



Province of Alberta

The 25th Legislature
Fourth Session

Alberta Hansard

February 17, 2004 to May 13, 2004
and Index

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, February 17, 2004**

3:00 p.m.

Date: 04/02/17

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order! All rise, please.

[The Clerk read the Royal Proclamation dated February 4, 2004, summoning all Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to convene on this date]

The Clerk: Please be seated.

[The Sergeant-at-Arms left the Chamber]

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order! Order! Mr. Speaker.

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, the Speaker, accompanied by the officers of the Assembly, entered the Chamber and took the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Almighty God, author of all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, we ask Your blessings on all here present. We ask Your guidance in order that truth and justice may prevail in all our judgments for the benefit of all Albertans. Amen.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would now invite Mr. Paul Lorieau to lead us in the singing of our national anthem. Would you please join in in the language of your choice.

Hon. Members and Guests:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: What a wonderful choir. Please be seated.

head: **Entrance of the Lieutenant Governor**

[The Premier, the Clerk, and the Sergeant-at-Arms left the Chamber to attend the Lieutenant Governor]

[The Mace was draped]

The Speaker: Ladies and gentlemen and hon. members, prior to the arrival of Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor the Royal Canadian Artillery Band will play a brief musical interlude.

The RCA Band, Canada's oldest regular army band, was formed in Quebec City in 1879. It was subsequently stationed in Montreal and Halifax. It has seen service in both world wars and in Korea, and it has travelled across Canada and beyond our borders. Reconstituted in the city of Edmonton in 1997, the band is today under the direction of Captain Gerry Heslip, who is in the Speaker's gallery.

The band will now play a piece written by English composer Gustav Holst, the details of which are in your program.

[The Sergeant-at-Arms knocked on the main doors of the Chamber three times. The Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms opened the doors, and the Sergeant-at-Arms entered]

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Ladies and gentlemen, all rise, please.

Mr. Speaker, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor awaits.

The Speaker: Sergeant-at-Arms, admit Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

[A fanfare of trumpets sounded]

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, her party, the Premier, and the Clerk entered the Chamber. Her Honour took her place upon the throne]

Her Honour: Please be seated.

Ladies and gentlemen, before I start the Speech from the Throne, I would very much like to thank the Premier for the lovely letter he sent to the Prime Minister on my behalf. [applause]

Also, I would like to thank all the rest of you because I know I have your support. So I thank all the hon. members. I thank the ladies and gentlemen who are here today. Thank you very much.

I also would just like to say that every one of you should have the opportunity to ride escorted by the police. It is truly magical. I know that the people are wondering: what is going on? I just wish it were an open car and I could stand up and wave. But it's exciting, and it really is truly magical.

Lastly, may I say that the rotunda looks absolutely beautiful. To Ruth, who made sure that she got all the flowers: well, I noticed. They're lovely.

head: **Speech from the Throne**

Heading toward Alberta's Second Century A Proud History, A Promising Future

Her Honour: Fellow Albertans, I am pleased to welcome you to the Fourth Session of the 25th Alberta Legislature. It is once again my distinct honour to mark the opening of the Legislature with the Speech from the Throne. While I am always honoured to fulfill this aspect of my duties as Lieutenant Governor, I am particularly pleased to be addressing my fellow Albertans this year as it gives me the opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to you all.

Thank you to everyone here in this Chamber and across the province who offered hugs and kind words of encouragement over the past year. Thank you to those who sent messages of hope and understanding and kept me in their thoughts and prayers throughout what has been a challenging time for me and for my family. Your messages and other expressions of support helped me gather the strength and energy I needed to overcome the obstacles I faced, and overcome them I have.

Your words and actions over the past year have reminded me of the many qualities that are so fundamental to the Alberta spirit, qualities like generosity, strength, compassion, and above all optimism. This is a province of people who never shy away from a challenge and who look to the future with boundless confidence, enthusiasm, and hope.

Albertans will soon have an opportunity to appreciate and to celebrate everything that sense of optimism has achieved. The year 2005 will mark this province's 100th birthday. It will mark a century that allowed Albertans to forge a unique identity. That identity is one of confidence in our ability to work hard and achieve great things, pride in the prosperity and growth we have accomplished together as Albertans, and gratitude for the many strengths, privileges, and responsibilities we enjoy as Canadians.

This government shares Albertans' sense of optimism for the future. It has developed a 20-year plan to help the people of this province build on the many successes of the past 100 years and create even greater success in the century to come. The plan identifies four key areas, or pillars, that will be crucial to Alberta's continued success and sets out specific goals for Albertans to achieve in those four areas. The pillars of the plan are unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit.

While the 20-year plan contains long-range goals that will require the co-operative efforts of many individuals and sectors and over many years, there are a number of steps the government is taking now to begin building on the successes of the past and create an even brighter future for all Albertans.

Unleashing Innovation

An important key to building that brighter future is the ability to unleash the full potential of Albertans' innovation. As the global economy continues to shift toward knowledge-based industries and technologies, so will the government's focus on expanding the province's capacity for innovation.

Our province's wealth of natural resources has long been a source of pride for Albertans. While Alberta has traditionally gained much of its prosperity from the rich resources that grace the province, some of the opportunities that lie before us will hinge on what Albertans are able to do with those resources, on the ability to create new economic opportunities out of traditional strengths. That includes finding new and innovative ways to turn Alberta's raw resources into manufactured products for export markets, which is why the government will unveil a strategy to develop a diversified and competitive manufacturing, tourism, and business services sector for the province.

Building a culture of innovation also takes new ideas and new processes, and that means research. In 2004 government will expand on the work already taking place through the Alberta energy innovation strategy to ensure that Alberta continues to lead the way in energy innovation and research.

The energy industry has been a key factor in creating Alberta's prosperity. The industry's positive impact on this province is clearly felt through the royalties it contributes to government revenues that help fund front-line services for Albertans, and its impact is clearly demonstrated by the hundreds of thousands of jobs the industry creates and by its tremendous contributions to the growth and well-being of Alberta communities. The new strategy will help to build on those contributions. It links public- and private-sector partners from across Canada to work together on research to further oil sands technology, develop cleaner coal technology, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, manage water resources, improve conventional oil and gas recovery, and explore alternative energy sources.

The government will also encourage innovation in the way Alberta's resources are developed through its water strategy for the province. This spring a provincial water council will be established to help manage this resource for future generations of Albertans.

Other promising opportunities for new innovations can be found in developing sectors such as information and communications technologies and life sciences. To encourage Alberta's expertise in information and communications technology, or ICT, the government will create an ICT institute to guide research and innovation in this emerging sector. Work will also continue this year in the area of research and technology commercialization, which focuses on providing opportunities for Alberta-grown innovative products and services to be developed.

The life sciences sector is another area where Albertans are showing their innovation and where their research and development are showing even greater promise. The government will assist in this area with the creation of a life sciences institute to co-ordinate research taking place across the province in areas such as agriculture, environment, forestry, health, bioenergy, and water research.

Co-operative research will be further considered with a new prion research program with an initial focus on BSE. This past year Albertans have found themselves at the centre of debate over this disease, and the province will also be at the centre of work to find solutions.

The government understands that building a culture of innovation goes well beyond supporting technical research and scientific development. That is why this government is also committed to building a future where Albertans can continue leading in learning.

Leading in Learning

The process of learning begins as soon as a child is born and continues throughout that child's life. The government recognizes this fact through a full spectrum of programs that covers every aspect of child and adult education.

This year the government's commitment to lifelong learning in Alberta will be further strengthened with the introduction of a bill to establish the new Alberta centennial education savings plan. Under the plan, beginning in 2005, every child born in Alberta will receive a \$500 contribution toward an established registered education savings plan. This program will provide a foundation for children born in Alberta's centennial year and those born in the years following to plan for and pursue whatever postsecondary education opportunities they choose.

The program represents more than an investment in individual children. It is an investment in our shared future as Albertans, in the generations who will inherit all that Albertans have worked hard to create and who will lead the province in the century to come.

While this investment will have an important impact on future students, improvements must also be made now to ensure that young Albertans already in the kindergarten to grade 12 system enjoy every possible advantage. This year increased funding for learning will work in combination with a new funding framework to give school boards increased flexibility to meet the unique needs and circumstances of each Alberta community. Under the new framework government will not dictate to school boards how to allocate the dollars they receive, leaving it to each board to address priority areas and account to parents in each community on their decisions and outcomes.

These investments come on top of other improvements to the basic learning system in response to recommendations from Alberta's Commission on Learning. Some of those improvements are already underway including implementing new guidelines to ensure that class sizes are manageable. Work has also begun to create a new school wellness program that recognizes that a strong mind is nurtured by a healthy body. That includes phasing in a mandatory program of daily physical activity for all students. The change will help set all young Albertans on a path toward lifelong health and fitness.

While the Alberta Learning Commission has generated increased awareness and debate over the kindergarten to grade 12 system, the province's postsecondary education system is of equal importance to Alberta's future. Postsecondary education and lifelong learning experiences are important, and they should be accessible to all Albertans. These experiences offer much more than simply a path to a new career or a better job. They also offer one way for Alber-

tans to achieve their dreams and realize their full potential. Nothing could be more important.

This year new funding for postsecondary learning will include an increase in base operating grants for all postsecondary institutions as well as additional dollars for new spaces in high-demand programs. That initial investment will come with a commitment to create a total of 2,000 new spaces over the next four years.

Access to lifelong learning opportunities will also increase this year with the implementation of the new postsecondary learning act. The legislation gives more postsecondary institutions in the province the opportunity to offer degree-granting programs. Each student's ability to access a quality education will be further enhanced through the creation of the Campus Alberta quality council. The council will review all new degree program proposals to ensure that each program is of the highest possible quality.

As well, government will strengthen and enhance apprenticeship programs. While Alberta leads the country in apprenticeship training, the province's economic growth continues to create a shortage of skilled workers in many key economic sectors. In addition to helping Albertans get the training they need to find and keep jobs, the Alberta government will also work with the federal government to attract highly skilled immigrants to the Alberta workforce. These initiatives will help employers find the skilled workers they need in this growing economy.

Competing in a Global Marketplace

Alberta is poised to enter its second century from a position of economic strength, but that position offers no guarantees for the future. Just as they have throughout the province's history, Albertans will need to continue working hard and looking ahead to future challenges and opportunities in order to secure long-term security and prosperity for the province.

Potential threats to Alberta's economic prosperity and security were made abundantly clear this year, when the challenge of prolonged drought was compounded by a single case of BSE, bringing the province's beef industry to a virtual standstill. As steps were being taken to restore the industry, a single case in the United States connected to Alberta only served to deepen the crisis. Albertans were quick to rally around affected producers and communities, offering their support and showing their confidence in the quality of Alberta beef, but more work needs to be done to restore international confidence in Alberta's beef industry and open borders to live cattle.

The recent BSE situation served as a sharp reminder of the interconnected nature of today's global economy. More than ever the policies and decisions of other jurisdictions can have a direct effect on Alberta's economic health. That is why the Alberta government will redouble its substantial efforts to strengthen its ties with the province's largest trade and investment partner, the United States.

To that end, the government will open an Alberta office in Washington, D.C., to advance the province's economic and policy interests and to help expand Alberta's contacts with top American decision-makers. Alberta is consulting with the federal government on this matter. Alberta will also continue to work with the government of Canada on key trade and policy areas of importance to all Canadians including improving and enhancing common border practices and trade policies and regulations.

While the Alberta government is committed to working with the other provinces and the federal government on areas of mutual concern, it will also continue to use opportunities such as the newly established Council of the Federation to ensure that Alberta's unique

needs and perspectives are heard and respected. Alberta will also pursue other avenues as required to represent the interests of Albertans. That includes aggressively pursuing options to create grain marketing choice for wheat and barley producers so their operations can realize full market potential.

The people of this province are fiercely proud of their Canadian identity, but they are also proud of all they have achieved as Albertans. The government will continue its efforts to ensure that national policies and decisions do not take away from those accomplishments or affect Alberta's ability to make the most of future opportunities. Those opportunities may be national and even global in scope, but their effects will be felt much closer to home. Economic growth and prosperity help to ensure a high quality of life for all Albertans. They are key factors in what makes our province the best place to live, work, and visit.

Making Alberta the Best Place To Live, Work, and Visit

This year the government will continue building on the programs already in place to ensure that all Albertans enjoy the highest possible quality of life with a particular focus on the most vulnerable members of Alberta's communities. This focus includes all children. There can be no greater accomplishment for Albertans than to raise healthy and strong children who are confident in their knowledge and their abilities, optimistic about their future, and compassionate in the way they interact with their peers, their community, and the world at large. Our goal is simple: to ensure that Albertans, especially children, feel safe and protected.

A first step toward creating that kind of environment for all children will be the upcoming Round-table on Family Violence and Bullying. The round-table will be held in May and will be preceded by province-wide workshops. These efforts will help communities and government partners find ways to break the cycle of violence that can have a devastating and lasting effect on individual families and on the fabric of Alberta communities.

Alberta's most vulnerable citizens will also be protected through a new plan to prevent sexual crimes that target children, such as Internet crimes, Internet luring, child pornography, and child prostitution. Alberta already has unique legislation to protect children involved in prostitution. This new plan will bring all crimes that sexually exploit children together under one initiative, strengthening the way in which young Albertans are protected from exploitation and abuse.

The safety of all Albertans will be enhanced through changes to the way the government funds policing. This year the government will begin implementing a new funding formula for policing which will significantly increase the dollars to deliver this important service. This initiative comes about in part as a result of this government's ongoing consultation with municipalities on their concerns in this area.

More effective and better co-ordinated services are also the goal of the Alberta disability strategy. It calls for the creation of an office for disability issues which will work with the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and government ministries to encourage greater cross-government co-ordination and more effective delivery of programs for disabled Albertans, promote positive attitudes toward the disabled, and raise awareness of disability issues.

A third area where the government will be looking to create greater co-ordination is in its response to the diverse and changing needs of Alberta's seniors. A plan will be developed to help the province's health system, workplaces, and other institutions prepare

for Alberta's aging population. The focus will be on initiatives and approaches that contribute to the well-being and independence of seniors. The upcoming budget will provide sufficient dollars to meet the current program needs of Alberta's growing seniors' population and ensure that services continue to be available to those in need.

To better serve those Albertans who can no longer live independently and have moved to a long-term care facility, the government will establish a new process to ensure that facilities are accountable for the accommodation services they provide. The government recognizes the many contributions of seniors and will work to ensure that they receive quality accommodations at an important time in their lives.

For Albertans who need support meeting their basic needs or finding a job, the government will introduce a new program called Alberta Works. The program will help clients assess their strengths and needs, whether it's job-search assistance and training, income support, health benefits, or child support services. For the first time financial assistance will also be available for people fleeing family violence, to help them establish a new household and make a fresh start.

This year will also see improved programs and services for aboriginal Albertans. The government will continue to work together with its aboriginal partners in key areas such as economic development, joint relationship building, consultation on resource development, learning, and health care to meet the specific needs of aboriginal communities. Upcoming initiatives for this year include an expansion of the mobile diabetes screening program to include off-reserve communities and the creation of new programs dealing with HIV, tobacco use, and community-based care for aboriginal citizens.

Good health care for all citizens is also a vital component of preparing for Alberta's second century. For most Albertans the measure of a strong health system is its ability to provide front-line service and response to their everyday health needs. Toward this goal, the government will continue to work with the Alberta Medical Association and regional health authorities to implement a new primary care initiative. Under the initiative Albertans will have access to a team of health care providers that can offer primary care 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Greater access will also be provided through greater choice of where and how Albertans receive the care they need. That includes increased government support for community-based care options for seniors, persons with disabilities, and mental health clients looking for alternatives to acute care in a hospital setting.

Quality of patient care will be further strengthened through a new mandate for the Health Services Utilization and Outcomes Commission. This year the commission, which will be renamed the health quality council of Alberta, will take on an expanded mandate for patient safety. This builds on its current role of monitoring and reporting on the performance of Alberta's health system.

Alberta needs to continue pursuing meaningful health reform so the system remains affordable and accessible to future Albertans. There has been great progress in Alberta in health reform in recent years, and the government pledges to continue that work. The goal of reform is not to weaken the system but to strengthen it. Alberta also pledges to work with other provinces and the federal government on a program of national health reform because every government, regardless of ideology or party, has acknowledged that the system is not sustainable unless meaningful reform is made.

Ensuring the safety and health of individual Albertans is important, but so is the health of Alberta communities, of the traditions, institutions, and infrastructure that form the backbone of our

province. For rural Albertans that structure has been challenged through the recent years of drought, the BSE crisis, and the migration of certain jobs and opportunities to larger urban centres. In response to those pressures, the government will introduce a new rural development strategy to help ensure that the people and businesses in rural Alberta enjoy every opportunity to reach their full potential.

The approach of Alberta's 100th birthday will also be marked by continued investment in the centennial capital plan, announced last year. Year 2 of this infrastructure plan will see continued investment in new health facilities, schools, postsecondary institutions, government facilities, and centennial projects. As well, in the upcoming budget the capital plan will be extended out another year to keep infrastructure work rolling into 2007. In the coming year Alberta municipalities will also continue to benefit from ongoing centennial capital plan investment in municipal roads and water infrastructure.

As always, all new government spending will be carefully measured to ensure that new programs and services don't jeopardize the financial security Albertans have worked so hard to create for themselves and for the province as a whole. The principles of the sustainability fund will be respected, and the fiscal discipline that carried Alberta successfully through the past decade will continue to move the province forward into its second century.

To ensure that future generations of Albertans are no longer burdened with the debts of the past, the government remains committed to paying off Alberta's debt as it comes due until that debt is zero.

Conclusion

The many new projects and initiatives to be launched in the coming year are much more than the result of careful fiscal planning. They are also a testament to the remarkable energy, dedication, and forward-looking spirit of Albertans.

Albertans are keenly aware of the privileges and obligations they hold as citizens of this province and this country. They are confident in their ability to take on the challenges of the future and are anxious to make Alberta's approaching second century even more successful than the province's first hundred years. The government stands ready to support all Albertans in that goal. Albertans have achieved remarkable things together since 1905, and the coming years will show that those achievements were but an introduction to an even brighter history yet to be made.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and may God bless you all.

God bless Alberta.

God bless Canada.

God save the Queen.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order! All rise, please.

The Speaker: Ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to invite Mr. Paul Lorieau to lead us in the singing of *God Save The Queen*. Would you please remain standing at the conclusion.

Hon. Members and Guests:

God save our gracious Queen,
long live our noble Queen,
God save The Queen!
Send her victorious,
happy and glorious,
long to reign over us:
God save The Queen!

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order!

Her Honour: May I just say lastly, before I leave, that this could be, you know, the last throne speech. I hope not, but I just want to say that I look around and I see people who have put on wonderful concerts, done wonderful things. I've attended wonderful community events and enjoyed everything that I have done and have met so very many wonderful, amazing people. So I thank all of you.

To the hon. members, all of you, from all parts, thank you very much for your support.

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, Her Honour, her party, and the Premier left the Chamber as a fanfare sounded]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

[The Mace was uncovered]

[The Premier returned to the Chamber]

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Bill 1

Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, thank you. I request leave to introduce Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act. Next year Alberta will celebrate its 100th birthday, and it's fitting that this milestone be recognized with a commitment to the province's children and to Alberta's continued success for years to come.

In keeping with this government's promise to be a leader in learning, Bill 1 will establish the Alberta centennial education savings plan. Under the plan the government will contribute \$500 to a registered education savings plan for every child born or adopted to an Alberta family beginning in 2005, provided that the parents open a registered education savings plan in the child's name. In other words, there is some parental responsibility. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to provide an incentive for parents to plan and save for their children's future education.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a first time]

head: **Tablings**

The Speaker: Hon. members, I have the honour to table a copy of the speech graciously given by Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

head: **Motions**

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I move that the speech of Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor to this Assembly be taken into consideration Wednesday, February 18.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that pursuant to Standing Order 49(1) the select standing committees for the present session of the Legislative Assembly be appointed for the following purposes:

- (1) Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund,
- (2) Legislative Offices,
- (3) Private Bills,
- (4) Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing, and
- (5) Public Accounts.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the following persons be appointed to the Assembly's five standing committees:

- (1) Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Committee: Mr. Hutton, chair; Mr. Magnus, deputy chair; Mr. Bonner; Mr. Broda; Ms Carlson; Mr. Knight; Mr. Lougheed; Mr. Marz; and Mr. VanderBurg.
- (2) Legislative Offices Committee: Mrs. Tarchuk, chair; Mr. Ducharme, deputy chair; Ms Blakeman; Mr. Friedel; Mrs. Fritz; Ms Graham; Mr. Hlady; Mrs. O'Neill; Dr. Pannu; Dr. Taft; and Mr. Tannas.
- (3) Private Bills Committee: Ms Graham, chair; Ms Kryczka, deputy chair; Rev. Abbott; Mr. Bonner; Mr. Goudreau; Mr. Graydon; Mr. Jacobs; Mr. Johnson; Mr. Lord; Mr. Magnus; Mr. Maskell; Dr. Massey; Mr. McClelland; Mr. McFarland; Mr. Ouellette; Dr. Pannu; Mr. Pham; Mr. Rathgeber; Mr. Snelgrove; Mr. VanderBurg; and Mr. Vandermeer.
- (4) Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing Committee: Mr. Klapstein, chair; Mr. Johnson, deputy chair; Rev. Abbott; Mr. Amery; Mr. Cao; Ms Carlson; Mr. Danyluk; Mrs. Fritz; Mr. Graydon; Mr. Hlady; Mr. Jacobs; Mr. Knight; Mr. Lord; Mr. Lougheed; Mr. Lukaszuk; Mr. MacDonald; Mr. Masyk; Mr. McClelland; Dr. Pannu; Mr. Renner; and Mr. Zwozdesky.
- (5) Public Accounts Committee: Mr. MacDonald, chair; Mr. Shariff, deputy chair; Mrs. Ady; Ms Blakeman; Mr. Broda; Mr. Cao; Mr. Cenaiko; Ms DeLong; Mr. Goudreau; Mr. Hutton; Mrs. Jablonski; Mr. Lukaszuk; Mr. Marz; Mr. Mason; Mr. Masyk; Mr. Ouellette; and Dr. Taft.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that the Assembly stand adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; at 4 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, February 18, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/18

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. Our Father, we confidently ask for Your strength and encouragement in our service of You through our service of others. We ask for Your gift of wisdom to guide us in making good laws and good decisions for the present and the future of Alberta. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mr. Naim Ahmed, consul general of the United States, from Calgary. He's accompanied today by his wife, Linda. There is no doubt that the United States is Alberta's most important trading partner and closest friend. Alberta exports to the United States over \$50 billion in goods annually. This accounts for more than one-quarter of our GDP and includes over 80 per cent of our beef exports. Today, unfortunately, the U.S. border remains temporarily closed to live cattle exports. However, we remain very optimistic that live cattle trade will resume in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, the United States also provides two-thirds of our foreign investment in our province and 60 per cent of our tourists. In return Alberta remains a secure and reliable supplier to the U.S. for many products. This is particularly true in the case of energy with our oil and gas feeding markets from California to Chicago to New York and many places in between.

Alberta's ties with the United States go far beyond dollars and cents. We have shared interests and common values as well as friends and family on both sides of the border. Mr. Speaker, I would ask that all members of the Assembly give our guests the customary and traditional warm welcome.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure that my guests have arrived yet, but I wanted to introduce to you and through you to members of the Legislature some people with whom the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development and I had the opportunity to meet earlier today and whom we deal with on a government-to-government basis with respect to the province of Alberta. These are the chiefs of Treaty 8. We met with Chief Archie Cyprien, Grand Chief, Chief Bernie Meneen; Chief Francis Gladue; Chief Rose Laboucan; Chief Don Testawich; Chief Fred Badger; Elder Francis Meneen; Elder Gabe Meneen; as well, Allan Willier, Lorraine Muskwa, Janice Chalifoux, Donna Roberts, and Richard Auger.

I had understood that they would be coming into the galleries today. Perhaps they will, but I'd like this Assembly to welcome the governments of the Treaty 8 First Nations of this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through to the members of the Assembly Dan Astner. Dan is chairman of the board of the Battle River Rural

Electrification Association and has been for about the last 10 years, I believe. He's also on the Alberta council of electricity. As the new head office for the Battle River REA is located near Camrose, it's no surprise that Dan spends a great deal of time in my constituency. Later on the Order Paper I'll be giving a member's statement about the accomplishments of the Battle River REA, and it's a pleasure to have Dan here for that as well. So I'd like to welcome you, Dan, and ask the members of the Assembly to give you a warm welcome as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to colleagues of the House it's my pleasure to welcome and introduce a group of students from the University of Alberta in the Speak Out club. They are students whose intent is to forge lines of understanding and communication between the electors and the elected. May I ask our distinguished visitors to please rise when their names are called. Oh, that's fine: all stand up. Jung-Suk Ryu, Calvin Loewen, Woo-sun Shim, E.N. Keteku, Joo Yeon Kim, Jung-Woon Whang, Shad Thevenaz, and Anika Loewen. Thank you and welcome. Please receive the warm greetings of the House.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, would you like to do your introduction now?

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure if my guests have arrived yet, but I would like to introduce them anyway. They will be here a little later today. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 136 of the brightest stars from central Alberta from the school of Fox Run in Sylvan Lake. They're also going to be accompanied by about 24 adults: teachers, parents. I would also like to make special mention of them because the daughter and granddaughter of our own Clerk Assistant and Clerk of Committees, Louise Kamuchik, are going to be amongst them, Danielle Breton and Lynne Breton.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Ministerial Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Dr. Ken Nicol **Former Leader of the Official Opposition**

Mr. Klein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to express the congratulations of the entire government caucus as well as my own personal best wishes to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, who has recently left his post as Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition and who is expected to leave this House entirely before the end of the year.

Over his career in the House the Member for Lethbridge-East has brought great and well-deserved distinction to himself, his constituency, his party, and this Legislature. As leader of his party he has shown a deep respect for the traditions of this Legislature and a deep commitment to his constituents and his province. To my occasional chagrin he has also shown himself to be a thoughtful and effective debater both on the floor of this Assembly and outside the Assembly in front of the media.

Being leader of a political party in a democratic system is a great honour for anyone and I feel humbled by that honour every day and I strongly suspect that the Member for Lethbridge-East has felt that way as well. With that honour comes responsibility as well as tremendous pressure. The hon. member has borne that responsibility

and pressure with grace and skill. In his actions he has always fought hard for his constituents and for his vision for a better Alberta. In his approach he has always focused his attention on issues, not personalities. In his personal conduct he has always shown that the honour of serving Albertans in this Legislature meant more to him than mere words.

Mr. Speaker, for all those reasons I want to extend the very best wishes to the Member for Lethbridge-East and to his family, who have obviously stood behind him throughout his career and brought him great strength. This Legislature has benefited from his presence over the years, and he will be missed when he leaves us. I also wish him luck in his next public endeavour, though not too much luck. Regardless of how he ends up serving Alberta in the future, serve it he will, I am sure, and he will serve it with the same dedication that he has brought to this Legislature every day.

If Mr. Speaker will allow an exception to the rules of the House, let me simply end by saying thank you, Ken, and may the hopes and dreams of you and your family come true in the future.

Thank you. [applause]

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my Liberal caucus colleagues I am pleased to offer tribute to Dr. Ken Nicol, our leader. In a world of politics that becomes more complicated and challenging every day, Ken represents the opposite. Ken's values are deeply rooted in rural Alberta. Ken knows how to govern himself, how to contemplate, and how to create. He has a reputation for thoroughness, concentration, inner discipline, and invention, a talent for thinking things through.

1:40

Financier and philanthropist George Soros said:

At the moment, people are voting their pocketbooks all the time.

They are trying to bend legislation to their own financial interests.

The common interest gets lost. [I think] there used to be a concept of civic virtue.

Soros doesn't know Ken Nicol. If he did, he would know, like all of us, that civic virtue is not dead. Guarding the public interest and working for the common good has been the hallmark of Ken's work in this House.

Ken came forward to be Liberal leader at a time when we most needed his help. He brought to the leadership strong beliefs. He said that government policy must be based on what is fair for all citizens, that our task is to view all public policy first and foremost from a sound set of principles, and that we have a special obligation to connect citizens with holders of public office in order to develop policies for the common good. Much to some critics' dismay and to his credit he saw no barriers to working in a bipartisan manner with the government in the interests of a better Alberta.

Ken is equally at home in the lecture halls of a university, as his work at the universities of Lethbridge and Iowa attests. His management expertise sees him welcome in the boardrooms of any business, and he is a respected government adviser on the international scene, as his work with the Royal Thai government demanded. Most important this past year has been his role as father, grandfather, and Linda's husband.

Lest this sound more like a eulogy than a tribute, Mr. Speaker, I must tell you and my Legislature colleagues that there are times when Ken won't be missed. Ken won't be missed when we have one of those caucus discussions on finance that just happens to coincide with his old economics 301 lecture notes, an unfortunate coincidence, my caucus colleagues all agree. Ken won't be missed,

according to those who sit next to him in this House, on those days when he used to clean the barn and drive directly to the Assembly without changing boots. Nor will Ken be missed by staff who joined him on his long, long car trips throughout Alberta when Ken preferred to just keep driving instead of stopping for coffee or a comfort break.

Seriously, Mr. Speaker, one of the great joys of being elected to this House is meeting outstanding Albertans of high integrity serving on both sides of the aisle. They come from every corner of this province, and Ken Nicol is one of them. We will miss Ken's qualities as a leader but are pleased to have him around a little longer as our friend and our colleague in this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, unanimous consent will have to be granted in order to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. Would there be any member opposed to granting such a request?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the House for this opportunity to say a few words of thanks and pay tribute to the Member for Lethbridge-East, who recently resigned as Alberta Liberal leader.

I think I know as well as anyone the sacrifices involved in leading an opposition party in the province of Alberta. Being the leader of an opposition party is very challenging when you're small in numbers and the resources at your disposal are minute in comparison to the resources at the disposal of the government.

The Member for Lethbridge-East has served this Legislature and his constituents with distinction for the past 11 years and since 2001 as Leader of the Official Opposition. I've always been impressed by his dedication to public service. He always conducted himself with the utmost integrity. He is a principled person who has earned the respect of his colleagues on all sides of this House. Glancing at today's headlines, some might say that leaving as Alberta Liberal leader and deciding to run as a federal Liberal candidate is a bit like going from the frying pan into the fire. However, I know that all members of this House know that the Member for Lethbridge-East has never backed down from a challenge. After all, the Member for Lethbridge-East defied the odds before by getting elected as a Liberal in southern Alberta three elections in a row.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Member for Lethbridge-East for all the service that he rendered to Albertans through his presence in this House and by his work outside. Best wishes to you and your family as you embark on the next stage of your political career.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Would the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East like to participate? I'm sure unanimous consent will be provided.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, I just want to say thank you to everybody. It's really an honour for me to have served the province of Alberta with each one of you.

I think each one of us probably sits here in this House and has a vision of how we would perform as government. With the 83 members here, if each one of us were a dictator, to say, in a position, we would all have a different Alberta. But democracy works because all 83 people in this House come together both in their

government role and in their opposition role and work to make Alberta the greatest place in the world. I hope that I can continue to be involved in public service in this province to help the people in this House continue to make Alberta that great place.

In conclusion, thanks to everybody. It's been an honour to work with you. I look forward to staying in contact. If you're ever in southern Alberta or, hopefully, if you're ever in Ottawa, look me up.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Government Travel

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the government said that "all new government spending will be carefully measured." But documents acquired by the Liberal opposition indicate that in the recent past it is the taxpayers of this province who have been taken for an expensive ride by this government. My first question is to the Premier. Was government spending being carefully measured when a whopping \$8,000 was spent on a car service on a four-day trip in New York City in December of 2002?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, to answer the question, that mission involved, I think, about 14 people or maybe 10 or 12, and for the length of the mission we had an Econoline van and a Suburban with a driver from 8 o'clock in the morning to midnight. That is hardly luxury. These were not limousines; that is the going rate. If the hon. member has ever been to New York, that is cheap probably at twice the price for transportation. These people had to get around, both officials and political leaders, and the use of the Suburban and the Econoline van were very effective and very utilitarian vehicles to get these people to their various meetings and other obligations.

Mr. Speaker, ministerial travel is part of the job of any government, and God knows that the federal Liberals know about travel. As the hon. Deputy Premier pointed out in her introduction of the consul general from the United States, we are an exporting province, and we rely on capital investment from outside the province. So having ministers work with business leaders to promote the province is essential to the success and the prosperity of this government and this province and the people of this province.

Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member was paying attention yesterday to the Speech from the Throne, he would have noted that one of the pillars is to take advantage of our potential to add value to the products we produce so we can further export them. Ministerial missions occur in order to promote Alberta businesses, products, and services to international customers; attract investment to the province; encourage new businesses to set up shop in Alberta; meet with international government and business leaders to inform them about Alberta and inform them positively about Alberta; promote cultural ties with friends and neighbours around the globe; and reciprocate visits that are made to Alberta by foreign dignitaries.

Mr. Speaker . . . Well, I'll wait for the next question.

1:50

Mr. MacDonald: In light of that, Mr. Speaker, the next question is: how are Alberta's interests being served by this delegation going to the Cornell Club in Madison Square Garden? What were you doing in those places to enhance Alberta's exports?

Mr. Klein: I don't know anything about the Cornell Club. I've never heard of the Cornell Club in New York City. Perhaps one of the other ministers on that mission can respond. But perhaps I was

at that club, and I was giving a speech to a group of investors, or one of the ministers was giving a speech to a group of investors.

Mr. Speaker, I want to put this thing totally and absolutely in context, and if the Liberals were honest, they would put it in context too. By the Liberals' own estimate the government has spent \$1.1 million on all missions over the last three years. Now, to put that into perspective, listen to this: over three years this entire caucus has spent only one-fifth of the \$5.3 million that the Governor General of Canada spent on one single mission — one single mission — and that mission was concocted and designed by the federal Liberal government, the soulmates of Alberta's Liberals.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that the next comparison is probably going to be to George Radwanski, how can this government consider that they are spending money carefully when the Premier and his staff have forked over over \$1,100 of taxpayers' money to maids in Mexico when you refused even to put the minimum wage up in this country?

Mr. Klein: Well, first of all, \$1,100 is a lot to me, and it's probably a lot to that member, but, Mr. Speaker, the matter of \$1,100 spent on tips to hotel staff in Mexico City in 2002 is also very explainable. In Mexico, if the hon. member has ever been there, service charges are added automatically to the bill. We estimated what our total bill would be for that mission and, as I understand, got a deal on the service charges. I'll have the hon. Minister of Economic Development explain the deal that was achieved. But you have no choice because the tip is added to all the bills, and when you . . .

Mr. MacDonald: Put the minimum wage up.

Mr. Klein: This has nothing to do with the minimum wage. I don't know where this guy gets off; I'm telling you that, Mr. Speaker. You know, he's over there chirping about the minimum wage, and he's talking about \$1,100 for tips for one full week for a full mission, tips that are added automatically to a bill.

I'll have the hon. minister explain.

Mr. Norris: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, I would really encourage the hon. member to focus more on what's happening in Alberta than Mexico. The trip was a remarkable success.

I want to say here right now to the House that Alberta is remarkably fortunate to have a Premier who understands international markets and our international marketplace and spends so much time on these missions because it's vital to the success of Alberta. I want to say thank you, sir. Thank you.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars globe-trotting at Alberta's taxpayers' expense. Now, if we want to focus on Alberta, let's focus on Alberta seniors, students, and health care patients that are being told by this government to do with less. To the Premier: how does this Premier justify jacking up seniors' long-term care fees when this government spends over \$8,000 on car services in New York City? Tell that to seniors.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm sort of curious. Is the hon. member saying that we ought not travel, that we ought not sell Alberta, that we ought not sell Alberta products, that we ought not concentrate on adding value to our products and travelling the market, that we can

find all of the officials, the 22,000 employees, many of whom are in different parts of the globe right now selling Alberta – not politicians; we're stuck here. At any minute of any hour of any day of any week of any month of any year we have numerous officials, probably hundreds of officials, in different parts of the world selling Alberta. Is this hon. member saying: stop all of that right now? If that's what he's saying, let him stand up and say so. Let him stand up and say so.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I want this government to be careful not careless.

How does this Premier justify soaring tuition and crowded classrooms while his government spent over \$5,900 on accommodation, food, and services at the Sheraton hotel in New York City?

Mr. Klein: Fifty-nine hundred is not very expensive in New York City, I'll tell you that for sure, Mr. Speaker. His Liberal cousins have spent that in one night on hotel rooms in Ottawa.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: how does the Premier justify increasing health care premiums and contemplating other user fees on seniors while this government forks over \$1,100 in tips to maids in Mexico?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, I could go on if the hon. member would promise to publish all of the information on the web site. I can tell this Assembly about the value of any mission.

As a result of one mission by the Learning minister to southeast Asia, many Vietnamese students are choosing Alberta institutions as a place to study, both in postsecondary institutions and primary. It is estimated that the potential number of students from Vietnam could bring in \$2.7 million in revenues for our learning institutions. That one mission alone would therefore result in revenue for Alberta more than two times the total estimated cost of all – of all – ministerial missions over the past three years. That one mission.

On a mission to the U.S. in 2001 the Minister of Economic Development and I took part in discussions that led to some Alberta businesses signing lucrative business deals in California.

Energy-related missions have led to face-to-face meetings with the vice-president of the United States to talk about how Alberta can contribute to the new U.S. energy strategy. They've also led to literally thousands of key decision-makers around the world learning a great deal about the energy sector in Alberta and investment opportunities. As a matter of fact, we now see either on stream or contemplated about \$50 billion – \$50 billion – worth of new investment in the oil sands, much of that investment coming from the United States.

A 2001 mission to California primarily to promote the Alberta energy and film industries resulted in successful negotiations for a Disney miniseries that is being shot this spring near Okotoks. Many other Alberta film deals followed on the heels of that mission.

Mr. Speaker, the list goes on and on and on, and I would like a commitment from the hon. member to publish the success of all these missions on their web site.

2:00

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the hundreds of thousands of dollars this government spends on globe-trotting, it's clear that the promise to carefully measure spending rings hollow. In fact, this is a government hiding travel expenses from the scrutiny

of Alberta taxpayers. My questions are to the Premier. Why has the government not publicly released itineraries for 79 out-of-province trips taken since March 2001? Where are the itineraries?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I can't speak for the other ministers. I do know that this government is probably one of the most, if not the most, open and transparent governments in the country. If it weren't for this government, the Liberals wouldn't have put our officials to the great expense – and I don't know how much their FOIP requests cost our officials in this government, but if it weren't for this government, they wouldn't have been able to get any of this information.

Relative to the openness and transparency of this government I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance speak to it.

Mrs. Nelson: You know, Mr. Speaker, back in 1992-93 when our Premier took over as Premier, we introduced as Bill 1 the open and transparent Financial Accountability Act in this province. We have led the nation by putting in place not only an act that governs openness and transparency but also through the Auditor General Act even an external audit committee that meets with the Auditor General and reviews the policies and procedures that are in place with this government. If there are difficulties, they have been identified and rectified.

Insofar as openness I can tell you that there isn't any other government that has had as many filings as we do in this House, well, since December of 1992. On a quarterly basis we bring Albertans up to date with all the expenditures. We explain various analyses where we have variances from budget to actual on a quarterly basis. We identify the costs that are coming through our government. We deal with pressure points. We deal with emergencies. We are open and transparent. It was Bill 1 under this Premier.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why has the government not publicly disclosed the costs of 26 out-of-province trips taken since March 20, 2001?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will attempt to get the answer, really. We do as a matter of policy require ministers to issue a news release relative to the itinerary for international missions as well as the estimated costs.

Now, we don't issue news releases for government travel within Canada; that is, out of province but within Canada. In almost all cases when ministers or I travel to other parts of Canada, the trips are to attend meetings with federal and provincial counterparts or various committees: the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, for instance, the francophone matters; yourself, Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary sessions. There are numerous others including some that the members of the opposition attend as well. But for any mission sponsored by my office a full report on the mission and what was accomplished is posted on the web site. The International and Intergovernmental Relations department is responsible for producing that web site, and it's provided in other ways as well, through the media, newsletters, and so on.

So our caucus, if there are any shortcomings . . .

Ms Blakeman: Twenty-six of them.

Mr. Klein: Send us the 26. I hear the chirping over there again: there are 26. Identify the 26. We'll have a look at them, and we'll review the matter of publicly releasing detailed receipts and detailed

accounts of missions if it's absolutely necessary within and without Canada, but normally we don't issue news releases relative to meetings within Canada.

I'm going to Vancouver next week for a meeting of the Council of the Federation, which is the former Premiers' conference. Now, do you object to that? Do you want me to stand up and, you know, explain? I usually do a news conference before I leave for those meetings. I do stand up at the uni-mike while I'm there. You're welcome to take a car and drive out to Vancouver and watch all the Premiers in action if you want to, but I don't see where it would be worth while in any event to stand up and say that I need the Liberals' permission to travel to Vancouver or to feel: oh, my God, this is going to make it 27 now; oh, good Lord, what are we going to do?

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Then in the interests of accountability, Mr. Premier, will you today agree to report all Executive Council expenses to the Public Accounts Committee?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we have been very, very good in my office about reporting all Executive Council, at least as it pertains to my office. We will do it to the best of our ability. Lookit; I have to sit here and face the music relative to public accounts and the questioning that comes from the opposition, so I'll be prepared for any questions they have to ask me, and hopefully I'll be able to provide them with the proper answers.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Alberta Blue Cross

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, last Thursday the New Democrat opposition blew the whistle on changes that will pick the pockets of 1 million Albertans with Alberta Blue Cross coverage. A major change being proposed forcing Blue Cross to make payments in lieu of taxes is contrary to the advice of the Blue Cross Review Committee, chaired by the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why is the government going against the advice of its own review committee, which argued that the change in Alberta Blue Cross's tax-exempt status would result in a transfer of costs to Albertans and would not be appropriate?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to note that the committee chaired by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed looked into the matters of the operations of Alberta Blue Cross in a great deal of detail, and I thank her for her work and the dedication that was spent in coming up with the recommendations that are coming forward and are being implemented.

Mr. Speaker, there is some erroneousness about what the hon. member has said with respect to the number of clients that would be affected by these changes, but the long and the short of it is that where Alberta Blue Cross's efforts are in competition with the private sector, we felt that it was most appropriate since the private sector was paying these premium taxes, in order to level the playing field, Alberta Blue Cross should do the same. Now, the impact on a per-client basis is that for individuals now paying roughly \$140 a month, depending on the package of Blue Cross that they decide to take, it would result in a \$3 change to such an individual, a very reasonable amount of money.

2:10

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, why won't the minister admit that the so-

called level playing field is code for high premiums, which is being done for no other reason than to allow the private health insurance industry to take business away from Alberta Blue Cross?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I wouldn't admit that because it's an asinine suggestion.

Dr. Pannu: My final question to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is the government forcing Albertans with Blue Cross coverage to pay more just so that Tory friends in the private health insurance industry can make more profits by grabbing a bigger share of the market?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, Alberta Blue Cross is a valued service to individuals who are in the province of Alberta, but they, of course, should have the choice as to where they get their services from. It appears that Alberta Blue Cross does provide a very solid service, and that's why Alberta Blue Cross has many, many clients.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member's suggestions are simply unsubstantiated. They are untrue, and as I said, it's perfectly reasonable to be looking at levelling the playing field between Alberta Blue Cross's operations and the private sector vis-à-vis other private-sector insurance operators.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Protection for Persons in Care

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During my time as an MLA I've learned much about the complexities of elder abuse, whether physical, financial, mental, or emotional. It can occur at any time, whether deliberately or innocently, and by anyone, even in one's own home by a family member. Last month a senior resident at the Jubilee Lodge Nursing Home in Edmonton appears to have died as a result of burns to her legs. I understand that among other investigations Community Development's protection for persons in care branch has completed its investigation. My main question is to the Minister of Community Development. What was the outcome of the investigation by the protection for persons in care branch?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me begin by expressing my personal and collegial sincerest condolences to the family who has suffered the loss of a loved one in this particular instance.

I also want to briefly explain that the Protection for Persons in Care Act, over which I have responsibility, is required to review all cases of alleged abuse or outright abuse that are submitted to us where a particular client may reside in a publicly funded care facility. Of course, I can't comment on the specific details of any single case, such as the one that is being referenced, but I would like to say that after a preliminary investigation of the particular case that has been asked about, we did ask the PPIC branch people to consult with the local police department. They did that, and it was determined to hand that file over to the Edmonton Police Service. They did do that, and then shortly after that the Department of Justice also became involved, and the Minister of Justice may wish to augment where the process went from there.

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Justice, you'll have to guide the chair. Anything sub judice in here at all?

Mr. Hancock: No, Mr. Speaker, no sub judice at the moment. I won't comment on the police investigation other than to say that yesterday I signed an order calling for a public fatality inquiry into this particular situation. We made that request public today after notifying the family that the inquiry would be called. Of course, members of the Legislature will know that public fatality inquiries do not proceed until other investigations, particularly police investigations, are completed. So when it's actually held, the timing of it will be after that has been completed, but a public fatality inquiry will be held. The purpose, of course, of a public fatality inquiry and the reason why it follows the other inquiries is because it does not find fault. It finds the facts and makes comment if any with respect to how these types of situations can be avoided in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you. My next question is also to the Minister of Community Development. If Albertans have concerns about potential abuse in publicly funded care facilities, how can they get Protection for Persons in Care involved?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, the short answer is that they can call our reporting line, which is toll-free. I believe the number is 1-888-357-9339. They will be assured of some follow-up because it is the mandated requirement of the protection for persons in care unit to in fact follow up on every reporting of abuse or alleged abuse. We will then usually contact an investigator who will look into the details and provide a report back to us for further action.

However, I should tell the member that if someone feels they have a relative or a loved one or an acquaintance who is in some immediate danger, they should immediately contact the local police department to have that issue looked at.

The final point, I think, is that there are several other acts that might come into play which people should also consider reviewing. So anyone who is residing in a publicly funded care facility has protection from a number of other avenues besides the Protection for Persons in Care Act.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Kryczka: Yes. Thank you. Also to the same minister: how can you improve and strengthen protection for persons in care?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, when the Protection for Persons in Care Act came in approximately five years ago, it was already determined that within five years it would be reviewed for the very purpose that the hon. member is raising the question. So a couple of years back I did appoint an MLA-led committee which was chaired by the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. As a result of that, a report did come out which I think all members of the House are aware of. We then sent it out for public feedback.

We've received that. We are now analyzing it all. We're looking at and considering changes to do the very thing the member is asking, and that is to look at the mandate of the act, to look at the definitions of abuse, the definitions of intent, to look at the scope and coverage of the act, and perhaps also expand the act to provide greater coverage to more individuals who may need it which the act currently does not cover.

Climate Change Initiatives

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, in January the Minister of Environment

sent a letter threatening industry leaders. He stated that if companies failed to consult with the province on any federal Kyoto initiatives, tax credits and royalty breaks could be lost. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. What was the minister thinking when he sent such an arrogant letter?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Taylor: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I did not send any threatening letter. What the letter stated quite clearly was that we wish to work with Alberta companies. We wish to work with the federal government to reach a solution on climate change initiatives. Quite clearly, the owner of the resource is all Albertans, and all Albertans need to be at discussions with the federal government so that we can work co-operatively with both the industry and the federal government.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, does the minister believe that using strong-arm tactics and placing our industries in the middle of his fight with the feds will encourage investor confidence and innovation in this province?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Premier mentioned just a few minutes ago, we have \$50 billion worth of investment in this province. I think there's extreme confidence in Alberta.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, can this minister tell us what this government's commitment is to helping Alberta businesses meet Kyoto targets?

Dr. Taylor: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. We have an Alberta climate change action plan that, hopefully, the hon. member has read by now. We are putting that climate change action plan into effect. We've done that action plan in consultation with industry, and it's an action plan that works.

I would point out, Mr. Speaker, that we're hopeful that the federal government will pay attention. There is a policy vacuum in the federal government at the present time on climate change, and we feel that by Alberta once again being in the lead on climate change action plans, we can fill that policy vacuum. The new Prime Minister is making the right sounds. He is saying that he wants to consult with the provinces. So we need to take him at his word, and after the next election we need to hold his feet to the fire and make sure that he lives up to his commitment to work with Albertans on climate change.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

2:20

Downer Cows

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The two North American cases of BSE introduced many nonranchers to a new term: downer cow. Since then, many of my constituents have wondered what a downer cow is and if they pose any danger to the safety of our food supply. My questions are to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Could the minister please explain to my constituents: what is a downer cow?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, very simply put, a downer cow is an animal that cannot stand or walk without assistance, so nonambulatory. The more important thing is the cause of this, and right now that is the source of a lot of discussion around downer cows being presented at abattoirs.

Downer cows can be identified in this way because they are injured on the truck, have a leg injury, break a leg. They could have an injury from calving, somewhat unusual, but it definitely happens that an animal is injured during calving and experiences some inability to walk from an injury to her hind quarters. It can be a metabolic disease. The important thing in our province is how downer cows are handled.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: are downer animals allowed in the human food chain?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I would like to just take a moment to explain how we handle downer animals in this province and how we have handled them for some time. First of all, if downer animals are presented at a provincial abattoir – and I must say that this is not a common experience – they are inspected by a qualified veterinarian prior to slaughter to ensure that they are healthy enough to even move into the slaughter line.

Mr. Speaker, the carcass from a downer cow is held in this province until it has tested clear for BSE before it would be allowed to move into the human food chain. That is a very, very important aspect of how we handle downers and how we see continuing to handle them.

Mr. Johnson: My final question, then, is to the same minister. Do downer cattle pose a health risk to Albertans?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, handled in the way that they are in this province, with the inspections that we have and the fact that they are held, which is in every case, until they are cleared before the carcass is allowed to move on, yes, they are allowed in the human food chain.

Again, I have to go back, Mr. Speaker. A downer animal can be an animal that was being transported to an abattoir that is injured in transport, and the meat from that animal is perfectly safe. So I think we have to put this into perspective. It has in light of the BSE issue become a term that's used in some very negative ways. The term "downer" isn't new in the industry. The understanding of what a downer is is very clear in the industry, and it's important that the public understand what this terminology means.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, on January 22 a government news release stated that the government had decided that Albertans would not accept recommendations from the Graydon report like increasing health care taxes and introducing medical savings accounts. Then less than a week later the Premier arbitrarily decided that, quote, the Graydon report is coming back. My questions are to the Premier. Exactly who is in charge of health reform in Alberta? The Minister of Health and Wellness or the Premier? It seems they're not talking to each other.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't recall saying that the Graydon report wouldn't be tabled at all or considered. Not all recommendations in the Graydon report are acceptable, but that report along with other reports – and when I'm talking about other reports, I'm talking about reports we might get from places like Sweden, France, places that have been touted as having much better health care systems than we do and why. We will consider all of these documents in conjunction with a number of processes that are now underway vis-

à-vis the national health ministers and finance ministers, the Premiers and territorial leaders across the country including the Prime Minister and including our own budgetary problems related to health care.

Notwithstanding what the hon. member says and this hokey-pokey relative to GDP, the fact is that health care costs are rising much faster than are revenues. Indeed, across this nation we're spending about \$72 billion – billion – a year right now. By the year 2020 it's estimated that if health care costs continue to rise the way they have been rising, it'll be \$172 billion. Mr. Speaker, many governments across this nation are already in crisis related to health care where health care spending has now reached 50 per cent of their total provincial budgets. All Premiers and all territorial leaders are saying: we have got to do something about this.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'm serving warning right now that the Graydon report along with all of the other information we can obtain from all sectors, including other countries that have been rated much, much higher than Canada, will be brought together as we embark on a program of meaningful reform to achieve sustainability.

Dr. Taft: Well, given the chronic confusion around these reforms, let me repeat: who is in charge of health reform in Alberta? Is it the Premier, or is it the Minister of Health and Wellness?

Mr. Klein: Not that it makes any difference, Mr. Speaker, but it is a joint responsibility. The primary responsibility, of course, rests with the minister. [interjection] What's that? [interjections]

The Speaker: Hon. the Premier, ignore it, and please proceed.

Mr. Klein: Thank you. He's loud enough to be recorded in *Hansard*.

The responsibility is a government responsibility. The primary responsibility, of course, is with the minister for the development of policy, but through our system of standing policy committees any policy changes are brought to the SPCs or considered by cabinet or considered by this 83-member caucus, Mr. Speaker. Of course, I'm involved at the Premier's level in addressing health care reform with my provincial counterparts and with the federal government. The minister is involved with his colleagues across the country and the federal minister. He's also involved with other ministers like the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Seniors, Environment to some degree, Community Development to some degree.

So, Mr. Speaker, who's in charge? We're all in charge, except that they are not in charge, thank God.

2:30

Dr. Taft: That incredibly convoluted and confused response explains the problems.

Mr. Speaker, then I ask a simple question to this Premier: does he know when his government signed off on the budgets of the regional health authorities for the current fiscal year? Or have they even been signed off now? Is anybody in charge? Hello?

The Speaker: Okay. Question period is not the place for theatrics time and histrionics time. I'm sure there's some local community theatres in the city of Edmonton who would love the entertainment, but that's not what we're doing here.

I heard at least four questions, and I don't know how anybody can answer four questions at one time, so we're moving on to the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Beef Exports

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE, has caused unthinkable devastation to our cattle industry and to rural Alberta. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development has said on more than one occasion that the real solution is to get the borders reopened, and I would agree. All of my questions today are to that minister. What countries are currently importing Canadian beef?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, currently there are 24 countries who have lifted a ban at least partially on importing Canadian beef and cattle. They range from Barbados to the Cayman Islands to Russia to most recently Macao. But more importantly, very early in this issue our two largest trading partners, the United States and Mexico, lifted the ban on boneless beef.

Mr. Speaker, certainly the most important issue is the complete opening of borders, complete resumption of normal trade in beef and beef products, but I must say that the opening of the borders to boneless beef was a huge, huge bonus for our industry because that is the majority of what they ship. I'm pleased to inform the hon. member and indeed all of the Assembly that our exports of beef into Mexico have increased significantly, and in fact the last week in December Mexico imported more than 10 million pounds of fresh or frozen beef and cattle products.

So, Mr. Speaker, we're making progress. Is it fast enough? No. Is it enough? No. But we are making progress, and 24 countries have opened their borders at least partially to our beef.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is very encouraging.

Are there any conditions that our trading partners are demanding of us that we have not yet met before they will reopen their borders to our live cattle?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, this is one of the very frustrating aspects of dealing with this issue because we, frankly, have not had from our trading partners a specific list, if you wish, of things that would be required in order to open the borders entirely. We have put some measures in place as a country. Reflecting, though, on the international panel's report saying that there were some things that we could do that would further strengthen our already excellent system – and I do remind all members that the international panel applauded the systems we do have in place in this country – we put some new mitigation measures in including the removal of SRMs, specified risk materials, from the food chain, removal of them more in their entirety from animals.

We continue to negotiate through our federal negotiators with other countries to try and ascertain what they would require for a complete opening of borders and a complete resumption of normal trade. In fact – and I hope you'll listen; I will put out an itinerary – I will be travelling to Washington early in the week to further those discussions with our largest trading partner in beef to understand how we can work more closely with the U.S. on a North American solution so that our product on a North American basis is accepted in every country in the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker. Given that North America has an integrated cattle industry, is the minister prepared to encourage the federal minister of agriculture to place a ban on the process-

ing of any sick animal to mirror the recently announced U.S. policy on downed animals?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, we don't process sick animals. Animals are cleared by inspectors and veterinarians to ensure that they are healthy before they are processed unless they're going to rendering.

On downers the question is: should downers be allowed to be presented at all? The fact is that they are not allowed to be presented at slaughter plants that are federally inspected for export beef. Should they be allowed to be presented at all to provincial abattoirs, which is in our domestic market? That is a discussion that we continue to hold.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that the safeguards that we have in place, where we have inspectors on-site, where we have veterinarians who examine the animals and ensure that they are fit, are sufficient. However, it will be the consumers of that product that will finally determine how we should handle this.

I just have to remind all members that all animals that are termed downers are not sick. They maybe have been injured or in some way incapacitated, but their meat would be very healthy. In Alberta no downer animal would enter the food chain until all tests on that animal were cleared. They are held, and I think it's important that the consuming public knows that.

I should also point out that there are a number of our 52 provincial abattoirs that have made a decision not to accept downer animals, and that is certainly within their prerogative. If a farmer has an animal that has been injured and he wants that animal slaughtered, they will require a veterinarian to examine that animal on the farm, give a letter of clearance for that animal to pass to their abattoir, where it could be slaughtered and would be further inspected.

So we have a good system, Mr. Speaker. It's tough. It's a tough system, but I think it's stood us in good stead.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Protection for Persons in Care

(continued)

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On January 11 a 90-year-old woman died after being scalded during a bath at Edmonton's Jubilee Lodge Nursing Home. Both the woman's family and I repeatedly called for a fatality inquiry. The fatality inquiry review board has now recommended that an inquiry be held, and today the minister has complied. My question is to the Minister of Justice. Is the minister looking into this one person's death as an isolated incident, or will he order an investigation into the questionable deaths of other nursing home patients documented by FAIRE and by the Elder Advocates of Alberta?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the fatality inquiry that's been called, obviously it's been called with respect to this particular incident. In looking into this particular incident, the inquiry should consider the circumstances around how this death occurred, determine what the facts are, the manner of death, and the judge that leads the inquiry may make recommendations on the prevention of similar occurrences in the future. But a fatality inquiry relates specifically to a particular incident, a particular death, and a particular individual.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My next question is to the Minister of

Community Development. Given that the Protection for Persons in Care Act review is complete, would this tragic death have been automatically investigated out of the changes that are now flowing from the review?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, we have not made any changes yet to the legislation that's being referred to. We are simply contemplating and considering all of the feedback that has been received, both during the consultation process, which was province-wide, and also the feedback that has now been actually received in the form of the recommendations that were in the report.

I will be coming forward with some of those recommendations in the not too distant future, and we will be looking at places where we can improve the act, where we can strengthen the act. That will hopefully help stem any of these kinds of occurrences in the future.

We can never guarantee it, Mr. Speaker, but we do what we can through the PPIC Act, which, by the way, is more educative, as the member knows, than it is punitive. There are a couple of punitive sections within the act, but we do what we can by way of following up with every single one of those investigations and reports, which for the timing being at least are mandatory to be done.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My final question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Will this incident prompt the minister into creating and implementing standards of care for all long-term and continuing care which can be applied across all of the health regions in Alberta?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me say first of all that this, as the hon. Minister of Community Development said, was a very tragic set of circumstances, and I join him in expressing personal condolences to this family.

Capital health has conducted a review of this, and I can assure you that Capital health is most interested in ensuring that throughout all of the facilities that it has responsibility for, it takes the appropriate corrective actions to ensure that this doesn't happen to somebody else. As an example, the Jubilee Lodge, on the advice of Capital health, will be improving its water system, and the staff at Capital health are checking the water temperature at all of its long-term care facilities, and Capital health has also sent revised bathing guidelines to all long-term care operators.

Mr. Speaker, I can say that long-term care operators throughout the province are watching this particular set of circumstances very carefully and that throughout the province if any circumstances like this happened, there would be the appropriate investigations, as were done here at Jubilee. A number of reviews took place. The regional health authority did a review, the Jubilee operator itself, and Protection of Persons in Care also reviewed it. The department takes this very seriously. I think that there is some merit in making the suggestion that we make these types of learnings available to all operators of long-term care centres so that we can hopefully do our very, very best and make every reasonable effort to ensure that this doesn't happen again.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll introduce the first of the hon. members. The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Battle River Rural Electrification Association

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the

Battle River Rural Electrification Association. REAs have served the Wetaskiwin-Camrose constituency for over 55 years. They arose out of necessity because rural power customers were being overlooked by the larger power companies of the day.

Today the Battle River REA ensures that rural consumers have a reliable power supply. The Battle River REA is an amalgamation of 19 REAs from around central Alberta. It continues to grow, and this is growth undoubtedly linked to the fine service that it provides to its members.

Not too long ago I helped the Battle River REA open a brand new centralized office in my constituency at Ervick, just west of Camrose. The opening of this building is the culmination of the Battle River REA's tireless work in rural communities in Alberta.

REAs are extremely important for our rural communities. They ensure that the concerns of rural Albertans with regard to electricity are properly heard by both government and industry.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Edmonton Oilers

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A sports franchise cannot be successful without the support of its fans and followers. As a sports fan myself I don't believe that I'm out of order in saying that sports enthusiasts are a demanding bunch who expect the best out of their beloved team day in and day out.

As a result, it is not every day that a small franchise sports team gets rated by the fans as the most popular in the league. Earlier this month the Edmonton Oilers received such a prestigious rating by *ESPN Magazine*. The magazine rated the Oilers not only as the fan favourite in the NHL but also the overall number one bang for your buck in all professional sports. The recognitions, Mr. Speaker, are not only reflective of the organization's commitment to its fans and supporters, but they also reinforce the notion that a sports team does not have to be located in the richest city or have the largest player payroll in order to be successful and popular.

I wish to congratulate the Edmonton Oilers on their great achievement and wish them the best to make a spot in the playoffs, and they'll need it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Freedom to Read Week

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Next week, February 22 to 28, is Freedom to Read Week in Canada. This annual event encourages Canadians to think about and reaffirm their commitment to intellectual freedom guaranteed them under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Check out www.freedomtoread.ca for events in your community.

In Edmonton the freedom to read committee has organized Read is a Four-Letter Word: Teens' Views on Censorship, a reading and debate at 7:30 on Monday, February 23, at the Whitemud Crossing library.

The Writers Guild of Alberta is also encouraging folks to participate in the BookCrossing, an international endeavour to make the whole world a library by having people read a good book, register it at www.bookcrossing.com, and then release it into the wild for someone else to read. Leave it on a park bench or a bus, give it to a friend or a coworker, or leave it at a shelter.

In Calgary the freedom to read committee is celebrating its 10th anniversary by awarding the 2004 freedom of expression award to Greg Gerrard of Pages Bookstore on behalf of his late wife, Cathy

McKay, and with readings by past award winners and raising funds in support of the Writers' Guild of Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

South Calgary High School

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the Calgary board of education and the construction firm of Stuart Olsen. They announced last week that they will be opening the new south Calgary high school one full year ahead of schedule.

On behalf of my constituency and all of the high school students in south Calgary I'd like to recognize and thank them for this much-needed, timely completion of a new high school in Calgary.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Lac La Biche Forest Capital of Canada 2004

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to stand today to announce to members of this Assembly the designation of Lac La Biche as the forest capital of Canada for 2004. The forest capital of Canada program is spearheaded by the Canadian Forestry Association and highlights the valuable role that forests play in the economic and environmental health of our communities. This is a great honour for Lac La Biche, a community that was created and continues to flourish today due in large part to the success of our forest industry.

It is fitting, then, that the theme of the forest capital of Canada should be Lac La Biche, gateway to the boreal forest. As forest capital Lac La Biche and its neighbours will embark on a 12-month celebration of historic community and forest relationships with a focus on the future through public awareness and education on the wise use of our forests.

I would like to ask members of this Assembly to join me in congratulating the people of Lac La Biche and the surrounding area for this great honour.

EPCOR

Mr. Yankowsky: Mr. Speaker, I rise to give recognition to EPCOR on the occasion of their winning the 2004 national award in governance, sponsored by the Conference Board of Canada and Spencer Stuart. The award recognizes innovation and excellence in board governance. EPCOR was one of only three winners.

It all began in 1891, when the city of Edmonton's first power plant was built in the North Saskatchewan River valley. From this early beginning, the company has grown into one of Alberta's leading power companies.

EPCOR won this prestigious award because of its governance model, which blends the best of the private sector with public-sector accountability. This governance model works because the shareholder, board, and management have clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

Congratulations and thanks to Don Lowry, CEO, and the EPCOR board and management for your efforts in winning this award.

The Speaker: Hon. Opposition House Leader, my notes suggest that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is the next participant. Is there a substitute? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Henry Harder

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to

recognize the life of Mr. Henry Harder, who, unfortunately, passed away at the age of 78 years last November. Mr. Harder lived with his wife, Molly, in the Strathearn neighbourhood of Edmonton, where they were very active in their community and their church while they were raising their family and ever since their family has grown up and moved away.

Mr. Harder was a passionate golfer and a very proud grandfather. He found enough time from golf and his family to act as returning officer in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar for many elections. It was this job that displayed his sense of fairness. Everyone who dealt with his office was treated with dignity and respect.

Mr. Harder's strolls through our neighbourhood on Sunday mornings will be sadly missed. His walk to Strathearn United Church was an event. He will be missed, but he will not be forgotten.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we move to the next order of business, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:50 Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you two very special constituents of mine: Keith and Maureen Griffiths from Coronation. Yes, they're my parents. These two people helped make me who I am. I can honestly say that I am as proud of them as they say they are of me. I'd ask them to rise, please, and have the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Bill 2 Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will allow limited recreational vehicle access to continue through the Black Creek heritage rangeland on two already existing trails to maintain access to the few existing designated OHV trails in the adjacent Bob Creek wild-land. Recreational OHV activity is prohibited in heritage rangelands. However, in this case we truly have a unique and exceptional circumstance. Therefore, this bill provides an exception for two specific existing trails through Black Creek heritage rangeland as there are no other feasible alternatives that would allow access into the Bob Creek wild-land. It's also important to note that off-highway vehicles are already allowed in wild-land areas in certain circumstances, such as in Bob Creek.

In conclusion to this introduction to this bill I'd like only to add that this bill fulfills our government's commitment to local stakeholders without opening up the possibility of general recreational off-highway vehicle use in any other heritage rangeland or in any other parts of this particular heritage rangeland. The ranchers and landowners who live in that area have been very cautious and careful

stewards themselves and so, too, have their predecessors for many decades.

So we will look forward to the support of all members of the House as this bill goes through the various stages.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Bill 3

Architects Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the Architects Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this act would define the registration and scope of practice of licensed interior designers and clarify registration and renewal for other professionals included in this act.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 3 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Bill 4

Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 4, that being the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill is in response to a public review process, and it addresses concerns raised by stakeholders and concerned groups and individuals from across the province. The bill includes changes to legislation affecting blind persons who rely upon the use of guide dogs. The amendments will clarify the existing Blind Persons' Rights Act and will strengthen those areas that pertain to the rights of blind persons.

Specifically, this bill will provide a more acceptable definition of blindness as determined by the medical profession. It will also establish higher maximum fines for violations of the act, and it will provide protection for certified dog trainers and for dogs in training, and it will allow an identification card for the blind person/guide dog team to be issued. Finally, it will allow the minister responsible for the act to make regulations respecting qualifications for guide dogs.

I know that blind persons across the province are looking forward to this bill and the amendments that it contains, and they are also looking for support from all members in the House. They already have the Premier's support, Mr. Speaker, and they certainly have mine.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Bill 5

Family Support for Children With Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce to

the Legislature Bill 5, Family Support for Children With Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004.

There are primarily three minor amendments made following consultation with stakeholders on regulations to make this act as we know it, this legislation, the first of its kind in Canada, more user friendly for people especially requiring supports, family members who require supports in caring for children with disabilities. This adds a little clarity.

I move first reading of the bill.

[Motion carried; Bill 5 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Bill 6

Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment I request leave to introduce Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this bill makes minor wording changes to the Income and Employment Supports Act and protects the privacy of third parties who provide information to help government obtain child support agreements and court orders for children and families.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 6 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Bill 7

Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce for first reading Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, the current act expires at the end of this year. We are proposing an amendment to the act which would extend the act to December 31, 2010. This allows the Alberta government to hold Senate elections beyond 2004 should we decide to do so.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a first time]

head: 3:00 **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the appropriate number of copies of the letter I've received from my constituent Abdulahi Mahamad regarding his concerns with false allegations of sexual abuse.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table appropriate copies of a document that I referred to during the question period called Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee report. It was

submitted to the Minister of Health and Wellness in December 2002. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there additional tablings?

Hon. members, the chair has several today, first of all being a copy of Members' Services Committee Order 2/03, Constituency Services Amendment Order (No. 12); as well, Members' Services Committee 3/03, being Constituency Services Amendment Order (No. 13). Number 13 may be of interest to hon. members. Essentially, it will look at the base constituency office allocation numbers to be coming into effect on April 1, 2004. In the base there will be an adjustment from \$52,699 to \$56,915 and a mailing clause increase from 96 cents to 98 cents. The additional information will be forthcoming in that one.

Hon. members, pursuant to section 63(1) of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act I am pleased to table with the Assembly the annual report of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. This covers the activities of that office from April 1, 2002, to March 31, 2003.

The third one. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly the 14th annual report of the Legislative Assembly Office for the calendar year ended December 31, 2002. This report presents the audited financial statements of the fiscal year ended March 31, 2002, and the sixth annual report of the Alberta branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which contains a complete inventory of all travel by all members of this Assembly funded under the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

head:

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the Office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Mar, Minister of Health and Wellness.

Pursuant to the Regional Health Authorities Act the Aspen regional health authority annual report 2002-2003, the Calgary health region 2002-2003 annual report, the Capital health region annual report 2002-2003, the Chinook health region annual report 2002-2003, the Crossroads regional health authority annual report 2002-2003, David Thompson health region annual report 2002-2003, East Central health region annual report 2002-2003, Headwaters health authority 2002-2003 annual report, Health Authority 5 annual report 2002-2003, Keeweenaw Lakes regional health authority No. 15 annual report 2002-2003, the Lakeland regional health authority annual report 2002-2003, Mistahia health region annual report 2002-2003, the Northern Lights regional health services annual report 2002-2003, Northwestern health services region annual report 2002-2003, Palliser health region annual report 2002-2003, Peace health region annual report 2002-2003, the WestView regional health authority annual report 2002-2003.

Pursuant to the Health Professions Act the Alberta College of Optometrists annual report 2002, the College of Chiropractors of Alberta annual report 2001-2002 and 2002-2003.

Pursuant to the Opticians Act the Alberta Opticians Association annual report 2002.

Pursuant to the Health Disciplines Act the Health Disciplines Board annual report January 1, 2000, to December 31, 2000; Health Disciplines Board annual report January 1, 2001, to December 31, 2001; and Health Disciplines Board annual report January 1, 2002, to December 31, 2002.

Pursuant to the Regional Health Authorities Act the Alberta Mental Health Board annual report 2002-2003.

Pursuant to the Health Facilities Review Committee Act the

Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee annual report 2001-2002.

Pursuant to the Mental Health Act the Mental Health Patient Advocate Office annual report 2002.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Consideration of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Mr. Griffiths moved that a humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank you, Your Honour, for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour for me to be able to rise today to move acceptance of the Speech from the Throne as delivered by Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

This fourth session of the 25th Alberta Legislature will be one of the most significant in the history of our province not only because it is the last year before our great province reaches its centennial but because of the bold and promising statement delivered by Her Honour yesterday on the course of this province and the future that awaits Albertans.

Her Honour referred to four key areas, or pillars, that will be crucial to Alberta's continued success. I was very excited by that terminology. You see, I had the honour and pleasure of co-chairing with my very talented and hard-working colleague from Innisfail-Sylvan Lake a committee that was tasked with finding a way to ensure that the Alberta advantage would be enjoyed by all Albertans. We approached our work by looking for ways to extend the Alberta advantage off the highway 2 corridor into rural and remote communities. I'm proud to say that the first major step in our work has been completed with the report entitled rural Alberta, land of opportunity, set to be released shortly. In our report we spoke of four key pillars, pillars that are crucial to the success of any small rural or remote community. Those pillars are health care, education, economic growth, and community infrastructure.

All Albertans know that we enjoy one of the best quality health care systems in the world. Rural Albertans also are most keenly aware of the particular challenges that our health care system faces in trying to deliver those services. The challenge of trying to get the same work done year after year while input costs continually rise but little new money comes in is very reminiscent of farming. Our rural Albertans are creative, imaginative, and hard-working and are prepared to be part of a long-term solution, Mr. Speaker, to the health care issues that our province is facing.

The Health Services Utilization and Outcomes Commission has the current role of monitoring and reporting on the performance of Alberta's health system. The commission created a report card of provincial health care, part of which analyzed the key components of health care delivery by health authority region. What was discovered from that report was that the East Central health authority, the only health authority without a full-scale regional hospital designed to achieve economies of scale on health care service delivery, had far and away the greatest level of customer satisfaction, a commodity often hard to come by in today's world of exceedingly

high expectations. This accomplishment, Mr. Speaker, was possible only because of the close co-operation between the authority and the rural communities it serves. Thanks to their close work they were able to find ways to meet the health and community needs of those rural Albertans.

There is so much yet to do, Mr. Speaker. Communities across this great province are working hard to find ways to deliver quality health care in creative and innovative ways that maximize efficiency and assist in the repatriation of services to rural Alberta. Such solutions could help us maintain quality rural services while relieving stress on urban centres. But the implementation of new and creative ideas will need the support and co-operation of both urban and rural health regions, the public, provincial health unions, the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Rural Physician Action Plan, the provincial and federal governments, and, well, as you can see, the co-operation of nothing short of every organization associated with health care in this province. I know it may sound challenging, but everything worth doing is.

I must say that I was excited to see the continued commitment of this government to delivering quality health care services in cost-efficient and innovative ways through numerous initiatives, not the least of which is the expansion of the commission mandate to that of a quality health council. That commitment will reap great results for all Albertans.

We know rural Albertans are creative, imaginative, and hard-working, and whether it is in delivery of health care or finding new ways to grow their local economies, Mr. Speaker, they will continue to find ways to succeed.

From an economic point of view, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has led the nation, even North America, in fiscal and economic policies that other jurisdictions have been working hard to mimic for years now. Rural Alberta and Albertans have experienced some very trying times in the past few years, mainly the worst drought in historical record, followed by a lone case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy that has devastated our beef industry.

These trying times have led many rural Albertans to feel that they are economically underdeveloped and inadequately diversified to cope with the new world and changing times. They see buildings and facilities closing, youth, young families, and even seniors moving away, sometimes for new jobs, sometimes for better access to education or health care or community services, but always – always – for new opportunities that today appear few and far between in the rural landscape. Rural Albertans need faith, and they need hope, but most of all they need to know that there is a vision for the province, a vision in which they are viewed as growing, prospering Albertans and positively contributing to the collective province.

3:10

I was excited to see some of that vision in the new and renewed commitments I heard yesterday, Mr. Speaker, commitments that are designed to ensure that Alberta's entire economy not only remains strong but builds on its foundation to grow and diversify every corner of our economy. The new value-added strategy will lead the process of moving our provincial economy from one that is predominantly based on harvesting and exporting natural resources such as grain, oilseeds, raw wood products, oil and gas, coal to one that turns those resources into finished goods for export, thereby creating jobs here in Alberta, adding value here in Alberta.

Other initiatives outlined in the Speech from the Throne such as the life sciences initiative and tackling the Canadian Wheat Board issue head-on will do much to compound the advantages that can be achieved with the value-added strategy. Rural Albertans will be pleased by these commitments and with ample reason too. However,

the government must ensure that the new economy, the value-added industries, and new technologies that lead this economy and this province into a prosperous second century are not located only within urban strongholds. Placing or locating value-added industries and technologies in urban centres and merely leaving rural Albertans and the rural economy to harvest natural resources for those processes will do nothing to mitigate the situation in rural Alberta. In order to attract business and industry to rural Alberta, there must be a sound physical infrastructure within and among those communities.

I was glad to hear a commitment to extend the capital plan another year, until 2007. Quality transportation, whether by plane, train, or automobile, is essential to ensuring that artificial barriers aren't created, thus making location in rural areas unfeasible.

We cannot forget either, Mr. Speaker, that infrastructure is also important in areas of telecommunications and the Internet. Improved telecommunication service and SuperNet access to every community within Alberta means that rural Albertans and rural communities will be able to partake in the attraction of ICT industries and business, which will again assist in mitigating the dependence on our resource-based economy.

I was also very pleased to hear about the province's commitment to tourism across the province. Tourism continues to be one of the fastest growing industries around the world. Alberta has one of the richest and most unique histories on the continent, Mr. Speaker, blending strong cowboy traditions with native culture, with buffalo, grain elevators, and steam trains. People around the world are fascinated by those aspects of our culture, and the potential to capitalize on that interest could lead to an industry infinitely more dynamic than the one inspired by the dinosaur craze, but we need to ensure from this moment on that we are prepared to commit to developing and packaging tourism products that cater to these new interests and not just marketing familiar favourites. This is one case where the approach "if you build it, they will come" could never hold more true. I look forward to seeing the tourism strategy fleshed out in the weeks and months to come.

I could speak about economic growth opportunities all day, and I'm sure that some members may feel that I already have, but I simply could not leave this subject without mentioning what is likely one of the most important initiatives that I believe this government will undertake in its entire 20-year strategic plan, Mr. Speaker. I'm referring here to the water strategy. Simply put, all of the economic issues discussed to date are futile without water. This province would be hard-pressed to grow tourism, to grow value-added production, to grow primary production, for that matter, or even to grow its very own population without access to clean, potable water. Regardless of what anyone believes should be done with water, none can deny that water will become a major issue and will remain so forever. This issue needs to be addressed now, while we can act now, rather than later when there is only reaction. So I applaud the government for addressing this issue now.

The government has long had an understanding of the nature of the global economy and is fully aware of the need for open borders and free trade to ensure a strong local economy. Border and free trade issues have not been restricted to beef and BSE, however. They have grown in number in recent years with duties on Canadian wheat, softwood lumber, and a host of other issues. Those issues have direct negative consequences to all Albertans, Mr. Speaker, but specifically to rural Alberta.

Opening an Alberta office in Washington, D.C., is a clear demonstration that this government will not wait for the Canadian government to take the initiative on behalf of this province, and it will no longer allow the mood of the federal government to deter-

mine our province's economic fate. This action is welcome. It shows leadership, and it inspires confidence most among those dependent upon the relationship with our neighbours to the south.

There is a very common saying that I'm sure everyone in this Assembly is familiar with: give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime. Well, Mr. Speaker, that is the nature of education, and that phrase shows its intrinsic value to society. But as I have done so far in this address, I will not speak of the benefit to all Albertans of education but specifically to the importance of education to rural Albertans.

I have always seen this government's deep commitment to education at every level and to every single student, and much of that commitment was reflected within the Learning Commission's report, that was released only recently. There are, however, still small but significant issues that remain unsolved in rural Alberta. These issues are outside the scope of the commission's report, but I am confident that they will be addressed in the months to come.

To be more specific, Mr. Speaker, transportation is a growing issue within rural communities as younger and younger children are finding themselves on longer and longer bus rides, sometimes caused by school closures, sometimes by fewer buses to make up routes, but always caused by shortened resources. The cause is not necessarily provincial funding, but can also be school board management as student numbers decline in many school jurisdictions while dollars spent on administration often remain the same.

In many rural communities class size is not an issue, but rather it is the inflexibility in class accommodation. In a community with one school and one class for each grade, how is the community to handle one class that may be an anomaly and have 40 students at the grade 7 level? A good teacher often cannot be hired for one year to deal with such a situation, and it's impossible to find a teacher with the credentials to follow the class from primary grades right through to high school. How do rural schools address these anomalies in these situations? Those are educational issues that need to be addressed.

It's imperative that communities, school boards, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and the provincial government work to find ways to deliver education in a manner that utilizes public dollars to the maximum available benefit of the community as a whole. However, kindergarten to grade 12 is not the fundamental issue in many small communities. Many communities are curious about how to improve access for adults to education, and how to address on-site training for high school graduates that may want to stay in or close to their community while they work.

These ideas are not just about education but are also about the economic growth of a community. Many communities struggle with how to attract business or industries when further on-the-job training or upgrading of skills cannot be done close to the community; the employees would have to travel. Communities also face difficulties in retraining and attracting youth and young families when higher education opportunities are lacking and far flung. Young people usually move to places where higher learning opportunities are in greater abundance and inevitably just tend to be located in those areas. I cannot suggest any solutions, Mr. Speaker, but I am confident that this government will continue to lead in the pursuit of finding solutions to these and other issues in education with all stakeholders and will work hard to present all Albertans with opportunities for life-long learning.

From a community infrastructure perspective many rural communities, counties, towns, and villages find that they are falling behind. Whether we are discussing community halls, sports facilities such as rinks and ball diamonds, bowling alleys, service clubs, and so on, the community infrastructure across rural Alberta is weakening and in some places deteriorating quickly. What is at stake here, Mr.

Speaker, is the quality of life of rural Albertans. Rural Albertans lose quality of life as they lose affordable and available community infrastructure. They also lose the ability to attract new and young people who are looking for opportunities in small communities. To remedy this problem, we need to offer rural Albertans supports and tools which will not only help them realize their full potential but which will enable them to energize their local economies, their volunteers, and their fundraising capacities.

3:20

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, we need to encourage and promote rural development projects regardless of whether they are funded publicly or privately in order to expand the local infrastructure and capitalize on the entrepreneurial spirit that is so readily available and already in place in rural Alberta.

After the first case of BSE was discovered, Mr. Speaker, I was very heartened that Albertans came together in support of the beef industry, which in turn resulted in a 70 per cent rise in the consumption of beef in our province. I have often said that rural Albertans are strong and proud and that this group has survived droughts, pestilence, flooding, blizzards, tornadoes, hailstorms, and even the odd bout of government intervention. Federal intervention, mind you.

At this time for many rural Albertans the situation seems desperate, and for some it undoubtedly is. There are also a lot more questions than answers, and unfortunately there is no magic bullet that will resolve this emotionally charged and hotly political international issue.

However, there are two things that all Albertans, especially rural Albertans, can be sure of. First, regardless of what happens at any political level in the weeks, months, and even the years to come, nothing in the beef industry, indeed in rural Alberta will ever be the way it was. Secondly, the provincial government and all Albertans will be there for the people of this devastated industry in the days, weeks, and years to come, whether it be through redevelopment, refocusing, repositioning, or transitioning the industry. Two eternal truths remain. Albertans don't just survive; they succeed. And they do so because they look out for each other.

There is not a more pivotal point in our province's centennial than this 99th year. I and all Albertans are proud of this government's continued commitment as outlined in the Speech from the Throne to a rural development strategy that will help ensure that people and businesses in rural Alberta enjoy every opportunity to reach their full potential. It is imperative, especially now, that something be done to share the Alberta advantage with that part of Alberta that so desperately needs our immediate attention and co-operation. If we don't, that segment of the population stops producing what amounts to far more than its share of the economy.

The consequences for the entire province will be devastating. The Alberta advantage created in rural Alberta could be lost to all Albertans. Without healthy, vibrant rural and remote communities it will be impossible to continue to ensure that our resource-based economy continues to grow and thrive. Furthermore, it will be next to impossible to ensure continued diversification and the growth of value-added production within this province without strong, vibrant rural communities. In short, it will be almost infeasible to effectively and successfully implement any of the great new initiatives that the government has announced to take us into the next century without rural Alberta enjoying it.

I would like to take this final moment of my remarks to pay the deepest of respect to Her Honour the Honourable Lieutenant Governor for her eternal grace, her constant dignity, her unwavering faith in the human spirit, and of course her fabulous hugs. Mr.

Speaker, I know that if Her Honour could give rural Alberta a hug right now, she would. I'm confident that all hon. members in this Assembly agree with me when I state that Her Honour is a shining example of the capacity of the human spirit to endure, survive, and prosper through adversity. In hard times may we all, rural and urban Albertans alike, remember Her Honour's strength, grace, and faith and aspire to such levels of composure, dignity, and strength in times of despair. May she also continue to serve us in her current capacity for years to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has truly been a pleasure to have the opportunity to move the Speech from the Throne.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm extremely proud and honoured to have been asked to rise on behalf of the people of Calgary-Egmont to second the motion put forward by the hon. and young Member for Wainwright to accept the Speech from the Throne – I'm sure that his parents must be very proud of him today – a speech that was delivered with grace and special charm by the Honourable Lieutenant Governor, Lois Hole. Her Honour represents the best traditions of the office of Lieutenant Governor, and I'm sure that I speak for everyone in this Chamber when I say that Alberta's favourite grandmother has been in our thoughts and prayers during the personal challenges that she endured and overcame with such grace over the past year.

Mr. Speaker, I wish I were in a position of eastern influence so that I could influence the extension of her appointment at least to the end of 2005, our centennial year. Her Honour is loved by all Albertans and, in my view, is a true expression of the values and steadfastness that have made Alberta what it is today. A centennial celebration without Her Honour is just not an option. Show us that you're listening, Mr. Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, in delivering the Speech from the Throne, Her Honour has opened the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature of Alberta. I feel so privileged to be a member of this Legislature and to represent the people of Calgary-Egmont, who have honoured me with the responsibility to speak on their behalf as we prepare to move into our second century.

Mr. Speaker, the people of Calgary-Egmont embody the qualities that make Alberta such a wonderful place to live. In many ways they embody the qualities that we so admire in Her Honour: directness, honesty, entrepreneurship, strength of character, kindness, dedicated service, and a willingness to tackle problems head-on, persevere, and emerge stronger for the future, and – I would agree with the hon. Member for Wainwright – her hugs as well. Those same values and attitudes have brought Alberta from a fledgling member of Confederation in 1905 to become one of the strongest provinces in this great country in less than a century.

Albertans continue to make significant contributions to the freedom and quality of life that we have experienced as Canadians, and I'd like to take this opportunity to offer my best wishes to our troops currently stationed in Afghanistan and throughout the world. Their past and present service to Canada and Alberta contributes to the richness of our lives and has secured the freedom for Albertans to pursue their dreams in peace and security.

Mr. Speaker, I've called Alberta my home for all of my life, as has my father before me and two generations before him, and now two more generations, my children and grandchildren, continue to be blessed with the opportunity to be all that they can be and contribute to the fabric of this great province. I have considered myself privileged to be able to live and raise my children to appreciate the awesome natural beauty that is Alberta and the entrepreneurial

strength of character of Albertans that define who we are as a people. Additionally, my children have enjoyed the benefits that come from the wealth of natural resources and the hard work of previous generations that have made Alberta what we have become today.

The strength of character of Albertans that rise to every challenge has never been so evident as during the current agricultural crisis. Albertans did not hesitate to wholeheartedly support the cattle industry and continue to do so in the face of ongoing difficulties. I'm confident that we will ultimately emerge stronger and resume our international role as the beef of choice for all nations.

Mr. Speaker, while we can look back at success and the current challenges for our people, we must look forward with Her Honour for ways to contribute to the conditions that will enhance the future success of our grandchildren. Almost two years ago I was blessed with my first grandchild, and I was so proud when Her Honour announced the Alberta centennial education savings plan, because my grandson Matthew provided the motivation for the plan, and now thanks to the statesmanship of our Premier we have the opportunity to make it a reality for all future Albertans. Statesmanship, for the benefit of those across the way, focuses on the benefits for the next generation, while partisan politics frequently focuses exclusively on the next election.

I'll look forward to the debate in this House as we examine the benefits of this tremendous investment for the future generations of Albertans.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, in my former life I was involved in the computer and telecommunications industry, so I was especially pleased when Her Honour spoke about unleashing innovation as one of the four pillars that will become the framework for future success for all Albertans. By supporting innovation in Alberta, we can not only move from being exporters of raw material but to being exporters of finished goods and now a new product called knowledge. I feel that the knowledge industry has the potential to become the fifth pillar in Alberta's economy in our second century, the 21st century.

The creativity required for the knowledge industry depends in part on successfully unleashing innovation and successfully deploying ICT initiatives like SuperNet that will become the conduit of knowledge. Another critical initiative to support this vision announced by Her Honour is the creation of an ICT institute to guide research and innovation in this emerging sector. This initiative will in turn help support Alberta's booming economy, that saw the creation of 206,300 jobs over the last five years and 47,900 jobs in 2003 alone. Our unemployment levels continue to be amongst the lowest in the country, and the provincial average hourly wage is higher than the Canadian average.

Mr. Speaker, I've been privileged over the last 10 years to play a small part in the initiatives that have advanced innovation and ICT to the forefront in this government. As politicians we are often quick to take credit for these initiatives when in reality we are accidents of democracy, that happened to place us in the presence of great Albertans who are the ones who, in reality, make it all happen. So I salute all of those clear-thinking Albertans from all disciplines who continue to serve Alberta on all types of authorities, boards, and committees of government and who provide the good counsel from which our decisions flow. Another critical initiative brought forward by these clear-thinking Albertans will see the creation of a life sciences institute to co-ordinate research taking place across the province in areas such as agriculture, environment, forestry, health, bioenergy and water research.

Mr. Speaker, this new knowledge age must be supported from a young age, and that's why I was so pleased when Her Honour spoke

to the government's continued strong support for education at all levels. As most Albertans know, Her Honour has a passion for ensuring that Alberta's children continue to benefit from one of the best education systems in the world, and I share her passion. As the international community evolves around globalization, having an excellent educational experience and, I might add, in more than one language will become even more important to ensure the future success and quality of life for our children.

In October 2003 the members of the Alberta Commission on Learning released their final report. They detailed 95 recommendations that they felt would improve the education system in Alberta. This past December the government responded by adopting 84 of the 95 recommendations. This shows the level of commitment of the government to ensuring that Alberta continues to have one of the best education systems in the world.

The recommendations of the Learning Commission provide opportunities to improve our education system in a variety of ways. I'm pleased to note that the throne speech confirms that the government is taking the report seriously and is taking the necessary steps to implement a great number of the recommendations. This year increased funding for learning will work in combination with a new funding framework that gives school boards increased flexibility to meet the unique needs and circumstances of each Alberta community. Government will not dictate to school boards how to allocate these dollars they receive, leaving it to each board to address priority areas and be more accountable to the parents in each community for their decisions and outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, access to postsecondary institutions is key to producing a productive and caring society. Her Honour described new funding for postsecondary learning that will include an increase in base operating grants for all postsecondary institutions as well as additional dollars for new spaces in high-demand programs. Indeed, that initial investment will come with a commitment to create a total of 2,000 new spaces over the next four years.

Mr. Speaker, on another matter, Her Honour knows of what she speaks because she's played an important role in making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. I was pleased to hear Her Honour describe how this year the government will continue building on programs already in place to ensure that all Albertans enjoy the highest possible quality of life with a particular focus on the most vulnerable members of Alberta communities, a focus that includes all children. In her words, and I quote: there can be no better accomplishment for Albertans than to raise healthy and happy children who are confident in their knowledge and their opportunities about their future and compassionate in their interests with their peers, their community, and the public at large.

While the government steps forward to create that kind of environment for all children, it will be the subject of an upcoming Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying, and I certainly want to congratulate the Minister of Children's Services for putting that together, because I think that's a tremendously important initiative. That round-table will be held in May and will be of course handled with prior consultation province-wide. Communities and government partners find ways to break the cycle of violence, that can have a devastating and lasting effect in dividing families and on the fabric of Alberta communities.

Ultimately, many Albertans are acting in support with communities to strengthen the modelling of values and attitudes in our communities. I was very pleased to see comments dealing with values and attitudes in the Learning Commission report. I think that they're on the right track, and I'm aware that the ASBA is doing some good work in this area and is planning a conference soon to deal with this very important issue.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's most vulnerable citizens will also be protected through a new plan to prevent 21st century sexual crimes that target children such as Internet crimes, Internet luring, child pornography, and child prostitution. We're fortunate here in this province through the actions of our Solicitor General, the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, to have legislation to protect children involved in prostitution, but this new plan will bring all crimes that sexually exploit children under one initiative, strengthening the way in which young Albertans are protected from exploitation and abuse.

Mr. Speaker, the Speech from the Throne, delivered by Her Honour, contained much more that time does not permit me to discuss. She re-emphasized the government's commitment to Alberta ideals of making spending decisions that best meet the needs of Albertans while being fiscally responsible. These ideals, coupled with strength of character and the willingness to face difficult challenges, will ensure that all Albertans, including my grandson Matthew, will be proud to live in the best province in Canada.

So may God bless Her Honour and Alberta. Thank you very much.

3:40

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would add my comments and praise of Her Honour for the speech that she delivered yesterday. Her Honour always speaks with grace, good humour, and warmth, and each occasion that you meet her is one that you remember. She's also very unique in terms of Lieutenant Governors of this province in her ability to speak out in terms of what she believes in, and she's been an outspoken advocate for education and schools in the province, as she has been for libraries. Yet she does it in a way that doesn't offend and has, I think, the desired impact on listeners. She again delivered a speech yesterday that we were all privileged to be part of the audience and listen to.

As I listened to the speech, Mr. Speaker, I couldn't help but think back to my constituency. I had been in the office for a number of days and had gone through the log of constituents that we had worked with in the last week or so, and I was struck by how there seem to be two worlds in our province: the world that we heard about yesterday, for the most part but not exclusively, in the throne speech and a world that is lived in by a whole large group of other Albertans.

As I listened to the speech, I wondered what that speech would sound like to the mother who phoned our office and is on a multiple handicap program. Her income is \$675 a month. She was provided at the beginning of the year \$173 for school fees for her teen daughter, and she called because she was in great distress that her daughter was not going to be able to take part in a number of junior high school programs because she didn't have the funds to pay the fees.

I wonder how she would have listened and reacted to the centennial savings plan. What kind of chance is there that she'll be able to even get a hundred dollars to open such a plan for her daughter, much less add to it over the coming years? I wondered how she might react to the K to 12 suggestions in the throne speech saying that there is going to be more money added.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Yet she lives in a world of school fees. We now have fees for courses in schools. We have always had and still continue to have the textbook fees and a whole host of other fees that have now been

resorted to by schools particularly in this city, where they have been desperate for funds. The cuts have really hurt a lot of schools. It seems to me that one of the things that has been lost over the past number of years has been the "public" in public education, and I think it is mothers and children of parents like this that suffer the most.

The second constituent that I thought of was again a lone-parent mother who phoned me in desperation, saying that her utilities were going to be cut off because she was unable to pay the utility bills. And she's not alone. We have recommended and had to draw upon the CFRN Good Neighbour fund to try to bail out constituents who find themselves in a similar situation more times than I care to recall. I wondered, as she listened to the throne speech, what she would think of the lack of any mention of a deregulation plan and modifications that might be made to it that would help the province return to utility rates that were affordable, but the throne speech was strangely silent.

Another constituent phoned, a young man who was mired in debt, postsecondary school debt and private debt that he had added to that to try to complete his program, and through some unfortunate circumstances healthwise found himself in some difficulty meeting all the obligations. I wondered, as he listened to the plans for increasing funding for postsecondary education, how he felt about nothing being said about tuition and nothing in terms of support for students with respect to loans and the kinds of difficulties that they find themselves in.

A third constituent came in with his son and brought with him their invoices from their automobile insurance company and tried to make the case – at least we're looking into it for them – that they were facing some unwarranted increases in their rates. They were getting little sympathy from the insurance company and found themselves facing the possibility of not being able to drive their vehicles. Again, if you looked at the throne speech, for that constituent the speech was strangely silent. I guess I wonder why the two pocketbook issues that seem to be front and foremost, utilities and auto insurance, were strangely missing from the Speech from the Throne.

The K to 12 class-size proposals leave me a little concerned because as I read the throne speech carefully, it talks about regulations. I hope that's not going to be the solution for the Learning Commission recommendation that K to 3 students be in classes of 17 or less and the other recommendations with respect to class size, that there won't be a set of regulations put in place that lays on the board the responsibility, for instance, for saying that there shan't be more than 30 students in a high school class and then leaves it up to board to try and figure out how that's going to work without the additional resources that are going to be needed. I had looked forward to that reference to class sizes to be accompanied with some recommendation in respect to funding increases, but it wasn't, and I'll watch very carefully for that link to be made when the spring budget is presented.

As you go through the recommendations, I think, as I said, that for many Albertans and a growing number of Albertans the throne speech presented a different world and not one that they're very familiar with. Again, I think it's unfortunate at this time in our history, when we are so blessed with resources, that there isn't a huge attempt to make sure that all Albertans are benefiting from the richness of those resources. It's something that's troubled me, and I think even more troubling, Mr. Speaker, is the dismissal of these people and the growing feeling, it seems to me, that they are somehow responsible for their own plight and that whatever happens to them is just too bad and that the greater community has no responsibility or if not no responsibility, then minimal responsibility

for what happens to them. As I say, that's a feeling I've had for the last number of years, that that's a growing perception among some Albertans.

3:50

As I look back at the speech itself, the fact that base funding for postsecondary institutions is going to be increased is going to be welcomed, certainly, by those institutions. I think the proof in the pudding will be, of course, in the budget in terms of how much it is. For a long time I wished and hoped and advocated that the government work with those institutions and the federal government to bring in a long-term plan for financing postsecondary schools in this province.

I don't think we can continue the way we are. If you believe the president of the University of Alberta – and he presents the figures to support it – 20 years ago a student's dollar in tuition was matched by \$10 from government sources. Today a dollar put in by a student is matched by only \$2.34 from the government. There's been a tremendous drop-off of financial support for our postsecondary institutions, Mr. Speaker, and I submit that it can't continue, that we're going to have institutions in crisis and that the pressure on students for increased tuition and the pressure to try to access outside funding is going to reach a breaking point where these institutions are not going to be able to cover their costs.

If you look at one area alone, utilities, the massive growth in those utilities over the past number of years, the expenses for those institutions are not going down. That's why my call for a long-term plan for funding for postsecondary institutions in the province. As I said, I think that whether the government recognizes it or not, it's eventually going to have to happen.

A similar thing may be said about the K to 12 system. I find it a little irksome, Mr. Speaker, that the government in the speech talks about giving boards the authority to spend money as they see fit. It was this government that took that authority away when they started enveloping money. So it is a little irksome to say the least. But just to say, "Now we won't have an envelope for administration, and now we won't have an envelope for instruction; now you can spend it any way you want," isn't going to solve their financial problems if there's not enough money. It's the total money in the envelope that's going to be very important. I don't think tinkering with the funding framework or giving boards more freedom with respect to how they spend it addresses the fundamental problem for the K to 12 system, and that is that no one knows what it costs to educate a youngster in the K to 12 system.

Adequacy has not been addressed. I give the government credit for addressing equity in the early 90s, when they addressed the problem of some wealthy boards with a large tax base being able to finance their schools at a much higher rate than school districts who found themselves in jurisdictions where there was a smaller tax base to draw upon. The government's solution was to take all the money in and then redistribute it across the province on a per-pupil basis, which is a commendable step in terms of equity.

But equity is not enough, Mr. Speaker. Equity has to be coupled with adequacy. It's no good saying, yes, we have a system that's equitably funded if everyone is equally poor. I think that at least for the large urban boards in this province, those that educate 75 to 80 per cent of the youngsters, that's exactly what has happened. They find themselves not being able to access the resources they need to provide programs for the youngsters that they're expected to serve.

The recommendation from the Learning Commission that would have given them some taxing authority, as distasteful as that was, Mr. Speaker, would have at least given them some flexibility. Whether it would have led to the situation we had in the '90s before

the changes were made, where that taxing became unacceptable to communities, it's hard to tell, but at least the proposal from the Learning Commission was designed to give them some access to funds.

But again the problem is adequacy, and our neighbours south of the border have had to face the problem of adequacy because they've been forced to by the courts. You have a number of American states where parents have gone to the courts and said, "Look; the state is not providing adequate funds for my youngster," giving that youngster the program that he should have, and the courts have said to those states: then you better revise your funding formulas and your funding frameworks so that adequacy is addressed.

Of course, that raises the whole question of adequacy. What is an adequate education? You'll have states like Wyoming who have said that schools must prepare every youngster to be eligible for a postsecondary program on graduation. That could be vocational. It could be university. It could be an institute. It could be a whole variety of things. But there's the obligation on the school system there of an adequate education. It's one that prepares every youngster for that world when they leave 12th grade.

Other states have approached it quite differently and come up with different measures of what they consider adequate, but it's something that we haven't even looked at in this province. It's been raised. We held a town hall meeting, and I know some government members were there. At least one member of the Learning Commission was at that meeting, yet again we see a throne speech with nothing in terms of adequacy being addressed.

A number of other proposals in the throne speech are going to cause a lot of discussion. I've already mentioned the centennial education savings fund, and as much as I welcome any kind of help for parents and for students in terms of financing their education, I think it may have some unfortunate consequences. One of them is to signal to parents: you're the one that has to pick up the costs for postsecondary education. That's fine for those parents and those students where that's a possibility, but there are a vast number of students in this province where that's not the case. There's a television ad on by one of the insurance companies the other night promoting an educational savings plan and indicating what tuition is going to cost 10, 20 years down the road. Astronomical. I think it's a well-intentioned plan that's going to have some unintended consequences, as I said.

I think the other thing that it seems to do is to pick winners and losers: those people in the province that can afford those kinds of programs for their youngsters and those that can't. A third thing that it does is that it takes away the pressure for the government to really seriously examine postsecondary funding. Again, I think that's a task that the government needs to address in the very near future.

So as much as some may applaud the centennial education savings, I think we'd be naive if we didn't realize that it's going to have varied effects and some policy effects in terms of the future of the province.

4:00

I wanted to touch briefly on the postsecondary degree-granting proposal in the speech, Mr. Speaker, and the move of the government to open up degree granting. It's something that I support, and I think any move that can be taken to open doors to widen the opportunity for students to have access to degrees is worthy of support. I think the major roadblock for this in the past, of course, has been fears of quality. Are the degrees that are going to be offered from some institutions going to be of the quality that one would expect from a university or a college in this province? We have the Campus Alberta quality council which is going to be charged with sanctioning those degrees.

I think it's a move, as long as it's well monitored – I remember

serving on a committee that looked at an institution in the province that wanted to be given degree-granting status and the close scrutiny that they were given in terms of their library collections, the qualifications of their staff, the condition of their laboratories. Those things were looked at extremely carefully, and if that kind of standard remains in place, then I think that this will be a good move in the province.

The fear is that the opposite will happen. We have had experience with that in the province already, not with degree granting but with some of the diploma granting, the private institutions granting diplomas. We've had a couple of those fail and leave students stranded. We've had representations from groups of students from some of those institutions really concerned about the quality of instruction, the kinds of resources that they have to work with, and how much the final paper that they were going to get at the end of the program was really worth. As far as I know, there are still no standards in place, and there is no way that they can be enforced. I had one student tell me that the instructor was two pages ahead of him with respect to instruction in the computer course that he was taking, and that's just not good enough.

I think we can and should at this time raise legitimate concerns about the quality of those degrees. But I think it would be great for our students to be able to access a degree and not have to move to Edmonton or to Calgary but to get it elsewhere in the province and to get a good quality program that was recognized elsewhere. Right now for students in some parts of this province there is no choice, and hopefully this will open the doors to that.

There has been a comment about the school wellness program and the daily physical education. I think the research on daily physical education is pretty well founded. It has an impact on student achievement, to say nothing of their physical well-being. It's been done elsewhere and probably long overdue. The concerns raised, of course, are the preparation and the resources to put that kind of program in place. Are schools going to have the facilities where that daily physical education program may be carried out? Are they going to have the resources for people to run quality programs that youngsters deserve?

I think the last item I'd like to comment on, Mr. Speaker, is the centennial capital plan. The reaction to me by people in terms of the infrastructure plans is confusion. It seems that money is announced then reannounced, that jurisdictions make plans and those plans have to be changed or those plans have to be delayed, and I think that that's unfortunate. It seems to me that it is one area that badly needs attention, badly needs resources, and the kind of confusion and the uncertainty that exists around the plans, I think, has to be dealt with and dealt with directly. I think that, for instance, there should be some limit on how many times you announce funds for a project. It does no one any good when they're repeatedly announced and then they end up being delayed or not completed at all. So I would make a plea for the centennial capital plan to be clear and straightforward and carried out as quickly and as carefully as we would hope those plans would be.

I'll just conclude, Mr. Speaker, returning to what I started out with, and that's this notion of two different worlds. I give credit to the throne speech where there is going to be assistance for families that are facing violent situations. I think the concern for bullying and its impact on children, trying to protect youngsters from the Internet – these are good initiatives, but they are certainly among the minority proposals in the Speech from the Throne.

Like the previous speaker, Mr. Speaker, I too have a grandson. Mine's four years old, and his name, too, happens to be Matthew. I look in this throne speech and just wonder: 14 years down the road is he going to have the opportunity to access a postsecondary

education? Will his high school experience be the kind of experience we would want for all Alberta children? I'm afraid I leave the throne speech with more questions than answers.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 kicks in. Anybody have any questions for the hon. member?

There being none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to have this opportunity to speak to the Speech from the Throne delivered by Her Honour, the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, Lieutenant Governor, at the opening of the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature, Tuesday, February 17.

Mr. Speaker, let me begin my remarks today by commending Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor Lois Hole for her delivery of the Speech from the Throne with her characteristic warmth and humour. For the past four years the Lieutenant Governor has fulfilled the duties of her office with grace, generosity, and, yes, with the hugs for which she is world famous. Over the past year she has shown remarkable courage in facing enormous personal difficulties and health problems. Through it all her characteristic good cheer and work ethic have been an inspiration not only to members on all sides of this House but, indeed, to all Albertans. Thank you, Your Honour. One thing the Premier and I do agree on is for her to remain as Lieutenant Governor through Alberta's centennial year and for as long beyond as she sees fit.

Had the Lieutenant Governor written the throne speech, I suspect it would have read differently, Mr. Speaker. But the throne speech is only read by the Lieutenant Governor; it is written by the government and sets out its agenda for the next year.

Mr. Speaker, I smell an election. It's almost as sure as the first sign of spring that as this Conservative government enters the fourth year of its electoral mandate, the purse strings get loosened, and Albertans are asked to forget what they were put through the previous three years. Albertans are told to forget about the fiasco of electricity deregulation that had drained \$6 million out of their pockets. They're told to forget about the highest auto insurance premiums in western Canada. They're told to forget about student tuition that has tripled in the last dozen years. Albertans get three years of Mr. Hyde, and, presto, the year before an election they get Dr. Jekyll. We need stable, predictable, multiyear funding, but what we get is the government's Jekyll-and-Hyde approach: turn on the taps before an election and turn them off afterwards.

4:10

Much was made in yesterday's throne speech about an education savings plan under which the government proposed to provide a \$500 contribution to children born in 2005 and beyond. The question must be asked, though: is introducing this kind of voucher-style system the most effective way to fund postsecondary education? I think not. Only about 40 per cent of Alberta parents are able to afford to set up a savings plan for their children's postsecondary education. How will this plan assist the 60 per cent of Albertans who lack the financial means to participate?

Mr. Speaker, we need a tuition freeze, not a half-baked savings scheme that will only begin, presumably, to benefit students starting in the year 2023 – eighteen years of wait for even those ones who are fortunate to start receiving this money. Is this what the Conservative government means by a 20-year plan: pay high tuition now and hope for the best 20 years down the road? It's today's students that have seen their tuition fees triple in the past dozen years. For little more than the cost of this education savings plan the government, if it

chose to do so, could immediately freeze tuition fees for every student in university, public college, or technical institute today. Unless we tackle today's sky-high tuition fees, which continue to rise at two or three times the rate of inflation, we are saddling the current generation of students with a lifetime of debt.

In commenting on the government's education savings scheme, Shirley Barg, president of the Council of Alberta University Students, described the RESP strategy as bad policy and went on to say, and I briefly quote: a flat, across-the-board giveaway like this program is about the election, not about postsecondary education. This is indicative of the chronic government underfunding of universities. Albertans won't be fooled. End of quote.

Brett Bergie, executive director of the Alberta College and Technical Institute Students' Executive Council, points out that the program will not benefit anyone born prior to 2005, which is grossly unfair to young people facing sky-high tuition fees now and in future years.

Mr. Speaker, this Jekyll-and-Hyde approach is also evident when it comes to support for K to 12 education. This past September this government laid off 1,000 teachers, causing class sizes to skyrocket. Yet in yesterday's throne speech the government undergoes an election-year conversion by promising to hire more teachers and make class sizes more manageable. In the throne speech the government has the audacity to say, and I quote, the Learning Commission's recommendation to reduce class size is already being implemented, unquote.

Well, tell that to the students of Edmonton public, which lost 450 teachers last September. As a result, 25 per cent of K to grade 3 students are in classes of more than 25; 70 per cent of K to 3 children are in classes of more than 20 students. Class sizes are up significantly in every grade. Try telling these students and their parents that the Learning Commission's recommendations to reduce class sizes are already being implemented. These students and their parents will see such a statement for what it is: pre-election rhetoric from a government that has failed to deliver on its claim that K to 12 education is a top priority.

What about seniors, Mr. Speaker? There was no mention of seniors in the Premier's TV infomercial two weeks ago, and once again seniors barely rated a mention in yesterday's throne speech. There's a vague mention in the throne speech about the government setting up a new process to ensure that long-term care facilities are accountable for the accommodation services they provide. Well, the frail and elderly in Alberta's long-term care centres, who recently faced a hike of anywhere from 38 to 50 per cent in their accommodation rates, must be sleeping easier knowing this. Does the throne speech commit to rolling back some or all of the 50 per cent rate hike? No, it does not.

What about eliminating seniors' health care premiums as a first step to phasing out this regressive and unfair health care tax for all Albertans? Now, that would be a concrete initiative to help the province's seniors. But is scrapping seniors' health care premiums mentioned in the throne speech? No, it's not, Mr. Speaker. That is because the government's priority is not the province's seniors. It is continued corporate tax cuts and royalty giveaways.

The situation facing our rural communities does receive several mentions in the throne speech, Mr. Speaker. A vague mention is made of a comprehensive research program focusing on BSE. While lacking in details, this sounds like a worthwhile initiative which may do some good in the long run but does very little to address the looming farm crisis in the short term.

After recovering late last year, the prices for both finished cattle and feeder cattle are once again in free fall. In some cases cattle are fetching only half of what they were last year. The seriousness of the

situation facing our families and our rural communities cannot be overstated, Mr. Speaker, yet not everyone is suffering. Prices in our supermarkets have barely budged. Profits at Tyson Foods and Cargill, which process 90 per cent of Alberta's cattle, are up, despite the hardship being experienced by our farmers and ranchers.

What else isn't in the throne speech? The throne speech makes no mention of the fact that Alberta has the highest auto insurance rates of any western Canadian province. The throne speech makes no mention of the fact that this province has the highest power bills in Canada because of the Tory government's bungled deregulation scheme. No mention is made of a plan to increase Alberta minimum wage, which is the lowest of any Canadian province and, at \$5.90 per hour, has not been adjusted for almost five years.

The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that there's not much in the throne speech that offers a better deal to middle-class and working Albertans except for vague promises to ramp up spending in areas where the government is vulnerable on the eve of an election. Perhaps all the government's rhetoric about a 20-year plan is an excuse not to deal with the problems of the present. The problems of the present are piling up: mad cow and a looming rural crisis; the highest electricity bills in Canada; the highest auto insurance rates in western Canada; a refusal to scrap health care premiums, which would be good medicine for everyone; royalty giveaways instead of meaningful action to reduce class sizes; the nickelling, diming, loonie-ing, and toonie-ing of our seniors; subsidies for the horse racing industry instead of a break for students on postsecondary education fees.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, while the rest of us have to worry about rising power bills, auto insurance premiums, class sizes, tuition fees, and long-term care centre fee hikes, the government's priority in the throne speech is to go on a 20-year blue-skying exercise in the hope that the government's poor track record in dealing with current challenges will be overlooked. Well, this doesn't wash with Albertans, and it doesn't wash with the New Democrats.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29; any questions for the hon. member?

There being none, the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to be able to respond to Her Honour's Speech from the Throne. Like many Albertans, I have admired the strength and compassion with which the Lieutenant Governor has undertaken her duties over the past year, and it was a joy to once again listen to her deliver the throne speech.

Mr. Speaker, I am an Albertan by choice. Back in 1980 when my husband was transferred to Alberta, we hesitated to accept the job placement. After all, Alberta? It was too far from home. But we had heard how beautiful the Rockies were, and we laughed with a friend who had visited Olds and spent a few evenings at the old Penholder. Maybe Alberta was an okay place to live. Well, we were young and full of adventure, so why not?

4:20

When we arrived, it became all too clear to us that this was home. It had called to us, and we had come home. This was indeed the land of opportunity and majestic mountains and fly-fishing streams unequalled. It was the land of rednecks, where you were not judged by what your family was but by who you were. This was the land of promises: work hard, work smart, and you can make all your dreams come true. Thank you, Alberta, for making my dreams come true.

I can speak for my husband, who is also very thankful for having his dreams come true. So our province moves into its second century. We need to have a plan that will keep this province strong so that the opportunity to work hard, work smart, and make your dreams come true is there for our children and all our grandchildren to come.

In my view, the foundation of any strong province or country has been the individuals and the families who reside there. It is interesting that the teachings of Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, are as relevant today as they were more than 2,000 years ago. Aristotle's philosophical view of a strong nation was this: you start building a strong nation with strong and healthy family units; when that foundation is secure, it creates healthy communities, and those communities come together to create healthy nations or, in our case, a healthy province. Aristotle had one major concern, and that was that should any of the family or the community be corrupted, the entire nation suffers.

So as MLAs, if you want to keep our province strong and free from corruption, then we must keep our families strong. We face the challenge of protecting and enhancing not just our province but the lives of those who reside within our communities. It is our duty to listen to our citizens, to hear their aspirations, and to work to maintain the supports that will help them to achieve their full potential.

For Conservatives this doesn't mean that we become the centre of families. It can't ever mean that. What it means is that the government takes its rightful role as the stewards of a clean, healthy, and safe environment and as facilitators of programs that help those families who need help. It means that we undertake our duty to maintain a strong education system, solid environmental standards that guarantee clean air and clean drinking water, and finally programs designed to aid those who are at a disadvantage, including children in abusive homes, persons with developmental disabilities, seniors who face health and income problems, the homeless, and single parents working hard to raise their families. Just as in every other constituency in Alberta we face all of these challenges in my home constituency of Red Deer-North.

As I think about where Alberta has come during the past 100 years, I often find myself doing so by reflecting on Red Deer's growth in its 100-plus years. Red Deer started out as a small village on the Alberta prairie. It, like many villages in pioneer days, was focused on agricultural pursuits. Red Deer was inhabited by determined men and women who worked tirelessly to build the sort of community that could sustain them through good times and bad. I imagine that when they were told they were going to Alberta, they thought, just like me: Alberta? It was too far from home. But they came anyway because they sensed the opportunity and the promise that was here in this land. I think those pioneers would be proud of their city and proud of our province were they able to see it today. We have kept the promises they made to future generations.

Red Deer has grown from being simply an agricultural hub to being a centre for oil field and gas services, food processing, manufacturing, and retail. We've got a college that is the pride of central Alberta. We've got great workers and hard-working volunteers. We've got strong community values, and like other communities in the Calgary-Edmonton corridor Red Deer has continued to grow, showing itself as a true economic engine and a vital part of the great western tiger. We have much to be proud of.

Yet with that growth has come several problems, and it is these problems that cause me great concern. My focus lately has been on the issue of community safety. Like others who live in Red Deer, I find that our city is in a sort of in-between phase. We all want and appreciate the small city feel, the closeness of our neighbours, the feeling of safety, the promise of lifestyle and community that gives

its young every opportunity to succeed and become the future pillars of Red Deer and of Alberta, but with our huge growth we also find the emergence of gang activity, drugs, family abuse, and violent crime. These elements are eroding the solid foundation of our families and therefore our communities.

I feel comfortable speaking for every upstanding citizen of our city and our province and saying: I want them out. We've had too many families ripped apart by the violence and terrorism of drugs. We've had too many families ripped apart by the terrorism of domestic violence. We've had too many families ripped apart by addictions.

So with our growth and prosperity come the enemies that would destroy us. When these enemies weaken our families, they weaken our province and our country. Aristotle was right. Should any of the family or the community be corrupted, the whole nation suffers, and therefore it becomes our duty to ensure that all Albertans are safe and protected.

Her Honour outlined in the throne speech that in May the province will conduct a round-table on family violence and bullying. These efforts will help communities and government partners find ways to break the devastating cycle of family violence. We will fight crime and drugs through changes to government funding for policing. There will be a new funding formula for policing that will increase the dollars to deliver this very critical service. Special police units have already been assigned to defeat the gangs that seek to control drugs and prostitution in this province, and we look to AADAC to help fight addictions.

I share with Her Honour a commitment to a better and brighter education system. I share with Her Honour and with many of my caucus colleagues the desire for our government to make as strong a commitment as possible to the education of preschool- and elementary school-age citizens, so much so that I believe our government should take on the aim of ensuring that every child in Alberta can read by the time he or she is eight years old. In fact, we should adopt a policy that guarantees that every child who is able is reading by the end of grade 3. Reading is the basic building block of a good education. One of the four pillars of the 20-year plan is leading in learning. Let's lead in learning by guaranteeing that all children will read by grade 3.

A good educational system is the foundation of a strong nation. During my trip to Bangladesh in October, when I attended the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference, I saw a poor nation with great potential. The Bangladeshi people were very friendly and welcoming. They had fought for their independence in the early '70s, and they are going to build a strong nation one day. The majority of people in Bangladesh live in poverty with inadequate food, very little health care, inadequate housing, and a questionable educational system. As I observed the people in the countryside around me, I asked myself how the problems in Bangladesh could be solved and what would be the quickest and most effective way to bring these beautiful people to our higher standard of living. I came to the realization that the only way the quality of life in Bangladesh could be improved for everyone was through education. Education is the foundation of a strong and prosperous nation. For Canada to be a strong and prosperous nation, there must be strong and prosperous provinces and territories.

In November 2003 I was given the honour of being appointed co-chair to the government MLA Committee on Strengthening Alberta's Role in Confederation. It has been a great pleasure to travel to the communities and towns in Alberta to hear what the people have to say. While we hear about an Alberta police force, an Alberta pension plan, and collecting our own taxes, we also hear about the gun registry fiasco, the Canadian Wheat Board monopoly, and infrastructure needs like roads and regional water and sewage

systems. We have also felt the pain of hard-working, desperate farmers whose livelihoods are affected by mad cow disease. I have felt the pain of good and loyal citizens being labelled criminals because their guns are not registered.

The first of the four pillars described in the throne speech is unleashing innovation. We need research and innovation to help us prove to the world that our beef and our food supply in Alberta is safe. We need innovation to help us strengthen the role of this province in Confederation. When we make this province stronger, we make all provinces stronger. I am receiving e-mails from all over Canada saying: go for it Alberta; we are right behind you.

The four pillars of the 20-year plan that Her Honour spoke of are the four pillars of promise. We need to have research and development point us in the right directions. We will lead in learning. We will compete in a global marketplace because this world is getting smaller and smaller and we are a big part of the world's breadbasket. We will go beyond wheat and raw materials to develop centres of manufacturing and export. The fourth pillar will follow from the first three: to make Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit.

There is no doubt in my mind that Alberta is the best place to live and work, and we welcome all visitors. Alberta is the land of the pancake breakfast and the beef barbecue served up with friendly faces and cowboy hats, and if this province is calling you home, as it called to my family, then we offer you goodwill and opportunity. Welcome. But when you come to make it your home, then give it all you have, because you will be expected to return that welcome and to protect the heritage and rights of all Albertans and Canadians.

4:30

I agree with Her Honour when she states that the many new projects and initiatives to be launched in the coming year are much more than the result of careful fiscal planning. They are also a testament to the remarkable energy, dedication, and forward-looking spirit of Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans understand that of those to whom much is given, much is expected. We will fulfill those expectations as we take on the challenges of the future and make Alberta's approaching second century even more successful than the province's first hundred years.

Aristotle was right when he taught that a strong nation rests on a foundation of strong families. This is the promise of Alberta, a province that offers an economy with jobs and safe communities so that your family may grow up strong and free, strong and free to dream and to succeed, a strong province that offers a good education to make your dreams possible and a health care system to keep your body strong and free.

On my way home late at night when the northern lights dance in the winter sky, I pause to watch the beauty and the majesty. I breathe in the crisp air as it fills my lungs with life and energy, and I'm compelled to say a humble prayer of thanks: thanks for the many gifts that I have been given, and thanks for giving me the opportunity to help make this province strong so that I may be able to pass those gifts on to others.

My final thanks is to the people of this great province. Thank you, Alberta, for all that you have done for my family and me.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 kicks in. Any questions for the hon. member?

There being none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. The opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne is always an interesting one, and I listened with great respect and fondness to my hon. colleagues opposite put their feelings, their passions on the record.

It's always nice to hear what people really believe in and want to promote.

I'm picking up a theme as I listen to a number of them today, as though the Lieutenant Governor has written the speech, and we know that it's a quaint tradition that we regard it that way, but in truth it's meant to be – and it is – the government's plan, setting forward its blueprint as read into the record by the Lieutenant Governor. I've listened to a number of very kind remarks about the Lieutenant Governor and her place in the hearts of Albertans, and I think they're all absolutely true and they're all heartfelt, and I would add my voice to that. She has been a wonderful representative for all of us, representing the Queen to the people of Alberta, but I'm sure that also goes the other way, representing Albertans back to the Queen. We all appreciate the heart and soul that she has brought to this position and made it a very human position, and we admire her strength in pursuing that.

We are looking at the Speech from the Throne, and it is the government's blueprint: vague, no new ideas, and once again telling Albertans to lower their expectations, which I always find really interesting coming from this government. It's not about good news and let's look forward; it's about how you need to expect less and how things are going to be a little tougher. Always interesting.

The one thing that I did see as a theme this year – and perhaps the Minister of Environment has been reading some books or having some influence with his colleagues. I can certainly see the three Rs of recycling coming into play here, so we have reuse, reduce, and recycle. Certainly, we have reuse when I look at what's being proposed around the Alberta workfare. That's a reuse of a program that we had in place here in Alberta a good 15 years ago: the Alberta Works program to "help clients assess their strengths and needs," where they go in and you sort of do a little test and they tell you, you know, that you should go off and be a doctor and you should be a ditchdigger and that kind of thing. So here we have it again, Alberta government recycling, in this case reusing an old program.

We have the reduce factor involved here as well as we tell university students that they need to reduce their economic viability with continued high tuition costs and associated costs of trying to get postsecondary education in this province. We have some recycling of some platitudes and ideas when we talk about what's in this particular throne speech for seniors and the usual, well, yes, we respect the dignity and uphold the independence of seniors.

Overall, this speech sounded very much like last year's and the year's before that. I actually had one fellow who hadn't been to listen to a throne speech in a couple of years pull me aside and say: you know, this could have been the same speech. The only thing that was different was that Martha and Henry were no longer involved in it, but other than that, he really couldn't see much difference and wondered if it was possible that it could be the same speech. I hope not, but it's possible, I suppose.

Part of what I'm noticing from this government is that since paying off the net debt in 1999, it's lost its unifier, its glue, its focus, its absolute adherence to a vision that it had, and it's all over the place now. Some members of caucus say: spend money. Some other members of caucus say: don't spend money. Some people say: go forward. Some people say: go back. So it's all over the place, and I think that the throne speech reflects that. That unifying focus has gone, and there's a lot of dissipation of energy.

When I look more specifically at what's being laid out here, I think I am most profoundly disappointed by the flagship bill or the flagship idea, the centennial education savings plan. Talk about reuse, recycle, reduce. Once again we have the government picking winners and losers. Everybody born this date forward gets to be a winner; anybody else, you're on your own. We'd had so many

assurances that that was not going to happen any more, but that's exactly what's happening. Honestly, if you really wanted to be helping the young people and families in Alberta today, then put that money into the universities and the postsecondary educational institutions and reduce the tuition fee across the board for all of those students. That would have an immediate effect on not only those students but their families and any children they're going to have. That would be far fairer than anything that's being contemplated here.

What do I mean by fair? Well, the government says that it plans to offer this \$500 initial amount of money to anyone, any family or parent, that can open a registered education savings plan for their children. Well, if you start to look into this, which I have done, you in fact have to invest some money to get one of these going. You have to buy a minimum number of units, and I suppose, depending on the banking institution or your own tax status, that probably has some effect on what the bottom line is. But you don't get into these things for \$10 or \$25. You're looking at a much more substantial investment. The figure, I've been told, is a hundred dollars, and I'm having that confirmed from someone across the way who would know: a hundred dollars to start it.

So what the government has really said is that for those families out there who can afford to put a hundred dollars into a registered education savings plan, then we will give you \$500. Okay. Then my question here is: what about those families who with a new baby born in 2005 do not have a hundred dollars to put aside into this registered education savings plan? Do they not get the \$500 then? Do they not get to participate in this? Sounds like it. So once again winners and losers. People who are wealthy enough to be able to put aside that hundred dollars get to enjoy the government's largesse. Not wealthy enough? "Sorry. Bye. You're not part of the Alberta advantage." Back to the winners and losers theme.

4:40

I find this a gimmick bill, and this is the biggest disappointment for me in what's being talked about in the government's blueprint. I would like to see the government follow through on lofty ideals about helping students. Well, good; then reduce that tuition. That will help students right now and for a long time to come. But picking those winners and losers and especially setting up families to fail with new babies in 2005 – I'm really disappointed.

Here's another way. You really want to help students? You really want to help young families? Well, the Learning Commission came out with 95 recommendations. The government has already said that they're going to institute 84 of them, but no money has been invested in actually implementing those 84 Learning Commission recommendations, so let's see the money. Invest that money now. Let's get them happening. Let's make it happen. Thus far we've got, "Yeah, yeah, we sure do agree," but no money that's going to actually implement them.

One of the other things that struck me as I went through this was that I have a concern around BSE, which is of enormous consequence to everyone in Alberta. I represent an inner-city riding. Yes, we recognize as well what kind of impact this has already had in Alberta and could have in Alberta. My concern when I read what is in the Speech from the Throne is that I see an attempt to control the message, to spin the message out rather than concrete plans about how it is going to achieve what's being asked from us from those international markets to restore our credibility, to restore our position in the world.

You know, the talk about the single case of BSE and then later there's the second – well, it doesn't say: second case. It just talks about the "single case in the United States connected to Alberta." I

heard someone on CBC who was really laying out some of the things that are possible and that are being asked for by other countries that could be purchasing our beef, things like the exact labelling of where it comes from and the idea of marketing beef, in the way that wine is marketed, from certain regions of Alberta to help restore that credibility. Testing is a huge issue. I don't see that in here. What are we doing about testing? I don't see where that is. So I don't know what the government is trying to tell us with this. All I can see is the massaging of a message, but I don't see the concrete plans to move us out of this.

There's a discussion about skilled workers and the need to strengthen and enhance apprenticeship programs. At the same time it's talking about attracting highly skilled immigrants to the Alberta workforce. Well, let's face it: in most countries that you would go to that already have a highly skilled workforce, they're not going to move from where they are to come to Alberta. So you're actually looking into markets and into countries where they are facing much more stress financially or far fewer opportunities. So really what we're talking about here is cheaper labour rather than more skilled labour, and I am interested to see how the government looks forward to working with and strengthening the workers and particularly the unionized workers in the province as compared to bringing in cheaper labour from somewhere else and how those labourers are going to be treated.

Policing. You know, I'm not going to complain when I see an about-face by the government when it's an about-face that comes to a position that I have been championing. I know that in the draft police report that we actually saw, it specifically said that they would not be looking at funding municipalities, and now in this throne speech they seem to be saying that the government will be funding or considering a different funding formula for police forces. I'm happy to see that. Once again show me the money. What does this actually mean? We're not getting a very clear indication of what would happen. Implement "a new funding formula for policing which will significantly increase the dollars to deliver this important service." That's all it says. So again it's a very vague plan. Let's see the actual money and what that means here.

We've got a number of municipalities and municipal organizations that have indicated, you know, that they have been squeezed by the province on the issue of police funding. The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics has indicated that the province is way behind in funding policing. Saskatchewan pays twice as much per capita on policing, and Newfoundland spends four times as much per person on policing as does Alberta. The same Centre for Justice Statistics has indicated that the province's municipalities pay the highest percentage of the provincial policing costs at 82 per cent, and some communities like Lac La Biche, High Prairie, High Level, Edson, St. Paul, Cardston, Valleyview, and others are paying nearly 50 per cent of their municipal revenue for policing. So we look forward to seeing the money there and what that actually means.

There's also a discussion about continuing a centennial infrastructure program here, and that I am having problems with. What I'm really seeing here is that the regular maintenance of infrastructure and upgrading of infrastructure that's needed in this province, that should be planned for and budgeted for all the way along, that this province has failed so miserably in in the last 10 years has created an infrastructure deficit. They're now going to plow money in there under the guise of the centennial project. What they should be doing all the way along, what they should be doing as prudent managers and stewards of the assets that all Albertans own, they're now going to gussy it up, call it the centennial capital project, and do the work they should have been doing anyway. We're not getting anything, you know, extraordinarily new here, and I don't see any money, and

the end of this fiscal year and the period of time that this throne speech anticipates – there's no money forthcoming for communities to implement centennial plans.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to join those who have spoken in a positive manner in light of what was said in yesterday's Speech from the Throne. I find it most oppressive listening to those who speak from the school of negativity. I have found that the speech yesterday which was read by Her Honour, who is a constituent of mine in the community of St. Albert, was, indeed, one that was full of optimism, and as the speech read, it spoke to the Alberta spirit of generosity, the spirit of strength and compassion, and certainly to the optimism that is in the hearts of so many Albertans, particularly those, I might add, in my community.

I'd like to speak about and pay tribute to, of course, Her Honour for a moment because I do find her to be a woman of true dignity and the embodiment of the common touch. She has presented to us a spirit of Albertans that is very, very honourable, and unlike the Member for Edmonton-Centre I do feel that the tradition is not a quaint one. I believe it is an honourable tradition for Her Honour to read the Speech from the Throne, which is, indeed, not only the blueprint but the vision that we as a government have for the people of this province in the years to come. That vision is embodied in the registered education savings plan for children as it was detailed yesterday in the Speech from the Throne. I believe it is the cornerstone of all that we are envisioning for building the strength of this province as we move into our second century.

I couldn't help but note as well that it is the Speech from the Throne for the 99th year of this province, and 99 has a special meaning, if you will, and is a very lucky number, I think, for those of us who live in the area of the capital city and, indeed, right across the province because of the hockey player who skated with that wonderful number and brought great fame and encouragement and delight to the people of Alberta.

4:50

But I want to return specifically, of course, to the sentiments that have been expressed and to the vision that has been articulated in the Speech from the Throne. The four pillars of the plan to take us and lead us and initiate us into the second century of this province are "unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit."

I want to speak, first of all, about the unleashing innovation. In the speech Her Honour spoke of the incredible emphasis and that we will be directing our resources to research as it will be done in this province, research both pure and applied. It will give us opportunity to create new economic opportunities or circumstances out of our traditional strengths. In particular, I find great delight in the creation of the life sciences institute which will co-ordinate research as it relates to much of what life presents us with for our challenges, from water and a water strategy to agriculture, indeed, to health issues and everything else that encompasses the quality of life that we hope to strengthen for our province.

The second pillar mentioned was leading in learning. Of course, for the people of the constituency of St. Albert that I'm honoured to represent here in this Assembly it means that we can continue our journey of facilitating for everyone the ability to reach their full potential, whether that means my friend Sarah whose abilities are

challenged and encouraged every day in Vital Grandin school or whether it means any one of the 284 Rutherford scholarship recipients from St. Albert over this past year. The important thing is that we will lead everyone and provide the circumstances, the encouragement, and those opportunities for everyone to reach their full potential. This is a value that my community has expressed often.

I should speak a little bit about the preschool programs, the early intervention and the Head Start programs that currently exist in my community. There are many volunteers and qualified teachers who work with young children to enable them and to create a climate of readiness to learn so that those individuals who might have been somewhat shortchanged by either circumstances or ability will be able to be ready with everyone else to reap the benefits of a really remarkable education system.

But the topic in yesterday's Speech from the Throne that did excite me greatly was the postsecondary level opportunities as mentioned. As far as postsecondary facilities go in my community, we do have the NAIT/Fairview College St. Albert campus facility. Also, not only for the students who attend that facility in the community but for the thousands who attend or learn cyberly from postsecondary institutions around the world, the statements and the commitment in yesterday's Speech from the Throne speak to our value that we highly, highly regard of investing in the future, investing in our own lives, and, indeed, investing in the knowledge base that we believe resides and will grow in our community.

Also, I'm particularly encouraged by the ability for more qualifying postsecondary institutions to offer degree-granting programs, and I, too, believe that this is an opportunity where students around the province will be able to perhaps stay closer to home while they raise their families, work at their jobs, and receive a degree at the same time. The Campus Alberta quality council will indeed make sure that those degrees are valuable and recognized around the world. You can't have one without the other, so it is opportunity and quality control.

Competing in a global marketplace is the third pillar. I want to say that what I have been hearing from Albertans as I've had the opportunity to travel around the province is a desire to assist in this whole movement called value added. It was best expressed to me the other evening and to a group of us who were doing some hearings in Wainwright, Alberta, by a farmer who spoke about the crop of oats. In fact, I know a number of landowners in my community who do own some of the finest quality oat crops grown around this province. This farmer from around Wainwright mentioned that what he really wanted to do – and he stated the obvious – was not only continue to grow his quality oats in Alberta, but he didn't see why we had to ship them to Ontario where the cereal was manufactured and packaged and returned by shipment to Alberta so that I can buy my Cheerios from the shelf of the Garden Market near home.

This is what I would call value added. This is what I am hoping: that unleashing innovation and competing in the global marketplace will enable us to enhance our products, to innovate where needed, to increase our ability to add value to our natural resources and in some cases our nonrenewable resources so that we have here in this province the opportunity to compete and to compete at a very high level in the global marketplace.

Finally, I wanted to speak about making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. In St. Albert our economic development a couple of years ago had a slogan saying: St. Albert, the best place to live, work, and shop. It is a play on the same words, but indeed it is the same activity. We want to have a quality of life – and the Speech from the Throne yesterday enhanced that desire – that is, indeed, valuable, life giving, and enhancing for our residents, our constituents, and our citizens of Alberta.

Health care, of course, has been mentioned in the Speech from the Throne and new ways of delivering health care that are really quite exciting, but they are more customer/patient-friendly. They will be more one-stop shopping, a better, more comprehensive, and inclusive way for individuals to approach the health care system at the primary care level for the services that they need, not only that but to get the right services that they need.

Yes, I will speak of car insurance. It was not specifically mentioned in the Speech from the Throne, but that's because the plan is underway for a new delivery of how car insurance will be delivered in this province. I look forward to it, having been the sponsor of a private member's bill a couple of years ago that looked to gender equity insurance premiums. It was defeated, but I'm very happy to say that that issue is being addressed in the new plans, which I look forward to seeing implemented come this spring.

For my community the centennial infrastructure program, or the centennial capital program as it was called in yesterday's Speech from the Throne, speaks to an opportunity that the folks in my community will indeed, I know, respond to. We have been dealing over the years with the concept of a recreation facility. We do have some very fine ones in my community, but in no way do they meet the needs, the demands, and the desires of those in my community who want an active lifestyle, an opportunity for their children and themselves to lead that active lifestyle, whether in organized sporting events or in healthy self-directed activity programs. So I look forward to that because we do look forward as a community to a centennial celebration in which we can not just recognize it by, if you will, monuments or facilities, but we can recognize the spirit, the pioneering spirit, the building spirit, the generous spirit, and the optimistic spirit of the people of Alberta.

5:00

I find that the Speech from the Throne articulated in so many ways in such a broad spectrum our vision for the future. It looked for opportunities for our children. I look forward to the next generation and the succeeding generations to capitalize on the opportunities that we are presenting to them, to their parents, to their families, and to their friends to join in making sure that they have the wherewithal, the opportunity, the training, and the resources to assist them in their postsecondary education.

I have confidence in the people of Alberta, in particular in the people of my community, to share in the responsibility and the exciting optimism as it was presented in yesterday's Speech from the Throne. I am very, very happy to say that I believe Albertans, who have always been positive thinkers, who have been conquerors of obstacles that got in their way, who have been able to use their abilities to the best of their powers, are looking forward to a new century in which we will build on all that is good and strong from the past.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions for the hon. member?

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, before I recognize the next speaker, I just want to caution members. It's been – well, it's day one, technically – a little over three and a half hours since we've been in session. I know that a lot of people want to catch up with what has transpired over the last few weeks and few months. If you have anything to converse with your colleagues, please step outside,

and you can do that. I hope that you will give due respect to every speaker that's speaking on this very important subject.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Debate Continued

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate those words of caution and advice to all of us. I'm sure they will be closely heeded.

I appreciated listening to the Lieutenant Governor deliver this speech yesterday. It was great to see her in fine form and excellent health and speaking so clearly and so forcefully to Albertans. It's always a pleasure to be in her presence in this Assembly, and I think we all feel that way.

I will struggle here to lead with the positive. There are some things in here, actually, that I think are good ideas. I will mention those and elaborate a little bit on those before making some other comments.

I do believe that the idea under Leading in Learning that a new school wellness program will be developed recognizing that a strong mind is nurtured by a healthy body is a good idea. It does emphasize a mandatory program of daily physical activity for all students. Terrific. Well placed. I value that. My wife and I have two boys in the school system, and they're both really active. I think all kids and, indeed, all adults should be.

I'd like to see this program go a little bit further, emphasizing not just physical activity but proper diet. I would be one who would support restricting vending machines, for example, in schools, especially in elementary schools where soda pop and candies are turning up, and they're turning up even more so in junior high and high school. I'd be happy to support any activity by this government to restrict or eliminate that development as part of this program for nurturing healthy bodies. In the long term these are significant health issues that we'll be paying for over and over and over.

I also found some other things in the policy here under the pillar of making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. The general idea of expanding government funding to municipalities for policing services, I think, is certainly something I endorse. I'm not seeing very many details here. We've read some leaks in the newspaper about this, how this might be handled, so I'm reluctant to give it a wholesale, unqualified endorsement because I don't know the details. But in general this level of government, the province, has to show stronger support to municipalities, and this is one way to do it.

I also endorse the idea of a mobile diabetes screening program for aboriginals living off reserves as well as emphasizing programs dealing with HIV and tobacco use and community-based care for aboriginal citizens. That's all to the good.

I also endorse the idea – I'm on page 9 now – of “increased government support for community-based care options for seniors, persons with disabilities, and mental health clients looking for alternatives to acute care in a hospital setting.” Again, there's not a lot of detail here. We don't know how much increase, and we don't know how that will be delivered, and I would encourage the government to deliver these services through nonprofit groups as much as possible. I especially think that mental health clients need strong community-based alternatives to keep them out of the very costly acute care treatment system.

So those are all points to the good and that I endorse in principle, and hopefully when I see the details, I'll be able to endorse them in details. Beyond that, I have a number of comments and concerns, and I think some of these will reflect the attitude of ordinary Albertans. The four pillars truly sound vague and general. I was actually talking to a former cabinet minister of this government this morning who said very much the same thing and, in fact, that these

could have been drawn from government documents of the 1980s. He mentioned a white paper in the 1980s that sounded a lot like this.

Unleashing innovation. It's a slogan, and frankly I don't think it's even a very clever slogan because it makes one ask: well, who's leashing it? Who's keeping innovation on a leash that it needs to be unleashed? I certainly hope this government hasn't been leashing innovation although I am concerned that it has. I think that Alberta has one of the lowest research and development expenditures as a percentage of its economy in the country. So we need to be moving aggressively on that. We should have been doing that long ago.

Leading in learning. A clever slogan, I suppose. Competing in a global marketplace. We've been talking about this year after year after year. Making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. Again, kind of a vague slogan. I guess the Public Affairs Bureau with its 260 staff or however many got their hands on this. In fact, I know they did because they produce this kind of thing, but it doesn't ring with anything specific.

I know that what I'm getting called about at my constituency office are very specific concerns. The kind of Speech from the Throne that would excite Albertans, would get a real endorsement from me, would be a Speech from the Throne that addresses those specifics. If the pillars were things like bringing in public auto insurance, unplugging electricity deregulation, reducing classroom sizes – those are specifics, those are something you can grab onto. Whether you agree with them or not, at least you know what you're dealing with as opposed to something like leading in learning or unleashing innovation.

So I'm finding it frustrating to deal with this kind of a vague document. If it was a Liberal government, I know what we would be saying. We would be bringing in specific pillars or specific points aimed at resolving the issues that Albertans are facing today, like their high electricity bills and their high auto insurance rates. So I find that generally a huge disappointment in this speech.

If I wanted to get more specific I would like to see something addressing, for example, electricity costs. Why is there nothing in here when that turns up as an absolutely top concern of ordinary Albertans, of Alberta businesses, of Alberta postsecondary education institutions? I mean, we talk here on page 5 about new funding for postsecondary learning including “an increase in base operating grants for all postsecondary institutions.” Well, aside from the fact that it doesn't say how much – it could be 2 per cent or something – unfortunately, it doesn't address the largest single underlying cause of why this has to go up, which is soaring utility costs to our postsecondary learning institutions, especially electricity costs. So it's unfortunate that that's not here.

5:10

I also am concerned – and I see the Deputy Premier is here, and she will undoubtedly respond here – about false hope about opening the American border to our live cattle exports. I know that the Deputy Premier made comments earlier today about how she's hoping those open soon, and I see a reference here to this sort of thing. I am concerned and I know many, many people in the beef industry in this province are concerned that we're into a long, long problem here. In fact, it's almost certainly many, many months and quite possibly a few years before the American border is fully open again. So we might want to have a BSE strategy that recognizes that we're into a long-term crisis here. At least let's be prepared for that possibility.

Our goal here – I'm quoting from the plan, page 7, under Making Alberta the Best Place to Live, Work, and Visit. It says, “Our goal is simple: to ensure that Albertans, especially children, feel safe and protected.” A laudable goal, of course. Everybody would feel that

way. Again, if there was a specific in here – I'd love to see something like a hot lunch program, some commitment that no child goes to school hungry or no child is taught at school on an empty stomach. That doesn't mean that we have to feed every child in Alberta who's going to school, but we do know that there are an unacceptable number of Alberta children who are hungry at school and that the school is often their only shelter from a harsh world and their only opportunity to get a hot meal. Why can't we make that sort of commitment to our children?

I'm also concerned in this throne speech about several places where there are new institutes or new councils or new offices that in fact instead of taking what we've got already and making it stronger, we're window-dressing by putting up another office. I'm thinking here specifically of one example on page 8, the creation of an office for disability issues, and it says here in the Speech from the Throne that this "will work with the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and government ministries." Well, why are we adding yet another player to an already complex mix? Why aren't we strengthening what's there now? Why aren't we giving the muscle, say, to the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities instead of adding another player to the mix?

Earlier today there was heated debate in question period over health care reforms, and one of the things that's clear is that there are too many players in the mix. It seemed like every person in the government benches was involved in one way or another in health care reform and all kinds of people beyond that.

I am concerned about the same kind of loss of focus drifting over this government generally, whether it's health care, persons with disabilities, innovation. We have the Minister of Economic Development; we have the Minister of Innovation and Science; we have Sustainable Resource Development. We've got a government that's losing focus, and it shows in this Speech from the Throne.

Again, another example: a new rural development strategy. Well, how many rural development strategies has this government brought forward, and where are we? Where we are is with a rural economy

that is in crisis, with rural towns that are emptying out, with rural towns that are seeing their provincial buildings vacated, government employees reduced, schools downsized, health facilities downsized. Rural development strategy: I'll bet that if we did a search in the library under that term, we would find that there have been dozens, quite possibly, of rural development strategies. So, again, a sense that I reflect for many people, including former members of this government, that this is a pretty tired document.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to wrap up by saying that perhaps underlying that fatigue is what's become known as the democratic deficit in this province. The kinds of things that would reinvigorate this entire Assembly have to do with reforming the way it works and quite possibly addressing how all of us here are elected and how the representation of the population is reflected in this Assembly. In the last election almost 50 per cent of Albertans who were eligible to vote did not vote, and certainly a majority of those who voted supported the governing party. Nobody debates that. But when you do the math, what it means is that about 30 per cent of eligible voters voted for this government. I think that's a reflection on how a sense of fatigue and a sense almost of irrelevance has settled on this government and on this Assembly.

So, Mr. Speaker, if this had something substantial in it that addressed any of those issues I've mentioned, whether they're relating to the democratic deficit or to policy issues around electricity or insurance or education, we could get really excited. As it is, there are bits and pieces in here that are good, but overall I think most Albertans would say that it's a real disappointment.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I'd move that we adjourn until 8 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:19 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, February 18, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/18

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Government Motions**

4. Mr. Stevens moved on behalf of Mrs. Nelson:
Be it resolved that the Assembly do resolve itself into Committee of Supply, when called, to consider supply to be granted to Her Majesty.

[Government Motion 4 carried]

5. Mr. Stevens moved on behalf of Mr. Hancock:
Be it resolved that the Assembly resolve itself into Committee of the Whole, when called, to consider certain bills on the Order Paper.

[Government Motion 5 carried]

Spring Recess

6. Mr. Stevens moved on behalf of Mr. Hancock:
Be it resolved that when the Assembly adjourns on Thursday, April 1, 2004, at the regular hour of 5:30 p.m., it shall stand adjourned until Monday, April 19, 2004, at 1:30 p.m.

[Government Motion 6 carried]

The Deputy Speaker: May we have unanimous consent for a brief introduction of guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Assembly 33 air cadets and four individuals who are accompanying them tonight. These 33 individuals are members of the 810 Grant McConachie Air Cadet Squadron, and they are accompanied this evening by Second Lieutenant David Jackson, Mrs. Deb Leonard, Jen Carter, and Scott Packrant. They are in the public gallery, and I would now ask them to please rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this House.

Thank you.

head: **Government Motions**
(continued)

Adjournment of Session

7. Mr. Stevens moved on behalf of Mr. Hancock:
Be it resolved that when the Assembly adjourns to recess the spring sitting of the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature, it shall stand adjourned until a time and date as determined by the Speaker after consultation with the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

[Government Motion 7 carried]

head: **Consideration of Her Honour
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech**

Mr. Griffiths moved that an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank you, Your Honour, for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

[Debate adjourned: February 18]

The Deputy Speaker: Do we have further speakers? I was going to indicate that we didn't seem to have any speakers, and then suddenly my eyes deceived me and there are three. We'll take the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and share with the Assembly my response to the throne speech tonight. As always, I was impressed with the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as she delivered her speech, and I always ask myself: why do we have such a deep affection for her? Why does everybody when they speak of her always talk about these wonderful characteristics and the things that they like best about her? I thought: the thing she represents to me sometimes is that she just really loves the province and she loves us, and you just love the things that love you. You can feel that come off her. Her words kind of bring a pride into this House, and it's a thing that reminds us what being an Albertan is like and what loving your home means.

It's been almost three years since I rose on the floor of this Assembly to give my maiden speech, and I'd like to say that these past few years have provided me with many opportunities and experiences that I'll be forever thankful for. In my maiden speech I shared with the Assembly, as some of you may remember, a brief perspective of the Calgary-Shaw constituency. At that time there were some 80,000 constituents living in the constituency, and they expressed similar concerns to those I've heard from my colleagues. At that time they wanted a good education system, strong, accessible health care, and the assurance of a bright and prosperous future for their children.

The three main concerns, though, for Calgary-Shaw were infrastructure, infrastructure, and infrastructure. I represented Alberta's most populated constituency, and it was growing at a breathtaking rate, a far cry from the three subdivisions and a cow pasture that once was Calgary-Shaw as described by the hon. Jim Dinning in his 1986 maiden speech. However, this was 15 years later, and in place of a sparse subdivision and abundant pasture came the most densely populated constituency in the province. We needed schools, we needed roads and health care facilities, and we needed them yesterday.

Much has happened since my maiden speech, and I'd like to acknowledge the work that we as government have done to address those needs and to help make the constituency of Calgary-Shaw what it has become. The thing that I have learned since I've come into government is that the work is never finished. You can never sit back and say: all is well, and there are no problems in the province of Alberta. Constantly that landscape changes, and government has to be able to be adaptable and flexible as it meets the challenges that come to it.

For example, who would have thought that one cow could create so much devastation to an industry in this province? As I listened to my colleagues today in their responses to the throne speech talk

about their areas, I have great sympathy for them as they are dealing with changes in their constituencies that they never anticipated and with families that are looking at lifestyles changing, industries, homes. So I have great sympathy for them. The thing that it has taught me is that as government you can't relax. You have to always be mindful of the challenges that are coming and be ready to meet those. But I think it's also important that we not spend all of our time on today's problems, that we take just a moment and we pause and we recognize the things that we have received in government and what government has been able to do for us and that we be grateful for those things.

Government has done a lot of work in the Calgary-Shaw constituency. It has successfully laid the foundation that will allow the communities and families within the constituency to flourish as Alberta enters its second century. Over the past three years we have announced or opened nine educational facilities, including six new elementary and middle schools, a private school, and two high schools. That is not an insignificant number of educational facilities, and that's just in the south end of Calgary. So I think that government has done a great deal of work and that we should be able to look back on that and acknowledge what has been done.

The traffic tribulations have been eased with the construction of the extension of the Deerfoot Trail. In this month's newsletter I was saying to my constituents that everybody in the constituency is saying, in whispers almost, how much better our life has become since the Deerfoot Trail extension opened. We went from bogged down and miserable to almost overnight going back to something that is reasonable. My constituents could tell immediately that the Deerfoot Trail extension had opened. It fundamentally changed the quality of their lives in the south end of the city of Calgary, and we want to say that we're grateful to government for the work that they did on that.

In June an urgent medical care centre will open in Sundance, part of the new SouthLink health centre. For the first time in Calgary when we need stitches at night or someone breaks a bone, we don't have to go necessarily to the emergency wing and try and triage ourselves between people that are having serious health concerns such as heart attacks. We'll be able to access this new health centre, and it'll open this June. It's a wonderful example of a P3 partnership in the province of Alberta. As well, the Calgary health region has acquired land for a hospital south, by the community of Cranston. I can assure you that you will hear me as well as my colleagues discuss this project in the future as we work toward its approval. This adds to the two health care facilities that opened in Calgary-Shaw over the past three years.

We must also not forget the 18 local projects that are government supported through the community facility enhancement program and the community initiative programs. These projects range from recreational complexes to playgrounds to community centre renovations.

They're all amazing contributions and accomplishments, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Alberta government on behalf of the citizens of Calgary-Shaw for their attention to the needs of the constituency. I came into the office with a long wish list, and many of the concerns have been answered by this government. It's no surprise to me that the rest of the country has figured out that Alberta is a wonderful place to live. They are coming and they continue to come in record numbers not just to Calgary-Shaw but to many constituencies in this province, and this work will go on.

8:10

As we commence the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature, we continue to build on the commitment the government embarked on

12 years ago. To ensure Alberta's continued success and prosperity, the government has developed a 20-year plan. This plan will build on Alberta's first hundred years and take us into the province's second century equipped to excel locally, nationally, and internationally. The four pillars that were discussed during the throne speech encompass much of what has contributed to Alberta's overwhelming success over the past hundred years. They will act to further advance the province in what has made it so successful. I'd like to commend the government on committing to these long-term goals and ensuring that Alberta's future will be bright and rich.

A substantial portion of Calgary-Shaw's constituency is represented by some 25,000 children within this constituency looking for this government to make the choices that will ensure them educational opportunities, jobs, a healthy environment, and a successful, prosperous province. That's what they heard yesterday in the Speech from the Throne, and I commend the government on making those choices. It's now up to us to follow through and make that future a reality.

The Alberta centennial education savings plan is an investment in Alberta's children, and it encourages parents to plan for their children's future. I am the mother of four children, three of them at the age of advanced education with one more joining them in a year, and I know that planning for your kids' educational future is critical. This plan will help encourage that investment and will undoubtedly contribute to the future success and well-being of Alberta's children, but also, as the Premier said in remarks about this, the Alberta centennial education plan is an exciting way for Albertans to support and encourage children to pursue further education and help ensure future success. It is fitting that the end of the province's first century be marked by an investment in the children who will carry on the Alberta advantage in the second century. I find this an exciting venture that the government is heading into.

The Alberta centennial education plan is an investment in Alberta's children that encourages parents to plan. It is important. This investment will undoubtedly contribute to future success well into the future. The government has made education a top priority in its 20-year plan. That bodes well for the 25,000 children living in Calgary-Shaw as well as for the children that live throughout the province. They are, after all, the leaders and the workers of tomorrow and the ones that will be taking care of us when we're no longer able to.

The government's support of the recommendations from Alberta's Commission on Learning is also important to the education of Alberta's children and the families of Calgary-Shaw. Five hundred copies of the report were distributed from my constituency office alone last year. I had the privilege of meeting with parent councils at schools throughout the constituency to discuss the recommendations, and I think that some of the more interesting moments I've spent in government I spent listening to those parents as they talked about what they wanted to see education look like in the future of this province. Some of the recommendations have been carried out, but it's also important that we continue to study and implement the remaining recommendations to ensure that every Albertan has the opportunity to take part in Alberta's educational opportunities and excel while doing it.

Finally, I would like to commend the government on their commitment to continue with the centennial capital plan, which addresses infrastructure concerns in the Calgary-Shaw area but also throughout the province. We know that people will continue to come to this province because we've set in place those things that make this province successful. People are attracted to success, and they will continue to come. We can make all the promises we want concerning education and health care, but those promises are empty

without schools and health care facilities to make them a reality.

In closing, I would like to take just a moment to thank my colleagues for their support and their friendship over the past three years and express my most sincere appreciation to the government for addressing the many needs that I expressed in my maiden speech. Calgary-Shaw is a constituency built on strong families of all shapes and sizes. That strength is seen throughout this province, and it is apparent that the province is committed for the next 20 years to ensuring that things will only get stronger.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, were you wishing to ask a question of the hon. member, or is it okay to go on?

Okay. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this evening and participate in the Speech from the Throne that was delivered by Her Honour on Tuesday, February 17. Certainly, whenever one is sitting here and watching the parade of people entering the Assembly, one would be left with the impression that this is an open and a transparent government. The doors are opened and many people from many walks of life enter the Assembly, and unfortunately we don't see or hear from them again until the next Speech from the Throne. Sometimes I think that the interests of Albertans would be better served if, perhaps, a little of this space were allocated on a daily basis for the taxpayers.

We on this side of the House listened with a great deal of interest to this plan. It was an extension of what the hon. Premier had said in his television address, and I forget exactly how much that cost the taxpayers, but it was a significant amount of money. It's wonderful to talk about Alberta's second century, which will unfold next year. We're talking about our proud history and a promising future, and certainly the first 100 years for this province have been proud.

There have been significant achievements not only in this province but in this province's role in the country, and it is a role, I hope, that will continue to develop. At the end of another 100 years of this country's history I am certain that Alberta will be playing a leading role. Despite some of this government's policies I think this province will grow and it will prosper, but it will certainly change from a province which is reliant upon natural resources, which are depleting, to a province which will rely upon a public education system that is used to produce economic wealth, an education system that would be accessible to all.

The first criterion of a good education system, Mr. Speaker, is accessibility. Unfortunately, in this province we are rapidly becoming a place where not everyone who has the ability can go to a postsecondary institution. I would caution all members of this Assembly to reflect on this, and perhaps we can make further improvements so that each and every student that has the ability and wants to go can improve themselves through the education system.

The education system has to be accessible, and it has to be affordable. The best way to do this is, of course, through a public education system just as the best way to deliver the maximum amount of health care to the most number of citizens is through the public health care system. We can't allow our public health system and our public education system to be eroded by a government that seems to think that privatization is the answer to everything.

8:20

Now, the hon. member who spoke previously, Mr. Speaker, talked about the 20-year plan. Twenty-year plans are fine, but this government has overlooked the fact that because of electricity

deregulation we don't even have a 20-week plan in this province as far as the planning for electricity transmission expansion goes or the expansion of our generating capacity. We can talk about 20-year plans and we can talk about the future, but we can't talk about that with this government's electricity deregulation plan because there was no long-term planning. If we're going to talk about planning for Alberta's future, well, then, we should also be talking about our future as far as the electricity grid goes, and that has not been done. It has been a major policy failure. There is no mention in this throne speech about unplugging electricity deregulation.

In fact, we're talking about bills. We talk about a lot of bills in this Assembly. We're already talking about bills 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. This government has forgotten about the really important bills for Albertans, and that's their natural gas bill at the end of every month, their electricity bill at the end of every month, their insurance bill, the bill for their children's tuition fees, the increasing number of tax increases. They may call them user fees; I call them tax increases, Mr. Speaker.

I received my car registration the other day. It's gone up. Look at the bills seniors have to pay. We've got long-term care costs. We have CHOICE programs that are now being paid for partially by the seniors. There is no end to the bills that because of this government's policies consumers – Albertans, citizens, taxpayers; call it what you like – are having to pay. This document does not mention those bills, those bills which Albertans are telling us they are most concerned about. In fact, in our constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar we had a town hall meeting last week to hear directly from the citizens exactly what they want this government to do. It would be a great centennial gift to the citizens if this government were to simply say: we were wrong; we're unplugging electricity deregulation. This has not worked. It is the biggest public policy failure in the history of Canada. That's what they would like to see.

They would like to see some sort of control on skyrocketing insurance costs, but there's no mention. There's no mention of auto insurance in this document, Mr. Speaker.

How are we going to deal with the high cost of natural gas over the long term, over the 20-year period? No mention of that either.

In fact, I would have to say, you know, that this is really a lite document. It's a lite document, and it's the first piece of campaign literature that the public, the citizens of this province, are seeing before the next provincial election. I consider this nothing more than campaign literature, and unfortunately it had to be financed by the taxpayers. If the Progressive Conservative Party wants to produce campaign literature, I think they should do it out of their ample budget because they do have, as far as I know, a lot of money. They have plenty of money.

Now, Mr. Speaker, there are some other issues, I'm sad to say, that were not addressed, and one of them is connected to the high tuition costs. Everyone knows the crisis that has occurred in rural Alberta as a result of BSE. Alberta has several vacancies in the medical professions for individuals who are trained to perform the tests for BSE, chronic wasting disease, and other transmissible diseases. Now, there's a shortage of these veterinary pathologists around the world, and many of them are snatched up by the private sector, who pays better and provides better benefits and better working conditions. For the sake of food safety the government needs to increase the salary and benefits of these professionals in order to be able to compete in the world market for these much-needed people.

We have to attract young people into these professions. I don't know; maybe the hon. minister has a plan that is going to attract, for instance, the brightest and best in the 4-H club movement to these professions. Hopefully, that's going to happen, but we not only have a shortage of veterinary pathologists, we have a shortage of trained

surgeons, we have a shortage of registered nurses, and we'll probably again have a shortage of teachers. This in my view is called long-term planning to deal with these shortages. We just can't keep jacking up the tuition fees and then scratch our heads whenever we have shortages of some of these skilled and much-needed professionals.

Now, intensive livestock operations. We've had a number of debates in the past in this Assembly on ILOs, and there have been several instances where communities have been torn over the establishment of these intensive livestock operations, or confined feeding operations, in Alberta. Hardisty was one such example, and there are also serious concerns in the Valleyview and Grande Prairie regions. The government brought in the Agricultural Operation Practices Act in order to standardize the approval of these facilities across the province; however, as I understand it from calls to the office, there are serious flaws in that act, and I don't see anything to address that in this throne speech.

There is the improper safeguard for the environment. There are water concerns as well as air pollution concerns which remain, and I would like an explanation from the members across the way as to how the provincial water council, which is to be established to help manage the resources for future generations of Albertans, is going to deal with this issue, Mr. Speaker. These facilities are not required to undergo health impact assessments to ensure that Albertans close to these operations but also at greater distances are not affected by them.

There have also been concerns expressed about the expertise of the officers who examine the lagoons. There was one case where an officer approved a lagoon in an area where the soil content was 50 per cent sand. Further, it was located near an aquifer. These sorts of rubber-stamp approvals . . .

Dr. Taylor: Aquifer.

Mr. MacDonald: I stand corrected. I'm really glad to see that the hon. minister is awake. That's certainly a change, Mr. Speaker.

Communities are the ones that have to live with these operations. They should be the ones to have the final say as to their approval or expansion.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, there is a sense in this province that it's time for democratic renewal. This Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004, is a start. One could call it a start, but it's certainly not what we need in this province. Several provinces such as B.C. and New Brunswick have started consultation on changing the electoral system in favour of a system which better reflects the true wishes of their respective citizenry for representation. For instance, if we had representation by population, there would be a lot more Liberals and there would be a lot more New Democrats in this Assembly and a lot less Conservatives. I think you have the best government whenever you have a strong opposition regardless of which level of government you're at, Mr. Speaker. There's no mention of a gift to the citizens of this province in their next 100 years in Confederation of even going back to the system we had previously, which was a form of representative elections.

Thank you.

8:30

The Deputy Speaker: No indication of questions. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, a question?

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a question for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I'm wondering: does he think that Bill 1 will provide the framework for people to begin

saving now for their children who are yet to be born so that they can afford all of the tuition increases between now and the time their children enter university?

Mr. MacDonald: Certainly, that is a very good question because if we look at the children that are born next year, by the time they enter university, they're going to need close to \$92,000 to get a four-year degree. A four-year degree. Now, this amount of money will probably buy a few books. It's a start. It's a very modest start, but we would be better served, I believe, with a freeze of tuition fees. We can freeze car insurance premiums. Why can't we freeze tuition fees? Why can't we make postsecondary education accessible and affordable? But it's a gesture. Perhaps it's an admission of guilt by this government that they have allowed tuition fees to skyrocket and many people cannot afford them.

In conclusion, hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, I would have to say that many of the citizens will not be able to set aside any money for their children's education as the government had planned because they need it all for their electricity bill, their natural gas bill, and if they can afford a car, to insure it.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Calgary-West, a question?

Ms Kryczka: Does it have to be a question, Mr. Speaker?

The Deputy Speaker: Or a comment.

Ms Kryczka: A comment? Yes, I would like to make a comment. I heard the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar make a comment on bills, bills, bills. He made specific reference to the long-term care increase for seniors, and as the member well knows, though, there has been no real increase in long-term care rates in Alberta since 1994. By far we have been for many years the lowest in Canada, and even with the increase that we recently had, we are still among the lowest, if not the lowest, in Canada. I would say that if you want to look at a glass that's half full rather than half empty, I feel that our seniors and those who are in long-term care situations had a great deal for many years, but it was catch-up time. We all want quality of care, and quality of care costs.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Do you want to respond to the comment?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I would like at this time to remind the hon. Member for Calgary-West that this government has been slowly but surely eroding the benefits from the seniors in this province, and it's got to stop. Seniors can no longer afford to take these insensitive hits from this government. Seniors have been nickelled-and-dimed by this government for the last 10 years, and they cannot afford any increase in their long-term care rates. I'm sorry; many seniors in the community that I represent in this Assembly are appalled at how this government is treating them.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wonder if the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar could share with the House his mathematics and how he came to the conclusion that a four-year undergraduate degree was going to cost over \$90,000 in 17 or 18 years. It would be some interesting mathematics to try to figure out how to make that particular investment.

While the member is on his feet, perhaps he can explain to the House, if deregulation of electricity has been such a startling failure in his eyes, how it is that we end up with over 30 per cent more surplus power in the province with a price per kilowatt hour that is lower than virtually every other jurisdiction in Canada, and why we have not one cent of public investment in that extra generation capacity, we haven't had a brownout, industry is growing, consumers are gradually shaking out the problems.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, you're unable to respond. That's the rules of the game. You have the five minutes.

I wonder if the hon. members would agree to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure this evening to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Dr. Paul Grundy. He is a parent of children in Belgravia elementary school, Vernon Barford junior high school, and Ross Sheppard high school. Accompanying him this evening is Dr. Robert Price, who is a parent of a child in Belgravia elementary school, as well as Preet Sara, who is with the Action for Education committee. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would now ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Consideration of Her Honour
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech**
(*continued*)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed with pleasure that I rise this evening to respond briefly to the Speech from the Throne and particularly as it relates to northern and northwestern Alberta. As many are already aware, the north is in the beginning stages of some critical world-scale developments that will meld with past success to define this province as a dynamic player in North American and global political and industrial jurisdictions. This throne speech, with its four key pillars, speaks volumes to our confidence and ability as we plan for the next two decades in this province.

Allow me, Mr. Speaker, to take a moment to look back at a few of our previous successes and connect them to this encouraging throne speech and that to our bright, positive future. Innovation is no stranger to Albertans and certainly not to northerners. OSTR, the Alberta Oil Sands Technology and Research Authority, was a program initiated by Shell and the Alberta government, and they started with the underground oil sands in the area just out of the town of Peace River, a little east of Peace River, and worked there on steam-assisted drainage, in those days called huff and puff. Those meagre beginnings about 24, 25 years ago have resulted in some tremendous, tremendous potential for the province of Alberta in the SAGD recovery of oil sands in north and northeastern Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, another example of innovation is the new biomass generator that we see in place in Grande Prairie, start-up to be commencing in April, where we'll produce about 50 megawatts of power from biomass that used to be burned as waste from the fibre industry.

On the Peace River we have a run-of-the-river weir that is now being re-permitted or at least the application is being reassessed. Again, run-of-the-river, a more or less benign operation with respect to the environment, producing 80 megawatts of much-needed power in Alberta's northwest.

We've seen advances in engineered wood products. The first off export line cryogenic or deep-cut plant to remove natural gas liquids from sales gas, done in northwestern Alberta about 35 miles west of the city of Grande Prairie. Again, innovation, Mr. Speaker, that keeps Alberta at the lead of this industry in North America and certainly in the world. Directional drilling technologies are certainly another one. Livestock diversification programs, which, although I do admit are under siege at this moment, still – still – have opportunity and do show promise. One of Alberta's ads could read: innovations are us.

8:40

Mr. Speaker, as we move to leading in learning, I believe that the Learning Commission, the first full review of the education system in Alberta that was undertaken in more than 30 years, was much needed and well received certainly by educators, by most parents in Alberta, and I believe by most members of this government. What we need now and what we have and what I believe we have is the courage to move ahead with the recommendations contained in that report. Things like the new funding framework and new funding for postsecondary schools and a capital plan in place to replace and modernize schools are things that will keep Alberta at the lead in learning.

We don't have to look far, Mr. Speaker. The information and the writing is everywhere, in newspapers, certainly in reports from school boards across the province, that shows that Alberta produces some of the best students in the world. Our system is rated one of the best in Canada in a report from Stats Canada, and Alberta students continue to score amongst the highest marks in the world on reading tests and certainly close to the top with respect to science and mathematics. Those initiatives that have been brought forward by this government will stand Alberta in good stead as we look ahead to our next 100 years.

Mr. Speaker, the global marketplace is another initiative in which Alberta, with its very, very strong leadership both from our Premier and from the Minister of Economic Development, is moving out – we are moving out – into new areas, into areas where we have traditionally had good markets. Our success is phenomenal. Albertans can be found working and contributing on every continent on the globe, and that, I believe, for a place the size of Alberta, 3 million people, is remarkable.

I would like to touch a bit on the contribution of Albertans globally in areas such as medicine, energy, agriculture, forestry, and the environmental and hydrology fields. Closer to home, Mr. Speaker, we continue to explore ways to increase the capabilities to supply North American energy markets. We have in place, soon to be brought into action I believe, the Alaska/Alberta bilateral task force. These initiatives taken on by the Premier of the province of Alberta in conjunction with contemporaries in the areas where we trade and do business will assist us as we move forward with a number of our large projects that will again enhance the province of Alberta. Certainly, the Alaska gas pipeline and Northern Gas have to come to mind as major initiatives that will play quite large in the future of Alberta and certainly in the prosperity and competitiveness in North America.

Mr. Speaker, another area where we have certainly something to be thankful for is Alberta's fibre resource. In northwestern Alberta the fibre resource is an extremely important part of our economic

diversification program. In very recent times the Alberta government, again through leadership, through the leadership of our Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, took steps to reallocate some of the fibre available in northwestern Alberta. This reallocation took place in a fair and open market, in an auction that returned a very fair return to the province of Alberta for the resource. It encourages industry to build and rationalize to meet market demands. Markets connected to fibre sales send positive signals to international traders and will assist us with resolutions to trade barriers.

With respect to Alberta being the best place to live, work, and visit, we need only look again at some of the forward-looking comments that are in the throne speech and connect them again to things that we have done in the province of Alberta. We are building and have built strong and safe communities in the province of Alberta. We have, Mr. Speaker, in front of us the Traffic Safety Act that helps to make Alberta's roads safer. We've invested in an organized crime unit to help make Alberta's communities safer. We have continued to invest through the centennial legacy program in libraries, galleries, performing arts centres, and places that certainly will in the future increase our quality of life in this province and the quality of life for young people that start out to build families and build a future for themselves in Alberta.

So, Mr. Speaker, rather than maligning what has been brought forward and presented in this Assembly with respect to the most recent throne speech, I find many positive things in the document. I look forward to working with my colleagues and working with the government to see to it that the initiatives that are laid out in this throne speech are committed to and come to fruition through this and successive governments.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Questions? Comments?

I'll call on the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It certainly gives me great honour to stand up and speak to the throne speech this evening. As many of my colleagues have said before, I would like to speak of the Lieutenant Governor, a wonderful lady that we have serving us here in this province and that all Albertans have come to enjoy and appreciate so much. I do hope that maybe we're successful at seeing her be here for an extended period of time for the future. I think that would only serve us to a better quality.

Mr. Speaker, my constituency of Calgary-Mountain View going into this next election when the next writ is dropped will actually be the largest by population in the province with over 42,700 people plus. So I'm very excited and honoured that I'm able to represent the largest constituency by population here in the province going into the next election. I'm looking forward to that as we approach that.

There have been very many things inside the constituency that are exciting. We've had some wonderful growth at the Calgary Zoo, one of the top 10 zoos in North America. Destination Africa has changed the whole face of the Calgary Zoo, and the numbers of people that are going there are unbelievable. I was visiting it this weekend actually, Mr. Speaker, during the Family Day weekend, and the parking lots were packed. They were parking on the streets. It was lined up at every facility. We were fortunate because a chinook had also blown in. It really has turned the zoo into a year-round facility and a wonderful investment here.

8:50

I also have the fortune to have SAIT and the Jubilee Auditorium

and Alberta College of Art and Design, and as we know, there is some expansion going on at our Jubilee auditoriums here in the province as we approach the 100th anniversary of our province. It's exciting to see the growth there as well in my constituency.

As I move west with the new boundaries, I pick up Foothills hospital, which I'm excited to see become a part of my constituency as well, a centrepiece and a major trauma centre for southern Alberta. So lots of exciting and dynamic things happening in Calgary-Mountain View.

I'm going to start off this evening, Mr. Speaker, speaking to Alberta's continuing to lead in learning. I was a little surprised just to hear the comments from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar a little earlier in regard to saying that he felt that freezing tuition for 20 years would be a much more effective way than having our Bill 1, which is allowing Alberta's children of the future to have a chance and a better opportunity to be successful in their education. I mean, if he's asking for a freeze in tuition for 20 years, to follow on that he must be saying that he wants to freeze professors' and support workers' wages for 20 years as well, which just doesn't seem likely. If you're freezing tuition, you wouldn't have any more money to go up for our professors and our support people, so I don't think that that logic probably follows quite the way he was thinking.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, I did want to speak to the education savings plan because I think that's a very, very exciting piece of legislation that we have. It's forward thinking; it's visioning for the future. Just to give an example: my wife and I have a four and a half year old and an 18 month old. When our eldest was about one year old, we started putting into an RESP, which is interesting. In three and a half years we're close to \$7,000 sitting in there for him. When I grew up, I didn't have an RESP. My parents couldn't afford to put me through school, and I had to have loans and so forth that I was actually still paying off when I was a member of the Legislature. I was fortunate enough to get through that, but it was a very, very tough thing. I think the cost of education will only go up in the future. So to have this starting to build already and to see that maybe by the time he's 18 or 20 when he decides, hopefully, to go into postsecondary, he will have the cost being covered for him is a very exciting thing.

More important, Mr. Speaker, I believe, is the fact that having this structure for an RESP for all children being born in the province is really going to help our lower income families. I really see it as an opportunity and a bridge to allow our lower income families to move past what maybe their parents and their grandparents never had, which was a postsecondary education which gave them the opportunity for higher earnings and a better life for their children as well. As I understand it, I think there are approximately 27 to 30 per cent of families that actually have an RESP today. Of this, in over 80 per cent of the families that have an RESP, the kids actually go on to postsecondary education. That's a very, very impressive number, and you know that they're going to have a much better chance of being successful in the future.

So as I say, I believe the real opportunity is for our lower income people to break that cycle because they're going to have a chance for a vision. By having even a small nest egg waiting for these children when they complete grade 12, I think this opportunity will certainly be picked up by a much larger number of the lower income people and give them that hope and a strong hopeful future.

The next piece I wanted to talk about a little bit tonight, Mr. Speaker, is unleashing innovation, which was another focus of our Speech from the Throne. The first part I want to talk about is Inno Centre. It's something that's been running for a couple of years now. It's a real key piece about innovation, about technology. It's about the future, and it's about really building on the strengths that we have — we have a highly educated workforce in this province, the

highest in North America – and taking the pieces and what we have to make it happen. Inno Centre, Innovation Centre, is being supported by organizations in this province, and it's becoming a cornerstone. It's a cornerstone in the sense that what it has is about an 80 to 90 per cent success rate in taking companies from noncommercial to a commercialization process, from a precommercialization process right through to being successful.

When you have technology companies being started up in other parts of the world, even down in San Jose, in the centre of where we see technology growing in California, the centrepiece in the world by far, a 20 per cent success rate on start-up companies is considered pretty good and very much an average. But the model of the Inno Centre, allowing for an 80 to 90 per cent success rate, means that you have such a better chance, a better place to be investing your money, a better place to be coming as workers and having a chance to continue to be successful. That's a big piece of unleashing the innovation in this province that we have been working on.

Another big piece, I believe, Mr. Speaker, is going to be around the petrochemical area. The oil and gas has been a raw product that we've been able to ship, and it has been a huge piece of allowing us to have the advantages that we do have in this province. The royalties we've been collecting off that have been fantastic. At the same time, we've been shipping a lot of the product as a raw product off to other parts of North America, and it hasn't been graded and brought up to full value and getting the value-added piece that we want to see.

Right now the Alberta Chamber of Resources is working on setting up a task force. That's been talked about; the industry is out there working on it, working together with the petrochemical industry and bringing this task force together. Hopefully, that will happen in the very near future. What they're looking at is a cornerstone of potentially one more refinery. Potentially an \$8 billion private-sector investment, this particular refinery would probably work maybe in the area of clean fuels, polypropylenes, and this piece along with what we already have here would allow for a big piece of the cornerstone of the value-added structures, products, manufacturing to be happening here in the future. It's very crucial for creating a cluster that we have this other cornerstone, and we certainly hope that we can see this sort of thing happen and that the private-sector money sees it as a good investment and a place to do this.

I want to give an example of what we have right now. Out of our natural gas comes the product of ethane. When you have the rich natural gas, you have more ethane. NOVA Chemicals takes and buys the ethane at four cents a pound. They take that four-cents-a-pound ethane, and they turn it into 40- to 70-cents-a-pound polyethylene and really upgrade the product. They have the largest polyethylene plant in the world right here in Alberta in Joffre, just outside Red Deer. They ship that polyethylene all over the world today to take it to other values. There are a few manufacturers here in the province but not very many.

One example of what we do have is a company in Calgary that buys the polyethylene and other products coming out, and they turn them into hockey sticks. So they're taking a pound of the ethylene that has gone from four cents to 40 to 70 cents, and they're turning it into hockey sticks at \$200 to \$300 for a hockey stick. That's where the value-added is. That's the advantage of what we have with the raw products that we have in this province, and the opportunities are there.

In Germany in the city of Marl it's a very interesting model. They did a very specialized set-up, and over a 1,200 hectare area they set up 70 companies, 70 companies hooked up in a couple of sections of land. In those 70 companies working together, there are 400

different products being produced. Very, very exciting. We have that opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to be doing that with the Fort Saskatchewan site that we have, working all the way from Fort McMurray down to Joffre and the pipelines and rights-of-way that we have created out to Lloydminster and the wonderful opportunities to bring all of that together, whether they're right together on the same site or slightly along the pipelines. Great opportunities to make it happen.

Today about 40 per cent of our product, our ethane, is going out as a waste product. I'm sure everyone has seen the big, black Procor cars when they're going south. Well, they go south full, and they go down to the Gulf coast or they go out to eastern Canada, down into southern Ontario as well. We don't have the ability to take those products and refine them and turn them into finished goods. They're taking them down there. What we have is a waste product, and they're turning them into finished goods. We don't have the catalyst size, the cluster size, that we need to be able to take those products and turn them into finished goods.

These are the opportunities, Mr. Speaker, that allow us to grow. I think that by working to really make some things happen around this task force, we will see some really big innovation things happening in the future and growth in this province, hopefully in the manufacturing sector.

Mr. Speaker, this sort of leads me into the global marketplace, which I think is really the most exciting piece as we see things happening, and you've seen it in the speech as well. With the approach of our 100th anniversary, certainly we are bursting with opportunities in this province for Albertans to be successful inside the province and taking the technology, the knowledge, the products out of the province and selling them world-wide. Albertans certainly know this, and they do like to compete globally. We see it happening. However, it's important to continue to push out the envelope, to be present in all corners of the globe. With 85 per cent of our trade with the U.S. it's extremely important to have a presence in Washington, which we've talked about as well, and the expansion for that. It's important that we have that presence there. We must continue to work on that. That is our one trade partner that we have some amazing success with today.

9:00

It's also important that we get to the rest of the world. We heard the minister of agriculture speak earlier today about 24 other countries that we're exporting our beef to today. Very, very exciting. But you have to be present in those countries to be able to talk to the people, to talk to the people who are going to buy the products, to help market them and make it happen. I think that when we're so dependent on one country, as we are with our neighbour, it is a risk by not being out into the rest of the world. So I think it's very important that we continue to expand and work hard at being everywhere as well as strengthening our relationship with the United States.

I was also very happy to hear Her Honour speak to creating grain marketing choice. I think the words she actually used were "aggressively pursuing" grain marketing choice. I believe our producers desperately want that. I think it's a wonderful thing, and I'm glad to see the minister of agriculture thumping and supporting me on that. I believe that's what we need to see happen.

I think a couple of facts are important to say again, and I'm sure you've heard me say it before. Pre-1945, 35 per cent of the value-added agricultural products due to wheat and barley in Canada were produced in Alberta – 35 per cent, pre-1945, pre-World War II. Along came the Canadian Wheat Board, and we saw a migration of

the value-added products moving to eastern Canada. We today have less than 5 per cent of the value-added agricultural products here in this province. One of the targets that the minister has set forward is a \$20 billion agricultural industry. To achieve those goals, we need to have the value-added agricultural industry here in this province, and we have to fight hard to make sure that that does happen. I think we will work hard on that this spring. I'm excited to see it, and I hope we can be successful in achieving that.

I'm also hopeful in the fact that we have a new federal minister of agriculture, Minister Speller. He has done some wonderful things in regard to agricultural expansion and wanting to see a test market happening. I hope that we have a chance to work closely with him to make that sort of thing happen here in the future.

Mr. Speaker, I think there are many, many pieces of this throne speech that we have gone through that have allowed us to see wonderful things happen: our seniors, which have been spoken of earlier tonight, funding for our police officers. Many, many other pieces are going to make an exciting time in discussion as we go through the spring session.

We're very, very fortunate to live in this province, and I'm honoured to have a chance to speak to the speech here this evening. It's going to be a great, exciting year, and I look forward to hearing more debate on this tonight.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Questions or comments?

The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure and a great honour to rise today and respond to the Speech from the Throne delivered by the Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour the Honourable Lois Hole, to open the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature. The Speech from the Throne is rooted in tradition. This speech is more than a simple message. It symbolizes the ideals and aspirations of Albertans. This speech is a road map for future years. It outlines the goals and directions for the upcoming session. It also holds the priorities of our government and focuses on addressing the challenges that Albertans face.

I am proud to stand before this Assembly representing my constituency of Lac La Biche-St. Paul and respond to this important message. It is evident that the government continues to look towards the future with high hopes. It has instilled the values that will benefit all Albertans. This government has worked diligently to foster goals, principles, and policies that all Albertans can be proud of and proud to call Alberta their home.

The government has taken a proactive approach in planning for the future not only for our children but for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We have witnessed this course of action over the last year, and it is evident from the Speech from the Throne that these intentions will continue. As Her Honour mentioned, the government's 20-year plan will identify key areas of success and set goals relative to these areas to secure the future of all Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, this forward-thinking is definitely not new to this government. Earlier this fiscal year the province created the stability fund to bring predictability and stability to Alberta's finances. This year the government has put \$2.5 billion into the fund, and it is forecast to be \$3.4 billion by March 31, 2004. As the Premier mentioned in his televised address, the fund is based on a simple principle that you don't spend every dollar you have. This fund is designed to stabilize provincial resource revenues in planning for the future of Albertans. It also allows for government flexibility in funding for immediate necessities.

During this past year it has permitted the province to respond to

natural disasters as well as providing compensation for high energy prices without having to take money away from core programs. It also has been there to help the province through the difficulties experienced in agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to spend a few moments commenting on Alberta's agriculture sector. As one of the major industries in Lac La Biche-St. Paul this subject is of great importance to my community. Agriculture is the backbone of this province and undoubtedly an important part of the economic future of Alberta. This industry has faced many challenges over the last year. Farmers from across the province have felt the effects of BSE. This has dramatically altered the entire Canadian cattle industry. I would like to stress that the province has responded to the crisis by offering support to producers while working diligently to restore confidence in our beef industry.

As Her Honour alluded to in the throne speech, the North American cattle market is highly integrated, and therefore we need to continue working on restoring international confidence in Alberta's beef. Rebuilding beef markets is at the forefront of that effort. The province will continue to work with industry leaders to make necessary changes for sustainability and vitalization of agriculture. Government and industry together need to take appropriate actions while developing solutions that reflect new market realities.

The province has responded with a variety of programs. Since last May this government has committed nearly \$400 million to BSE recovery and related programs, which is more than any other province in Canada. These efforts are designed to help ease some of the difficulties our producers are facing. Programs were developed by the Alberta government along with the Alberta cattle industry to assist livestock producers. I would like to stress that the programs were not designed to solely provide compensation. These programs focused on ensuring the system worked effectively and moved cattle throughout the entire process. Cattle movement from feedlots and packing houses was crucial and provided a positive impact back through the system for cow-calf producers and truckers.

I want to acknowledge that BSE is not the only area where Alberta farmers and ranchers have felt industry pressure and hardships. Drought was still a factor that impeded crop harvest, although the province experienced some increased moisture levels this past year. Moisture levels are significantly low, and revitalization of pastures and replenishment of groundwater levels is crucial. The government rose to address this impediment with programs and security measures for our farmers. Alberta producers have access to comprehensive risk management tools and support programs to respond to drought. These include emergency water pumping programs, crop insurance, the Canadian agriculture income stability program, and the farm disaster loans.

Grasshopper infestation has also devastated crop production over the last year. The grasshopper outbreak was widespread, affecting many areas of the province, but it was exceptionally evident in my constituency. The potential crop damage can be ravaging if left uncontrolled. The Alberta and federal governments have recognized this problem and provided more than \$20 million in producer assistance over the last two years.

Despite the many difficulties that farmers and ranchers are experiencing, we must remember that agriculture is an important industry to this province as well as the future of Alberta's economy. The government is working to facilitate agriculture industry growth, enhance rural sustainability, and provide safety nets for producers. The government will continue to operate alongside industry to develop creative and responsive solutions to challenges we face in the future.

9:10

Mr. Speaker, I would like to spend a few moments addressing tourism, which I believe is another important industry in the province. The Lac La Biche-St. Paul constituency is the home of Alberta's Lakeland region. This area offers much diversity, including boreal mixed forest; clean, clear lakes; sandy beaches; marshy wetlands; and prairie landscapes. The tourism sector holds great potential for the future of this province, and Her Honour brought attention to it in the throne speech. Albertans need to look ahead to future opportunities that can aid in securing prosperity.

Many tourist activities exist, and opportunities are continually being developed. However, I believe we must further encourage this development and expand the scope of provincial tourism. Alberta's tourism industry derives its strength not only from its magnificent scenery, but it does so in conjunction with its service excellence and its strong private-sector partnerships. During 2003 Alberta's tourism industry generated over \$5.3 billion in annual revenue. Revenue estimates are expected to continue growing over the years. Mr. Speaker, I feel tourism efforts should be promoted for all areas of the province. Great potential resides in other locations as well as the Rocky Mountains, Alberta's splendor.

Alberta is very fortunate that tourism is supported by provincial, national, and international visitors. The province must continue to invest in our parks and campsites to continue attracting national and international travellers. This is a vital part of our future. I'm pleased that the Premier mentioned during the televised address the importance of our provincial parks and protected areas. Twenty-one million dollars will be invested in our parks in order to upgrade facilities. This money will be allocated over the next three years. I truly support this initiative to revitalize provincial parks. They are an important attraction to generate revenue in this province. We must also ensure that there is a consistent standard across all parks and that we maintain the infrastructure in order to continue providing premium service in Alberta tourism.

Mr. Speaker, I'm also pleased that the government will stay dedicated to spending in priority areas such as health care and education. It is crucial to promote sustainability conditions and equitable health care for rural communities. We need to strike a balance between providing essential health care services in rural communities while remaining cost-effective. Her Honour in the Speech from the Throne referred to increasing access through providing greater choice of how and where patients can receive the appropriate care. I welcome the province's increased support for community-based care options. It is imperative to keep important health services in our communities. We need to concentrate on bridging health care gaps between urban and rural settings in order to increase access for rural Albertans. Health care providers and the delivery of medical services must remain effective and be provided in an efficient manner for all communities regardless of their location.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to mention that over the last year Albertans saw improved access to health care services. A key strategy of this government is to improve the overall health and wellness of Albertans. Health spending in 2003-04 was increased to \$7.35 billion, which is up 7.4 per cent from the previous year. As well, the new electronic health record offers health care providers access to patients' medical information, which translates into optimal care decisions for Alberta patients.

Mr. Speaker, this government remains committed to seniors. It recognizes the valuable contributions these individuals make to communities across the province through their work in volunteerism. Seniors donate their time and services to enrich and enhance our

neighbourhoods. The Alberta government is dedicated to providing support and services needed to maintain their independence and well-being. I believe this is crucial. As Her Honour mentioned in the Speech from the Throne, the government will be creating further co-ordination in its response to the changing needs of Alberta seniors. We must ensure that as Alberta's seniors population grows, we have the services as well as program assistance to provide for our seniors.

As all Albertans can tell, the government will be dealing with a lot of important issues over the course of the next year. In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne. I am pleased to support this vision as it represents our government's sound principles, leadership, capabilities of forward thinking, goals for continued prosperity, and commitments made to all Albertans.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Questions? Comments?

The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to respond to Her Honour the Hon. Lois Hole's Speech from the Throne. Her Honour talked about the four pillars in Alberta's 20-year plan to help develop Alberta's success. Today I would like to relate these pillars to the issues affecting the people living in Whitecourt-St. Anne.

The important issues in the Whitecourt-St. Anne constituency that affect each and every one of my communities are related to agriculture. Alberta's agriculture industries continue to battle major issues. Drought continued to destroy crops in 2003, and of course the presence of BSE in northern Alberta crippled Alberta's multimillion dollar beef industry. Hundreds of jobs have been lost, and many farmers are left with few options. The Alberta government needs to continue to support this industry focused on ways to help our primary producers.

There's another threat to Alberta's economic prosperity that's also important in Whitecourt-St. Anne, and that's the ongoing softwood lumber dispute. I hope the opening of the Alberta office in Washington, D.C., can help make progress with Alberta's largest trading partner. I also hope that the Alberta government can work with the federal government and other provinces to find a solution to these major trade disputes.

One of the factors that makes Alberta a better place to live, work, and visit is its tourism industry. People from around the world enjoy Alberta's wildlife and environment. However, in Whitecourt-St. Anne illegal hunting and fishing continues to threaten the stability of our natural resources. Conservation officers in my area have told me that more resources would help to find and catch more poachers. This session, Mr. Speaker, I'll be sponsoring a motion that asks the government to levy a surcharge onto existing fines for fish and wildlife offences. Under the Wildlife Act or the Fisheries (Alberta) Act surcharges attached to the fines are collected and dedicated to the victims of crime fund. I think we should expand the spirit of the Alberta victims of crime fund to all offences to the Alberta fish and wildlife resources by dedicating funds to the conservation fund. Amending existing legislation to create a conservation fund would help solidify additional revenue for provincial conservation and enforcement programs.

Mr. Speaker, a safe and well-maintained transportation system is important to help Albertans work and live. Transportation is an important factor assisting the growth of Alberta's rural economy. Through good planning by the Department of Transportation the twinning of highway 43 is progressing very well. I hope to see this

project completed through Whitecourt-St. Anne in the near future, but as well the department needs to continue to work closely with my municipalities to meet their ongoing needs and pressures.

9:20

A special note I have now is to the Minister of Infrastructure. You know, things are going well in the Department of Transportation, but I'm not quite as optimistic about the infrastructure projects. Her Honour talked about the changes and improvements to Alberta's education system. I worry about some areas in my constituency that will struggle to meet leading in learning goals. For example, some of the schools operating in my constituency were built in the 1920s and have been scheduled for replacement for some time. New school construction has been delayed due to other provincial priorities. I can understand that immediate issues keep arising. At the same time, students in my area are trying to learn while chilling winter winds blow through the cracks in the walls. I've even had the opportunity to tour the Minister of Infrastructure through Whitecourt-St. Anne to have a first-hand look at these buildings. I'm hopeful, given that the minister has seen the light – that's through the walls, I mean – that he will find a way to address the situation. I wonder what would happen if a school built before the Second World War and in poor condition were used in our more modern, newer communities. How long would it take before a new school would become a priority in these centres? I hope the government's commitment to infrastructure improvements will help address these old schools.

On the learning front a concern that I hear directly from the teaching community deals with their benefit plan, and I think many MLAs have heard this. One way to help teachers is to revisit the unfunded liability in the teachers' pension. Alberta is blessed to have young, energetic teachers entering our public system. These teachers will be forced to carry a financial burden created before many of them were in school. According to the current repayment schedule the unfunded liability will not be paid down until 2060. Mr. Speaker, this means that the burden will be on the shoulders of today's teachers for long after they retire. It's important for these teachers to keep as many of the dollars they earn as possible. I proposed a motion for this session that will raise this issue.

Another important pillar to the Whitecourt-St. Anne area is competing in the global marketplace. I agree with Her Honour that we need to continue to work hard to secure long-term prosperity for the province. Some sectors of Alberta's economy will need our help. This time I turn to the Minister of Revenue for an important message. I share in Her Honour's optimism for the future of Alberta. I also agree with the urgency to find new ways to generate capital. Right now Alberta is only attracting 3 per cent of Canada's venture capital. Mr. Speaker, we have to do better, and I'm sure with the help of the Minister of Revenue we can. I would think we should look closely at ideas such as flow-through shares to encourage more venture capital into Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, most members are aware of my support for the mining industry. Flow-through shares would encourage junior mining companies to look at northern Alberta's large kimberlite deposits. These deposits are an indication of diamonds. I think this government should consider flow-through shares as a way to raise the capital needed to diversify and expand the northern Alberta economy.

Venture capital is also important for two other growing industries in Alberta: nanotechnology and new agriculture initiatives. The potential for nanotechnology is incredible. Some believe that it could be the next Industrial Revolution, and I'm proud that Alberta began the centre for nanotechnology in 2001. I think more needs to

be done to ensure that the knowledge discovered in Alberta results in profits and economic success for Albertans. We also need to ensure that the scientists we train continue to work and succeed in our province.

As I mentioned before, the agriculture industry has been hit hard in recent years, but the resiliency of this industry is something that must be admired. For example, proposals for slaughterhouses owned and operated by Alberta's producers are on the table now. Again more work and more investment must occur to move these ideas forward. Why not take a few per cent of our heritage trust fund or introduce flow-through shares? This could help the industry raise the capital that's needed today. Some may say that venture capital is risky business because the financial benefits aren't guaranteed. Well, the Premier tells us to be prepared to think differently. There's a great deal of energy and different thinking in this Assembly and throughout our great province. We should not be afraid to explore these new ideas.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, it was a pleasure to see Her Honour speak yesterday afternoon, and it's been a pleasure to serve the residents of the Whitecourt-St. Anne constituency. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Comments or questions?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May I first recognize the enormous contributions to our province by our Lieutenant Governor, the Hon. Lois Hole. Her grace, her carriage, and her courage embody the highest ideals of service and of the Crown in our parliamentary tradition.

In these dark days when elected public service is under a cloud as a result of a culture of entitlement, as a result of a betrayal of trust by some who bring discredit to all members in all Legislatures if only by association, it is most important that our government and our Legislature reflect society's highest ideals of public service. In my experience the vast majority of persons in public life are persons of the highest character, on both sides of the aisle. We should be careful not to demean public life by action or by innuendo. Citizens must be inspired and confident in their leadership. I'm proud to be part of a government committed to honesty, transparency, and sound principles, a government that is, above all, of the people. There is no light between Albertans and their provincial government.

Tonight I am honoured to speak on behalf of the residents of Edmonton-Rutherford in reply to the Speech from the Throne opening the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature. Edmonton-Rutherford is an established community with a wide demographic mix of income, age, and ethnicity, a constituency of vibrant community leagues where citizens come together to create a better future and life for all. Like other constituencies Edmonton-Rutherford is not without challenges. There are individuals and families living on the edge, living without great confidence in their future, some with little hope. We have not and will not allow those Albertans to be forgotten or left behind. It is specifically to those Albertans, individuals at the margins, that this Speech from the Throne offers not just a promise but a blueprint of future possibilities and opportunities.

How is this to be achieved? It starts with vision. The Lieutenant Governor on behalf of the government of Alberta outlined a 20-year strategic plan designed to ensure that Alberta's economy will have balance and strength and stability even as our natural resource revenues decline. The vision is based on four pillars: innovation, learning, competitive ability, and quality of life.

Innovation. We need to ensure that we are a value-added economy. We must turn our natural resources into value-added products, thereby enhancing not only the value of the resource but

also the value of the labour and profit in the resource.

Learning. A knowledge-based economy requires both a positive attitude towards lifelong learning and the necessary investments in the bricks and mortar of learning. Our ongoing investment in learning is reinforced and confirmed. This Speech from the Throne clearly confirms our government's commitment to education: kindergarten to grade 12, postsecondary, and lifelong learning including apprenticeship training. Specifically, it recognizes the contribution of educators and of the teaching profession to our society. It is fair to say that in recent years many teachers felt undervalued. This Speech from the Throne and the subsequent budget following the Learning Commission firmly establish this government's commitment to education, to students, and, indeed, to the teaching profession.

Competitive ability. In a global economy Alberta requires a global reach and the ability to communicate directly with our customers. The throne speech commits us to that end and to continue to work with the federal government and our provincial partners to ensure that we are competitive.

Quality of life, making Alberta the best place to live, work, and play. A government sensitive and responsible, responsive to those in need; a government committed to using tax dollars wisely, carefully, as a trust responsibility; a government sensitive to and responsive to seniors, including seniors living on a fixed income, seniors apprehensive as they witness their cost of living rising faster than their income; a government capable of responding to citizens generally ambivalent about health care until personally involved. Then health care becomes priority number one and must be responded to immediately. No matter how much money is spent, those citizens expect everything at that time, no questions asked. We must ensure our ability to fund health care according to our expectations, and that will require honest debate, thought, and resolution. Let us not demonize those who challenge the status quo. We will not arrive at a responsive, sustainable health care system without serious, honest debate.

9:30

A government sensitive to and investing in art and culture, the beating heart of our province. We don't live on bread alone. Our artistic and cultural community is a critical economic driver of our economy and reflects our values. The brightest and best of the world, encouraged to make Alberta their home, will base their decision not only on economic considerations but also on the quality of schools, the safety of streets and community, quality of health care, and the beauty and safety of our environment.

This, then, is the hope of the future, the road map of opportunity for those yet unborn, a vision of the future to inspire confidence and hope in all Albertans. Acquisition of knowledge leads to the application of knowledge. It is the application of knowledge that creates wealth and opportunity. Our future is based on a foundation of opportunity and education for every Albertan.

Mr. Speaker, there's one more thing that I'd like to touch on in the throne speech debate, and that is Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, a plan to encourage families to prepare for and to plan for postsecondary education for Alberta's children. Not only does the plan make a positive financial statement; it also suggests to families the desirability of postsecondary education in preparation for life. As we know, education is in large part the ladder of opportunity.

Surely, all Albertans will applaud this throne speech and the government for its vision, its action, and its promise for the future.

Mr. Speaker, may I move that debate do now adjourn.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head:

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 1

Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf of the hon. Premier.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Premier it's my pleasure to move for second reading Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think I beat them to their feet probably. I'm honoured to speak at second reading to Bill 1 on behalf of the Premier. I want to thank the hon. Deputy Government House Leader for moving second reading on this bill.

Speaking to the principles of the bill, I want to begin with some of the principles on how this bill first came about. I think you've heard me talk in this Chamber very proudly about my grandson Matthew. Really, about two years ago my wife and I were blessed with the birth of Matthew, our first grandchild. [some applause] Thank you. After discussing what we could do to celebrate this new life, we decided to start an RESP for his future postsecondary needs. That seemed natural enough because 35 years earlier we had done the same for our own sons, and the funds were very helpful in their postsecondary education despite the fact that RESPs were not nearly as flexible then as they are today. We discussed how precious this young life was and how fortunate it was that he was born in Alberta and had parents or, in this case, grandparents with the means to start saving early for his future advanced education.

The discussion turned to the financial disadvantage that those children without a savings plan faced when the time came for funding a postsecondary program of studies and, in particular, the difficulties that some of our rural children face when having to move away from home to the big cities where some of the postsecondary institutions are. So I remember thinking out loud about how great it would be if all newborn children in Alberta had an opportunity to have an education savings plan. As she has done so often in the past, my good wife, Rose, encouraged me to look into it, and thanks to our Premier, the Learning minister, and many others who offered encouragement and good counsel, here we are with the opportunity to make it a reality.

I want to also thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, who successfully passed a motion in this House in 2003 called Motion 506 that urged government to look for new ways to help students finance their education. That motion put many of the issues on the table and, in my view, paved the way for the bill that we have before us today.

I began looking into the possibilities of how the province could contribute to starting an RESP for every newborn and how much such an investment program would cost and what benefits would accrue over time. I found that on average 36,000 children are born each year in Alberta and that the average cost of an RESP unit was about \$500. That didn't seem like a very large investment considering the benefits that were becoming more apparent as the work progressed. One of the most significant benefits was that on average 80 per cent of the children who have RESPs go on to postsecondary education. Now, that's a very significant number, Mr. Speaker, especially when you realize that less than 50 per cent of students who graduate from high school in Canada go on to postsecondary

learning. That information was very useful and was provided by the RESP dealers association, which has more than 40 years of statistics on plan holders and their success.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has one of the most highly educated populations, but what an opportunity to increase the number of high school students who go on to postsecondary education immediately after graduation. What an opportunity to build on the knowledge age, where knowledge can become the fifth pillar of our economy. What an opportunity to lead the country once again through a postsecondary brain gain that produces a vibrant economy, a healthier population, and a quality of life that is better than the one we currently experience; in other words, a brighter future for our children and grandchildren in a better educated society.

So let's look at some of the benefits of doing such a plan. It is estimated that increasing the number of postsecondary certificates, degrees, and licences by 20 per cent has potentially about a \$3 billion impact on our economy. That's in 2003 dollars. That's in higher wages and salaries when compared to earnings of those who don't graduate or don't go on to postsecondary education. What will that be worth in 2023 dollars? Perhaps \$6 billion, perhaps \$9 billion. Who knows for sure? But it is very, very significant indeed.

A financial analysis of several scenarios determined what could be available to Alberta students in 2023 as a result of the savings plan. The worst-case scenario that we looked at was: what if Albertans decided not to participate at all? There would still be about \$800 million available in 2023 due to the magic of compound interest and the federal government's RESP participation at 20 per cent. This would produce approximately \$2,588 for every child enrolled in the program available for their postsecondary education. That's if everybody did nothing.

9:40

The second scenario is if Albertans contributed to the level of the current national average for RESPs, which, I'm told, is about \$500 per year. The amount available for Alberta students to pursue their education in 2023 would be between \$6 billion and \$8 billion, depending on the return on investment and assuming an 80 per cent participation rate in the plan. Now, those are huge benefits, Mr. Speaker, and that would contribute approximately \$21,291 per child enrolled in the plan for their postsecondary education.

The final scenario that we looked at: what if Albertans participated at the level that they did in 2002? In 2002, Mr. Speaker, the last year that figures were available, Albertans contributed an average of \$1,489 per year to RESP plans, but only 17 per cent of Albertans with children in school had a plan. So what would happen if 80 per cent of Albertans with children in school had a plan and contributed to that level? The amount available in that case would be between \$16 billion and \$20 billion. Now, even in Canadian dollars that's a huge return on investment and would make \$59,340 per child available for their postsecondary education.

Some of the other benefits of passing this legislation. First, we believe it will enhance awareness of the benefits of postsecondary education among students and parents. The plan sends a message to Albertans that postsecondary education is valued and is worth saving for very early in their children's lives. It will increase the number of Albertans that participate in postsecondary education and, therefore, in a better economy. The plan supports the principle that the cost of postsecondary education is a shared responsibility between students, their families, and government. It encourages Alberta parents to plan and save for their children's education from the earliest opportunity. Over time it will establish a culture of saving early and often for advanced education for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, the centennial education savings plan will be

consistent with current federal regulations with respect to RESPs and the Canada education savings grant plan, so we're not doing anything any differently than what already exists. The plan will contribute an initial \$500 to a registered education savings plan for every child born or adopted into an Alberta family in 2005 and subsequent years. The government will provide an additional contribution at ages eight, 11, and 14, with a matching requirement. If the beneficiary does not use the money on postsecondary studies at an eligible institution, the trustee will return any grant money to the province of Alberta. This is consistent with the rules under the Canada education savings grant and currently what happens under the federal plan.

Other provisions and regulations governing eligible investments and fees are also consistent with current RESPs and the Canada education savings grant. The federal government has agreed to administer this plan with a single application form and at very, very little or no cost to the province.

I want to thank the Minister of Learning for his support on this bill as well as his excellent staff, who became enthusiastic proponents and did a wonderful job of dealing with the many research requests. The successful negotiations with the federal government are a tribute to their professionalism and diligence. I want to thank the Treasury people who worked out all of the financial analysis, and I would urge everyone to vote in favour of this bill.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I guess it's not a real treat to stand in that I don't support the bill, and it probably doesn't come as a great surprise to most people in this House.

I agree with the preamble. I think everyone in the House would agree with that, that we need to recognize the benefit of postsecondary education. I think that there's no question that the government should be working to raise awareness for the benefits of postsecondary education among children and their parents, and certainly we should encourage parents to plan and save for their children and their postsecondary education. We should encourage people to plan for their education, for their retirement, for their old age, for their business hopes and dreams. It's certainly no secret that planning short term and long term is one of the keys to success. We should encourage them to do that, but we shouldn't do it for them.

I'm going to only speak to some of the principles that I feel are involved in the second stage of this bill, and one of them that I have a hard time with is the principle of fairness and the fairness of application. I'm going to talk about yesterday's students, students that aren't going to be born in the centennial year. They didn't have any choice of where, when, or how they were born. They're here. They have the same aspirations as centennial babies will have and as babies for many years to come. They'll have the same expenses for schools to live with, and I just don't think that you can say: well, all of a sudden, now we're going to put this money away for you, but because you were born yesterday, too bad. I don't think that's fair, and I don't think we should want to go there.

Like the Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne said, we've got kids going to schools that are in excess of 70 years old, and in fact the wind does blow in and these are deplorable. To go back to them and say, "We don't have the money; we haven't had the money for the 10 years that your school has been scheduled to be rebuilt; we haven't had that money and we don't have it now, but we have \$20 million to put in the bank for something that might happen 20 years

down the road," I can't do. I can't look the children and I can't look

the parents in the eye and say: that's a priority with us, to let you stay there. So I have no problem saying that if everything were perfect in education now and all our bills were paid, then you can look at how we reimburse Albertans with their own money.

I also have a problem when we say that this has to go to the students who go to universities or colleges, full-time school. While they certainly do have an advantage in life and that's not in question, we also need the plumbers, the electricians. We need the policemen. We need the firemen. We need the farmers who don't go to college or school, who go to the school of hard knocks many times. We need everybody to be treated fairly, and it is their money we're dealing with here. It's not ours; it's theirs. So if we have this extra money, give it to them. Give it to every Albertan, and let them decide where their priorities are for their money. It's not our money.

There are many other reasons that I think we'll get to in committee about priorities that we have as Albertans, about whether this is what Albertans want, but I have to finish with going back to the principles that I and most people in this room signed on to when we ran for this party in 2001. I agreed with these principles then, and I do now.

The Alberta Progressive Conservatives believe in the following principles. This is from our web site, so I didn't get to make this part up.

We recognize that lifelong learning is central to a successful society. It is important that learning opportunities be accessible, affordable, and sustainable for all Albertans. We believe in enabling and encouraging Albertans to contribute to their fullest potential.

It doesn't say that we're going to take their money and put it in the bank for them. It says that we're going to provide schools and universities and the best system we can, and we do that. As it goes on, it says:

We respect the rights of the individual and are mindful of the responsibilities that accompany those rights. By accepting responsibility and acting on their own initiative, Albertans will achieve their full potential as contributors to prosperous communities.

That's what our principles as a party say. I believe we're falling away from that, and I don't agree with it. I'm certainly thankful that I'm in a party that allows us to disagree, and disagree I do.

Mr. Speaker, thank you.

9:50

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak in favour of Bill 1, and I find myself in a little bit of an awkward situation in speaking against one of my colleagues who has just spoken about Bill 1, which is a government bill sponsored by the Premier.

Bill 1 is the type of bill that allows for future thinking. It's the type of bill that I ran for this job for. It's the type of bill that I believe all MLAs should support. It's the type of bill that plans for 18, 20 years down the road. It is not the type of bill that fixes potholes in the roads but instead looks and sees where that road is going and heads towards that destination.

What this does is that it allows kids to save for their education where their parents, for example, may or may not have saved for it. It opens up an account so that a \$10 or \$20 gift for a birthday can be deposited in that RESP account, Mr. Speaker, and that money will indeed grow, as the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont has alluded to. The potential that this has to grow for students to be able to go to postsecondary education is absolutely unbelievable. An invest-

ment of around \$20 million per year has the potential to grow into around \$6 billion.

What is even better about this bill is that if the \$500 and subsequent \$100 contributions are not utilized by the student to go to postsecondary education, they are clawed back and they go back into general revenue. They go back into the place where they can be used for health care or fixing roads or fixing potholes, things like that. Therefore, again I'll state that this bill is incredibly important when it comes to many for the education of their students.

Mr. Speaker, this does allow for apprentices to utilize this bill for postsecondary education: the plumbers, the electricians, anyone who goes to postsecondary education for a diploma.

Take a look at the employment rates for people who go on to postsecondary education, for those who finish high school, and for those who do not finish high school. Mr. Speaker, respectively, for those who did not finish high school, the unemployment rate is around 10 to 12 per cent. For those who finished high school with no postsecondary education, you're looking at a 7 to 8 per cent range, and for those who have a postsecondary diploma or postsecondary degree, you're all of a sudden down to 2 to 3 per cent on the unemployment rate. So there is little doubt – little doubt – that postsecondary education is extremely important, and there is little doubt that what we are doing here is planning for 18 to 20 years down the road when parents will be able to plan for their children's future.

Mr. Speaker, the \$500 and subsequent \$100 amounts are not going to be enough to pay for their tuition down the road. What this does is it allows the parents to put money into their savings plan to allow them to go to postsecondary education 18 to 20 years down the road. I would have loved for my parents to have started an RESP for me. I think it would have been great to enable myself to go to postsecondary education, but they did not. I know people now who have RESPs who have \$8,000 and \$10,000 and \$15,000 in these RESPs, and they will enable those kids to go to university.

The other thing that must be remembered, Mr. Speaker, is that these are matched by a 20 per cent contribution from the federal government. That is a much better rate of return than anything else you are going to get, and it's because it is an RESP. I feel so strongly about this that I will actually give a federal Liberal credit for this. It was Prime Minister Paul Martin who brought this plan in many years ago, and I will say that it was the right thing to do at that time, and it is still the right thing to do.

This bill certainly builds on that. It allows every child born in Alberta from 2005 onwards to have an RESP started, to kick it off with \$500. Mr. Speaker, could that \$20 million be used to build half an overpass? Yeah, it probably could, but I think that our children's future, our children's postsecondary education future is much more significant and much more important than half an overpass.

With that, I would move to adjourn debate, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn the Assembly until tomorrow afternoon at 1:30.

[Motion carried; at 9:59 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, February 19, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/19

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Grant that we the members of our province's Legislature may fulfill our office with honesty and integrity. May our first concern be for the good of all of the people. Let us be guided by our deliberations this day. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed with great pleasure that I rise today to introduce to you and through you some very special members of our community who are working with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. I would ask them to rise as their names are called, and then perhaps we can salute them all at the end of my introduction. Mr. Bryan O'Donnell, chair of the board for CNIB; Mr. Bill McKeown, the executive director of CNIB; Ellie Shuster, director of communications for CNIB; Diane Bergeron, who is here with her daughter Summer Satre, and I think Diane has brought her other special friend, Polar. Is Polar with you? Where is Polar? There he is, Polar the dog. Diane worked with the city of Edmonton as a co-ordinator on the advisory board on Services to Persons with Disabilities, and she's a board member of CNIB. They are accompanied by a member of my staff, Mr. Andrew Turzansky, who has worked extensively on the revisions to the Blind Persons' Rights Act, which is before us for debate today, and they are here to witness that.

I might just add quickly, Mr. Speaker, that this was the group that also put together the first ever Vision awards, which occurred yesterday at the lovely Winspear Centre with the Edmonton Symphony and Ian Tyson and George Blondheim and all those superstars, and presented our Premier with the first ever Vision award.

Thank you for that, and welcome to the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to the members of the Legislature three members of Alberta's law enforcement community. These three men are members of Cops for Cancer. Cops for Cancer started in Alberta in 1994 when Edmonton Police Service then Sergeant Gary Goulet became friends with a young boy suffering from cancer. Over the past 10 years Cops for Cancer has raised more than \$15 million for the Canadian Cancer Society.

Yesterday I had the honour of participating in one of their fundraising events by riding with them as part of their cross-country Canada and back stationary bike ride set up at West Edmonton Mall. I would like to thank everyone who sponsored my ride. Donations are still coming in today, and I sincerely thank all of my colleagues and Legislature staff who were so thoughtful in contributing to this worthy cause.

I am very pleased to ask Edmonton Police Service Inspector John Ratcliff and EPS Staff Sergeant Kerry Nisbet and Staff Sergeant Gary Goulet to please stand and accept the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the House this afternoon two people whose company is responsible for some of the best ads on television. Ferg Devins and Jeff Gaulin of Molson Canada are with us today. In addition to being vice-president of corporate affairs, Ferg is also one of the very best impersonators that I've had the opportunity to be entertained by. I'd ask both Ferg and Jeff to rise and receive the acknowledgment of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 18 young students in grade 6 from Clive school. With them today is teacher Mr. Robert MacKinnon, who's just the best and one of my all-time favourites; parent helpers Mr. Keith Knight, Mr. Jake Tolsma, Mrs. Monica Catellier, Mrs. Debbie Wagner, Mr. Dave Rainforth, Mrs. Colleen Rainforth, Mr. Scott Clark; bus driver Mrs. Deanne Rowley. Today is one of the students' 12th birthday. Happy birthday, Carmen. Would you please stand, and would the Assembly please award them the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly a constituent of mine, a young man we're very proud of, Dave Arcand. Dave has recently graduated with honours from the business administration program at NAIT and is looking forward to a career in finance. Dave is also getting married in September. Many of the members in this Assembly know Dave's mother, Deb Arcand, who is the legislative assistant to the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane. Dave has risen. Would you please give him a warm welcome from this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly four guests: the first is Joe Fardell, who is the president of Tourism Calgary; George Morrison, the president of Leap Sports Incorporated and also the Alberta Classic golf tournament; Mike Stevens, the vice-president of the PGA tour, who was here yesterday to launch the Alberta Classic, being held at Redwood Meadows this year in August; and also the president of the Edmonton Golf Association, Pat Carrigan, who is touring them around here in the city today. I'd ask them all to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: I think that at this point it's probably appropriate for a point of trivia, seeing as we have golfers from across the country. Very few people know that the first golf course built in Canada was actually built right on the site of this building.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I always appreciate your wisdom. Almost always.

As I'm sure many MLAs have noticed, there have been people in the gallery, parents and other people connected to education, watching our debates closely and following progress on education

issues. Today I'd like to introduce one of those people in the public gallery, Susan O'Neil. Susan is a parent with kids in the Edmonton public system. She is editor of *CommissionWatch* and with Education Watch and as such will be watching us very carefully as we debate in the Legislature today. Please give her a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the Assembly two student leaders who are here to observe today's proceedings. They are Melanee Thomas, executive director of the Council of Alberta University Students, and Brett Bergie, provincial director of the Alberta College and Technical Institute Students' Executive Council. They are seated in the public gallery. I'll ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two postsecondary students. Melissa Stephen is a first-year social work student who is working in my constituency office at Edmonton-Highlands for the practicum portion of the social work program she is enrolled in at Grant MacEwan College. She is doing a very good job of handling the large volume of casework that comes to my office, and I'm very happy that she could join us today. Erin Lindon is a second-year student at Grant MacEwan in the correctional services program. She hopes to continue with her education following this program with a criminal justice degree, and her ultimate goal is to work with the RCMP. I'm very pleased that they could join us today, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Government Expense Claims

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier tried to justify his government's travel expenses by saying that it was necessary to promote and sell Alberta abroad. Well, I'm sure Albertans would like to know what this government is doing with their money in the province. My first question is to the Premier. What was the government selling when the Premier and the executive director of his southern Alberta office spent \$750 of tax money for a meal at Caesar's restaurant in Calgary?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know and the hon. member has not said when, and I don't know who might have been at that meeting, but obviously there was more than one, more than two, more than three, perhaps more than four, perhaps five, perhaps six, perhaps seven, perhaps eight people at that particular meeting.

1:40

Mr. Speaker, I can't tell you how frustrated I am with the Liberals, who have FOIPed, as they have the right to do, and have put literally dozens and dozens of public service employees to work at great expense. They have spent countless hours investigating these matters. Countless hours. I would guess that once the tab has been tallied – and I plan to table it in this Legislature – it far exceeds the expenses incurred by my office over the past three years, and I will table that.

I'm frustrated and I'm disappointed that the Liberals would not be honest enough. You alluded to honesty and integrity in your prayer today, Mr. Speaker, and it's something that is desperately lacking within the Liberal Party: honesty and integrity. I read the headline in the *Edmonton Sun* today that a glass of orange juice cost \$27. That is not true, Mr. Speaker. It is not true, and they didn't go out of their way to say that that was not true.

As a matter of fact, what cost \$27 Canadian was three jugs of orange juice. Three jugs of orange juice. At \$12 that was roughly \$27 Canadian, and that works out to approximately \$2.70 a glass. That wasn't in the *Edmonton Sun*, and the Liberals did not go out of their way to explain the situation. They did not go out of their way. That to me speaks to the lack of honesty and the lack of integrity within that party.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday they tabled information relative to the amount spent on transportation in New York. I will have to give credit to some of the media outlets who phoned New York and said that at that price, my delegation and myself got a bargain, an absolute bargain. Again, this speaks to their lack of integrity and honesty, not standing up and telling the public what the cost of doing business in New York actually is.

They raised the matter of \$1,100 spent on tips to hotel staff in Mexico City and others. Mr. Speaker, they lacked honesty and integrity when they failed to explain that this is not a discretionary expenditure. It is part of the way Mexican hotels and others bill customers. That fee covered the service costs of six people for four days and also included costs for meeting room use. They did not say that. They didn't go out of their way to explain that. That to me says that they are not honest and that they lack integrity.

The Speaker: The hon. member has been recognized.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking of being frustrated and disappointed by a government, it's the citizens of this province who are on AISH and SFI. They have not had a raise.

Now, how does this Premier justify spending almost the same amount on a meal at Caesar's restaurant in Calgary as some Albertans on AISH receive from this government to live on for an entire month?

Mr. Klein: Again I speak to honesty and integrity, and this man, this person, lacks both tremendously, because he is implying that I spent personally \$750 on a meal for me. That, Mr. Speaker, is dishonest, and he knows it.

Mr. MacDonald: I'm tempted to ask if there's tuna fish on the menu at Caesar's.

My next question, Mr. Speaker, is: why are no details provided by the Premier's office on the dinners and hotel expenses charged to taxpayers by members of Executive Council? Why not?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, Executive Council is granted certain privileges by virtue of the oaths we take as ministers, oaths, by the way, that are not required of the opposition, not that they would keep them anyway.

Mr. Speaker, in many cases there are sensitive meetings that take place between members of Executive Council and individuals. That is the reason that some business meetings, whether they're over dinner or otherwise, are kept secret and the names of the clients or guests are not disclosed.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, at a time when a thousand teachers are laid off in Alberta, when tuition fees soar, and when seniors are left in

jeopardy, this Tory government found plenty of money for travel and communications. In 1998 annual reports show that this government spent an amazing \$89 million for travel and communications. By last year that huge amount had soared an unbelievable 47 per cent to \$131 million. To the Premier: why has this government's travel and communications spending soared 47 per cent since 1998 to a mind-boggling \$131 million a year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll attempt to get that information for the hon. member. I understand that he has a request for a written answer to that particular question on the Order Paper, and I'm sure that he'll be provided with that information. In addition, I've agreed to appear at Public Accounts at a time that will be suitable to the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, who I understand is chair of the Public Accounts Committee. We'll try to arrange a time. Be glad to answer those questions, and I'm sure there are detailed explanations for all of the expenditures.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to point out to the hon. member that for the disabled alone I think we spend in excess of 1.7 billion – billion – dollars. Even this person can understand \$1.7 billion for disabled services in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Can the Premier tell us if he himself is ultimately responsible for expense claims filed by staff in his office?

Mr. Klein: Am I responsible? I really don't know. I haven't given it any thought. But if he wants to know what I had for lunch today, I had a bowl of mushroom soup and an egg salad sandwich.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, in the interest of openness can the Premier explain why his chief of staff spent over \$1,500 of taxpayer money on hotel rooms in Edmonton when he lives in metro Edmonton?

Mr. Klein: I really don't know, but I'll ask him about that. I really don't know. If the hon. member will provide me with the documentation, I'll look into it. Perhaps – and I say perhaps – he had to secure those hotel rooms for out-of-town visitors, Mr. Speaker, visitors who had been invited to do business at our expense, various consultants. We have numerous people, literally hundreds of people, coming to Edmonton each and every day who do business, who require my office to give them help in securing transportation and securing accommodation, and we do that as a matter of courtesy.

Mr. Speaker, I guess these people don't understand, thank God, what government is all about and how government runs. If they look to their Liberal cousins in Ottawa, as an example, I would remind the Liberal Party that the total expenses they're talking about don't equal over three years the amount spent on one trip by the Governor General – one trip, \$5.3 million – and that was sanctioned by their Liberal cousins in Ottawa, and they think it's okay.

1:50

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier claimed that his government was open and transparent. However, when one looks at the record of this government, that claim rings hollow. My questions are to the Premier. Why has the Premier and his executive staff not appeared before the Public Accounts Committee in over eight years despite having been issued invitations to appear? Eight years.

Mr. Klein: Very interesting. I said that I would. It's not normal for Premiers to appear before public accounts committees. As a matter of fact, I was the first Premier to appear before the Public Accounts Committee in almost 30 years, Mr. Speaker. No other Premier in this country, as I understand it – as I understand it – appears before Public Accounts. Now, I have agreed to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why is the Premier and his Executive Council provided special privileges to withhold information under the freedom of information act?

Mr. Smith: They signed off on the act.

Mr. Klein: On the FOIP Act.

Mr. Smith: Yes. They signed off on that.

Mr. Klein: Well, I'm advised by the hon. Minister of Energy that they signed off on the FOIP Act, which provides certain exemptions for members of Executive Council due to the sometimes sensitive nature of the discussions we have with our citizens.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Then to the Premier again: will the Premier bring in amendments to the freedom of information act to drop the special exemptions for Executive Council around travel details?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we are as open and transparent as we possibly can be. We don't sneak around. We don't hire operatives like the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to find out what we're doing in London. If he wants to know or if the Liberals want to know, then get on a plane and go. Find out; don't sneak around.

Mr. Speaker, the Energy minister will be representing me in New York. He has issued this news release, and to me it's quite satisfactory because he'll be representing me in New York City. "The estimated cost of the trip for Minister Smith and his executive assistant is \$9,500." Estimated cost. It could be \$10,000; it could be \$9,000. We don't know. The full itinerary is listed, what he's going to be doing. I'm sure that he doesn't know everyone who's going to be there, because I've attended these conferences before and usually there are 150 to 200, sometimes 250 people. But he will travel to New York; he will attend the East Coast Canadian Energy Conference. There will be presentations by companies with operations in Alberta. Minister Smith will be the keynote speaker at that meeting. There will be media availability. Now, if you think this is all wrong, you stand up and say so. You stand up and say so, that it's wrong.

On Thursday he will attend the FirstEnergy research trust overview. He will do an interview with *Petroleum Intelligence Weekly*. He will attend a presentation by Henry Groppe, who's a well-known analyst in the oil and gas business. He will attend the FirstEnergy research update on oil sands evolution. He will do another media availability. He will attend presentations by companies with operations in Alberta on Friday. Then he will depart the conference for Edmonton or Calgary.

What is wrong with that? If the opposition feels that there is something wrong with this mission, stand up and say so. Be honest. Show integrity. Stand up and say that they don't agree with these missions to sell Alberta. Stand up and say it.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I do want to supplement that. As a matter of fact, on the topic of yesterday and today, the trips to New York,

the last time the Premier and I were in New York, while the Kyoto-loving Liberals were sucking lattes down in the United Nations, we were downtown defending Alberta's interest and the destruction of the Alberta economy through the Kyoto protocol that those guys caused. So, boy, we'll continue to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Cattle Prices

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to the most recent weekly survey done by the agriculture ministry, Alberta cattle prices are in free fall. In fact, cow-calf producers are only getting about half as much for their feeder calves as they were one year ago. With the news that the border for live cattle could remain slammed shut until next year, it's become pretty clear that this government's strategy of barbecues and pleading with their pals in the Bush administration just doesn't cut it. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Why is the government turning its back on rural Alberta by refusing to even consider getting a floor price for cattle in this province?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I have had a lot of questions in this House over a period of many years, and I have never heard one that was as off base as this one. I would invite this hon. member to go out to rural Alberta, to get out of the city and go sit in an auction market, to go stand before 1,200 people and discuss this industry, to spend nine and a half months meeting almost daily with them, and ask them how they feel about this government's support to agriculture. I'll tell you that it'll be not this member that has stood up for agriculture. I think two questions in the last session. I have listened for two days to the opposition benches questioning trips on trade missions for this province of ours while these important issues sit out there.

Mr. Speaker, we have provided support programs that have carried this industry, that were designed by this industry in its totality. Every member of every organization in agriculture, in beef production, including processors and retailers and truckers, has been at a round-table designing those programs. If he doesn't believe it's worked, tell the industry that because they designed them. We supported them to the tune of \$400 million, which is more than any province in Canada has provided and double what the federal government has provided to date.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that only cattle producers are being devastated while the profit margins of supermarkets and packing plants are on the rise, why is this government letting the cow-calf producers bear the brunt of this crisis? Why don't they share the pain at least?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, if we had time, I would give the hon. member a little lesson in market, but we don't have that kind of time in the House. It again displays his lack of knowledge of the industry. Through the programs that were provided last year that supported the chain of beef production, which is how it works, cow-calf producers received as good or better prices in the fall for their calves. No question; the evidence is there, and I can provide tapes from a sale one year ago to last fall. That is fact, and it's a simple matter. Pick it up on the web site. They're all there. Yes, you will find some feeder cattle today at half price, but generally, Mr. Speaker, 800-pound steers, if they're good cattle, are up to 65

cents. That is not satisfactory. It is not half. It's probably 25 cents off, 15 cents off what it should be.

2:00

Mr. Speaker, we do have in place, if we can convince the rest of the provinces to sign, a disaster assistance program called the Canada agriculture income stabilization program. If he could write to some of his NDP governments on either side of us, that would help, and then that support would be available to the producers of this province. We've signed.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, why is it that while cattle ranchers and feedlot owners are losing their land, losing their herds, all this minister can do is flip burgers and go on bended knee to Washington? [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier has been recognized.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I must confess that I probably only flipped one or two burgers, and it was at a school in Edmonton where the teacher of that school had the foresight and wisdom to take his grade 4 class – and I wish he'd have invited the hon. member to attend – to do a study on BSE. He felt it was important that the students understood this issue thoroughly, to recognize this, and a special young lady in that school stylized the I Love Alberta Beef slogan by writing “still” – I Still Love Alberta Beef – on it. We did attend that school. I was proud to do that with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and recognize that grade 4 students take an interest in the struggles that our beef industry are going through right now. So I did; I flipped a burger there. That's the extent of it.

What I have done and what the hon. member has not done is sit down with this industry on almost a daily basis to try to work our way through what is a very complex and difficult situation that is no fault of theirs, and we continue to do that. I do not have to, I think, defend my work with this industry to that hon. member. The industry will determine that.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development to supplement?

Mr. Norris: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important, if the hon. members want to ask questions, that they at least get their questions and facts right. There are, indeed, trips to promote beef. They're in conjunction with the CBEF and BIC. The hon. Member for Wainwright has gone on one; the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert is going on one. But this particular minister of agriculture has led the nation in defending this industry, and I can tell you as minister of industry that they're very proud of what she has done. For him to comment that she's out flipping burgers is not only incorrect; it's wrong. I want to say in front of the House that the industry is incredibly proud of what this particular ministry has done.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Aldersyde Interchange

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last weekend there was yet another fatal collision at the intersection of highways 2, 7, and 547 near Aldersyde in my constituency. Today my question is to the Minister of Transportation. My constituents want to know how many collisions have to occur at this dangerous intersection before the Department of Transportation takes the initiative and builds an interchange.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the Aldersyde interchange is a priority for the department. Presently, to date all of the preliminary functional planning has been complete. The land acquisition is in progress. In fact, a fair amount of the parcels of land required to accommodate the interchange have been purchased, and we will be now issuing an RFP for the very detailed engineering plan to be put in effect at that particular location.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental question, then, is again to the Minister of Transportation. Recognizing the minister's comments that it takes time to build road infrastructure like that interchange, when can Albertans and my constituents expect to see construction at the intersection of highways 2, 7, and 547? When?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the interchange in question is not in the 2003-2006 capital plan. However, with Budget 2004, which will be announced soon, and with every budget we always update our capital plan, always go back to it, revise it, add another year to that three-year plan, and given this location, the traffic counts, and all the work that's been done to date, I'm looking forward to the capital plan being tabled in this House in the very near future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Lieutenant Governor's Residence

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been discovered that next week the government is going to be tearing down the official residence of the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta and selling off one-third of the land. This residence has been significant in terms of architectural style as well as for the heads of state and other officials, including Princess Diana and Grant MacEwan, who have lived or been entertained there. The government has provided no concrete plan to rebuild this public asset. My questions are to the Premier. Is allowing an asset to deteriorate to the point where it will cost \$400,000 to repair it the government's version of good stewardship?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, unlike the hon. member I've been in the home, and it was a nice home.

Ms Blakeman: How do you know?

Mr. Klein: If she has been in the home, then stand up and say so. Maybe she will do it when she, you know, gets up to question. If you've been in the house, I will apologize.

Ms Blakeman: Answer the question.

Mr. Klein: I'm going to answer the question. You haven't been in the house; have you?

I have been in the house, Mr. Speaker, and it was maintained as best as it possibly could be. We spent, I understand, about \$25,000 a year on the bungalow, which is a considerable amount of money, but as that old song says, *This Old House*, you know, there are things that go wrong with a house: the heating systems, the wiring systems, the kinds of things that you can't see.

It was the opinion of the Department of Infrastructure that rather than spend \$400,000 to renovate the home and completely overhaul it, it would be better to sell one of the lots at a very good price –

because it is prime real estate – and develop the other two lots, and it seems to me that you can build a very, very nice home on two lots in Glenora, a very nice home indeed. I'm sure once the architects have the plans prepared, the hon. minister would be prepared to table those plans, and I can assure you that whatever is built there will be most appropriate for a head of state, the Lieutenant Governor, and anyone who might want to visit her or him in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why did the government not consult with Albertans and particularly with the neighbours in Glenora before deciding to demolish this historic building?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, relative to the process I'll have the hon. minister respond.

2:10

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I did tour the house on two occasions, and of course the hon. member has admitted that she did not. We also toured the house with Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor. If you've been in the house, you would quickly see that it's built in three sections. Even the dining room is not really conducive to having royalty live in it. So we, in fact, assessed the condition of the home in many areas, and the Premier has talked about the various things that were a problem. We discussed it with Her Honour, and she also agreed that the house needed to be replaced and not to try to just simply repair it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. To the Minister of Infrastructure then: as the people's steward for this Lieutenant Governor's residence, under what authority did the minister decide to destroy the building?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, she said that we're responsible for it, so I would assume that that gives us the authority to manage the property the way that we see fit to spend money wisely, because they are Albertans' dollars.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Education Policy

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta students continue to be top achievers nationally and at the international level, and I know that everyone in this Assembly is proud of how well our students are doing. However, we must continue to maintain that momentum, and that doesn't happen easily. There must be a continuous plan for improvement. What I hear from teachers is that they want to be able to do their very best in teaching for all their students. What I hear from parents is that they want their children to learn to their potential. Teachers and parents believe that their children must be able to learn and succeed in a relatively pleasant environment. To the Minister of Learning: in the Learning department's planning what assistance will there be to ensure that every child, wherever they reside in the province, will learn to their potential?

The Speaker: Okay. Within the confines of the question period, please.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What the hon. member has just asked me is basically the essence of the Department of Learning. Our wish and our mandate is to ensure that every child succeeds so that every child can live to its full potential within the education system. I will say quite simply in one very short, succinct answer that that is exactly what we do in the Department of Learning.

Mr. Maskell: My second question is also to the same minister. Of the total Learning budget what percentage stays in the department and what kinds – and I say kinds – of support from the money retained is used to support schools and teachers and, as a result, students?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, in the K to 12 system we presently spend about \$3.8 billion per year. Of that \$3.8 billion roughly \$72 million is kept within the department for such things as curriculum, such things as assessments, such things as school board and teacher supports. Again a succinct answer to the hon. member is that every dollar of that \$72 million is aimed to support teachers and students.

Mr. Maskell: My final question to the same minister. The Learning Commission recognized that working with ESL students and early intervention with high-needs students must happen as early as possible. What is the Learning department doing to ensure that these students' needs are met?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, we do a lot when it comes to ESL, but in direct reference to the hon. member's question there were some interesting concepts raised in the Learning Commission about full-day kindergarten, about junior kindergarten, and we are currently looking at how we can best utilize those recommendations to ensure that the kids at an even younger age can do even better. ESL is incredibly important. We will be increasing our grants to ESL. Obviously, people in Alberta have to learn English if they are to succeed in the Alberta environment and the Alberta economy. Those two elements that the hon. member has mentioned are incredibly important to us, and it's something that the thousand people in my department work at continually to ensure that the best possible supports for ESL, the best possible supports for the teachers, the best possible supports for the students are out there and are looked at each and every day.

Municipal Financing

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, aside from implementing a few short-term financing measures, the minister's council on three Rs has failed to deliver long-term, stable financial solutions for municipalities. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: when is this council going to implement reliable, predictable, long-term funding for municipalities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to say that this minister's council is the only council of its kind in Canada, and I'm very proud of that initiative. Second of all, I want to say that the mayors of Edmonton and Calgary, our two biggest cities, but also every one of our 360 municipalities, are represented through the president of the AUMA as well as the president of the AAMD and C.

What I'm really particularly proud of is – one of the initiatives was ME First. It's a hundred million dollars that goes to municipalities

interest-free in terms of promoting energy efficiency in the province. Second of all, we've been working very closely with the initiative of the issue of the police report that is coming out. It's going to be reflected in the budget when it's released in March. We've worked very closely with the Solicitor General because policing issues have been ones that have been identified by municipal leaders across this great province.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: will this government show its commitment to a new deal for municipalities by matching the funding provided by the federal government?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is yes, but I would like to elaborate even further. The Prime Minister has appointed a representative, the former Premier of British Columbia, who was also a former city mayor, Mike Harcourt. The first province he's visited is the province of Alberta. We met with him last week here in the Legislature office in Edmonton. I'm really pleased to see that both the mayors of Edmonton and Calgary participated. One of the things he said, and I quote: we want to follow the example that Alberta has shown to other cities across all of Canada.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that the federal government has already formed a committee to work on a new deal for municipalities, will this ministry work with the feds to ensure that our municipalities are getting the best possible deal?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, let me elaborate, and I'll also ask the Minister of Transportation, responsible for the only deal of any province in Canada where the province of Alberta gives our cities, in fact, 5 cents a litre of the 9 cents that's collected by the provincial government. In actual fact, of the 9 cents that the province of Alberta collects, we contribute back to roads across Alberta something like 16 cents, so I'm very proud of the fact. This is the first initiative that we'd like to see the federal government follow in terms of helping a new deal for Alberta cities and also rural cities, because we have a subsequent meeting with the presidents of both the rural and urban associations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Gasoline Taxes

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that our Alberta government collects 9 cents per litre of gasoline and returns 5 cents to the municipalities of Calgary and Edmonton and also given that the federal government currently collects 10 cents per litre of gasoline, that translates to lots of dollars from Alberta, but none of this money is allocated and returned directly to our municipalities. They're now talking about increasing the gasoline tax in the name of the Kyoto agreement commitment. So reflecting the concerns from my constituents, my question today is to the minister of municipalities. What has the minister been doing to help Alberta cities convince the federal government to do the same as our Alberta government for our fast-growing Alberta municipalities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, of the 10 cents that Albertans pay to the federal government, the Minister of Transporta-

tion has informed us that the amount of money sent to the federal government over the last 10 years was \$7 billion. What we said is: we do not need to create a bureaucracy. We have a system in place that works very, very well. So rather than creating another bureaucracy – and I want to say that I applaud the federal government and the Prime Minister for saying that they want to help municipalities. That's positive, but why create another bureaucracy? Mr. Harcourt said that he would like to see a deal quickly and to follow the Alberta way of doing it. It's my hope that that will benefit all motorists in Alberta and that that money can go directly. I know that mayors across this province want to put that money back into roads, and certainly I know that the Minister of Transportation would agree with that statement.

2:20

Mr. Cao: Well, my last supplemental question is, in fact, to the Minister of Transportation. What is the minister doing now to facilitate or expedite the federal transfer of gasoline sales tax to the pressing needs of the cities of Calgary and Edmonton?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're also privileged in the province of Alberta to have the president of the AAMD and C as a member of the committee that was put together by the Prime Minister to review some method, some process of providing all municipalities with some of the revenue that goes to Ottawa in the form of a gas tax, so we have a good strong voice at the table. He is there as a citizen of rural Canada, not in his official capacity, but he is bringing forward, of course, the Alberta position.

Next week we will be in Ottawa with our first meeting of the provincial ministers of transportation and actually meeting the federal minister for the first time. This will be a topic of discussion. There are certainly musings from Ottawa. The committee has been put together, but we want to see the money, and we also are very adamant, Mr. Speaker, that we feel that all dollars from the federal government in terms of gas tax have to flow through to the province, and then we will sit down with our municipalities and decide how then that money will go to every municipality in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

School Construction

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Schools in Devon are badly overcrowded. A new separate school was approved in 1999, and in 2000 a budget was established. The board planned to open the school in September of this year. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure. With a budget within approximately 5 per cent of the planned cost, why has the government not proceeded with this badly needed project?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, it would have been very helpful if the member would have told me what school it is that he's talking about; I'm not sure. Certainly, within the city of Edmonton, in both the public and the separate boards, their utilization is still well below the 85 if you take it over the whole jurisdiction. There are some sectors that are somewhat higher, particularly in the separate board, and we, of course, have facilitated. As a matter of fact, since I was appointed Minister of Infrastructure, I have been present at the opening and/or the modernization of four separate schools and one public within the city of Edmonton, so over the last couple, three years.

I think that if we look at what has happened province-wide, in fact since the year 2000 we've spent some \$1.1 billion on schools within the province, some 774 projects. So it's not as though this government hasn't been spending money on new schools and modernization within the province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker; I think the minister misunderstood. The school has been approved, and a budget of \$4 million was established in 2000. So my question is: how can boards be expected to plan for student accommodation when four years after they have the approval for a building, they're still not allowed to go to tender?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again the member has not told me what school it is or what area. As I just indicated, just in schools alone we have some 774 projects, so if he comes to me and asks about one specific school, how am I supposed to know all 774 projects? I'm sorry, but I just don't have that information right at my fingertips, especially when he does not even have the courtesy to tell me what the name of the school is.

Dr. Massey: Well, I'm sure there are a number of schools being built in Devon. It's Evergreen Catholic separate regional.

My third question, then, is again to the minister. What does getting approval for a school mean if the school is never built?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, there's a whole process that we go through, and the process starts off with the boards giving us their capital plan. They have to prioritize the plan. Then we take all of those from all of the jurisdictions within the province and prioritize them on a provincial basis. A school may get an approval but not with funding. Very often what happens after that process is that the next year or subsequent years the boards may very well have changed their capital plan and have raised another school to a priority. He's suggesting that it was in the year 2000. We'll try to research and find out exactly what has happened and give an answer, but it's very, very interesting that he raises that here because I have met, as a matter of fact two weeks ago, with the separate board here in the city of Edmonton and they've never mentioned it, so I'm at a bit of a loss as to exactly what the problem is.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Health Care Funding and Revenue Generation

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, after gouging Albertans on electricity, after forcing drivers to pay the highest car insurance in western Canada, after jacking up health premiums and 70 other user fees and taxes, apparently this government wants more. Apparently, it wants more out of the pockets of Albertans, for the Premier now says that the Graydon report, which called for user fees for health care, is still under active consideration. Apparently, this government now thinks that parents rushing children to the emergency room should have to worry about receiving a bill, as if any parent wants to think about that when their child is running a 104-degree temperature. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. On January 22 the minister ruled out accepting the Graydon report recommendations. Why?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I want to say that we have a good health

care system. We have a good health care system in Canada, but the reality is – and Albertans and Canadians need to know this – that health care expenditures have risen between 8 and 10 per cent each year over the last 10 years and government revenues over the same period of time have only gone up 2 to 4 per cent a year. So that's the reason why a province like Nova Scotia now spends more than 50 per cent of its entire budget on one budget item, health care. They spend more on health care than everything else that they do put together.

Mr. Speaker, in this province we have the good fortune of resources that have assisted us, but the reality remains the same here. In 1993 roughly 24 per cent of our budget was spent on health care. That compares interestingly with 1971 when it was only about 10 per cent, and this year we'll spend about 36 per cent of our budget on health care, and in its current track we'll spend over 50 per cent within the medium-term future.

So, Mr. Speaker, we need to look at different ways of financing our health care system. We look for every efficiency that we can. We try our very best to pay for those things that make a difference to the health outcomes for individuals. We try our best not to waste our money. We try our very best to gear down our administrative costs, but we have to look at other jurisdictions around the world and ask: what is it that they're doing in their jurisdictions?

2:30

Now, let me say this, Mr. Speaker. In Canada we believe in values of sharing and caring as it relates to some of our social services, and one of our great social services in this country is medicare. We don't want to do anything to impair medicare, but unless we start looking at other ways of dealing with the ongoing costs and expenditures of our health care system, what will ultimately end up happening is that a duality in our health care system will accrue.

That means that there will be physicians who start to opt out of the Canada health system, and they will set up an entirely private system of health care. We will have at that point a two-tiered health care system, Mr. Speaker, something that we are very much committed to trying to avoid in the sense that our own provincial legislation adopts the principles of the Canada Health Act. But duality is inevitable, and it will be forced upon us by circumstances instead of by choice.

So, Mr. Speaker, we need to be open minded and looking at jurisdictions around the world, places that also have long traditions of social democracy and slightly left-of-centre perspectives when it comes to things like health care. We need to look at places like New Zealand. We need to look at Australia, we need to look at the U.K., we need to look at Sweden, and we need to look at France, all of which have elements of private and public delivery of health care service and all of which have elements where patients need to make a contribution to ensure that the health care system that they treasure is, in fact, sustainable.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On January 22 the minister gave reasons for not implementing the Graydon report, and they are as follows. He said that people in Alberta have not been clamouring for health care user fees, and therefore he wouldn't implement the Graydon report. What has changed from January 22 to today?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the whole issue of the Graydon report is not so much interesting from the point of view that it suggests that there is a single solution to this remorselessness of arithmetic of health care costs going up at 8 per cent and revenues going up by 4 per cent. The most important part of the Graydon report, in my opinion, is that it helps define the issue.

There are many Albertans who will talk about the issue in health care being one of access. But that's not the core issue, Mr. Speaker. The core issue is sustainability, and unless we come to grips with the fact, until Albertans and Canadians come to realize that something has got to give when you've got 8 per cent growth in expenditures and 4 per cent growth in revenues, we don't have a hope of ever dealing with the issues that precipitate from that, such as problems with access.

This, Mr. Speaker, is the reason why Mr. Romanow wonders out loud right now why a year after the Romanow report nobody has implemented his report. The reason is because Mr. Romanow, who I have a great deal of respect for, presented, frankly, a false picture of the choices that Canadians have. He suggested that your choice is between an American system that has 50 million uninsured Americans and tens of millions more underinsured or the Canadian system.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that if one looks at the World Health Organization's review of health care systems throughout the world, Canada is ranked somewhere around number 27. France is marked as number 1. I think that means that there are many choices along this continuum between the Canadian system and the American system that we should be responsible in looking at in order to determine: are there things that are being done in other jurisdictions in the world that can help make our health care system sustainable?

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the minister's flip-flop on this issue and given that the government is now actively considering the recommendations of the Graydon report, why won't the minister release the report and let Albertans have a say in the process?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we are going through that process right now. The hon. member doesn't know, having had no experience, how the process works for the release of reports. It goes through a process of going to our Agenda and Priorities Committee, it goes to our standing policy committees, it goes to our caucus, and it goes to our cabinet, all of which have the opportunity to vet it at each and every point before a report is released. That would be our intention, in fact, that if after going through that process, it's deemed that this report should be released, it will be.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona interjected at least six times in that last response. Is that really the way your students dealt with you in the classroom?

Thirty seconds from now we'll call on the first of the hon. members to participate in Members' Statements.

Well, hon. members, I can remember when I turned 40, so happy birthday to the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Alberta Winter Games

Mr. Friedel: I wish it was me.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the entire Peace country livened up to the sounds of excitement as several thousand young athletes, coaches, supervisors converged on the region for the 2004 Alberta Winter Games. For the first time in its history the games were hosted by multiple communities; in fact, 19 communities came together to sponsor and host the event. In spite of the logistical

challenges of splitting the event venues among the communities, it worked out remarkably well, and all the reports that I heard were extremely positive.

On top of it all, the games coincided with the St. Isidore Winter Carnival, which is a major annual cultural event in the region. The two events gave our visitors an even broader perspective of the Peace country notwithstanding the added challenges to the volunteer pool.

It's hard for me to put into words the pride that I felt for the organizers when thousands of spectators converged, along with the athletes, for the spectacular opening event. Our Premier along with a number of my colleagues and the mayors, reeves, and chiefs were there to show how proud we are of our province and our communities. I salute those who participated in the games and congratulate the winners of the various events.

The Peace country is renowned for its hospitality, but this one has to stand out as the mother of all co-operative events. It has opened the doors for other smaller communities to work together and host games of this stature in the future.

To all the organizers, the volunteers, the coaches and parents, and especially the athletes, we couldn't be prouder of you than we are right now. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Society for Treatment of Autism

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to bring to the attention of this House a growing problem for children and families in Alberta but also a message of hope. Autism is becoming one of the greatest threats to Canadian children today. It's now agreed that autism affects at least one in 300 children across Canada. Autism impairs communication and learning. Often children with autism don't understand the world around them, and there is nothing more crushing for a family than to receive the diagnosis of autism and to hear the words "there is no cure."

But there is hope. Early intensive treatment is remarkably effective in improving the lives of children with autism. This treatment can take children away from the path of institutionalization and reintegrate them with families and into schools. It is a miracle, but it needs our help.

In Calgary the Society for Treatment of Autism needs desperately to expand. A North American leader in autism treatment, the society needs the support of all Albertans to end waiting lists and provide treatment. Their dream of construction of a facility where all children with autism can receive treatment quickly and effectively is a dream shared by families across Alberta who have children with autism. Built on land they already own, opening in Alberta's centennial year of 2005, the new facility will create a critical mass of staff and expertise. It will allow the society to ensure that now and in the future children with autism never have to wait for much-needed treatment.

The society is working hard to raise private funds, but autism is a quiet affliction, one that does not generate headlines. For the families of children with autism there is no greater hope than for society to realize that they deserve help and that help makes a difference, and I call on this House today and on Albertans to lend a hand. We can't cure autism, but we can make a huge difference in the lives of hundreds of Albertans. Let's recognize the need, respond to that need, and give hope.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:40

Government Travel Expenses

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the people of Alberta expect this government

to be responsible stewards of the public purse. However, this government provides very few details on its entertainment and travel expenses, and we believe Albertans deserve to know where their hard-earned tax dollars are going.

First, let's talk about the trips. Between the last election and January 2004 the government has released information on 122 out-of-province trips taken by ministers and MLAs. While the total reported cost of all trips was over a million dollars, the government did not publicly provide costs for 26 of those trips, so the actual total is probably considerably higher. The government also failed to provide itineraries for 79 of the trips. That means that taxpayers do not know specifically what business was conducted during these trips.

Now let's look at what those trips cost. When the Premier, the Minister of Economic Development, and the Minister of Energy went to New York in December 2002, taxpayers paid \$8,320 for four days of car services, enough for over 250 trips from LaGuardia Airport to downtown Manhattan. During the same trip a senior staff member for Executive Council spent almost \$6,000 in just four days on accommodation, food, and the mini-bar at the Sheraton Hotel. During the Team Canada mission to the U.K. and Ukraine in May 2002 the managing director of Alberta's trade office in London charged \$15,720 to taxpayers, including \$4,922 for accommodation, \$4,511 for car service, and \$1,451 on one lunch at the London Marriott Hotel, a lunch worth two weeks of an average Albertan's earnings.

Mr. Speaker, it's time this government came clean with Albertans and opened their books. This issue is not just about what the government spent but what they have not told us or refuse to tell us about what they spent.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Government Travel Expenses

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today many Albertans are questioning why the Premier and his entourage dumped taxpayers with an \$8,320 bill for car service in New York City. Albertans want to know why they should have to foot such an outrageous bill.

The following are the government's top eight reasons why Albertans should pay \$8,320 for them to ride around in luxury, according to their own document that we have obtained by a freedom of information and privacy request. Reason number one: it was holiday season in New York. Reason number two: at least five cabs to each event would have been required. Reason number three: travel times are longer in New York. Reason number four: they needed security when they were leaving the New York Yacht Club. Reason number five: briefing. Reason number six: the lines for taxis are too long. Reason number seven: meetings and dinners are too late at night. The number eight reason why the government is charging Albertans \$8,320 for car service: they didn't want to go onto the street to capture taxis in New York City.

I would like to conclude, Mr. Speaker, by saying that a minimum-wage earner in Alberta would have to work 1,410 hours to make what the Premier and his entourage spent in four days on car services alone.

Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I'd like to present a petition signed by a number of individuals. It looks like they're mostly living in

Edmonton and St. Albert. They're asking the Legislative Assembly to urge the government to honour senior Albertans by "adopting the guidelines for rent increases pursuant to Section 14 of the Residential Tenancies Act" and "limit increases to no more than ten percent in any twelve month period" for long-term care.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, today I'll present a petition signed by approximately 150 people throughout Alberta who petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta "to support the establishment of Bighorn Country as a legislated protected area."

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do also stand and retain their places.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Bill 8

Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

Ms Graham: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This afternoon I request leave to introduce Bill 8, being the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill, Mr. Speaker, will have the effect of modernizing the duty of care to be exercised by directors and officers of Alberta Blue Cross and the duties of the board as a whole, and it will also go a fair distance to create fair competition between Alberta Blue Cross and other private insurance companies in the area of private insurance. Under the amendments the Alberta Blue Cross Benefits Corporation will start paying a 2 per cent premium tax and a payment in lieu of federal and provincial tax on its private insurance programs. To be clear, these latter changes only affect private insurance programs offered by Blue Cross. They do not affect government-sponsored insurance programs.

[Motion carried; Bill 8 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 8, the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be moved under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Bill 9

Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I also request leave to introduce

Bill 9, being the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004.

The original act, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act, was brought into force April 1, 2003, making it illegal for anyone under 18 to use or possess tobacco in a public place. Bill 9 will provide amendments that will clarify how the original act should be enforced to reduce tobacco use among youth and includes valid exemptions for tobacco use and possession by youth, such as allowing young sales clerks to sell tobacco in the workplace, permitting aboriginal youth the ceremonial use of tobacco, and allowing young people to be used in tobacco enforcement. There will also be amendments to provide a broader definition of public places where the act can be enforced, such as in school buildings, streets, shopping malls, and parks.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 9 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 9, Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004, be placed on the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

2:50

Bill 11

Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 11 will introduce amendments that will make technical and clarification changes to ensure that provincial legislation remains consistent with federal legislation, with current administration, and with other parts of the act.

Thank you very much.

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004, be placed on the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Bill 201

Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill will enable the creation of a new barrier-free design and access council as part of the Safety Codes Council, and it will also provide a greater opportunity for input regarding safety codes for persons with disabilities.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 201 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

**Bill 202
Environmental Protection and Enhancement
(Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004**

Mr. Masyk: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I rise and request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004.

The purpose of Bill 202 is to reduce emissions of VOCs, or volatile organic compounds, during fuel storage and distribution by requiring all service stations, gasoline fuel cargo trucks, terminals to install stage 1 vapour recovery by the year of our Lord 2014.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 202 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got one document to table today. It's appropriate copies of the news release issued by the Minister of Health and Wellness dated January 22, 2004, in which the minister rejects the findings of the MLA Task Force on Health Care Funding and Revenue Generation because "most Albertans would not accept [the] recommendations."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one document as well to table, and it is the appropriate number of copies of the Weekly Livestock Market Review dated February 13, 2004. The review shows the distressing plummet of cattle prices in Alberta, with sales of livestock such as feeder heifers bringing in as little as 50 per cent of what they did a year ago.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under Standing Order 7(5) I would ask the Government House Leader to please share the projected government business for the week of February 23 to 26.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to respond. On Monday, February 23, in the afternoon we will have private members' business, Written Questions, and Motions for Returns, followed by Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders including Bill 201, Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 202, Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. In the evening under Motions Other than Government Motions we will deal with motions 501 and 502, thereafter under Government Bills and Orders addresses in reply to the Speech from the Throne and then second reading, perhaps Committee of the Whole as well depending on progress, on Bill 1, Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act; Bill 2, Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act; and Bill 4, Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004; and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders

we will continue with addresses in reply to the Speech from the Throne, followed by second reading of Bill 5, the Family Support for Children With Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004, then Committee of the Whole for bills 5 and 11 and otherwise as per the Order Paper. On Tuesday evening under Government Bills and Orders we will begin with second reading of Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004, followed by Committee of the Whole for bills 5, 11, and 6 and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders supplementary supply messages may be presented. Government motions may also be presented referring to Committee of Supply and the number of days required for Committee of Supply, followed by second reading of Bill 7, Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 8, Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 9, Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004. Then Committee of the Whole will deal with bills 7, 8, and 9 and otherwise as per the Order Paper. On Wednesday evening under Government Bills and Orders, Committee of Supply, supplementary supply, day 1 of 1 is expected to occur, followed by second reading and possibly also Committee of the Whole for bills 7, 8, and 9 and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, February 26, in the afternoon we will deal with Government Bills and Orders, Introduction of Bills, Supplementary Supply Appropriation Act, second reading of bills 12 and 13, and third readings and otherwise as per the Order Paper. I should comment that we anticipate that bills 12 and 13, that I just alluded to for Thursday, will be introduced on February 24, two days earlier.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, you have received in the last several days the biographies of all the new pages, and I think they're quite energetic and quite enthusiastic, and they definitely will enforce the rule of no foreign objects in the Assembly until Orders of the Day is called.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 4
Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a privilege to rise today to officially move this particular bill, Bill 4, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, at second reading.

I say that because it has been a long time coming, and I'm delighted that today we are joined by the guests I introduced earlier to you.

Mr. Speaker, in May of 2000 responsibility for the Blind Persons' Rights Act and its regulation, the guide dogs' qualification regulation, was transferred from Alberta Health and Wellness to my Ministry of Community Development. We are continuing on a journey of change with this Bill 4 that puts into place very important and much-needed changes to the Blind Persons' Rights Act. It closes the gap in our legislation and provides better protection for individual Albertans who are blind and require the use of a guide dog or a white cane.

One of these individuals is present here today with her dog. That is Diane Bergeron. Diane, as I indicated to the House earlier, is a special co-ordinator of the Advisory Board on Services for Persons

with Disabilities and the City of Edmonton Youth Council. She also serves as a volunteer member of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, or CNIB, board. She has two children, and I'm so pleased that Summer, one of her children, was here today to be with her. She has a special two-year-old guide dog named Polar.

3:00

About two and a half years ago Diane and her children, accompanied by her guide dog of the day, were out buying groceries, Mr. Speaker. She called a taxi to take them home. Somewhere about 20 minutes later a cab pulled up in front of the doors, and as soon as the driver saw the dog beside Diane, the cab pulled away and left them standing there. Diane called the cab company, told the dispatcher what had happened. She was advised that the drivers could not be forced to pick them up even though there were three cabs from that company already sitting in that same parking lot. Obviously, she was upset that this would happen while she had her children with her particularly. I think her daughter still remembers seeing her crying in the store.

Diane is not alone in this particular situation, because we know that other Albertans are also telling us how they have been denied services in restaurants, denied access to shopping in local grocery stores, perhaps denied apartment accommodations and so on because of a no dog policy in those premises. Proposed amendments to the bill before us, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, are a step forward in creating an environment for Albertans that promotes a better understanding, promotes positive attitudes, attitudes that can contribute to the well-being of those who are blind.

I want to comment also on the stakeholder consultation that led up to the creation of these amendments. Changes and recommendations for change came from our stakeholders, the persons who will be served most by this particular set of amendments, and they also came from members of the general public. Many, many Albertans were consulted including a very public and open review process that strove to strike a balance in clarifying and strengthening the act as it pertains to the rights of blind persons.

The public review process that commenced in October of 2001 was in fact chaired by former Alberta Ombudsman Harley Johnson to address not only guide dogs but also assistive dogs that are trained for other purposes. These are dogs that are used by other disability groups such as persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or suffer from seizures.

The final report from that chair was submitted in late 2001. Public feedback on the report through a standardized questionnaire was then initiated. It has always been my practice, Mr. Speaker, as you know, to release these reports to the public for another look, if you will, at what the actual recommendations look like.

We had many active discussions in that respect with Albertans who fed into the process and, quite obviously, with the persons with the CNIB. Included in that feedback from Albertans was the fact that guide dogs and other assistive dogs are very different in terms of need, in terms of requirement, certification, and scope and that these matters should be addressed separately. The feedback also identified that legislation concerning blind persons' rights should concentrate on the rights of those who are determined to be blind as well as the need to develop a better definition of blindness, a more medical and legal definition, if you like.

So we began looking at how we can bring into effect those important and necessary changes. Bill 4 is in response to what we heard, and it addresses the concerns raised by stakeholders, including changes to legislation affecting those individuals who rely upon the use of guide dogs. Individuals who rely upon assistive dogs for other purposes will continue to be protected as they already are by

the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act.

Now, the amendments before us today clarify the existing Blind Persons' Rights Act, and they strengthen those areas that pertain to the rights of blind individuals. Quite specifically, Mr. Speaker, these amendments will do at least the following things. They will provide a more acceptable definition of blindness as determined by the medical profession. They will provide protection for certified dog trainers and for the dogs being trained. They will allow an identification card for the blind person guide dog team to be issued. They will provide ministerial authority for developing further regulations respecting qualifications for guide dogs. As well, they will establish higher maximum fines for violations of the act such as discrimination against a blind person accompanied by a guide dog or an individual purporting to be blind who is trying to garner benefits under the act.

For example, these fines will increase as follows. Discrimination against a blind person accompanied by a guide dog will increase threefold, from \$1,000 to \$3,000. An individual purporting to be blind to garner benefits under the act will see fines increased from \$100 to \$300, and with respect to abuse of white canes, individuals other than a blind person carrying a white cane in public places will see a penalty increasing from \$25 to \$250, a tenfold increase. These are very serious changes to a very serious issue within a very serious act.

Once the amending legislation is in place, we will also have mechanisms that will allow us to add other training facilities to the list of accredited facilities. You know, Mr. Speaker, as I was meeting with individuals from the blind community, I noted that there are about a dozen or so of these facilities across North America. There's only one in Canada, and it happens to be in Ottawa. I said to them, as I've said to others in the consultation process: why can't we have one of those facilities right here in Alberta? It would be another wonderful Alberta first, in this particular case specifically for the blind community. So we began looking at the possibility of doing that, and lo and behold I think we can and we will accomplish that. It will be a tremendously positive step forward in providing services to our blind community.

As I begin to wrap up, Mr. Speaker, I'll just add a few points. The amending legislation also will provide the minister of the day with the authority to make regulations respecting the qualifications for guide dogs, and this authority will expedite the process for making regulatory amendments such as adding additional training facilities to the accredited list, be they here in Alberta or elsewhere.

I recall one of my colleagues having said on several occasions that change is a journey, not a destination. Through the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, we will continue to create an Alberta that builds on what we already have and ensures that all Albertans enjoy the highest possible quality of life with a particular focus on the most vulnerable members of our communities. By doing this, I'm confident that we will be creating a place with a very level playing field for Diane, for her family, and for all Albertans, a place that encourages a more effective delivery of programs for those who are disabled and that promotes positive attitudes while raising awareness of these important issues.

In this respect, I want to sincerely thank the CNIB and their representatives who are here with us today – Mr. O'Donnell, Mr. McKeown, Ms Shuster, and, of course, Diane – and also my own staff members who have been working so diligently on this. Andrew Turzansky, whom I introduced to you earlier, has been extremely helpful, and he's become a closer friend probably to the community and to the department for his leadership in this respect.

For their help, for their stewardship, and for the care and concern that the CNIB have shown and continue to show daily for blind,

deaf-blind, and for all vision impaired individuals, they were certainly warmly received at an inaugural event in our community last evening. I think we had just under 1,000 people who came out to show support and respect for the CNIB and the many individuals that they serve. It was a particularly special night not only for the CNIB but also for our government because yesterday was the day that we actually had this bill introduced at first reading, and I was so privileged to do that.

3:10

At the same time, it was also the inauguration of what I hope will become a long-standing tradition, a fundraiser, as it were, with a sharp focus on not only raising funds but also raising awareness for issues pertaining to the blind community. In that respect, they provided the first ever Vision award to our Premier. I know that the Premier's work in this area goes back to at least 1980, if that is correct – I think it is – when he was mayor of Calgary, and we saw that in some of the film footage, Mr. Speaker, that was shown yesterday.

We also were shown what some of the issues are that blind individuals face on a daily basis, and we saw how much hope was given to people who have suddenly become blind or to the young children who are born blind. It was a tremendous message, and I'm so glad that so many of our colleagues from the Legislature were able to be there with us.

We've met many times with the CNIB. I think we will continue to meet many more times as we move this bill along and as we address these very important needs that reflect the needs of the blind persons' community and their guide dogs and the facilities that are needed to help ensure that that infrastructure remains solid and continues to be the best that our province can provide.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your support for this important Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am very pleased to be able to rise today and add my comments to the record in second reading for Bill 4, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004. This has been a long time coming. I can remember that it was some time ago, I think actually at the end of my first term, that this issue first came up legislatively with a bill introduced by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, if I remember correctly. I think we adjourned from the sitting before it got a full debate.

We've had a review, as the minister mentioned, launched in October, public reaction to the initial report, then a final report submitted to the minister by the end of December of 2001, and some additional questionnaires, the minister says. I wasn't aware of that particular consultation or go-round but certainly take his word for it.

I'm just going to go through the issues about why there's been a need for an update of this particular act. Essentially, what we've had is two acts that offered protection for people with a visual disability, and those are the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act and then the Blind Persons' Rights Act. This was to make sure that people were not facing any kind of prohibition or discrimination around accommodation and facilities, tenancies, housing, employment, access to government programs and services. All of those are protections meant to be offered to various individuals.

The Blind Persons' Rights Act quite specifically was setting out to make sure that no one was impersonating a blind person, so there was mention of not using the white cane and quite a bit of detail around a white cane. I even noticed that the original wording talked about the white cane being painted over a certain percentage of its

surface, which certainly does date it as now I think many of them, in fact, have a plastic covering or are made of some material that doesn't require painting.

A number of other things were in that bill. There was a definition of blindness, referring to someone registered as blind at the CNIB or who is receiving a pension as a result of blindness or an eye specialist has certified them to be according to a particular chart. It also went further to define "guide dog." That act has been problematic for some time for a number of reasons. The duplication in itself in that the blind persons are protected by both pieces of legislation can create some confusion, I think.

The enforcement of it. I think there have been problems with the police and the prosecutors being reluctant to act on complaints made under the Blind Persons' Rights Act because there are comparable sections available under the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act. That shouldn't have been a reason for no action to be taken at all, but enforcement seemed to be a problem.

The timeliness of resolving complaints. Some cases were resolved very quickly, but others took a lot longer, and it seemed that the ones that came forward under the Blind Persons' Rights Act hardly ever got resolved at all, which became problematic.

I in particular heard about the issues raised under accreditation and training. We need to know that the guide dogs have been trained and there's a standardized training, and that also offers reassurance to people who are working with the dogs. What we had was that the owner of a training school had to apply to the government to be included on the list of qualified institutions, but then there was no follow-up to make sure that that school or that individual trainer met any kind of ongoing standards or upgrading or anything else. There was no monitoring or evaluation to make sure that everybody stayed current and that acceptable standards were upheld.

Those regulations have not been updated since 1986, and the list of training institutions was not maintained, so there was a great deal of consternation over that. In fact, I can think of one individual with a dog that I'm sure was not trained at an accredited training institution, and yet they are out there with that dog. You know, that causes worry for the public, for the individual, and for everyone else that's trying to uphold the use of service dogs like blind dogs.

I wasn't aware of this until I started doing the research, but there was also a provision in the act that said that the CNIB would issue identification cards for the individual and for their dog, and in fact the CNIB has never done that and didn't really want to do it, and thus you see in the amending act that the ministry will take that over.

Aside from the currency of the accreditation and training the second-largest complaint or number of complaints that I heard about the Blind Persons' Rights Act was that it was not taking into consideration all of the other kinds of assistance animals that had come into fairly common usage. Essentially, there are service dogs, signal dogs, and assistance dogs. Right now we only have legislation that protects people that are using guide dogs for the blind.

There are hearing ear dogs. There are seizure dogs. There are special highly trained protection dogs for people who have been stalked or are under imminent threat of attack, and the dog is always with them and will protect them. That's a difficult one for many business owners and people to deal with. Nonetheless, it's a dog for a very specific reason to assist people. We've assistance dogs like the ones you see that work with children with autism, for example, or with people with mobility problems. They help, you know, turn on lights and appliances and pick things up that people that are in wheelchairs may drop. So that's an assistance dog, and there's nothing in the legislation that allows people to have those dogs and to have the same protection as is offered to the guide dogs. So there is no question that there was a need for an update in this bill.

3:20

Okay. So we had the need. We went through all of the consultations, and what came out of the focus groups and the resultant feedback loops was that there is still a problem with restaurants. We heard a story from the minister about taxicabs, a number of providers of services not understanding and not recognizing the guide dogs, and that lack of public awareness is still the biggest barrier.

I've already talked about the issue about the other kinds of assistance and service and signal animals, and although the minister said that they would be protected under the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act, in fact they're not protected in the same way that guide dogs are. There was a great desire to have those animals brought in under the act, and there certainly was a lot of discussion in the focus groups of that.

There is a real need for very clear training guidelines and upholding monitoring and evaluation of the trainers and the training institutions. There's a need to balance the rights of the dog handler or the person who is using the dog and their ability to control the animal in public. We need people to feel confident when they're in public with a dog that's being used as an assistance animal that that animal is clearly under the control of the person that's working with them.

The CNIB, whose main office is, in fact, in my constituency, developed a very strong position, and they put it forward to me at one point that they wanted to see this act, the Blind Persons' Rights Act, remain pretty much as it was, to not include additional kinds of service animals and, further, that they felt – and they did a good job of lobbying for it – that there should be some expansion and strengthening of the act to, you know, provide some additional assistance to students around Braille materials and classroom education in Braille. They had a very effective lobbying strategy to get that point of view across, and that was sort of balanced on the other side with those people that wanted to see the legislation expanded. So that's kind of the background and history of this.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I'm willing to support the act as brought forward by the Minister of Community Development, but I am disappointed that we are not looking at Bill 5 being, you know, the assistance animal act. Clearly, there's a need for that. There was a great deal of time and effort put in by people to say: we need this. If the choice by the government was not to include those animals under the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, to leave that as it is pretty much, then I think we should have seen the second piece of legislation come forward at the same time because we've waited.

I mean, 1980 I think is the originating act for the Blind Persons' Rights Act. We're now in 2004, so it took us 24 years to get a good amending act in front of us. I'm assuming that this is going to pass now. I don't want to have to wait 24 years to get an assistive or service animal act in front of the Legislature, and I think that if the minister were really committed to that, he should have brought it forward as a companion piece.

So that's my concern with what's happened in this process. I have no problem with the act as it's in front of us, but the process was not completed. There's a need for some sort of legislated protection against discrimination for people that use other kinds of service animals. We needed the same kinds of rules around monitoring and evaluation and registration of training facilities and of trainers for those other kinds of service and assistance animals, and we just don't have it. So we've got half the equation here.

Now, as I said, I'm more than happy to support the first half of the

equation, but I really wanted to see the second half of the equation. All of the groundwork has been done, so I'm disappointed that the government didn't take the time when they had it to come forward with the rest of what we need here.

From all of that work – from the 24 years, from the consultation process that started in October of 2001, and here we are in February of 2004 so over two years – what we have are some fairly minor changes to the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, essentially an update in the definition so that it's not quite so loosey-goosey and is looking for a medical definition. We've got fines for someone using a white cane who isn't visually impaired, fines and prohibitions for impersonating a blind person. It's including the protections and extending the protections and privileges to the trainers who are out on the street training or taking dogs that are being trained into cabs and places like that.

It includes, again, that standard clause, that the government always does and that I loathe and detest, about everything further is done by regulation behind closed doors with the minister with one exception, and that's the updating of the list of approved trainers. Finally, the minister is going to take over – well, I guess start, because there doesn't seem to have ever been anyone that actually issued the ID cards. So the minister would be responsible for issuing the ID cards. So all of that 24 years plus the consultation has resulted in five changes. As I say, I don't need to belabour the point. It's all there.

Oh, the one thing was that we've over the years, of course, heard from a number of individuals who felt very strongly about this. Just one that I'll highlight is Harry Lunscher, who's from Lethbridge. He was one of the ones that has written repeatedly to members of the Official Opposition caucus talking about his disappointment that this proposed act would only deal with sight assistance dogs and not with all service dogs, his point being that service dogs are used in support of lifestyles that go well beyond sight assistance. He and his wife use one. He's prone to falls and his wife is hearing impaired, so their dog T.J. helps them enjoy life to the fullest, and he doesn't get the same protection for T.J. that someone with a guide dog does.

He's been in touch with the Premier. He's been in touch with, I'm sure, many of my colleagues here in the House trying to lobby to have all service dogs included. Others went further and wanted it to be service animals because there are certain animals that are much more sensitive to be of assistance, like seizure animals. Certain ones are better at detecting the seizures coming. I've got a number of letters here from him. That's just one. He was writing at that point in June of 2001 in support of Bill 219, which was then the one brought forward by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan in which he was hoping it would pass because that one was bringing forward an act that brought hearing ear dogs or assistance dogs for the deaf into the Blind Persons' Rights Act, and that was sort of the first go at this.

I just wanted to point out, you know, how important it is to a whole other section of people that we do address and offer protection to those that are using other kinds of service and assistance and signal animals, and I hope that before we leave this spring session we will see the government bring forward the companion act to this one. In the meantime I am happy to state my support in second reading in principle for Bill 4.

Thank you very much.

3:30

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities I'm pleased to

speak in support of this bill. Bill 4 does a number of things. First of all, it clarifies guide dog certification and monitoring rules. It protects those who train these exceptional dogs. It strengthens the definition of blindness and helps prevent discrimination against those who use a guide dog.

I'm supportive of this bill also because it's one more step towards a barrier-free Alberta. It supports the spirit and the intent of the Alberta disability strategy that was developed by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. In it there's a call for full citizenship for persons with disabilities, and full citizenship means enabling persons with disabilities to be independent, to make choices, and to access opportunities to fully contribute to our society. The Premier's council believes that the lives of persons with disabilities can be improved if we break down those barriers, those barriers that prevent disabled individuals from contributing fully and participating. Bill 4 supports this belief in tangible ways, the way in which blind people and their guide dogs are perceived and treated.

Through my role as chair of the Premier's council I have the privilege to meet and know many people throughout the province with physical and mental disabilities. Almost to a person their frustrations in life are not connected to their disability but rather the limitations on their lifestyle that's imposed on them often by the opinions of others. These limitations are usually a result of preconceptions, assumptions, or just plain old lack of understanding and education.

I've been privileged in my time working with the council and being associated with the council members to learn a great deal about their issues. One example that stands out in my mind is the time I exited a building with one of our council members who was blind and accompanied by a Seeing Eye dog. We were coming up to a row of taxis waiting for customers and Shirley was a little bit ahead of me with her guide dog, Willie, and as she was walking along the first taxi driver sort of was there, and he indicated that he was waiting for somebody or he was in use. I don't remember exactly. I wasn't sure that he was actually waiting for a customer and had already committed to somebody.

Anyway, I ended up walking ahead and it appeared, I think, to the second driver in the second car that I was by myself. "Taxi, sir?" he says. I said, "Yeah. Great." So I gave him my little briefcase, or whatever it was, and he threw it in the trunk, and then I said, "Shirley, throw this in too." He nearly fell over because here was this other person accompanied by a dog, and I'm sure – I suspect, anyway – that Shirley would have been denied service if she had been alone and had been asking for cab service.

In another set of circumstances when Shirley and I took a cab to someplace else, the cab driver was not pleased in that circumstance either. Yet this dog, Willie, that Shirley has is one of the most obedient animals that I think anybody could ever see. It's an amazing dog. Shirley tells me that the many trips she's been on – for example, she goes across Canada to Newfoundland – Willie curls up under the seat on the plane. Shirley reports good service from the airlines. Willie will curl up under the seat and stay there for five or six hours without moving and then re-emerges from underneath, and people around are really surprised, you know, because Shirley would board first, that this dog was on the plane.

These are obedient dogs; they are well trained. These people face many challenges taking these dogs with them. Being in meetings with Shirley and seeing how she's always compelled to, you know, take Willie out during lunchtime so Willie can have a little break and get out there – she's got issues of dealing with dog droppings and disposing of those. Another big issue is pets. Whereas Willie is a well-behaved dog, if another dog comes along under poor control by its owner, runs up, starts barking and chasing Willie around, it's very

difficult. Here we have a lady, unable to see anything and trying to control her dog, not knowing what's going on, and the other person not controlling their pet. A difficult situation.

It was interesting for me last night at the CNIB Vision awards, and many of you were there. There were many dogs around. There was a bunch of noise at one time when people were doing something with different instruments just as a kind of entertainment time and lots of racket. I'm sure that there was not a single dog bark heard in that whole facility from all those Seeing Eye dogs that were there. They are under control, they are trained, and they are a credit to the people who are engaged in that industry to take care of them.

Something else that we've observed lately that is quite a change as well is the increase in the number of dogs in training that we see around. I don't know what agencies are doing that here in Alberta, but I do see quite a few of those dogs. Quite a few of those dogs have little signs on them saying: I'm in training. Some other dogs that are qualified, certified Seeing Eye dogs have: I'm a working dog; do not pet.

When I first became acquainted with Shirley and her Seeing Eye dog, Willie, you know, you tend to reach down and pat it, and if you like dogs, you scratch it behind the ears and so on. Everybody does that. It's a typical reaction. Those dogs are working animals, and they aren't pets. They aren't to be treated that way. It's encouraging to see those little signs that they do have on there. It's an education for the rest of us. We need to be educated in so many ways about the needs of people with disabilities that we just don't understand. So that's been an interesting observation over the past few years, to see how that's been happening with those dogs.

I'm appreciative, too, of this bill for the increase in the penalties that are mentioned. They're significant penalties, and they cut both ways. I'm aware of a situation in another jurisdiction. I have been in meetings in this circumstance. There was a person using a dog who didn't really seem to need this. It was an assistive dog. Just recently a fellow told me about how this wasn't really a trained dog; it wasn't necessary. The person wasn't utilizing it, as I kind of suspected. He was commenting on how that inappropriate use destroyed both his credibility as an individual and also jeopardized the work of people like the CNIB who are promoting the use of legitimate guide dogs, well-trained and useful to people with vision difficulties.

Mr. Speaker, a barrier-free Alberta is certainly possible if we have the will and the commitment to make it happen, and Bill 4 helps us get one step closer to that goal. I'd encourage all members to support me in supporting this Bill 4, and at this time I'd just like to adjourn debate on Bill 4.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head:

Consideration of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Mr. Griffiths moved that an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank you, Your Honour, for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

[Adjourned debate February 18: Mr. McClelland]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

3:40

Ms Haley: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne. The vision outlined within it comes at a truly momentous time as we approach our second century as a province. I would like to thank the Lieutenant Governor for so graciously beginning our session, and I am glad, as are all Albertans, that she is in good health in both body and spirit.

The Speech from the Throne covered many areas of great importance to Albertans. However, the area of greatest interest to me is the strategic plan. I appreciate that there are four distinct pillars to this plan; however, what I am most excited about in this speech is the part of the strategic plan that allows us to look forward on an economic basis. The plan is designed to set out a 20-year vision for Alberta, and that gives us a starting point to plan how we can continue to diversify our economy as we move further into the 21st century.

As a child growing up in the oil patch, I always knew how important the oil and gas industry was to our province's economic well-being. Moreover, I believe it will be of major importance for years to come. What I hope we can accomplish with the plan is to capitalize on the opportunities that allow us to further develop both our nonrenewable and our renewable resources as well as to pursue innovation- and knowledge-based sectors at a time that our economy is so strong. While our manufacturing sector is doing better and more jobs are being created in that area of our workforce, the real truth is that for too long now we have been shipping out our oil and gas, our live cattle, our grain and oilseed by the bushel, and our forest products with little or no value added to them, and value added is what I want to talk about today.

Almost a hundred years ago in Alberta no one could have imagined the massive changes that have occurred from cars and planes to electricity and running water, to plasma screen TVs, to towers that reach to the sky, let alone computers and the Internet. I mean, even 30 years ago people were lucky if they had a set of encyclopedias in their homes let alone the amazing information that we have access to today just by turning on a computer and surfing the web.

This second century that we are approaching will hold more changes than any of us can even begin to imagine. It is possible that a hundred years from now people could be living on other planets. Perhaps mundane issues like trying to build roads will no longer be quite so important. The sky is truly the limit, and Albertans with their go-to-it attitude will be major players in anything that is going to happen. But one thing is for sure: this is the time right now that we have to further develop our own unique industries in Alberta. We cannot sit back and say that things are just fine the way they are now. We do not have the luxury of taking anything for granted, particularly the surpluses that we have been so fortunate to achieve when oil and gas prices are high. This is precisely the time that we have to take advantage of our economic well-being to further diversify our economic base.

I would like to talk about the kinds of things that I think we can do even in the short term and where I think there are some issues that truly we need to deal with. We all know about and many of us have seen the petrochemical plants at Joffre and the magnitude of the multibillion dollar investments this industry created when they were able to strip certain gas components like ethane or butane, propane, and condensate from our own resources. It has allowed the private sector to make huge investments in our province, create great jobs, and further diversify our economy. The best part, Mr. Speaker, is that once these products were stripped out, we were still able to sell natural gas to heat homes in other parts of Canada or the United States.

However, several years ago the federal government's National

Energy Board decided against allowing Alberta corporations to strip out by-products when they approved the construction of the Alliance pipeline. This allows the petrochemical industry in Chicago to strip those same products out of our gas, allowing American industry to grow and flourish while our local producers struggle to secure an adequate supply for their production needs. It is clear to me that part of the strategic plan is to have the federal government be more willing to help all provinces in Canada achieve all that they can and not hamper progress or be at cross-purposes with the various regions of this country. In fact, it is time to adopt a policy all over this country of recognizing and encouraging strength and diversity. Whether it is the situation like the National Energy Board created or like the feds are creating now by trying to leave Alberta out of the negotiations with our industries on the Kyoto protocol, these types of situations have to be resolved.

Another sector that could benefit from a better-defined value-added policy is the secondary manufacturers of forest products. At just one plant in Crossfield Palliser Lumber has created over 125 jobs and many value-added products that are sold not just here in Alberta but as far away as Texas. You have to admit, Mr. Speaker, that it beats just shipping logs out of our province.

We have a very young secondary manufacturing industry in Alberta, and we need to nurture it so that it can develop into a viable contributor to our economy. It makes so much sense that you have to wonder why these same companies are struggling to exist. Well, it turns out, Mr. Speaker, that in a province where 60 per cent of the land mass is covered with forest, these companies struggle to acquire the very fibre they need to run their businesses. Perhaps the first step in helping them to make this value-added sector viable is to indicate to the big forest product companies that it might be a good idea to leave some fibre inside the province so that the secondary manufacturers could utilize it. Possibly a way to encourage them would be to tie their contribution of fibre to their forest management agreements. You have to wonder, if there was just a little more processing going on here and less raw wood leaving our province, whether or not the softwood lumber issue would be a little less damaging than it is today.

Another obvious area that will benefit from a better value-added strategy is agriculture. In this area, I want to give credit where credit is due. Much has been done, but much more needs to be done. Many Albertans can understand the whole concept of value added much more easily when we look at some simple products. A loaf of bread in some specialty shops can sell for more than a whole bushel of wheat. A bottle of Canadian Club rye whisky sells for more than about 10 bushels of rye. And, of course, there is beer, everyone's favourite barley product, and for some strange reason it has a much higher value than a bushel of barley. Now, that, Mr. Speaker, is what value-added is all about.

Many consumers appreciate the ready-to-consume products that require little effort to prepare after a long day at work. The more of that that can be done in our own province, where the raw materials are, the more jobs can be created and the higher the value of those products being sold.

The government of Alberta has assisted value-added agriculture by funding organizations like AVAC. It is a research arm designed to assist in product research, development, and production possibilities. There are other groups and organizations throughout the province, but many of them face the same obstacles.

Once again, we have to look at the federal government together with the Canadian Wheat Board, as they seem to be at cross-purposes to our value-added strategy. The anomaly of the shipping and elevation charges on board-controlled wheat and grain means that you would be hard-pressed to find a pasta manufacturer inside

Alberta. In fact, in the very province where some of the world's best durum wheat is grown, it is not economically viable to make pasta. That is just one more of the ludicrous situations we find ourselves in because of the Wheat Board's antiquated and counterproductive rules. The good news for canola producers is that the Wheat Board doesn't control it, and that is why we have a successful canola-crushing industry in our province.

It is not rocket science; it is just common sense but an important area that must be dealt with so that our province can benefit from the spinoff value of our own products. Many of our producers have discovered the importance of growing niche crops like mustard seed, canary seed, lentils, peas, flax, or oats. All of these crops allow us to look at further adding value to our products. Being able to ship Alberta beef in boxes or to make pet food and suede coats creates jobs here at home rather than outside our province.

I can only hope and pray that our beef industry can survive this crazy situation that we find ourselves in because of one case of mad cow disease. Perhaps the challenge we will face when it does finally end will be to consider whether we really want to continue being reliant on shipping live cattle out of our province. Or do we want to further add value to that product as we redevelop our markets in what will no doubt be a very different cattle business than it is today?

As someone that farmed and ranched in Alberta, I have to say that one day our producers are going to have to look carefully at the wisdom of growing crops and raising cattle for an export market. We are all learning the hard way that commodity market trends are down, that it is getting more and more difficult all the time to even get close to breaking even on import costs let alone make enough money to keep a farm viable.

We must use all of our ingenuity to find ways to add value to our agriculture products if we want farming to even continue in Alberta. I know that many people in this industry are looking at the situation, and I am confident in them and in their ability to find the silver lining in this incredibly dark cloud. The people who stay in this industry are some of Alberta's finest residents, and I wish them all the very best as they go through these difficult days filled with even more difficult decisions.

Another element of the value-added strategy that I want to talk about is knowledge-based industries. The big question is: what can we do to encourage such companies to come here? It appears that the strategy most commonly utilized by other provinces and the United States was to come up with incentive programs for these industries. Alberta is not competitive in this sector. The result is that most of the research and development funding in Alberta comes from government sources. Further, Alberta, with the third-largest economy in Canada, has only 1.5 per cent of the venture capital. These are things that need to change drastically if we are to become not just competitive but a leader in this field.

When I look at value-added, I see that government has to assess very carefully where it is important to level the playing field and make Alberta a strong competitor, one that is capable of attracting corporate research and development and venture capital as well as technology commercialization. For too long now research that is finally at the point where one can commercialize it has been leaving our province. This needs to change so that as taxpayers we can see the world's best research culminate in innovative products and technologies developed and marketed right here at home.

Our ingenuity fund is helping to make it possible for Alberta to have some of the finest researchers anywhere in the world locate right here. However, our inability to capitalize on what they develop is leaving the glass half full. As we get deeper into things like nanotechnology, I hope that we will have found a way to keep the

spinoff industries here, that that, in fact, Mr. Speaker, may well be the next oil and gas business for our province.

3:50

Film is an example of an industry that receives tax credits both federally and provincially in all parts of Canada, the United States, as well as Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. In order to have any film production done in Alberta at all, we had to come up with a program to assist this industry. The Alberta film development program has helped, and in fact many Alberta producers and crew members have moved back from other provinces to help re-establish our industry. Unfortunately, our program, the way it sits now, does not attract big productions over \$10 million, nor do we have the ability to work with offshore and guest production on a direct basis. We do, however, work with our own Alberta-based producers, who are able to enter into co-production work and still access our program.

This past year in Alberta close to \$100 million in production has been done, but that is a far cry from the \$400 million or \$500 million that should be done here if we were to achieve even 10 per cent of what is being done in Canada. Also, with a cap in place on our fund at \$10 million in this past fiscal year, we find ourselves hemorrhaging production into other provinces, and there is not enough money in our fund to do all of the business that should be done here, so they go where the tax credits are.

As well, this winter we have lost Great North Productions out of Alberta, and the reason was simple: they could not assure their owners, Alliance Atlantis, that when they were ready to move into production, they would in fact be able to access our fund. This company was doing over \$30 million worth of production in Alberta, and it is a real loss for Edmonton.

So once again I find myself looking forward to the budget because I hope that Treasury Board will recognize the importance of this industry to Alberta, to our communities, and particularly to our tourism sector. If you wonder at all about the logic of that, I leave you with this thought on film. The country of New Zealand has seen a \$3.8 billion economic benefit thanks to a \$200 million tax credit given to the producers of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Mr. Speaker, I'm absolutely delighted that my government has set out a 20-year strategic plan, and I know that as we move further down this road, there will be things that will need to be looked at including using our fiscal policy to ensure that we're competitive with other jurisdictions. We're a very young province—we're only 99 years old—competing with cultures that are thousands of years old. Even just in Canada alone we have had to do in less than a hundred years that which our eastern cousins have had over 300 years to accomplish. I do not see it as a disadvantage, but what I do see is that we have to take the time to look at the whole picture. We would not have the economic benefit of the tar sands and billions of dollars in investment they have created had we not had a government willing to find ways to assist that industry in the beginning.

As we take steps into the second century of our province's history, we must be bold. We must find ways to convince the federal government to work with us and not against us so that we may find ways to achieve our full potential. It is time to unleash innovation that focuses on becoming a world leader in research, development, and commercialization of new ideas. This applies to both our existing strengths in energy, agriculture, forestry as well as new businesses that create wealth by commercializing new technologies, creating new products, and adding value at home and for export abroad.

We must find the strength of will to look at our fiscal policies for ways to help our economy move past the hewers of wood and

drawers of water attitudes that have plagued us for decades and instead allow us to fully capture our own economic diversity. I am excited about our future, Mr. Speaker. I think the 21st century truly belongs to us.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It was indeed a pleasure to hear Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor deliver the throne speech. As always Her Honour brought renewed warmth and grace to this Chamber. I would also like to add my voice to those of my colleagues in expressing my hope that Her Honour will remain in office for at least the duration of next year's centennial celebrations. She does tremendous credit to her office, and I very much appreciate her contribution to the entire province.

The content of the speech of course, Mr. Speaker, as we know, is determined by the government, and Tuesday's throne speech certainly lacked the vision that I had hoped to see for this province. It lacked commitment, and it lacked any sense that this government has a plan for Alberta beyond the next election. Indeed, this government's insistence on setting policy according to the election cycle clearly demonstrates that their priority is on their own political survival rather than the long-term quality of Albertans' lives.

Mr. Speaker, the 20-year plan that has been spoken of by the Premier among others is in my view the height of arrogance. To suggest that this government with its record can make a plan for 20 years into the future is a joke. As one commentator put it: "Who are they trying to kid? They can't even stick to a plan for one year."

Mr. Speaker, I could list file after file that this government has bungled. I could bemoan the damaged relations between this government and Alberta's teachers. I could scold the government for abandoning seniors and condemning postsecondary students to massive debt loads. I could speak at some length about why I believe that this is perhaps the worst government in this country. But last year the government caucus felt it necessary to reduce the time that members are allowed to speak on matters such as this, limiting thereby the amount of debate time in this Assembly. Of course, such restrictions are to be expected from a government that has used closure to choke off debate more than any other jurisdiction in Canada and which boasts the fewest sitting days of any Assembly in Canada other than Prince Edward Island.

Alberta is suffering under a democratic deficit that is becoming wider and wider. A recent study by the Parkland Institute entitled *Trouble in Paradise?* found that 60 per cent of Albertans believe that our democracy is unhealthy and that 79 per cent feel that big business has too much influence on government policy. This growing skepticism about democracy in Alberta is symptomatic of a core problem: we've had a single party in power for far too long.

This longevity has led in the worst cases to outright arrogance – and we've seen that just in the last couple of days, hon. members – and to a closed-door approach to policy-making. No wonder, then, that there's a growing disconnect between the priorities of Albertans and the priorities of this government. There is, of course, the old saw that practice makes perfect, but in this case the exception seems to prove the rule. In fact, for this government the longer they have to play at politics, the more their mistakes and the accumulated effects of years of mismanagement begin to catch up.

For example, Mr. Speaker, as I travel through Alberta, I hear from both rural and urban Albertans that something doesn't quite sit right about how the government has handled and is handling the whole question of BSE. We found one cow, and the answer of the government was: well, it's just one cow. Well, then they found a

second cow, and that, I think, underlined the ineffectiveness of the government's response to that point. On one hand, the government claims that consumers can feel secure in the safety of their food supply, yet on the other hand they have done nothing to ramp up testing to meet even the standards in Europe.

Again the government claims to be fighting for our farmers, but it was this government that closed labs in Fairview, Airdrie, and Lethbridge, forcing farmers to use private labs at their own expense, and established full cost recovery programs for livestock inspection and branding services. It was this government that in 2001 amended the Agricultural Operation Practices Act to eliminate local communities' ability to interfere with the siting of massive intensive livestock operations. It is this government that has allowed rural infrastructure to crumble and decay, only offering some relief now that the election is nearly upon us.

Rural Albertans can be forgiven for feeling a little confused about this government's attitude towards our agricultural heritage. Judging by the lack of leadership that has been shown on this issue and the contradictory statements coming from the Premier, on the one hand, and the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development on the other, it seems that the government itself is confused about the future of rural Alberta.

Even worse, the longer this government is allowed to hold power the more devastating will be the cumulative effects of nearsighted privatization and lack of investment in our infrastructure.

4:00

Let me be clear, Mr. Speaker. This is a government that revels in nearsightedness and contradiction. Only a government that has overstayed its welcome could produce environment policies that indicate that the best way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is to increase their production and in the water for life strategy indicate that the best way to conserve water is to allow more of it to be used. Perhaps someone should explain to the government that George Orwell's ominous predictions about doublespeak were meant as a warning, not as a business plan for Conservative cabinet members.

But if anything positive can be said about this government, it's this: they are clearly a united team. When the Learning minister forced the layoff of 1,000 teachers in Alberta while claiming school boards were receiving adequate funding, the team stood behind him. When a year later the Learning Commission noted that not only should those teachers not have been laid off but that funding should be provided for an additional 1,500 teaching positions, the team stood together and pretended that the minister had never claimed that funding was already inadequate.

As a team this government allowed insurance premiums to skyrocket way past the levels in other western provinces. Then as a team this government locked in rates that were 57 per cent higher than those a year before with no clear plan to bring those rates down.

Let's not forget, Mr. Speaker, about the highly specialized section of the government team, the so-called Edmonton caucus. The commitment and unity shown by the Edmonton caucus as they watched the Electoral Boundaries Commission eliminate an Edmonton riding, as they watched the Calgary school board receive funding that Edmonton school boards did not, and when they allowed discrimination in auto insurance rates for the misfortune of having registered your vehicle in Edmonton, it was breathtaking to be seen.

Now, when confronted by these messes of their own making, the government, led by the Premier, has a very simple strategy. It's called blame it on the feds. They have elevated the science of distraction and misdirection into an art form. We have a government that cries and complains about the \$1 billion spent by the federal

government on the gun registry, and justly so, I might add, Mr. Speaker. However, they conveniently ignore the \$6 billion that has been drained from Alberta's economy by a bungled electricity deregulation agenda.

This government likes to gnash its teeth and to wail about the delay in the \$2 billion promised to the provinces for health care funding while behind closed doors plans to privatize our medicare system are carefully put into place. The Premier and the Minister of Health and Wellness hope that if they focus enough attention on the federal government, then no one will notice as services are reduced, user fees are increased, and profit is slowly allowed to eat up more and more of our health care dollars.

Tuesday's throne speech did bless us with one bit of distraction not undertaken at the expense of the federal government: the government's promise to throw money at people who don't even exist yet. The Alberta centennial education savings plan is clearly an attempt to throw money at babies fortunate enough to be born during an election year. The plan does nothing to address the massive debt loads faced by today's postsecondary students. It does nothing to make higher education accessible to the thousands of Albertans who would like to continue their learning but simply cannot afford to do so. Rather than simply freezing tuition fees now, a move that could be paid for by ending the unnecessary subsidy to the horse racing industry, this government is planning to make education so expensive that families will have to spend 20 years in preparing for one child to attend university. Mr. Speaker, I said at the beginning of my comments that this is arguably the worst government in Canada.

To conclude I would like to tell this Assembly that I'm proud that New Democrats are not only a part of a growing tide of people who are ready to challenge this government and work hard to replace it but that we are leading the battle charge, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue to do so into and through the next provincial election.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. I have a question for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, please. Now, would the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands in his speech elaborate on what was missing in the Speech from the Throne in regard to auto insurance? What would the hon. member like to see this government do to reduce auto insurance premiums?

Mr. Mason: Thank you, hon. member, for that question. I would like them to do what the Liberal caucus has done, and that is to adopt the New Democrat plan for public auto insurance. I might say that it shows great wisdom on the part of the Alberta Liberal caucus because across western Canada Alberta is the only province that doesn't have public auto insurance, and as a result we pay the highest rates.

Even under the government plan, such as it is, we will continue to pay higher rates for automobile insurance than under a public plan, and there are a number of important reasons for that. One is the efficiencies of combining the organization with the licensing, the licence plates, and the registration. There are great economies to be found there. Of course, any profits that are made are plowed right back into lower rates, and that's something that is impossible to achieve under the Conservative approach of letting private auto insurance companies charge to provide the service.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. Minister of Learning, a question?

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just a very quick question, and that is quite simply: would the hon. member consider a 15 to 28 per cent return after taxes, after inflation a good deal?

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. The hon. minister has not given me enough information to answer the question.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Seeing that the hon. member would not bite on that one, I'll just say quite simply that the TD financial group this week came out with a report that said that college students received an after-tax, after-inflation return on their dollar spent of 15 to 28 per cent and university degrees were 12 to 20 per cent after taxes, after inflation, which on this side of the floor is an excellent return on the dollar.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I might just point out that that's the problem with having a Learning minister that thinks like a banker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour for me to rise today and respond to the Speech from the Throne. The speech that was presented by Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor served to do more than just open the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature. It was also a bold statement on the course of this province and the future of Alberta. I would like to say that after 34 and a half months of being an MLA in this Assembly, it is a great day to stand here and know that the government of Alberta is saying that education is the number one priority in this province. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Her Honour for her grace, humility, and dedication. She has served our province and our sovereign with the utmost distinction.

I find it very fitting that the speech Her Honour delivered on Tuesday was entitled *Heading toward Alberta's Second Century: A Proud History, A Promising Future*. Next year our province will celebrate its hundredth birthday. As well, we look back at the past century. We as Albertans have many things to be proud of. Thanks to the hard work and perseverance of numerous generations of Albertans we have been able to transform our vast prairie grasslands into successful large farming operations, expand our small pioneer settlements and villages into thriving urban communities, and transform a small subsistence-based economy into the best performing economy in the world.

I want to look back for a minute to 10 years ago. We were sitting in a province that was in deficit and debt, and with the leadership that was taken at that time, we are able to enjoy the throne speech that we heard yesterday from Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor. If it wasn't for the leadership of our Premier and some of the members that are sitting on the front bench today and many of the other members that have left this Assembly, we would not be able to afford to move the portfolios of learning, advanced education, and health care. It is that vision from 10, 11 years ago that has allowed us this throne speech that we enjoy today.

4:10

Related to the throne speech – it is directly to do with learning – I'd also like to acknowledge and thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark for the work that he has done on the Learning Commission.

Over the last decade we have been able to further increase our productivity levels creating an atmosphere both business-friendly and environmentally responsible. By increasing employment rates, reducing income tax, and ensuring that Albertans retain more of their hard-earned money, our province has become one of the best places for people to live and work. As we look towards the next century, the health and welfare of Albertans will undoubtedly continue to be the top priority of our government. However, while we currently have an effective and well-funded health care system in place, it has become apparent Canada-wide that this system is not sustainable unless we are prepared to initiate appropriate reforms and improvements.

I applaud Albertans for having the courage to seize the initiative in addressing these problems through new and innovative solutions. I am fully convinced that through continued health care reform we'll not only enhance the sustainability of the system, but we will also guarantee that every Albertan continues to enjoy access to affordable and quality care.

During her address on Tuesday, Mr. Speaker, Her Honour referred to the 20-year plan this government has developed to ensure that the next centennial is as successful and prosperous for Albertans as was the last one. The main components of this plan are made up of four key pillars that over the next 20 years will strengthen and expand as they will be crucial to the continued success of our urban and rural communities. The four pillars I am referring to include unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to work, live, and visit.

Of those four pillars, the one that has been of particular interest to me and my constituents in Edmonton-Glenora is, of course, learning and the future improvement and enhancement of our primary, secondary, and postsecondary education. I look forward to the jobs that the hon. ministers will be involved in moving forward: the Minister of Learning, the Minister of Infrastructure, the Minister of Human Resources and Employment, and the minister of aboriginal affairs.

Our present and future realities, Mr. Speaker, demand that we maintain a world-class education system in order for our economy and society to grow and prosper. We need to train and attract a skilled and educated labour force that will be able to meet the needs and demands of the future. By investing in Alberta's learning system and placing it as one of the four key pillars of our development strategy, we're not only ensuring that future generations of Albertans are provided with the tools and knowledge they require to realize the goals and aspirations, but we are making certain that Alberta in 2025 will be a well-educated workforce with a strong and vibrant economy.

In support of this vision I was heartened to hear that the government will be marking our centennial year by investing in Alberta's children in the form of the Alberta centennial education savings plan. I feel that the announced \$500 contribution per child will not only help to encourage children to pursue higher learning but also create an incentive for parents to start planning and saving for their child's education as early as possible. Furthermore, by encouraging parents to start planning early, the centennial savings plan will help future students meet some of the costs associated with pursuing postsecondary education.

Another topic that I would quickly like to touch on, Mr. Speaker,

relates to the issue of class sizes. Over the past year I've had the opportunity to speak to many of my constituents who approached me with genuine concerns regarding the sizes of children's classrooms at their local schools. This issue was raised in the Alberta Learning Commission report, and I am indeed thrilled that this government has taken steps to increase funding to those schools that exceed the average class size guidelines as recommended by the commission.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to see that the government has chosen to deal with this issue by working with individual school boards as opposed to dictating to them what specific steps they need to take. I understand that school boards are reluctant to have the province mandate class sizes to them as this would not only infringe upon their autonomy and self-sufficiency but also severely limit their flexibility to respond to local needs.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, I am extremely encouraged by the fact that our schools and our learning institutions are continuously staffed by extremely committed teachers and instructors who provide our young ones with the superior curriculum and also promote parent involvement. All these factors combined give Alberta one of the best education systems in the world.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude by reiterating that we as Albertans have accomplished much in a relatively short period of time. We have developed a booming economy, established first-rate social services, and we have created a learning system that will steer our province towards a bright and prosperous future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was a privilege today to stand before you and respond to the Speech from the Throne.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity also to reply to the Speech from the Throne, and I also would like to lift up the MLA for Edmonton-Meadowlark as an outstanding young man.

Mr. Speaker, Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor, Lois Hole, delivered her speech the other day with dignity and grace that embodies the office she holds. The content of her speech outlined a path for the government of this province that I'm proud to walk down. The speech sketched in our plan that would not only address the current concerns of Albertans but also prepare Alberta's continuing success long into the future. This plan includes all of the cornerstones upon which our province's current prosperity is built. We see elements that will ensure that our children will be privy to a fantastic education system both in grade school and beyond. Other elements discussed will ensure that Alberta will remain strong in the international trade community while nurturing research and innovation at home.

Mr. Speaker, I had the liberty to visit our Research Council on a couple of different occasions, and each and every time I'm absolutely surprised at the distances they reach and what they're doing with biogas and biomass and other concerns of our environment.

On the international scene, Mr. Speaker, Alberta is not only known for its natural resources that reside underground but the wealth and beauty that lies above-ground as well. Alberta is home to an astonishing diversity of terrain from the Rockies to the west and the hoodoos down south. We're privileged to enjoy this natural splendour. However, this natural beauty will not remain if both government and society do not act decisively to implement conservation measures that will protect our environment. It is the duty and privilege of every Albertan to do their part to ensure that their environment will be protected.

The government has recognized the need to take the initiative in

environmental issues and to this end are developing a provincial water council. The council will work to ensure that Alberta's water supply remains fresh, clear, and readily available for generations to come, and from what I know of our minister in this department, it will be achieved.

This commitment to our environment will not stop at protecting Alberta waterways. In her speech the hon. Lieutenant Governor mentioned that some of our energies would be devoted to developing new technology that would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to investigating alternative sources further. We have to go farther to go further.

It is a stark reality that a good portion of our environmental contamination is a result of automobiles. Manufacturers have made great strides developing automobiles that are more fuel efficient, burn more cleanly, but there are still negative environmental impacts when dealing with vehicles fuelled by petroleum products.

These impacts result not only from burning fossil fuels but also from the transfer of the same fuels. In response to this alternative source of pollution I, myself, Mr. Speaker, with great wisdom am sponsoring a bill, Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004, that would help reduce the amount of pollution that results from transfer of both fuels from storage tanks into tankers and from these same trucks to service stations. My colleagues and myself, we don't only talk the talk, but we walk the walk, and that can be measured by supporting this bill and passing it. The installation of stage 1 vapour recovery systems into every storage facility, tanker truck, and service station storage tank would benefit our environment. This technology reduces the amount of gasoline vapours that are lost during fuel transfer.

4:20

Mr. Speaker, there are a variety of contaminants that are released into the environment during the transfer of fuel. Those include the formation of ground level ozones. While I'm talking about ground level ozones, I'd like to mention one of the ministries, Children's Services. As it's going into the ground level, these young future children of ours – mine, yours, everybody in this room, and all Albertans: why do they have to breathe that? They don't. By having healthy individuals, not only does it take in the Ministry of Learning to stretch their GPA to a higher level, it also takes in the Ministry of Environment, the ministry of health. The reason these costs are rising is because people are not healthier. I'd like to compliment the Minister of Learning for introducing physical education into the school, and coupled with that would be the air you breathe and dispensing these ground level ozones.

Mr. Speaker, benzene is another well-known carcinogen. The ground level ozone has a negative impact on health as well, and we know that it's linked to leukemia and various other diseases. That's not acceptable to this government, and there again, we can measure that by voting for this bill and passing it. By reducing the amount of emissions, we will not only be caring for the health of our environment, but by implementing such technology, we will be acting to prevent an environmental and personal health threat before the problem becomes insurmountable. I can honestly say that with my colleagues, as we talk in public or we talk in private, that is the number one foundation that we have built this government upon, and the encouragement of my colleagues is why I've taken the liberty to step forward.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take this opportunity to reply again and to give my utmost thanks to everybody for doing their part to form a good government and to look at the underlying factors causing our population and our citizenry to live healthier. At the same time, the

policy of our government is to make sure that when we bring something forward, it covers all ministries one way or another. For example, Bill 202. It's not what's said in the written word by Her Majesty's English, but it's what's not said as we look for the finite details and we bring forward our laws and our acts and our amending acts to make everything better.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you for this opportunity.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, did you want to rise to speak on this? Hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to rise today and respond to the Speech from the Throne delivered yesterday by our Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour the Honourable Lois Hole. With much grace and poise the Lieutenant Governor outlined the Alberta government's plan for the future to Albertans of all walks of life.

Before I address the important issues covered in the Speech from the Throne, I would like to express appreciation on behalf of my constituents for the dedication the Lieutenant Governor has shown in her position. She has captured the hearts of all Albertans through her passionate words and personal touches. This past year has not been an easy one for her, but her determination has been inspiring to all of us. It does not surprise me that Albertans have embraced this lady as their own and are very proud of her commitment to this province, its people, and the Queen.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to address the Assembly today on behalf of my constituents of Calgary-Fort. While there is much diversity among the people I represent in terms of age, ethnic ancestry, religion, and economic background, these Albertans have common traits and common goals. They are all proud to be living in the finest province in the world. They recognize the importance of family values, of helping their fellow man and making a difference in their communities. These are Albertans who want to contribute to the province's future and are ready for any challenge that may come their way. I am extremely proud to have the opportunity to represent such a proud, honest, and hard-working group of Albertans.

They are also very happy to hear about the Alberta government's vision for the future. As we reach the centennial year, it is important to look back and recognize the important people, initiatives, and events which have led us to this point in time. Our past deserves to be celebrated, and Albertans will have that opportunity over the next couple of years. We should be proud that we have led the country in debt reduction and are on the verge of becoming a debt-free province. We should be proud that our education system is among the best in the world and that other jurisdictions flock to Alberta to learn about our approach. We should be proud of the fact that we pay less tax than anywhere in the country.

From the beauty of our mountains and landscape to the cleanliness of our cities to the approach of our people, we can all be proud to say, "I'm from Alberta." We can even sing the Alberta song later next year. But as pointed out in the Speech from the Throne, it is also important to look towards Alberta's short- and long-term future. We need to set our goals and chase them with vigour, we need to continue to set standards as a province and exceed them, and we need to chart a course for the future by carefully outlining what is important to us as Albertans and instigating a plan that will allow us to reach our destination.

Albertans were very, very happy to hear about the province's 20-year plan for the future. Our four pillars – unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global market, and making

Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit – will provide support for this great province.

Today I would like to speak to some of the topics outlined in the Speech from the Throne and address the importance of each approach. I think we can all agree that we are extremely fortunate to live in a province that has such an abundance of natural resources. Oil and gas revenues have provided us with opportunities that other provinces could only dream of having. The advantage of having these resources gives us the opportunity to diversify our economy and make other sectors, like tourism, manufacturing, and the various service-oriented businesses in Alberta, stronger and more prosperous.

Unleashing innovation means researching our approaches and implementing action plans to benefit our energy industry, our communication and life sciences sectors, and areas like agriculture, environment, forestry, and water research. We have an opportunity to strengthen many different sectors across the province, and through this approach families will benefit through new jobs and business opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, with my global perspective I believe that we need to internationalize Alberta. Yes, just like any other free, successful, and lasting enterprises or jurisdictions, to grow we need to go beyond our borders. To me, we need to think global and act local, and we need to join the international exchange and trade.

Mr. Speaker, when we talk about our future as a province, we must talk about our youth. I am very encouraged by the direction that the Alberta government is taking in regard to education and the importance of giving our children every opportunity to succeed. This government has been a proponent of lifelong learning for years, but with some learning opportunities come future costs for families like university tuition and apprenticeship training.

In the spirit of Alberta's hundredth birthday the government's commitment to learning, the Alberta centennial education savings plan, has been announced. The initiative will help young families plan for their children's future. Beginning in 2005, every child born in Alberta will receive a \$500 contribution to a registered education savings plan. Not only will this head start help to alleviate the anxiety a new parent may face when he or she ponders their child's educational future, but the program will maintain choice for the future students.

4:30

In addition to this important program, the Alberta government, as outlined in the throne speech, will maintain its commitment to Alberta's public schools and postsecondary system. By allocating substantial new funding to these areas, the goal of creating 2,000 new spots in Alberta universities and colleges is an admirable one. These funds will help shape our future, our children, into respectable, dynamic, well-rounded leaders of tomorrow.

As outlined in the throne speech, it is important that Alberta finds its place in the global market. Decisions made in other jurisdictions can have a profound effect on the health of Alberta's economy and people. We have seen the effect of the closure of the United States' border to Alberta cattle, tariffs slapped on Alberta exports like softwood lumber.

Alberta has worked and will continue to work hard to protect the province's interest when it comes to issues that affect its citizens. Alberta can be proud of the fact that their Premier wasted little time in travelling to the United States after a single case of BSE was discovered in the province and proud of the fact that consumers helped out the farmers by continuing to support the beef industry. It was an example of this government's commitment to maintaining an important seat at the international table.

It is very important to have healthy ties to our most important trading partner, the U.S.A. As outlined in the throne speech, setting up an Alberta office in Washington is an important step for fostering a good relationship with our neighbour to the south. Alberta cannot rely on entities like the federal government to convey important Alberta messages to a country like the United States. This is a responsibility the province must put on itself in order to create a healthy trading environment with countries all over the globe.

It is absolutely imperative for Alberta's economy to be strong internationally as the revenues generated help to pay for domestic service demands. Therefore, it is up to the Alberta government to continue its focus on economic development internationally. I believe we have the tools as a province to make this happen. As my riding certainly reflects, Mr. Speaker, Alberta has a diverse cultural heritage. It is an advantage in an international economy as it allows us to connect with other countries in a meaningful way and to capitalize on trading opportunities.

Now that I have addressed the first three pillars of the Alberta government's 20-year plan for the province, I would like to state the final pillar. Making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit provides the most insight into what Alberta's future should and can look like. Our communities should be strong and protected. Our children deserve to be healthy and safe. Disabled Albertans should not be discriminated against. Seniors should be able to live independently and with dignity. Albertans should have employment, and an aboriginal Albertan should be able to access programs dealing with all sorts of social issues and community-based care.

Mr. Speaker, this is an extensive vision for the future indeed, and in most cases it would be easy to deem this list too idealistic. But the fact that Alberta's government is able to quite readily provide a list of programs, plans if you will, that squarely addresses each of these issues bodes well for our future. The Round-table on Family Violence and Bullying, the Alberta disabilities strategy, the Alberta Works program, the health quality council of Alberta, and the centennial capital plan are just some of the initiatives that will help keep Alberta a healthy place for all Albertans.

Alberta's government must continue to develop its caring social policies and programs that are based on a hand up and not handouts and to do what it can to provide a decent standard of living for Alberta's poor families. It is important to implement initiatives that allow the working poor hope and a sense of security. Measures like the Alberta Works program, which will help low-income Albertans find meaningful jobs and provide income support, health, and child support benefits, is an important step towards solving this problem. Providing financial assistance to people fleeing family violence to help themselves re-establish a new household and make a fresh start is another important initiative.

We need to pay more attention to the working poor, Mr. Speaker. This is a condition where some of Alberta's hard-working families need help. Affordable and low-cost housing needs more focus and implementation. We must continue to monitor the progress we have made in these areas and implement measures to help our children, our working poor, and our low-income seniors.

I would like to take time, Mr. Speaker, to elaborate on an issue that I believe especially important. Alberta's seniors are very important to this province, and this government must continue to improve its senior-oriented programs. I was very pleased to hear in the Speech from the Throne that a plan will be created to help the province's health system, workplaces, and other institutions prepare for Alberta's aging population. This is an issue that will only become more important as years pass by.

While we are on the subject of seniors, I would like to take this

opportunity to talk about a motion I will be putting forward this year. Motion 540 urges the government to

implement a consistent income qualification threshold for all seniors' benefits and subsidy programs that would be indexed to the annual inflation rate or the market basket measure and include a graduated scale of benefits and subsidy programs for seniors with incomes above the qualifying threshold.

I believe this approach would help low-income seniors receive the help they need to live independently and with dignity and would address funding needs for Albertans living in areas with a higher cost of living.

Also under the pillar of making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit is a renewed commitment for Alberta's infrastructure. Extending the plan by an additional year will allow more projects to be completed. The growth of our province has put strains on our infrastructure, and we must be committed to maintaining it. My constituents have seen the pressure that has been put on Calgary's services, like transportation, schools, health services, affordable housing. This area must continue to be a priority of this government.

The throne speech has touched on the importance of all new government spending being carefully measured to ensure that programs and services don't jeopardize the financial security that Albertans have worked so hard to create for themselves. The events in Ottawa over the past two weeks dictate a need for government to be responsible for taxpayers' money.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions?

The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. After that very good discourse on the Speech from the Throne I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading
(continued)

Bill 2 **Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act**

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to rise today and speak in favour of Bill 2. I am pleased at this time to officially move at second reading the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act.

Mr. Speaker, I want to begin my comments by providing a little bit of background, perhaps some context to the importance of this bill as it relates to this history of this province and in particular Alberta's reputed rangelands. During the years immediately following 1905, when Alberta was just becoming a province, so to speak, agriculture was really the driving force behind the growth of our economy and our population, and I'm happy that it is still such an important driver. Grain and mixed farming tended to dominate in the central part of the province and also up in Peace River, where we just were last week, and grain farming and ranching tended to dominate the south. Looking back, however, the prairies of southern Alberta have seen major changes in a very short period of time.

4:40

That change is very well illustrated by a pioneer rancher named

Frederick Ings in his 1936 autobiography, *Before the Fences*, and I'd like to quote a brief passage.

On the trail, as far down as the cattle might have drifted, we passed through an absolutely unsettled land; no towns, no farms, no fences, just one big grass-covered range, such grass as we never see now. The buffalo had been gone for years, and what cattle there were wandered at will from Sheep River (just south of Calgary) almost to the border.

He further reflected:

Gradually, the range had been closed out. The great leases were cut up into farms and smaller ranches. The cattle were restricted in their wanderings by the home fence. Wheat took the place of cattle on the plains.

Ings was, of course, commenting on the passing of the open-range ranching era that was all but gone by the 1900s.

Now, today, despite droughts and concerns for BSE, agriculture remains a significant part of Alberta's economy, and ranchers still raise large herds in the foothills and in the south of our province. Today less than one-third of the natural prairie landscape remains, but some very large tracts of the continent's finest prairies anywhere are still found right here in southern Alberta. These natural prairie landscapes continue to support viable populations of many of the plants and animals native to southern Alberta. The ecological integrity of these remaining prairie landscapes is due in no small way to the excellent and outstanding stewardship of Alberta's ranching community.

There's great value to the heritage rangelands and to the protected areas that we are so privileged to enjoy in this province, and the ranching community and the environmental community share a common interest in preserving the environmental diversity of our prairie landscape. This common interest has evolved into the establishment of the heritage rangelands class of protected area in the Alberta parks and protected areas system within my ministry. Through our provincially protected areas we can ensure that our natural heritage remains vibrant and strong and protected not only for today but also for the second century and onward.

I was very pleased, Mr. Speaker, to note during some of the research that I was doing that the provincial government of Alberta many years ago decided to pass the Provincial Parks and Protected Areas Act. I believe that was back on March 21 of 1930. Now, a lot has obviously happened in the 74 or so years since that time including the enormous amount of work that went into and honouring our government's commitment in 1992 to the Alberta component of the World Wildlife Fund's endangered spaces program. So we have the Whaleback protected areas: Black Creek heritage rangeland and Bob Creek wild-land. These were designated under the special places program in May 1999. In fact, I believe it was our own Premier who made that announcement and indicated that these two new designations under the special places program were being established to create a nationally significant protected area in the Whaleback: Black Creek and Bob Creek.

Heritage rangelands, as we all know, contribute very significantly to the conservation of Alberta's natural grasslands while recognizing traditional land-use activities such as grazing. This classification will also allow limited opportunities for some outdoor recreation that is compatible with that preservation of natural values and grazing management.

So with the proclamation of Bill 24 last June, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, and Natural Areas Amendment Act, 2000, the heritage rangeland designation formally became enshrined in legislation. Not only are the lands within heritage rangelands legislatively protected, but the cattle-ranching lifestyle, which is such a significant element of Alberta's history, is also legislatively protected.

At the same time, last June the Black Creek heritage rangeland in the Whaleback region of our province became Alberta's first heritage rangeland. The Alberta government has been working very hard with the municipal district of Ranchland, local ranchers, and other stakeholders to finalize requirements for the long-term management and protection of these unique areas, and we will be bringing that forward very soon. This goes back to at least 1999, Mr. Speaker, when local stakeholders, residents, and ranchers brought forward some concerns about this designation of the Whaleback because they felt that the designation of these protected areas would possibly significantly interfere with their livelihoods and with their way of life as well.

So out of all of this a number of commitments needed to be made to secure local support and comfort for the protected land designation process to proceed. One of these commitments was to maintain access into the recreational vehicle trails that exist in the Bob Creek wild-land, which the local community has been using for many, many years for their hunting and recreational and grazing purposes.

It is within this broader context, Mr. Speaker, that I outline the reasons that precipitated the bringing in of Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act, because it is another step in fulfilling our government's commitment to local stakeholders. This particular act will allow limited – and I want to stress that word “limited” – recreational vehicle access to continue through the Black Creek heritage rangeland on two already existing trails that have been there for many, many years in order to maintain access to the few existing designated off-highway vehicle trails in the Bob Creek wild-land, which is the adjacent park to the Black Creek heritage rangeland.

I need to indicate for the comfort of everyone that these two trails, where we will be allowing off-highway vehicles to travel, are 3.5 kilometres in total, taken together, and they are approximately 15 feet wide, so they're very small trails. They're already existing trails, and we're going to allow off-highway vehicle usage on those trails only through the heritage rangeland to get to the Bob Creek wild-land.

Alternative access was also explored, Mr. Speaker, around the entire rangeland, but the topography, the drainage patterns, the configuration of the rangeland, and so on virtually eliminated any other possible access points. So as you can see, there are no feasible alternatives for access into this area to the wild-land other than as provided for in this act. In fact, this act provides a specific exception without opening up the possibility of general recreational vehicle use in any of the heritage rangelands or in any other parts of this particular heritage rangeland.

So to be clear, we are not – and I want to stress that – opening up the entire heritage rangeland to OHV use. We are going to allow two existing trails that are very narrow and very short to carry the OHVs through the heritage rangeland into the Bob Creek wild-land. That is one reason why our legislation needs to come forward: because the people who were involved recognized how important it is to set aside areas for protection but at the same time to allow common sense to prevail. That's what's happening here so that that access can occur while protection can still also take place. So our legislation does not allow general recreational vehicle use in heritage rangelands, and I hope that has been made abundantly clear.

What Bill 2 does do is it provides a specific exception without opening up that possibility for general recreation that I mentioned, and more specifically it will also allow our parks staff access to manage recreational vehicle use on these trails through regulations. In fact, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act also applies to these trails and governs any other matters respecting the trails.

4:50

Now, I want to just briefly reference the issue of other heritage rangelands. Mr. Speaker, there are six remaining heritage rangeland natural areas that will be re-established as heritage rangelands over a period of the next several years and as site-specific requirements at each location are addressed. They will include Beaverhill Lake heritage rangeland natural area near Tofield, which is just east of Edmonton; Killarney-Reflex Lakes near the Saskatchewan border by Chauvin; Onefour, which is close to the Montana border, halfway between Coutts and the Saskatchewan border; Ribstone Creek just southeast of Wainwright; Tolman Badlands just northwest of Drumheller; and, of course, Twin River, which is not far west of Milk River. As always, we will continue to work with the local stakeholders of these other heritage rangelands to finalize requirements for the long-term management and protection of these unique areas.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I want to simply add that our parks and protected areas, which number over 500 in this province, are a tremendous and great source of pride for me, for my staff, and for all Albertans. They help us to deepen our understanding of that precious relationship between human beings and our natural environmental setting.

We all have a role to play in the stewardship of our land and for the continued prosperity of our province, which is dependent on striking a balance between economic growth and environmental protection. That successful balance, however, can only be reached with all partners working together: the private sector, the public sector, all three levels of government. All of us together have to make a long-term commitment to protecting our natural heritage and to understanding its value and importance to each and every one of us as well as understanding what the local needs are, in this particular case to the farming and ranching communities in the Whaleback area.

My final thanks goes to all the people who inputted through the public consultation that occurred down in the southern part of the province and in particular to the Minister of Government Services, who happens to be the MLA for Livingstone-Macleod, who took it upon himself to organize a meeting last year which I, our Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and our Minister of Sustainable Resource Development attended. The four of us went to a meeting with the ranching representatives. We had a pleasant couple of hours with them, aired all the issues, explained what our positions were, listened to what their positions were, and came out with the best possible solution under these particular circumstances.

So I would appreciate the support of members of this House for taking this bill forward and for the very unique circumstances that precipitate its need. This is a highly unique situation, Mr. Speaker, and I hope I've explained to everyone's satisfaction the need for it and the importance of having it go through.

My final comment is simply to say again that we are not opening up the entire heritage rangeland to recreational OHV use. That would not be the case. We are simply allowing OHVs, recreational vehicles, to travel through the heritage rangeland on two small existing trails so they can get to the Bob Creek wild-land, where that particular recreational activity can in fact occur.

So, with that, I'll take my spot and look forward to other speakers joining in this debate on Bill 2. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As MLA for that very special place known as the Whaleback, which contains the

Black Creek heritage rangeland and the Bob Creek wild-land, I am pleased this afternoon to take a few moments here, before we adjourn, to speak to Bill 2.

As the Minister of Community Development has so wonderfully outlined, it's the whole issue of access that is the need for this bill. This particular bill is very unique to a very unique place, the Whaleback, and as the minister pointed out, it doesn't apply to every heritage rangeland. It only applies to Bob Creek wild-land and Black Creek heritage rangeland.

Just a brief history. The minister did a very good job in explaining what's happened over the past seven or eight years. During the period from 1995 to 2001 Alberta did commit itself to the special places program, which was a made-in-Alberta solution to meeting our commitment to the World Wildlife Fund's endangered spaces program. During this period Alberta established 81 new and 13 expanded protected areas, and when we consider the national parks in Alberta as our own protected areas, over 12 per cent of Alberta land is now protected. About 8 per cent of that is through the national parks and the balance, 4 per cent, provincially.

I have to say that I was very proud to be the chair of the Special Places Provincial Co-ordinating Committee from 1997 to 2001. Under the special places program it was recognized that Alberta has many unique landscapes that contribute to our identity and that capture our western heritage, and that includes our prairie grassland. We needed to ensure that they are protected and appropriately managed, which gave rise to the whole concept of something new called heritage rangeland, where such landscapes can be protected while allowing their traditions to continue.

An Hon. Member: We can still drill?

Mr. Coutts: You can still drill.

In recognition of this, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act defined the parameters for establishing and protecting heritage rangelands, including the general prohibition on off-highway vehicles used in such areas as a means of assisting with their ongoing protection. Now, there are many dispositions that are permitted for such uses as grazing and trapping and the like.

This prohibition, however, has not yet come into effect and has had a unique situation affecting the Black Creek heritage rangeland, Alberta's first formally designated heritage rangeland. The Black Creek heritage rangeland is adjacent to the Bob Creek wild-land, and OHV use can be permitted on a limited basis on designated trails in wild-lands or wild-land provincial parks. However, access to the Bob Creek wild-land has traditionally been through the lands now designated as the Black Creek heritage rangeland, and no other feasible access is possible given the vegetation and the drainage patterns of the area. Ensuring ongoing access is a commitment that this government made when establishing those protected areas, and that was made to the local committee as well as the traditional users of the area.

We recognized that this unique situation had to be addressed before we proclaimed a general prohibition on OHV use in heritage rangelands. Without addressing this situation, we would have barred Albertans and producers from accessing an area where OHV use is permitted and failed to fulfill our commitment to the local residents. In addressing this unique situation, we are not opening up the Black Creek heritage rangeland for random recreational vehicle access. The minister made that very clear, and I would just like to confirm that. Instead, this bill will only apply to the two existing trails in the heritage rangeland, as the minister said, that have a total length of 3.5 kilometres.

5:00

Limiting recreational vehicle access to these two existing trails will ensure that heritage rangeland continues to be protected and that Albertans will continue, also, to have access to the Bob Creek wild-land, as they have traditionally done for years. Local ranchers and stakeholders are very supportive of this approach, which is responsive to this very unique situation.

Mr. Speaker, it's important that we continue to protect Alberta's special places and to consider the unique circumstances for which they provide. We've got ecological benefits which are done by maintaining essential ecological processes and by preserving diversity of species and the genetic variations that are within them. We have economic benefits by creating a climate of greater certainty for industry by establishing where they can and cannot operate and by balancing a healthy and sustainable environment with a vibrant and sustainable economy.

We have educational benefits by promoting a deeper understanding of the relationship between humanity and the ecosphere and by serving as outdoor classrooms for colleges, schools, universities, and organizations. We have recreational and health benefits by promoting recreation for the enjoyment of nature, physical fitness, and escape from the pressures of urban living and by providing opportunities for a distinctive range of outdoor recreation including hunting, fishing, equestrian, hiking, camping, boating, and other activities as well as the scientific benefits by providing natural research laboratories in which to gather and access information on how ecosystems function and how they respond to change.

It also gives us an opportunity for spiritual and cultural benefits by strengthening cultural identities and heritage values, by inspiring artists, poets, musicians, writers, and sculptors, and by ensuring the survival of species that symbolize our province such as bighorn sheep, the great horned owl, elk, and bull trout.

Mr. Speaker, this initiative will complete a very, very long process that was put in place under the special places program. Individuals from the community gave a lot of their time to making sure that it came to a successful conclusion, and I'm sure that there were times when I met with them that they had some doubts about the process, but all those doubts were taken away when the Deputy Premier, the minister of agriculture; the Minister of Community Development; the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development; and myself went down and met with them. They were satisfied with the consultation that we had with them that Saturday morning, and they agreed with this bill that was unique to their area.

This puts closure on it. It puts in place a management system that everyone can live with. So, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to speak in support of Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act, for it's fulfilling our commitment to the stakeholders that was made at the time that these protected areas, both Bob Creek wild-land and the Black Creek heritage rangeland, were established, and this will make sure that they are viable and managed well for years to come.

I encourage all my colleagues to support this legislation, and I want to thank the Minister of Community Development for his indulgence in this initiative, bringing it forward to this very successful conclusion. Without him listening to our concerns and without him sitting down and listening to me about the concerns of the stakeholders, this wouldn't have happened. So, Mr. Minister, I want to express my congratulations and thank you on behalf of my constituents.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have some questions for the speaker now.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 with regard to five minutes applies to the third speaker and the speakers thereafter. I recognized you to speak. Did you want to speak, or did you just want to ask a question?

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I'm sorry. I thought I was eligible to do that. I will then move that we adjourn debate on this bill.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very, very exciting opening to the spring session. I think we're all fully charged and ready to go for several more weeks and months. Given the hour of the day, I would now move that the House stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Monday.

[Motion carried; at 5:07 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, February 23, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/23

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Now, hon. members and ladies and gentlemen, with us today is Mr. Paul Lorieau. He'll lead us in the singing of our national anthem, and I would invite all to participate in the language of one's choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly the Deputy Minister-President and education and sports minister from Saxony, Germany, the hon. Professor Dr. Karl Mannsfeld. With him in the Speaker's gallery is a delegation representing a number of government departments in Saxony. Mrs. Maja Oelschlägel is in charge of international relations in the state Ministry for Education; Dr. Roger Mackeldey is with the office of the Minister-President and is responsible for international relations; Dr. Lutz Bryja is in charge of technological policy at the state Ministry of Economic Affairs and Labour; and Mr. Klaus Stapf is the vice-president of the Saxony Economic Development Corporation. Seated with the delegation in the gallery are Mr. Hans-Michael Schwandt, the consul general for Germany from Vancouver, and someone known to all of us, Mr. Fritz Koenig, the honorary consul for Germany in Edmonton.

Minister Mannsfeld and his delegation have the distinction of being the first Saxon government delegation to visit our province since Alberta and Saxony formalized our sister province relationship in the year 2002. Through this visit the delegation will be connecting with our government and other Alberta groups on a number of areas of mutual interest in the public and private sector. As an education minister Dr. Mannsfeld is especially interested in exploring our outstanding learning system and its best practices as well as examining some of our new initiatives that contribute to the success of learning institutions and students.

Although our education systems are different, there is much that we can learn from each other. Earlier today we signed a memorandum of understanding which will further our co-operation in the area of education and promote links between schools, students, and

educators in Alberta and Saxony. I'd like to thank Minister Mannsfeld and his delegation for sharing their knowledge and experiences with us. I would ask Minister Mannsfeld and his delegation to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On your behalf I'd like to introduce through you 92 bright grade 6 students from the Westlock elementary school, which is located in your constituency of Barrhead-Westlock. They are accompanied this afternoon by teacher Dan McDonald and parent helpers Denise Houle, Emily Cyna, Marilyn Beer, Mary Dijong, Heather Clarkson, Kim Stonehouse, Julia Walker, Cathy Klemp, Sandy Hiebert, Francis Cloutier, Tina Gatzki, Corinne Calkins, Fleur Whitley, and Deb Debrule. They are seated in the gallery this afternoon. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you today to all the members of the Assembly His Worship the mayor of Breton, Darren Aldous. He is with us in the members' gallery today. Darren is also the vice-president for villages and summer villages on the AUMA, and he's also a member of the child and family services authority for region 9. So we're glad to have Darren with us. I would ask him to stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to rise and introduce three very special guests and an additional special friend from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind who are here today to witness the introduction of Bill 201 as presented by my colleague from Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. This bill deals with safety codes and with barrier-free design and access, and I know that they are keen to see what happens with this particular bill as it goes through the process.

I would ask that our special guests please rise and receive the recognition in the order I introduce them: Mr. Bill McKeown, the executive director of the CNIB in Alberta; Ellie Shuster, the communications director for CNIB; and a board member, Diane Bergeron, and I hope that Polar is with her as well. There he is. Hi, Polar. Please welcome our guests.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of students from the University of Calgary. They are a political science class which, I believe, met with you this morning. They'll be meeting with me this afternoon. I guess they're here for the lab portion of their class. So I'd ask if, as I call their names, the group could rise. Ably taught by Dr. Keith Archer, they are Ms Janine Giles, Mr. Shayne Kuzek, Mr. Robbie Schuett, Timothy Duncan, Pierre Chan, Thomas Stooke, Brad Verhulst, Kelly Morrison, Shannon Cheesman, and Ms Meng Yang. If they're in the gallery, I'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the crowd, and if they're not, I know that they will receive it in absentia as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm just delighted today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly members of a very special group in my constituency. Today we have joining us in the public gallery 25 members of the Edmonton Jewish seniors' centre. This organization, which runs a day facility, has been in my constituency in the area of Oliver since the early '50s. They have a number of outings, like the one they're all on today, and they're accompanied by their team leaders, their group leaders, Joyce Galante and Rosemary Kitay. I would ask them all to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to this House a young lady that's been working in my office. We had one of our senior people go off for very serious surgery, and we have a young lady by the name of Sonia Ammar, that's been working in our office and has done an excellent job for us. She's been just a real pleasure to have in our office, and she is here today, being able for the first time in her history to observe the House in question period. I'd like Sonia to rise and receive the warm welcome from the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly today Shirley Barg, chair of the Council of Alberta University Students and president of Athabasca University Students' Union. Shirley and her colleagues on the council have been quite busy over the year. They undertook campaigns on Bill 43 and had some success in making changes in it. They also had campaigns on generation debt, drawing attention to student debt loads, and on tuition fees. I'll ask Shirley Barg – I believe she's sitting in the public gallery – to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure to rise and introduce some guests on behalf of the MLA for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert. There are 17 visitors from Alexander education centre. Are they in the public gallery? I'm not sure. Just to let you know, their teacher, Mrs. Sharon Fisher, is here. If everyone would join me in welcoming them.

Thank you very much.

head: 1:40

Oral Question Period

Long-term Care Facilities

Ms Blakeman: According to the government's own Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee, at the Bethany Care Centre for seniors in Calgary

- Residents are suffering.
- Residents are left in bed after baths and bowel care . . .
- Meals are rushed.
- Meals are being forgotten . . .
- Staff have no time to read residents' charts.

That's just the tip of the iceberg. My questions are to the minister of health. How can these appalling conditions exist in this province?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, long-term care facilities are the homes of a

number of seniors in the province of Alberta, some 14,000 of them. I want to assure the hon. member and all Albertans that we share their concerns that our seniors live in a place with dignity and with safety and are treated with respect.

Mr. Speaker, our regional health authorities and our facility operators are responsible for fulfilling their obligations under the Nursing Homes Act. All health regions as well as individual nursing home operators have a process put in place to receive and investigate complaints. When these issues arise, there is a place and a person where a complainant can raise such an issue. We are interested in investigating all such issues. The Health Facilities Review Committee does make recommendations to individual operators and to regional health authorities. The health facility operators and the regional health authorities are responsible for replying to those recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, again, by and large, long-term care facilities in this province have a very, very solid standard. There are complaints that arise from time to time, and we know that if the individual member here is aware of a complaint, she in fact does have an obligation under the Protection for Persons in Care Act to raise that issue with the appropriate person.

Ms Blakeman: I just did, and this is full of them.

To the same minister: given that Jennie Nelson was scalded in a care facility just two and a half months after your own government's report came out, what has the government done or, rather, not done to respond to this report?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the report that the hon. member is referring to by the Health Facilities Review Committee – I should give some background. The Health Facilities Review Committee does make regular unannounced visits to facilities throughout the province of Alberta on a regular basis. The recommendations that may arise from the review of a particular facility, in this case the Bethany facility in Calgary, would be appropriate to review with Bethany in Calgary and the Calgary health region. But it is not related to the situation which took place at the Jubilee and the unfortunate circumstances involving Jennie Nelson.

We have taken the appropriate steps to look also at the situation involving Jennie Nelson. We have expressed our personal condolences to the family of such an individual where a tragic circumstance occurred. But presently it's the subject matter of a fatality inquiry and, accordingly, our ability to speak further in any detail on this matter is restricted.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: given that this government is ultimately the funder, is the legislator, is the creator of this programming, why has the government allowed the staffing levels to get so low at Bethany that staff are telling residents that "they may not be able to get them up every day, or if [the residents] were up, they might have to stay up"?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, again, the regional health authorities and the facility operators are responsible for fulfilling the standards under our legislation. When reports are filed with certain recommendations, it is incumbent upon both the operators and the regional health authorities to answer to them. I should say that there is great co-operation from those groups. I'm not aware of any circumstance where recommendations under the Health Facilities Review Committee have been ignored. They've all been dealt with. I think that that is most appropriate.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Water Management

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today communities in southern Alberta are appealing a decision to divert water from the Red Deer River. Alberta Environment approved a diversion of well over 300,000 cubic metres of water annually from the Red Deer River.

Mr. Smith: Big deal.

Ms Carlson: This water will be used for injection into oil wells and will therefore be permanently removed from the water cycle. And it is a big deal, Mr. Minister of Energy.

My questions are to the Minister of Environment. Why did this ministry approve such an irresponsible use of Alberta's fresh water?

Dr. Taylor: Well, in the first place, Mr. Speaker, you could say it wasn't an irresponsible use. It's less than 1 per cent of the minimum monthly flow of the river.

As we move forward, we have very clearly an appropriate public appeal process. I believe we're the only province in the country where a director of the Department of Environment can make a decision and then that can be appealed through a semijudicial process called the Environmental Appeal Board. That appeal hearing is happening right now in Red Deer. It will go through the full hearing, the full public process. There will be interveners on both sides, and once that process is complete, then a final decision will be made.

Ms Carlson: Three hundred thousand cubic metres will support a small town for a year.

Given that central Alberta is growing rapidly and that Albertans are facing a water scarcity crisis, why would this ministry jeopardize the water needs of these communities?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again, nobody's jeopardizing the water needs of any community.

It points out another issue that we have happening at the same time. It's a committee that is made up of the energy industry; it's made up of environmental NGOs, the agriculture industry, the AAMD and C, the AUMA. I have asked them to come forward with a position paper on the water that is removed from the hydrological cycle. It's not just oil and gas industries. In fact, the oil and gas industry does a very good job on the whole of managing the water. I've asked for this committee – it's a consensus-based committee – to come forward with recommendations on what we should do: what should our policy be on businesses that remove water from the hydrological cycle? I expect to hear from that committee by the end of March.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, when will this ministry show its commitment to water conservation and focus on approving projects that use alternatives to fresh water for injection and just say no to allowing that to happen in this province forever? When will you do it?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're already moving very rapidly on water conservation issues. There's no doubt about that. As I've said, we have this industry/NGO/government committee meeting to take a look at this whole issue of water that is removed from the hydrological cycle, and it will report to me. I'm expecting their preliminary report by the end of March, and from there we will move forward with the plan.

Alberta Blue Cross

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, last week the chair of the Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee admitted that she went against the advice of her own committee when she recommended that Blue Cross lose its tax-exempt status. She also admitted that this decision was made after she was lobbied by private health insurers. Those revelations mean taxpayers' dollars and time were wasted on a review process that served the interests of private health corporations and not the interests of Albertans. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: will the minister admit that there are no controls to ensure that lobbying by powerful health care corporations is not unduly influencing the process of health reform?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member that the answer to that question is: no, there is not any such undue influence. It's all a matter of representing the interests of Albertans as a whole. One might call it lobbying, but you might also call it listening to Albertans, and that is what this government does. It's important for us to develop policy in a manner where we canvass the opinions of Albertans throughout this province. Just because it's an opinion that may not be in accord with the hon. member who has raised this question doesn't mean that it isn't an important opinion to listen to, and we do that.

1:50

Dr. Taft: Can the minister explain how forcing a payment in lieu of taxes on Blue Cross serves the interest of Albertans when his own committee recommended against it?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we don't pick winners and losers. In this particular case, it's most appropriate that there be a level playing field for the provision of private insurance services. In this case, where Blue Cross provides insurance to private clients, it's most appropriate that the playing field be level.

Dr. Taft: Will the minister admit that this is going to increase the cost of Blue Cross services to small businesses, who are the main subscribers to these kinds of services?

Mr. Mar: There will be a marginal cost, Mr. Speaker, but the marginal cost is a relatively small amount. The fact of the matter is that the advantage that they had was a very, very marginal one.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like a 19th century snake oil salesman, the Premier is headed to Vancouver to sell false and discredited cures for what ails Canada's health care system. Four weeks ago the health minister ruled out these snake oil remedies because they simply shift costs while doing nothing to improve the health care system. Now the health minister is falling in line behind his Premier. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What evidence does the minister have that Albertans support the Premier's agenda of delisting user fees and withdrawing from the Canada Health Act, and will he table any such evidence, if it exists, in this Assembly?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we have listened carefully to this hon. member and other opposition members, and they seem to be of the view that the issue of health care is that there is not an issue with

respect to sustainability. The allegation made by this hon. member is that, in fact, this crisis is manufactured by the government. Well, if that's the case, then we've managed to persuade every single Premier of every other province of the same crisis.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that if one looks at the Canadian Institute for Health Information reports – and I know that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has done so – what you'll find in the report National Health Expenditures Trend is that Alberta's health care spending grew 8 and a half per cent every year on average since 1994-95. Even after adjusting for matters of growth and population, the spending still increased at 6.7 per cent.

This is the reason why, Mr. Speaker, the Premiers of Canada are gathering today, as we speak, to discuss issues of sustainability of health care. What we are advocating for is that we need some flexibility on the part of the federal government in its interpretation of the Canada Health Act to ensure that we can have meaningful reform within that act.

Mr. Speaker, I'll say this: of the 14 governments across Canada, the only one that doesn't get it is the federal government. The reason why they don't get it is that they're of the view that sustainability is simply about putting more money into the system. That's not the case. We need more flexibility, and we are a long ways from the 50-50 cost-sharing arrangement that was in place at the time that our current Canada Health Act came in.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister's answer is nothing more than disinformation, let me ask him this question now. Why is the government using doomsday scenarios to scare Albertans into accepting user fees while ignoring Nova Scotia Premier Hamm's call for the Romanow report to be implemented as the best blueprint for strengthening and modernizing medicare?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the reason why we'll consider all of these options is because, unlike the hon. leader of the third party, we're not ideologues.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the minister: why won't the minister admit that his rhetoric about patient participation in funding health care is code for user fees and delisting of health services, which won't save money but only gouge Albertans?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I've not travelled to a great number of places in the world, but one finds a great deal of information about health care systems from around the world within the comforts of one's own office. I can tell you in front of our honourable guests from Germany that I've looked at their system. I've looked at the French system. I've looked at the Swedish system. I've looked at the system of health care in the United Kingdom. I've looked at what's done in New Zealand. There are many countries in the world that have the same traditions of social democracy that Canada has, and they have long traditions of values of sharing and caring similar to Canadians. I don't hear them clamouring for a Canadian health care system.

We do have a good system, but, Mr. Speaker, again, the core issue is one of sustainability, and our government's mission in this area is to ensure that the health care system remains in place for the future of our children and our grandchildren. Now, if we want our health care system to go over 50 per cent of provincial government

revenues – it's gone from 1993, 24 per cent; this year, about 36 per cent – we can do that. But we need to ask Albertans: is that the choice that Albertans want to make? On the assumption that the answer is no, we need to look at all the options, put them on the table before Albertans, and say: here are the possibilities. But we know with certainty that our system will collapse in its current course of expenditures.

Health Care Premiums

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I've received a number of calls recently from constituents saying that they're hearing that there may be an increase coming in health care premiums. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness: is the government planning to increase health care premiums?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there are no plans at this time to increase health care premiums in the province of Alberta, although I do want to put this in perspective. Right now our health care system costs in the magnitude of \$7.35 billion. In order to support that system, health care premiums have been a part of it, and this year approximately \$913 million will be collected from health care premiums.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can I assure my constituents or give the government's assurance that health care premiums are not going to be increased?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously I cannot assure the hon. member that health care premiums will stay the same forever, but I should reiterate that there are no current plans to increase health care premiums.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, there are no plans to remove premium subsidies for low-income Albertans, and I can share with the House that there are more than 250,000 nonseniors who currently have a subsidy for their health care premiums, that there are 200,000 seniors that receive partial subsidy assistance, and almost 180,000 seniors in the province that are fully subsidized and shielded from health care premiums.

Mr. Ouellette: My understanding of that is that the answer was no.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, again, can I assure the hon. member that health care premiums will remain the same into the long future? No, I can't make that assurance. Again, for the time being, there are no plans to increase premiums, nor are there any plans to remove any of the premium subsidies that benefit lower income Albertans.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Redwater.

Long-term Care Facilities

(continued)

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is responsible for caring for our frail and elderly seniors, and they are not adequately managing or funding long-term care. In regard to Calgary's Bethany Care Centre the Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee was "extremely concerned about the significant impact recent staffing and budgetary reductions are having on staff's morale . . . [and] the residents themselves." My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why has this government allowed

so many recreational programs to be cut that residents are “just sitting around with nothing to do”?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I first of all want to point out that we have come a long way from where the Canada Health Act has been. The Canada Health Act was about a funding arrangement from the federal government to provinces and territories relating to the services of physicians and hospitals, and one of the things that we go above and beyond the requirements for under the Canada Health Act is in the area of long-term care.

Now, we spend a great deal of money on long-term care, and when the hon. member talks about the role of the Health Facilities Review Committee, they are responsible for ensuring that there is quality care and that accommodation standards are maintained in health facilities. As I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, the committee does make regular unannounced visits to facilities throughout the province. Again, it is incumbent upon the individual facilities and the regional health authorities to look at the complaints that may be filed against such a facility.

We are working presently with regional health authorities and operators to strengthen and personalize the services in nursing homes, Mr. Speaker, and I think this is a very important point. There are 14,000, approximately, residents in long-term care. We should not be doing anything to unfairly besmirch the reputation of the almost 8,000 people who are nurses and care providers in our nursing homes that provide the care in those places where these seniors live. We are working on improving a number of programs.

As an example, we've developed a province-wide Alzheimer's training program that's being implemented so that caregivers can better understand the needs of their particular residents that they are responsible for looking after. We are developing quality indicators for monitoring and reporting of care. I know that the Minister of Seniors has worked hard on improving food services, giving wider choices of menus, eliminating service charges for things like incontinence products, and we are conducting a review of the contracts that regional health authorities have with long-term care operators and the number of hours of care that residents receive.

Mr. Speaker, these are all appropriate responses to some of the legitimate issues that have been raised in long-term care, predominately in a very constructive way by the Alberta long-term care operators.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Health and Wellness: how does the minister expect the Health Facilities Review Committee to be responsible for ensuring that all of these good things happen when that committee does not have the power to enforce corrective action based on what it's finding? Where does the buck stop?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated to the hon. member in her opening question, the facility operators and the regional health authorities that have contracts with such operators are the ones that are responsible for the maintenance of these standards, and I cannot think of a single example where a report by the Health Facilities Review Committee has been ignored by the operators or by the regional health authorities. A copy of the report provided by the committee is provided to both the CEO of the regional health authority and the operators of the facilities and the Minister of Health and Wellness, and if there is an unsatisfactory resolution of the issue as raised by a complainant, then there is an appeal process by which it can be looked at again.

But, again, overall these 14,000 residents that are in our long-term care centres generally enjoy a very good standard of care, a safe standard of care, and it is important that they be dealt with in a manner that ensures the best quality of life that we can confer upon them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My final question, then, is to the Minister of Community Development. Can the minister put the minds of Alberta seniors at ease today by promising that penalties for failure to comply will soon be included in the Protection for Persons in Care Act?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, the PPIC Act that is being referenced is under review at the moment. We had a full public consultation on that, and we will be coming forward with a government response very, very shortly.

I would tell the hon. member, as she probably may or may not be aware, that the act already provides for very stiff penalties for failure to report abuse or alleged abuse in those particular institutions, and we're looking at strengthening the preventative side so that we don't have to get to where those allegations are going. People need to know that this is an educative piece of legislation and it is going to be focused much more on the prevention and care, and we will look after that in due course, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's not easy having a loved one in a nursing home. That is why it is important to know that the family member or friend is getting the best possible care. I know that there have been some questions asked here today, and I'm going to ask a very similar question to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Will the minister use his authority to review Alberta's nursing homes to ensure that the health and safety of the residents are protected?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I indicated to this House earlier, we are looking at the contracts presently that establish the standards that will be applied between regional health authorities and long-term care operators. Included in that review will be a review of the number of hours of care per resident per day. I think that this is a legitimate issue that has been raised by the long-term care operators in a very, very constructive way, and they raise it in the context of it being about having to accommodate the fact that the acuity level of people in our long-term care centres has increased. So the resources would have been appropriate but for the fact that the acuity level of individuals that are residents in our long-term care centres has increased because of increased longevity.

With respect to individual complaints, Mr. Speaker, I've outlined the responsibilities of the long-term care operators and the regional health authorities to answer to questions and complaints that individuals may have, and we want to make sure that those parties fulfill their obligations under the Nursing Homes Act.

Mr. Speaker, I share the hon. member's concerns about making sure that we have seniors that are cared for with dignity and with respect. That is a primary goal of this overall program for our seniors in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question, my only

supplemental, is to the same minister. What action is the minister taking to improve care in Alberta long-term care facilities? I know that he's mentioned increasing the number of hours. Is there going to be funding available for that?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, after such a review of issues like the number of hours of care per resident per day, obviously it follows that there would need to be a corresponding increase if it's determined that, in fact, the number of hours legitimately needs to be increased. We are again looking at a number of different issues, and I've outlined some that the Minister of Seniors has looked into with respect to establishing standards for provision of better food and elimination of charges for things like wander guards and incontinence products. I've indicated our willingness to move forward on training programs. The example that I gave was about Alzheimer's. I've indicated that we are developing quality indicators for monitoring and reporting of care.

2:10

We are taking very important steps, I think, Mr. Speaker, in learning from individual circumstances that may arise. For example, in the case of the unfortunate circumstances involving Jennie Nelson, the regional health authority is establishing appropriate care protocols for bathing individuals within long-term care centres throughout the Capital health region. I think it would be most appropriate to say that those learnings should be benefiting seniors throughout the province, not just those within the Capital Health region. We continue to encourage that kind of sharing of information.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Access to Information

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Government Services: why is it government policy to exclude the Premier's Executive Council from the access to information law in this province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If anyone should know about the provisions within the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, it should be the hon. member opposite because he sat on the committee that laboured over this for nine months and then signed off on that particular document. Then when amendments were brought into this House about the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, yes, maybe he entered into debate and didn't agree with some of those, but it was actually debated and passed in this House.

Mr. Speaker, just to make it very, very clear: ministers' expense records are not exempt under FOIP. Let's just make it clear here today that ministers' expenses are not exempt under FOIP, and neither are MLAs'. They are not exempt under FOIP when they do government business. The hon. member opposite knows that. The hon. member opposite has also put in a number of requests asking for great volumes – great volumes – of information that is being processed by information officers in every single, solitary department. The process is set up by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, and we're abiding by that.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: when will the access to information law be changed so that the Premier

and the Premier's staff are no longer exempt from the access to information law?

Mr. Coutts: Previously to the actual law being passed in this House last spring, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act in this province was to be reviewed every three years. The committee that was looking after proposed changes to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act suggested that it be reviewed after five years. That's when he'll have his time to do it, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, just to give the hon. member opposite some comfort level, because I do know that he is the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, I would refer him to the Auditor General's report insofar as expenses go. If he refers to page 289 of the current Auditor General's report, he does say in his conclusions, "We did not find any evidence of inappropriate MLA expense reimbursement and we concluded that the systems in place would generally prevent inappropriate payments." I believe that the Auditor General does a thorough examination of those expenses for MLAs for all members within this Legislature.

One other thing that I found, Mr. Speaker, with the number of recommendations that clearly come from the Auditor General to our departments on an annual basis – at the very beginning of his introduction to this year's report he talks about progress with past recommendations, and he says: "We [clearly] ask ourselves – Is the government listening? Is the government making satisfactory progress in implementing our recommendations? The answer today is – Yes." So I hope that puts your mind to rest.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that the Premier stated that the Official Opposition put the government to great expense by submitting an access to information request regarding Executive Council expenses, can the minister tell us in this Assembly how much that request cost the government?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, the total number of requests that have come in under freedom of information and protection of privacy is about 2,457 in the year 2002-2003. Six per cent of those general inquiries come from elected officials. Six per cent. But that does not give any indication as to the volumes of information that were required or asked for in that 6 per cent. The average cost of every single, solitary FOIP request comes to \$1,629, and the total fee for a FOIP request that has actually come into government is \$44.05 per request. So actually the total direct cost of administering FOIP for 149 employees of this government is \$7,947,000. Seven million, nine hundred and forty-seven thousand dollars.

Now, Mr. Speaker, they're saying that there's not enough information. We have a Privacy Commissioner in this province. That Privacy Commissioner administers provisions of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, and if they're not happy with the information that's going, they can appeal to the Privacy Commissioner. That's part of the act.

Mrs. Nelson: Again, Mr. Speaker, our Legislature has a process in place, which I hope will be helpful to the hon. member opposite. If he has questions with regard to specific information of reports, he can place a written question on the Order Paper, and it can be dealt with on a weekly basis within this House. That data can be provided to him.

I noticed last week, Mr. Speaker, that they were asking the Premier certain questions, and he asked them to send over the details of the information that they required. We have yet to receive that information.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Emergency Room Wait Times

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the minister of health. Emergency room physicians have made the case that some patients are waiting far too long in emergency rooms. The problem is particularly acute in the Capital and the Calgary regions. Unduly long waits result in undue pressure on both patients and staff, particularly nurses. My question: why are some individuals required to wait unduly long in emergency rooms to be attended?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to make one thing very clear at the outset in answering the hon. member's question, and that is this: no one who requires emergency medical attention will wait. Those individuals will be treated immediately.

Now, there are some reported wait times, Mr. Speaker, of up to 24 hours in emergency rooms, but that only occurs when an acute care bed is not available for a patient. This 24-hour time period is not the length of time that a patient waits to be seen by a health care provider in an emergency room; it is the time that they might be waiting for the availability of an acute care bed. I should add, Mr. Speaker, that individuals waiting in emergency rooms for an acute care bed will continue to receive the kind of high level care that they require, recognizing their condition.

We recognize the pressures on emergency rooms. Seasonal viruses, as an example, will place a great deal of stress on our capacity in emergency rooms. Mr. Speaker, population growth in the province, of course, is also adding some extra demands on our emergency rooms and our in-patient beds that may be available to service such individuals.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you. I would ask the minister: what is being done to increase the number of acute care beds in emergency rooms throughout the province?

2:20

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the regional health authorities, again, as the hon. member pointed out, particularly in Calgary and Edmonton, are feeling the pinch perhaps harder than others, and they are up to this challenge. They're working hard at trying to decrease wait times. As an example, the Capital health authority has added an additional 80 temporary beds to cover winter demands, again at a time when the flu or other seasonal viruses might be causing a greater demand on the system. In Calgary the health region has opened more beds and is using technology that is helping track patients according to priority, and I can say that with some success they've been able to reduce their wait times somewhat dramatically as a result of doing that.

Also, Mr. Speaker, there are real issues with respect to the number of people who are in our acute care facilities whose needs, in fact, amount to long-term care. Calgary, for example, will be opening 120 new long-term care beds in north Calgary, that will allow those seniors to move from acute care facilities into more appropriate health care facilities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So what is being done to open up downstream beds to relieve pressure on acute care beds in emergency? Do we have new downstream beds coming on stream?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we continue to monitor that particular element with our regional health authorities. We are also working hard at encouraging Albertans to use Health Link Alberta. Health Link is giving Albertans 24-hours-a-day access to doctor-approved nurse-delivered advice. That is helping to alleviate some of the concerns that individuals might have about whether or not it's appropriate to go to emergency. Of course, if it is appropriate, such a nurse on Health Link will not hesitate to advise you to go. This service has provided a tremendous resource as a primary care initiative that is answering the calls of some 800,000 inquiries that are being made this year. Again, Mr. Speaker, it is expanding Albertans' access to primary care.

Also, Mr. Speaker, just having recently in January launched 10 new primary care projects – for example, the Alexandra seniors community care centre is providing primary care for seniors with complex social and health needs who are living in the inner city – we are moving on a number of different areas, Mr. Speaker, in primary care that are helping to alleviate the pressures that may be attendant upon our acute care facilities.

Highway Maintenance

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, this government's own 2003-2006 transportation business plan proves that they are allowing a decline in the quality of our highways in Alberta. Its own numbers indicate that overall quality of highways will deteriorate through to 2006. To the Minister of Transportation: why is this ministry allowing the physical condition and usability of our highways to deteriorate?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, along with building many new highways in the province of Alberta and, of course, four-laning a good stretch of those, we're also responsible for maintaining those that have been previously paved. If we go back in history about 20 years ago, a fair number of our highways were paved at that time, and the life expectancy is coming to an end for those highways. But I'm sure the hon. member will see us progress on that one particular measurement and will see some improvement next year.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister: why are only 78 per cent of our highways expected to meet basic required standards by 2006?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the measurement we use in determining the state of our highways is how comfortable you are riding on the road, how smooth your ride is. Although it's a matter of opinion how smooth this road is compared to another one, we've applied that same test measurement long enough now that we seem to have a trend, and people are saying: well, I don't know how much rougher this road is, but I've noticed that the maintenance, the smoothness, of this road isn't as good as it was once.

Sometimes, Mr. Speaker, the road is not as smooth as one would appreciate; however, engineering testing still determines that it's not appropriate to repave that road at that particular time. As I mentioned before, that is one of the measurements that we use in our department. We recognize that we have to move in that particular area, and we will.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Infrastructure: does the government owe this overall decline in the quality of our highways to the increasing use of P3s to fund highway maintenance?

Mr. Stelmach: He asked the Minister of Infrastructure to speak about provincial highways.

Mr. Speaker, the only public/private partnership that we are working on at the moment is the southeast leg of the Edmonton ring road. We have just completed the request for qualifications. We expected about four companies to put forward their qualifications, and in fact we have received six. We are now evaluating those six proposals. We'll boil that down to three, and the next stage is a request for proposals. We'd like to see that completed early in spring and construction to start in fall.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Gaming Revenue

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, a couple of weeks ago an in-depth 200-page study on VLT gambling was released. I will table its conclusions at the appropriate time. The study's findings are very disturbing. It found that while only one in eight Albertans plays VLTs, of those that do 22 per cent are problem gamblers, and if you include those moderately addicted to VLTs, the number is 39 per cent. My questions are to the Minister of Gaming. Given the study's disturbing conclusion that a high proportion of gambling revenue comes from a relatively small number of people who have a gambling problem or who are at risk, will the minister agree to take definitive steps to reduce its dependence on this source of revenue?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was about two weeks ago that a report was published on the Internet relative to VLTs, and, yes, it has some 200 pages. A large portion of the report deals with the history of VLTs in the province. A previous report was published in 2001 or 2002, namely the Canadian Problem Gambling Index report. That particular report related to an index that was established to determine the prevalence of problem gambling throughout the country, and in fact every jurisdiction in Canada that has gambling, to my knowledge, has had that problem gambling index applied to it.

The information in Alberta as of that time was that, generally, 1.3 per cent of the population were problem gamblers. In the VLT category some 5 to 6 per cent were problem gamblers. That particular report, Mr. Speaker, remains the best evidence that we have relative to the issue of problem gambling here today.

The report in question that the hon. member referred to has statistical limitations. Those limitations were pointed out at page 60 of the report by the authors. The reality, Mr. Speaker, is that as a result of those limitations, the information surrounding the 206 people who were interviewed for the new portion of the report is not applicable to the general public nor to the general gambling public.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since electronic gaming is clearly the most addictive form of gambling, will the government agree to cap the total number of electronic gaming machines, whether they be VLTs in bars or slot machines in casinos?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you are aware, we spend a lot of time canvassing Albertans with respect to the issue of gaming in this province. In 1998 there were plebiscites in some 37 communities, seven of which requested that the VLTs be removed, and in fact they now have been.

2:30

In the years 2000-2001 the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission canvassed Albertans and did a lot of other work relative to the issue of a gaming policy for casinos, VLTs, and other areas of gaming in the province for the next five years. As a result of that particular report, which was accepted by this government and which received comments like, "Wise new gaming rules" from the editorial boards of this province, we have maintained our cap on VLTs at 6,000, which was established in 1995. With respect to slot machines, which are found only in the casino environment, we have said that they will expand according to the wishes of municipalities. If there is an application for a new casino, then the community in which that is located will have an opportunity through its council to say whether they would like to see something like that go ahead or not or to be mum on the subject.

So, in short, we do have a policy capping VLTs at 6,000, and we have a very reasonable approach with respect to the potential expansion of slot machines.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I don't share the minister's definition of "reasonable."

Given that the report's finding is that Alberta is more heavily addicted to gambling revenue than any other province, will the minister admit that it is, in fact, this government that has the real problem?

Mr. Stevens: In 1998, Mr. Speaker, there was a gaming summit in Medicine Hat, and at that time Albertans from all over the province came together to talk about gambling and in particular to talk about what ought to be done with gambling proceeds. I think it's fair to say that Alberta has a very unique model – we call it the charitable gaming model – where our charities annually benefit to the tune of \$350 million as a result of the way we handle that. But what's really important is that the people at that particular summit indicated that they wanted the money to go into the Alberta lottery fund, which it was doing and where it continues to be handled since that date. Also, it's important to note that we were directed to put that money into community and public initiatives, and that is what we have done since that time.

Mr. Speaker, you're aware that every year as part of the budget process, we have lottery estimates, where on a line-by-line basis the proceeds of the lottery funds are put before this Assembly, debated, and voted on.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven hon. members who want to participate in Recognitions today, but in the interim might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was just brought to my

attention that a couple of constituents from the Peace River area have joined us in the Assembly. I would like to recognize that Jim and Judy Ashton, who are not only constituents but long-time very good friends of mine, are seated in the members' gallery. I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

University of Alberta

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the mantras of the University of Alberta is that they are constantly and actively engaged in recruiting and retaining the best and the brightest of researchers. Last week the University of Alberta was ranked number 1 in an international survey of postdoctoral students which was conducted by the British journal *The Scientist*. The survey asked more than 3,500 postdoctoral students from around the western world to rate their institutions.

When active participants who are immersed in a program being evaluated themselves credit the U of A as being the best place to work, I believe the U of A has every right to add this feather to its already colourful and distinguished academic hat. Researchers from around the world specifically recognized the fact that the University of Alberta supports and facilitates quality research and the proper environment in which new scientific and academic ground is broken.

Today I welcome the opportunity to once again recognize the University of Alberta, which has rightly received true recognition from its own postdoctoral students for their profound pursuit of whatsoever things are true.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Black History Month

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and recognize Black History Month in Alberta, which has been filled with concerts, seminars, a youth festival, and will feature an awards banquet on February 28. This tribute began in 1926 and was expanded in 1976 to a full month of celebration.

Earlier this month, Mr. Speaker, it was my great pleasure along with the Minister of Community Development to visit the new Marcus Garvey Centre for Unity, which is located in the Edmonton-Calder constituency, and to present them with a government of Alberta CFEP cheque toward this building project. The black community has contributed very significantly to Alberta and to Canada, and the Garvey centre will help facilitate even more achievements in the future.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to express my congratulations and I'm sure the congratulations of all members of this House to our black organizations and particularly the Jamaican Association of Northern Alberta and the National Black Coalition of Canada, Alberta chapter, for their great work in this regard. I am very pleased that the new headquarters is in the Edmonton-Calder constituency.

CNIB Vision Award

Mr. Vandermeer: Mr. Speaker, I rise to recognize the Canadian National Institute for the Blind in Alberta regarding their inaugural Vision award program, that occurred last week at the Winspear Centre. This spectacular event, which I attended with many of my colleagues, showcased the important work that the CNIB provides to 9,000 Albertans and their families at no cost.

Since 1918 the CNIB has charted many achievements for vision-impaired individuals such as the national digital library of talking books and assistive technology such as the Merlin computer, which enlarges images and actually talks to its users.

The Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, introduced last week in this House by the Minister of Community Development, is one example of our government's commitment to those individuals.

Thank you to the CNIB, its partners and sponsors, and congratulations to our Premier on being the first recipient of the CNIB's new Vision award.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Canada and Alberta Business Friendly Jurisdictions

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week a survey was released by KPMG that once again confirmed Canada's status as one of the most business friendly jurisdictions in the world. When the survey was released, it was revealed that out of 11 major industrialized countries throughout the globe, Canada offers the lowest business-related costs to 17 major industry sectors and maintains the lowest research and development tax dollars. The survey noted that Canada and Alberta enjoy significant labour cost advantages over other major economic powers like the United States.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, I'm particularly pleased to say that of all the cities in western Canada and the United States, Edmonton offers the business sector the lowest start-up in operation costs, which is allowing the city not only to attract new businesses every day but to retain the existing ones as well.

At this point I would like to congratulate the governments of Canada and Alberta and thank all Canadians and Albertans for their hard work and commitment to making our country and province a better place.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Phil Rauch

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me: these were the actions of Phil Rauch, a passionate believer in social justice, who died on Tuesday, February 17, 2004, at the age of 38 due to heart complications.

Phil worked tirelessly to address the needs of the most marginalized in our society. He took every opportunity to speak for those who could not speak for themselves. Phil is remembered for his outstanding commitment to the nonprofit sector. He was the founding member of the central Alberta addictions consortium and of the Safe Harbour Society. He was the vice-chair of the Residential Society of Red Deer, chair of the Helping Hands mobile outreach, and a member of the John Howard Society.

But more than this, Phil was a light in the darkness. Phil focused his energy on helping those with HIV, hepatitis, and addictions. He worked with the aboriginal community, prisoners, injection drug users, the gay and lesbian community, and the homeless. Phil gave strength and hope to those who needed help.

Phil, you changed the world. We thank you, and we will miss you. Your wife, Val Joa, and your two daughters, Alex and Kate, will always know that you were a true hero who worked tirelessly to address the needs of the less fortunate in our society.

2:40

U of A Golden Bears Hockey Team

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, this Saturday a remarkable record was set when the University of Alberta Golden Bears hockey team completed their 28-game season undefeated. No hockey team in the history of the Canada West Conference has ever done this. The Bears also set a conference record for the fewest goals in a 28-game schedule, letting in only 48 goals in an entire season.

As anyone knows who has seen the many banners hanging in Clare Drake Arena, the Golden Bears hockey team has an astonishing tradition of winning. Since the 1933-34 season the Golden Bears have won their divisional title an amazing 42 times and this year will be going for a record 11th national championship. Their current head coach, Rob Daum, has led the Bears to the playoffs eight straight seasons, and they have qualified for the CIS national championships every year since 1996-97.

Mr. Speaker, this year's undefeated season puts the Golden Bears hockey team in the rarified atmosphere of great athletic achievements. Not only have they been the top-ranked team in the country all season; they're also one of the finest university hockey teams in North America.

I invite all MLAs to join me in congratulating the achievements of this wonderful team.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Edmonton Firefighters

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When Edmonton calls on its firefighters and other emergency personnel, the city knows it can count on them to respond professionally and without hesitation even if that call comes in the middle of the night with temperatures of about minus 50 degrees Celsius with the wind chill and is the third major fire in less than a week, as happened in this city near the end of January. Firefighters not only fought the fires; they also battled frostbite, freezing equipment, and dangerous conditions.

Edmontonians are grateful that they and their families can sleep easy knowing that brave men and women are watching out for their safety. These heroes put their own safety second to the safety of the community they serve. Their dedication to protecting Edmontonians was in evidence yet again at the recent blazes in freezing temperatures.

While these emergency workers don't look for recognition, I think it's fitting that we recognize their bravery and dedication this afternoon.

Thank you.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of a congratulatory letter on behalf of the government of Alberta to Mr. Pierre Lueders, who this weekend at the 2004 world bobsleigh championship in Königssee, Germany, won the gold medal for two-man bobsleigh. Congratulations to Pierre and to his teammate, Giulio Zardo. We're very proud of this duo.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: It should also be noted that Mr. Lueders is the brother-in-law of the hon. Minister of Economic Development.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I have two documents to table today. The first document is a government of Alberta news release

dated February 12, 2004, which claims to confirm that responsible gaming efforts are on the right track.

The second tabling is a report entitled VLT Gambling in Alberta: a Preliminary Analysis, which shows that the government has failed to prevent problem gambling and continues to profit at the expense of VLT users who are either moderately or severely addicted gamblers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this afternoon. The first tabling is a letter that I wrote as chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee to the hon. Premier, president of Executive Council. This letter is dated January 27, 2003, inviting the Premier to meet with the Public Accounts Committee in the spring sitting of the Third Session of the 25th Legislature.

The second tabling is also a letter that I wrote as chairman of the Public Accounts Committee to all hon. members of Executive Council. This letter is dated January 29, 2003, and I was seeking opinions on the committee's operations and how we can alleviate some of the scheduling issues.

The third tabling I have this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, is a poll conducted by CFCN last week in Calgary. Of 1,487 votes cast, 94 per cent were in favour of making all government travel expenses available to the public.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings this afternoon. The first batch are from Kim Condon, Susan Taniguchi, Suzanne MacDonald, Anita Ashmore, Leslie Olson, and Bev Robinson. They are all very concerned about how the negotiations went for nurses. Their bottom-line statement is they don't want legislation or arbitration; they want the government to negotiate in good faith. So that's a sampling of the letters that I've been getting from nurses and supporters of nurses from across this province.

Now, the second tabling is from Lori Nash with concerns about car insurance payments and the way these are regulated.

Mr. MacDonald: No.

Ms Carlson: Yes. That's who it's from, and that's what she's concerned about.

The third is from Andrea Robbins, who is also very concerned about insurance rates and, in fact, has a solution for the government that they may wish to take a look at.

The last tabling for today is from Annette Le Faive, who is very concerned about the proposed Evan-Thomas provincial park recreation area draft management plan and wants changes made to that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been served on Thursday, February 19, I will now move that written questions that appear on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would also note that proper notice having been given on Thursday, February 19, I will now move that motions for returns on today's Order Paper also stand and retain their places.

Thank you.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, please proceed with introductions if you so wish.

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you for allowing reversion to Introduction of Guests. Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly in both galleries, and perhaps even some time later in your own, some members from the Canadian Paraplegic Association. We have Marlin Styner with his wife, Diane Gramlich, Betty MacIsaac, Larry Pempeit, Braden Hirsch, Margaret Conquest, who's a member of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, Laurie Szymanski, Emily Lawson, Carmen Binder. Also accompanying them is Godfrey Huybregts, who has assisted us with some of these projects. Previously, as well, from the CNIB we had Ellie Shuster and Bill McKeown and Diane Bergeron, who were also introduced. If those folks would rise and be acknowledged or wave their hand and be acknowledged that way, would the members present please welcome them.

head: **2:50 Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 201
Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access)
Amendment Act, 2004**

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to move second reading of Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004.

In this time available I would like to talk about why Bill 201 is necessary based upon concerns expressed by people with disabilities and their families. I'd also like to identify the objectives of the bill and how those objectives are to be achieved, but first, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to offer an example which will illustrate the need for experts in barrier-free design and access to be part of the Safety Codes Council. It can also be an example to illustrate the changing technologies and the need for experts who keep abreast of these changes to have input into future code revisions.

Mr. Speaker, like many people in this Assembly I've walked in and out of the east ground-level doors hundreds or probably thousands of times in the last seven years, since I was first elected. That's where the wheelchair ramp is located and where persons in wheelchairs access this building. Like most people walking through those doors, sometimes I take the stairs and sometimes I just go down the ramp, but I never thought anything about the design or layout of that little ramp.

Well, about a month ago I was down at those east entrance doors with a person in a chair waiting for his DATS bus. I went outside to check for the bus, and he went to the top of the ramp to wait for me, and since it was minus 30 and the bus wasn't there, I returned and

had occasion to observe this fellow at the top of the ramp. He seemed to be having a lot of difficulty, and I just dismissed his difficulty as some manoeuvring problems and power wheelchair idiosyncracies. Last week another person in a wheelchair made some comment about having difficulty negotiating the top of the ramp because the ramp wasn't built square with the door. Suddenly I realized why that other fellow was having those difficulties. In my present state, capable of walking on the ramp or taking the stairs, whichever I felt like, I was unaware of those challenges.

When the ramp was first constructed 20 years ago, no one used the kinds of power chairs that are used today. That's why we need to have experts in barrier-free design offering help to design those future safety code requirements for new construction and major renovations. Things change and the experts keep abreast of those changes.

Mr. Speaker, let's look at the background to Bill 201 and why this bill is necessary. Alberta has led the way in building safety and accessibility provisions that enable persons with disabilities to achieve independence by both contributing and sharing in the opportunities and responsibilities of our society. The number of persons with disabilities in Alberta, which for the purposes of this bill includes citizens having physical and sensory impairments, is increasing. The aging population trends that are foreseen to put pressure on public pensions, health care, et cetera, will also produce a significant increase in the number of persons with physical and sensory impairments as a result of aging.

In the not too distant future many of us will be using walkers, canes, or other mobility assists and may be wondering why after contributing and being active in our communities some places are suddenly inaccessible to us. Inaccessibility often prevents people with disabilities from contributing and fully participating in their communities.

While the codes and standards of the Safety Codes Act provide for the technical requirements of accessibility provisions, participation by the disabled community and experts in barrier-free design and access in the development of those standards and of the social policies around the application of those standards can be improved. There are provisions in the Alberta building code that allow for the relaxation of accessibility provisions of the code for buildings or installations. The process for approval of those relaxations is in need of improvement by including the opportunity for the input of a growing disabled community.

We've heard much from persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities have talked about the advancing age of the population of the province and the corresponding need for more accessible and barrier-free spaces. Legislation that will encourage barrier-free design and construction will ensure that this increasing need will be met.

Persons with disabilities often feel that there is no forum where their voice can be added to the dialogue about matters of design and construction while the building industry and other stakeholders have ample opportunity to make comment on such issues. The Alberta disability strategy developed by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, after extensive consultation, states in recommendation 3 that "a commitment should be made to embrace the principles of universal accessibility."

What does this bill do? This bill does not, first of all, change any of the current technical requirements or any of the safety codes currently in force. What the bill does do is amend the Safety Codes Act to achieve four objectives: first, to establish the provision of barrier-free design and access standards as a recognized and meaningful purpose of the Safety Codes Act; secondly, to provide the proper voice in the appropriate forum for persons with disabili-

ties to continue to effect change in the built environment; third, to establish fair and considered standards for the design and construction of things that are regulated by the act and are in respect of barrier-free design and access; and fourthly, to allow for the fair and reasonable application of barrier-free design and access construction requirements.

Well, how does the bill achieve these four objectives? First of all, the bill amends the Safety Codes Act to state that the act is, in 2(2.1), "to be applied in a manner consistent with the principles of barrier-free design and access." This statement is similar to recommendation 3 of the Alberta disability strategy and addresses the requests of persons with disabilities for better access.

The amendment to section 4 also addresses requests for better access. In 4(2) "the Minister shall, in accordance with this Act, co-ordinate and encourage the principles of barrier-free design and access for any thing, process or activity to which this Act applies." By stating that the minister recognizes and promotes the principles of barrier-free design and access, under the responsibilities section the act recognizes the importance of barrier-free design and access as a central component while expanding potential application to all activities governed by this act and its regulations.

Third, the act is amended to provide the proper voice in the appropriate forum for persons with disabilities concerning barrier-free design and accessibility issues. The proper forum for dealing with the building code and the related barrier-free design and accessibility provisions is the Safety Codes Council, which is established by the act to advise the minister. Specifically, in section 16(3) after "buildings" adding "barrier-free building design" and amending section 16(4) by adding "labour and persons with disabilities" instead of just "labour." Amending section 18 to include the clause "may promote the principles of barrier-free design and access for any thing, process or activity to which this Act applies." Section (f) to include "or barrier-free design and access" after "safety." Also, in clause (h) adding "safety standards and barrier-free design and access" after "safety standards" and in clause (i) adding "barrier-free design and access information" after "safety information."

These proposed amendments underline and expand upon the importance of barrier-free access and design as stated in the minister's responsibilities by mandating representation from persons with disabilities and the Safety Codes Council and explicitly including the promotion and acceptance of barrier-free design and access in the council's duties.

Lastly, it will give a stronger voice to the community of persons with disabilities in the development of codes and standards for barrier-free design and accessibility and to allow greater participation by persons with disabilities in the application of codes and standards for barrier-free design and access.

In section 65 the amendments enable the minister to carry out his or her responsibility for the promotion of barrier-free design and provide the minister with the power to establish clear and consistent regulations dealing with barrier-free design and access provisions, including an exemption process.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, the amendments to the Safety Codes Act that comprise Bill 201 employ the existing enabling structure of this act to position Alberta's safety system for the future.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Speaker. I'll make some further comments at the conclusion.

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to speak to Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free

Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. I believe that from the standpoint of access for those with physical and sensory disabilities this bill represents movement in the absolute right direction and at somewhat minimal cost to all concerned. The bill asks for more representation of disabled Albertans on the Alberta Safety Codes Council so that any additions to old structures and any new structures be built in such a way that they are accessible to those who have physical and sensory disabilities and who, as examples, use wheelchairs to get around or white canes to guide them.

Mr. Speaker, this consideration does not represent a significant change in the way our laws currently look at the construction and future development of buildings. In the past we've considered buildings from a safety-first perspective, and we will continue to do this. I might add that the matter of access for the disabled is a safety-first consideration in my opinion. However, we have for some time also included consideration of the needs of disabled individuals. Section 3.8 of the Alberta building code addresses many of the concerns regarding barrier-free buildings as well as the exceptions to barrier-free requirements.

Some of those exceptions admittedly do include private homes, some apartment buildings, some group homes, shelters and halfway houses, industrial accommodations, and buildings not used on a daily basis. However, this bill asks that we take further appropriate action. It suggests that we take greater account of the need of those with mobility challenges when we design buildings, and it argues that the best way to do it is to change the safety codes of Alberta to include a representative for disabled people on Alberta's Safety Codes Council.

Mr. Speaker, my support for this bill is based upon my belief in and commitment to equity of opportunity to access buildings in Alberta.

Much work has already been done to allow this government to secure the rights provided for the disabled in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms reads as follows.

15(1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular . . . discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Section 15(2) reads:

Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Mr. Speaker, it is fairly clear to me that Bill 201 is one that speaks directly to section 15 of the Charter. It addresses the disadvantages that certain disabled people face when attempting to enter or move into buildings that are not set up in a manner which accommodates them. It is my view that when those with physical or sensory disadvantages face barriers to equality, the government does have a role to play in levelling the playing field. Providing access to publicly accessible buildings is one place where we can and should start.

One of the other reasons I support this bill is because it advocates a modest, noninterventionist mechanism for achieving its ends and represents a balance between the rights of disabled individuals and the responsibilities of others who must implement proposed changes. This bill does not propose massive government intervention into the lives of Albertans; it simply proposes that we have a voice of sound, logical reason that will provide barrier-free access for all Albertans regardless of our abilities or disabilities.

I would ask everyone in this Assembly to support this bill because

I believe it is a recognition of the dignity and the strengths that all Albertans in our unique fashion as individuals have a right to in accessing both public buildings and, indeed, those facilities that we all enjoy and in this cold climate in most circumstances need to have access to inside from out. So again I would urge everyone here in this Assembly to support it. It is based on sound principle. It's obvious that we should take action, and it is an appropriate manner in which to do so.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure for me to rise today and join in the debate on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. Also, I might add that it's a pleasure because that member has worked hard, I know, on the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and has spent a lot of time with that constituency.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank the Deputy House Leader and Minister of Community Development for the work that he has done recently with regard to amalgamating and having an office for improved access for people with disabilities as we as a government spend I believe it's \$1.7 billion a year on the disabled in 11 departments. This will bring a little more focus, and I know that the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan was instrumental in moving that forward as well.

With regard to Bill 201 I see equality legislation, and that is, after all, what we are dealing with. Equality for all citizens of Alberta, regardless of their abilities, is a fundamental right in this province, Mr. Speaker. The barrier that Alberta faces is that this equality does not always come easily for over half a million disabled individuals across this province. This number equates to every sixth Albertan who is affected by a disability and who, as a result, is sometimes denied full citizenship. These individuals have to face the reality of this inequality on a daily basis. What's worse is that they have to be reminded of their inequality every time they attempt to access a business, an office, or any type of public facility that does not provide the appropriate accessibility options.

Mr. Speaker, as Alberta prepares to enter its second century, I feel that Albertans need to be reminded that we live in a time and a place that allows every Albertan—I repeat: every Albertan—the possibility for full citizenship. Bill 201 is our chance to do just that. In Bill 201 we have the opportunity to set national standards that see citizens in Alberta enjoy a life that to them may seem less disabled.

Mr. Speaker, in December 2002 the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities released an Alberta disability strategy. The document provides a foundation for promoting full citizenship for those Albertans with disabilities. Before I continue discussing this strategy, I believe that it is important to define exactly what is meant by the term "full citizenship." The Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities defines the expression "full citizenship" as

being treated fairly and without discrimination by individuals, companies, organizations and governments. It means having adequate supports to live a life of safety, security and dignity. It means having the chance to pursue educational and employment opportunities. And it means having the opportunity, choice and ability to participate in all aspects of Alberta society.

Mr. Speaker, that is a thorough definition of what Bill 201 deals with. It is, after all, asking the government to provide proper voice in an appropriate forum for the disabled community and in doing so embrace the principles of universal accessibility set out by the Alberta disability strategy.

3:10

Implementing the Alberta disability strategy increases the likelihood that the idea of full citizenship for all Albertans is possible. Of the eight recommendations made in the disability strategy, four of them deal directly with the goals of Bill 201. The first recommendation addresses Albertans' awareness of rights, needs, and aspirations of persons with disabilities and that it is necessary for Albertans to increase their awareness to successfully accomplish the goal. Mr. Speaker, Bill 201 would provide an appropriate forum, the Safety Codes Council, for the disabled community to voice its concerns and let all Albertans become better aware of the needs and aspirations of disabled Albertans when it comes to access. We cannot positively effect the rights of Alberta's disabled community if we don't listen.

The second recommendation of the Alberta disability strategy deals with the supports for daily living. The government of Alberta must ensure that the needs of persons with disabilities related to their daily living activities are met. Mr. Speaker, by amending the Safety Codes Act, the government would successfully address this goal. Currently, barriers for disabled and mobility-impaired Albertans are much too commonplace. Amending the act would allow Alberta's disabled community increased opportunities to actively be involved in decisions that affect their lives. In doing so, the government could ensure that the needs of persons with disabilities are met.

The third recommendation addresses the main point of Bill 201, which is the physical access of the disabled community to Alberta buildings. A commitment should be made to embrace the principles of universal accessibility as well as a process to be put in place to remove physical barriers from public spaces. In doing so, all Albertans could have the opportunity to fully participate in all community, employment, and business activities that are going along with the Alberta advantage. Mr. Speaker, although Bill 201 can be viewed as a broad stroke for promoting the full citizenship of all Albertans, its main objective is to break down the barriers that hinder Alberta's disabled population from accessing buildings and roadways. This legislation would overcome those obstacles and make Alberta more accessible.

The final recommendation that relates directly to Bill 201 is the sixth recommendation, which concerns learning. The government of Alberta should improve access for persons with disabilities to education by ensuring that all education facilities are physically accessible. Mr. Speaker, I don't think that a proper education should be available to only those Albertans who can access it without any impairment, and I am certain that this government feels the same way. The education of Albertans has always been the top priority of this government. Passing Bill 201 will reinforce that commitment thereby ensuring that all Albertans have the opportunity to learn and grow.

I don't think these recommendations are out of reach for this government. I believe that they are firmly in our grasp. The Department of Community Development is currently reviewing the Alberta disability strategy. I am confident that the response to these recommendations will be the same as mine was: complete support. After all, the real question we should be dealing with is: why aren't we already doing this? Bill 201 is a step in the direction of accepting these recommendations. It is conceivable that we can commit to providing full citizenship for every Albertan.

There are, however, critics of Bill 201 who will talk about the costs of implementation or talk about government getting into the business of business. Mr. Speaker, this legislation would likely lead to additional costs for Albertans who are building a new building or renovating an old one. However, these are also costs to those Albertans who are unable to access these buildings. Doing nothing

now will only delay the inevitable. As Albertans age, changes will be necessary, and implementing them at a later date will in all likelihood not cost less but, rather, a great deal more.

Bill 201 is not asking the government to get involved in the business of business; rather, it is asking the government to get involved in the business of equality for Albertans in the disabled community. These costs are not costs; they are investments in a universally accessible Alberta. Mr. Speaker, by supporting Bill 201 the government will contribute to making Alberta communities barrier free and physically accessible. As a result, a steadily increasing number of Albertans will be able to access the building spaces, services, and programs they require. All Albertans will have the opportunity to fully participate in and provide leadership to public policy processes and to activities and associations that define their community.

I encourage all members of the Assembly to vote in favour of this legislation and, in doing so, vote in favour of Alberta's continued support in making over half a million Albertans with disabilities full citizens of this great province. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very happy to rise today and join debate on Bill 201, sponsored by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. This is a very interesting piece of legislation that has the ability to affect a great many Albertans, and I think that we must discuss both the merits and the benefits of this legislation.

Last night I watched the documentary *Bowling for Columbine*. In one section of this documentary a young student from Columbine high school who had survived the massacre but had been shot and is now in a wheelchair had gone to the head office of K Mart in the United States to ask them to stop selling handgun ammunition in their stores. I was surprised and even a little shocked to see that there was no wheelchair access to the beautiful and massive building that was the national headquarters of K Mart. The young Columbine student had to be lifted by three men in order for him to enter the office building that was only accessible by a large exterior and interior staircase. I realized that I had taken for granted that all buildings in our modern world have wheelchair access and are barrier free. *Bowling for Columbine*, although an American documentary, made me realize that barrier-free access is a long way from being taken for granted.

I think it's worth stating again that Bill 201 will amend the Safety Codes Act so that the disabled in Alberta are not met with barriers when trying to access public buildings. It means that another group will be added to the Safety Codes Council to provide input into the decision-making process for safety codes in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, I would like to take my time this afternoon to speak about the Safety Codes Council and how I think this bill is a good thing for Alberta. I hope that my arguments will provide some good information for the members present today.

In Alberta the Safety Codes Council is responsible for overseeing the Safety Codes Act. It is a not-for-profit, nongovernment organization, and its actions play a very vital role in all Albertans' lives whether they know it or not. The council covers nine very important disciplines, which are covered under the act. Those disciplines are amusement rides, boilers and pressure vessels, building, electrical, elevators, fire, gas, passenger ropeways, and plumbing. Each of those disciplines has its own council, the Amusement Rides Technical Council for example, and then each is part of a co-ordinating committee. This machinery makes up the Safety Codes Council, and each group provides input on the decisions and policy-making of the council.

The council also develops and administers a system to accredit municipalities, corporations, and agencies to carry out specific activities; develops and administers programs to train, certify, and designate safety codes officers; administers an appeal process for decisions made in accreditation and certification programs, orders, and written notices issued; promotes uniform safety standards; and it also provides support to its many industry partners. Now, that list is fairly extensive, but you can see how this council has the ability to affect every Albertan.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

What I find somewhat discouraging about this council is that it has very little representation from a group that is becoming increasingly more visible in this province. This, however, is a situation that Bill 201 is looking to alleviate. Bill 201 would add another representative council to the Safety Codes Council, the barrier-free council. I believe that this would be a very unique addition to the Safety Codes Council because while the other groups represent purely technical and safety aspects, a barrier-free council would represent a good many Albertans and be able to provide the council with insight on how decisions will affect both the elderly and the disabled.

3:20

Now, one must look at the Safety Codes Council to understand why adding a barrier-free council would be a good decision. The Safety Codes Council mission is to work in partnership with industry, municipalities, labour, and government to "provide Albertans with quality public safety systems for structures, facilities and equipment and provide competency-based training for Safety Codes Officers."

If we back up a little and take a look at that, we see that its mission is to "provide Albertans with quality public safety systems." What is important is that the council provides for Albertans, all Albertans, and I think that most Albertans are represented on the council. However, a large group of Albertans is not represented, albeit through no fault of their own nor the council's. Rather, the issue of access to public buildings has really never been at the forefront of many issues in this province until now.

The disabled community in Alberta has stressed to many MLAs as well as MPs on the national scale that they feel they are being overlooked when many different decisions are being made about building structures and access. It could be as simple as having a curb cut on the street. Many of us overlook the fact that most sidewalks in Alberta are built so that if one is crossing the street, the curb of the sidewalk is cut down so that anything with wheels can leave or enter the sidewalk: things like a baby stroller or a shopping cart or a wheelchair, especially a wheelchair. This is something that I don't think many people really take notice of. A person pushing a baby stroller need only lift the front wheels and then the back to get it and the child up and onto the sidewalk, but what is a disabled person in a wheelchair supposed to do? Rarely do they have the arm strength to get themselves up and onto a sidewalk that has no cut-down. Common sense maybe but extremely important to the disabled community.

Nowadays there are many buildings that need to be accessed by the disabled community that are just too difficult. Granted, government buildings in very high traffic public places do have access for the disabled, but there are plenty of places such as restaurants that often don't have barrier-free access. Think about the places you've gone to eat in the past week or so. Did all of those places have a wheelchair ramp, or did the entrance to the eating establishment have a little step before the door, one that poses no problem for an able-

bodied Albertan but one that is a great challenge for a young man in a wheelchair? This is the sort of thing that a barrier-free council could bring to the table if it were represented in the Safety Codes Council.

Of course, the barrier-free council would not only be specific to disabled people but also help another group of Albertans that may have been overlooked in this process as well, and that group, Mr. Speaker, is seniors. Alberta is a province that is aging. The baby boomers are getting to that age where they will soon need a cane or a walker or a wheelchair or a permanent IV drip. Do you think the senior is going to be impressed by having to drag their walker up some stairs to get into their favourite restaurant? I don't think so.

Seniors are extremely important to this province, yet in the Safety Codes Council there is no group through which they can let their concerns be known about rules and regulations that are specific to buildings, structures, and equipment. Again, this is no fault of the Safety Codes Council. The groups on that council are not really meant to think about those issues. It would be nice if all the concerns of Albertans could be heard, but those representing the Plumbing Technical Council are not going to be overly concerned about barrier-free access when discussing building permits. This is something that has been overlooked in the past, and now is as good a time as any to see that it's fixed.

I don't see why the members of this House would not support a move such as the one that Bill 201 provides. We place a large amount of importance on our seniors population, so much so that we have provided a ministry specifically dedicated to seniors' issues. Therefore, one can see how this bill fits right in line with the attitude of not only this government but of Albertans as a whole. Bill 201 provides this House with an opportunity to strengthen the Safety Codes Council. This council has done a remarkable job over the years, and it is now time that we improve the council in a small but very important way.

There are many in this province who are at a disadvantage in living their daily lives. There are those in wheelchairs, with walkers, with canes, without sight who should have their voices heard when policy is being made about quality public safety systems for structures, facilities, and equipment. One thing that all members should know is that I don't believe that this bill is that great a change. However, it is a significant change in that we will be giving a voice to those who currently do not have a voice on this committee. I think that adding one more representative group will not be an administrative nightmare or a change in the council's philosophy.

The Safety Codes Council has done remarkable work for this government and for the people of Alberta over the past year. As I close this afternoon, I would like to ask all hon. members, some of whom may be getting close to that age where they're going to have to start thinking about these issues, to support Bill 201.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with a great deal of pleasure that I rise today to speak to Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. The importance of designing buildings in a manner that does not discriminate against those with a disability is undisputable. For years mainstream building design has for the most part unintentionally reflected the lifestyle and abilities of the able-bodied person. However, in recent years we have become more cognizant of the needs of the disabled, and important strides have been made both by government and the private sector.

In the last 20 years I've seen more public and private buildings

with wheelchair ramps, power doors, and handicapped parking spaces. Awareness of issues that the disabled face on a daily basis has improved, and the physical changes are noticeable. Businesses have recognized that barriers do little to improve the flow of customers who come through their doors. As Alberta's population ages, business owners have become aware of this fact and voluntarily make improvements in an effort to be more accommodating.

As much of the discussion on this bill will revolve around barriers like entrances and bathrooms, I would like to provide a different example that illustrates a business's attempt to make the theatre-going experience more enjoyable for those who face sight and sound barriers, so to speak. At the beginning of this decade, Mr. Speaker, Famous Players decided to invest a million dollars to outfit 50 theatres across the country with state-of-the-art hearing and sight-impaired technology. Infrared headsets provide visual description for the blind, and tinted plastic reflectors aimed at a scroll board from the back of the theatre provide captioning for deaf patrons. This is a classic example of a company not only recognizing the needs of a minority but also recognizing a business opportunity. By acting on an inclusive attitude, this company has expanded its market.

This mentality is likely to continue well into the future. We are an aging population, and with age comes difficulty climbing stairs, using washrooms, reading signage, et cetera. Between 2000 and 2016 it is expected that the number of Alberta seniors will rise from 10 to 14 per cent of Alberta's population, and 10 years after that, Mr. Speaker, it is expected that clearly 20 per cent of Albertans will be over 65.

This trend suggests a couple of different things. First, it means that barriers are becoming a challenge not only for a higher number of Albertans but a larger segment of the population.

3:30

Second, it reinforces the need to increase the emphasis that we place on the issue of barriers and how we can remove them from Alberta's buildings. However, just because a situation has been improved in recent history through changing attitudes of the private sector and added requirements found within the Alberta building code, it is not to say that there isn't room for improvement.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to focus my comments on two specific areas. First, I would like to talk about the mandatory representation the disabled community would be granted because of Bill 201 and the importance of including this crucial stakeholder when we make decisions about issues relating to the removal of physical barriers that are still present in many Alberta buildings. Secondly, I would like to address the need to be responsible in the pace we set to make Alberta a barrier-free society. While making significant grounds toward solving this issue is important, we would do much harm by trying to do too much at once. I would contend that Bill 201 is a responsible measure to make headway with this important issue.

On my first point, Bill 201 would mandate the Safety Codes Council to have representation from the disabled community, which through such representation would have a say in the principles of barrier-free design. Thus barrier-free design would become one of the Safety Codes Council's specific duties. Securely establishing a voice for the disabled through an official committee is an important first step to a more inclusive society. Adding representation for the disabled community to the Safety Codes Council is consistent with this government's history of consultation with Albertans on issues they face. It stands to reason that stakeholders can and do play an important role in solving problems they face.

In order to truly understand what difficulties disabled Albertans face and to seek out proper and timely solutions, it is imperative to

include those who face the barriers on a daily basis. In this instance, Bill 201 builds on progress made in the past and sets a new precedent for the future not only in Alberta but for the rest of the country as well. If such a committee is established, it is necessary to involve the group in the decision-making process that surrounds the issues of relaxation.

Currently the Safety Codes Act allows for relaxations to be made by the director if an owner of a building can show that specific requirements are unnecessary or extraordinary circumstances prevent conformance. It is arguable that an able-bodied person may not be in the best position to determine whether requirements are necessary or not. Some activists suggest that exemptions occur too frequently. Therefore, it would be beneficial if those who face the barriers had some influence in the decision-making process.

Mr. Speaker, I do not believe that relaxation should be eliminated, and establishing a voice for those who face barriers does not mean an end to all relaxations. There are times when upgrades are unnecessary and could pose an economic burden on a business owner. Is there a need to install barrier-free showers at an outdoor soccer field where those using the facility would be able-bodied players and referees? Is it necessary to improve access to a police training facility to which the general public has no access? Should allowances be made if there isn't proper room to add a wheelchair ramp to the outside of a building? These are real circumstances that warranted relaxations in 2003.

It is important to continue to look at each individual circumstance with a degree of balance. At the same time, it's imperative that we continue to move in a forward direction on this issue. I believe that Bill 201 achieves both.

This brings me to my second point, Mr. Speaker. Bill 201 does not eliminate the use of relaxations. Instead, it provides a better mechanism to deal with the issue. This process of discretion is essential to making sure that we move at a reasonable pace in establishing a method to removing physical barriers faced by disabled Albertans. The issue of relaxations is more contentious in rural portions of our province, and in smaller communities stores are more likely to be family-owned. They are likely to be a main staple for a family, and in many cases they don't generate the amount of cash that big box stores in urban areas do. In some cases business owners would take a serious financial hit to install ramps . . . [Mr. Knight's speaking time expired]

The Deputy Speaker: Sorry to interrupt the hon. member.

An Hon. Member: He was going so well.

The Deputy Speaker: He was just on a roll there.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure and an honour to speak and make a few comments to Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. I must commend the member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for not only sponsoring this bill but promoting it to all members of the Assembly. It's certainly a bill that I feel is long overdue.

Those of us that were present in the Assembly in 1997 had a very special moment when barriers were removed and we had the honour and the privilege of listening to Rick Hansen on his Man in Motion tour, the 10th anniversary. Also speaking was the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford at the time, Percy Wickman, who himself uses a wheelchair constantly. So for the Assembly to not pass this bill, to me, would be not what we are all about. I certainly, along with many other members that have already spoken, strongly urge all members to support this bill because it is a bill that is required.

On that particular occasion when Rick Hansen wanted to come and speak to the Assembly, what had to happen first of all was that we had to pass Motion 17 in this Assembly, which would allow an unelected member of the Assembly to pass the bar and come and speak to us. It was quite a day. Mr. Hansen was introduced in the Assembly by the minister of health at that particular time and, as well, there were some comments made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford at that time. I will never forget the words that he said, and I will quote what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford said at that time. He said:

Rick Hansen touched the world in three ways that come to mind quite readily. First of all, he leaves behind a legacy, the legacy of the 60 million plus dollars for research so that someday spinal cord injuries may be eliminated.

Secondly . . .

And I think this is what applies to this bill more than anything else.

. . . he single-handedly changed buildings to accessible buildings, and I experienced that in Thunder Bay, Ontario. After the election in 1989, when we were down there for a few days at my sister's place, she arranged for me to be interviewed at the local TV channel station. She had checked it out. It was accessible. When I went there, I couldn't believe it: an old CBC building, nice parking in front. I went inside and marvelled to the crew. I said: I can't believe how accessible this building is. They said: we had to do it; Rick Hansen made us. I said: what do you mean Rick Hansen made you? They said: we wanted him in the studio on the Rick Smith show, and he wouldn't come until we agreed to renovate the building to his specifications. I'm sure that was done dozens of times along the way.

And that is quite significant, because that is what we're here today to start debating in Bill 201. It's to make buildings accessible to people that have either physical or sensory disabilities.

3:40

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford at that time said was:

The third and the most important is the change in people's attitudes. Suddenly, being in a wheelchair, you could feel proud. People would look at you and say: God, he's one of those guys. There was something that changed people's attitudes. Suddenly, they realized we were equal, in some cases above being equal. It proved that with determination you can live out your wildest dreams. You've just got to have the guts to try.

Those were the words of Percy Wickman in this Assembly in 1997.

As well, one other thing that impressed me about the Man in Motion tour was that as Rick Hansen was wheeling those last few hundred yards to the finish line in Victoria, B.C., he was filled with elation, he was filled with many different feelings. He had wheeled through every country along the way in unimaginable conditions, heat and cold and wet, and as he came towards the finish line, there was a banner welcoming him home. As he went under that banner, he threw his head back, and on the back of the banner was printed: the end is just the beginning.

So as we look at a new chapter in legislation here in this province for those with physical and sensory disabilities, I think that this is a great start to legislation that will make accessibility to buildings in this province more available for all. I thank you very much for the opportunity to make these comments.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to be able to enter into this discussion on Bill 201, Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. One of the very most important people in my life, my father, was disabled. For

the last 17 years of his life he was in a wheelchair. So one of the things I did as a young woman was build a ramp for him to be able to get around his house.

In 1991 when I built my own house, one of the key things in the design was making sure that the house was wheelchair accessible. So I designed the two main floor bedrooms so that they could be made into one master bedroom when I could no longer climb stairs or if I was in a wheelchair. All the doors are at least three feet wide so that wheelchairs can get through, and there's full access from the street right up into the house on ramps. Right now I'm adding a garage to my house and, again, I'm making it so that I can get from the garage all the way up the ramps into the house.

So I'm finding this bill very interesting. I look at section (2.1). I'd like to be able to read this:

This Act is to be applied in a manner consistent with the principles of barrier-free design and access to allow persons with physical and sensory disabilities to access and use buildings and facilities to which this Act applies.

Now, this act applies to all the buildings in Alberta. This act applies to every private residence in Alberta. So it applies to the Alberta building code regulations, which is all the private buildings in Alberta, all the private homes that are being built in Alberta. I realize that what this act does is put us in a position where there's going to be a lot of relaxations, but I'm sure that it is at least moving us into the position where people are encouraged to build all their buildings, all their homes to be wheelchair accessible.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to join the debate on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by my colleague from Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. I, too, hon. colleague, would like to praise you for the fine work you've done on the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. I know first-hand that you're a good MLA, a very strong chairman, an avid advocate on behalf of those with disabilities, and a tremendous listener. One of the reasons I know that you're a tremendous listener is because you've brought this piece of legislation forward. This didn't come from you; this came from the people you've been working with and on behalf of for a number of years. So I'm sure they, too, would like to thank you.

May I remind everyone in this Assembly that no one - no one - chooses to be disabled. These things happen. They must deal with them, and as a society we must deal with them. I'm not going to be repetitious and repeat all the things that have been said thus far by the many, many speakers before me, but I will say that this legislation, if passed and proclaimed, would allow another voice to be heard at that table in the implementation of design and how those designs will affect the lives of many, many people. I ask that we as a group of politicians and legislators please consider what the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan is trying to do.

I think the importance of looking ahead has been brought up by a couple of speakers. We have an aging population. As baby boomers - and many of us in this room are considered baby boomers - approach the age of 65, the numbers will be great. If you think of those people that you know - friends, relatives, neighbours, co-workers, staff - that are 65, 70 requiring the use of canes, wheelchairs, walkers and sit down with them and ask them point-blank what barriers they face in their community in trying to achieve the lifestyle that they want and we would hope they would be able to use, I think you will find that there are many buildings that have

done an excellent job. There are many buildings where through this type of legislation we could make sure that in the future when renovations come due or are going to happen, they will include some of these things that the disabled community need and want.

I believe one of the speakers before me talked about the changes to wheelchairs that have taken place over the years. Those changes will continue as new technology comes along to help those that need them, and those wheelchairs and the other devices necessary for the disabled will have to be taken into consideration as we move ahead with buildings and changes in that regard.

I would thank the member from the opposition that talked about the former member of this Legislature, a good man that I had known long before I ever came here, and that was the former Member for Edmonton-Rutherford and a good friend of mine, Mr. Percy Wickman. Every day Percy showed us what it took to come into this Assembly, to leave this Assembly, to drive home from this Assembly. If I'm not mistaken, I think that recently Percy was awarded the Order of Canada for his work on behalf of the disabled and those that are afflicted with handicaps of one sort or another. So thank you, Percy, for the work you did on their behalf.

Fellow colleagues, I would ask you to please give consideration to this important piece of legislation and the implications it will have for many, many people today and well into the future. Thank you.

3:50

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. As other members have said, the main goal of this bill is to amend the current Safety Codes Act. This amendment would expand the Safety Codes Council to include a representative from the disabled community in Alberta. The expanded Safety Codes Council would be able to provide experienced insights into existing regulations and the application of the Alberta building code. This would not only enhance access to buildings but also render them more user friendly to persons with restricted mobility.

When I have encountered someone in the past who needed a wheelchair to get around, I often thought how much energy and work it would require just to get where you were going. However, I never really thought about what being confined to a wheelchair would really mean. And, again, I'm not talking about the big things; I'm talking about the daily implications and how much more difficult it would be, like going shopping, taking your dog for a walk, or getting in and out of your car. But perhaps in a very small way I've gained a bit of insight that maybe some of my colleagues of the current crop haven't when it comes to understanding this bill because I've already had experience in dealing with issues concerning universal accessibility.

Several years ago I held the position of county reeve, and at that time we were dealing with the issue of renovating our county office. Part of that discussion was making it universally accessible to persons that faced mobility issues, and one of the specific items was looking at putting in an elevator. Well, I don't have to tell many people here that have been involved in municipal politics that one of the most controversial things you can do is renovate or build a new county building, but in those days adding extra dollars to the cost of doing that by putting in a lift even added to that controversy.

So in order to understand the obstacles that people with mobility issues faced, I borrowed a wheelchair for a day when I knew many of the council members were going to be down at the office, and I tried navigating my way around the building and invited several of

my colleagues to take it for a spin to see how friendly our current building really was and to try some ramps at some other buildings. Well, needless to say, my experiences and my colleagues' experiences from that day helped ensure that when the building was renovated, regardless of the controversy, we did make it universally accessible and decided to install an elevator to assist those that use a wheelchair to have full access. It also helped the staff move big files on wheels from the top floor to the bottom floor and probably prevented a lot of injuries that could have happened in the course of trying to carry them down the stairs.

In a wheelchair an ill-placed set of stairs can be an insurmountable obstacle, and a hard-cut curve becomes an invitation for disaster. This is why creating a barrier-free technical council to be a separate entity would also be beneficial. The concerns and issues that it would raise would deal with more than just technical and safety issues. This body would be able to address everyday issues of utility and practicality. This is important because Alberta is committed to being open and accessible to all Albertans. The Alberta advantage applies to all Albertans, and we should take pride in knowing that all people are welcome here.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta along with Canada as a whole is home to a rapidly aging population. From 1971 to 2003 the number of Alberta seniors rose from roughly 120,000 to over 325,000. This is an increase of over 170 per cent in only three decades. Additionally, as a proportion of the whole population the population of seniors is rising. Currently seniors make up 10 per cent of the total population. This is projected to rise to 14 per cent 10 years from now, and after 20 years pass, they'll constitute roughly 20 per cent of Alberta's population. I will be in that number, as will many of my colleagues in this Chamber. This is a very large number of people.

Now, we're all aware that as we age, the chance of losing our mobility increases due to a variety of factors which could be just grouped together under the heading of old age. We'll no longer be able to move around as quickly or easily as we used to do. For some of us it will be severe enough that we'll need help to get around. Whether this help would come from a cane, a walker, a wheelchair, moving from place to place will no longer be as easy as it is now. This means that a higher portion of the population will have mobility issues, and the issue of universal access will even be more important than it is now, and it is important now.

Mr. Speaker, by acting now, we will avoid what could potentially become a very large problem in 10 to 15 years. This legislation takes a proactive approach in anticipating a real problem instead of having to scramble to deal with it once it's become a huge problem.

I realize that there are concerns with this bill, and most of these are cost related and whether we are placing undue burden upon certain Albertans. The truth of the matter is that Bill 201 does not change any existing building codes, nor does it change how renovations are dealt with, and it does not change the requirements that new buildings must meet right now. I cannot stress this point enough. There will be no new costs associated with this bill, and there will be no changes to the existing Alberta building code. What this bill does propose to do is create another seat on the Safety Codes Council so that concerns regarding barrier-free design issues will be properly addressed.

Mr. Speaker, the safety codes amendment act presents Alberta with an opportunity, the opportunity to ensure that our province is for all Albertans. By supporting this bill, we are supporting a greater voice for the disabled community in decisions that greatly affect them. By creating a barrier-free technical council, Alberta would become a leader among provinces in regard to issues that affect persons with impaired mobility. We would be showing other jurisdictions in Canada the way to ensure that all members of the

community will be assured of being able to participate in that community.

Bill 201 is not proposing radical changes to the Alberta building code. What is being put forward here will not result in changing the requirements that new buildings must meet, nor would it alter how renovations are to be completed. Additionally, passing this bill will not mean that the private sector will end up paying out large sums in order to meet new requirements, nor will it be sanctioning the creation of an enormous bureaucracy in order to deal with a flood of new paperwork.

Mr. Speaker, passing Bill 201 will allow the Safety Codes Council to benefit from the input of those who live with disabilities day to day. It will create a forum where a wealth of new knowledge can be shared and utilized in ways that will help Alberta remain open and accessible to all Albertans. This will ensure that members of our community that confront the obstacle of living with impaired mobility on a daily basis will not be excluded from being involved in their community. Alberta is committed to achieving the highest standard of living for all Albertans, and this bill will help us reach that goal.

As I've already mentioned, we're dealing with a rapidly aging population both in raw numbers and as a percentage of the whole. By including persons with disabilities on the Safety Codes Council, we'll be able to better prepare for the coming challenges that we will all be faced with. The safety codes amendment act will deal with the issue of accessibility before it becomes a problem.

I fully support this bill and ask all my colleagues to do the same. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise this afternoon and join my colleagues in support of a discussion and debate on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. I really do commend the member for bringing this bill forward. I think it is a very important initiative not only today but in the future, as many members have already referred to.

Mr. Speaker, as I understand it, the legislation has two primary objectives. First, it would aid in providing a voice to the disabled community. Bill 201 would require the Safety Codes Council to ensure that it has representation from those with disabilities. As the Safety Codes Act stands now, it necessitates representation from a variety of groups, including labour, business, and municipal governments. However, the disabled community is not included and does not get to offer its input into the decisions made surrounding safety and design issues.

4:00

Mr. Speaker, I feel that by including this group, we are giving these individuals a say in the decisions that ultimately affect their lives, and who better to make those decisions or give input into design plans that do increase accessibility than those who really face this challenge, realistically, every day. By implementing this change and giving representation to disabled individuals, we are taking yet another step in becoming a more inclusive society.

The second objective of this legislation is to increase access to buildings and roadways for those with limited mobility through the implementation of barrier-free designs. I would like to point out that this legislation would not be retroactive but would only apply to any new buildings or renovations to existing buildings.

Mr. Speaker, barrier-free designs can enhance daily living by

maximizing independence. This can improve quality of life by allowing greater participation in regular activities and enabling individuals with disabilities to maintain safe and active lifestyles. How important that is. Barrier-free designs promote independence for those living with disabilities. For those who have limited mobility, the physical surroundings can either facilitate or restrict their independence. A barrier-free environment will allow people with limited mobility to live more self-sufficiently, as I said earlier and as others have said, and they will still be able to access buildings and participate in community activities.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 201, Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, also takes a proactive approach. The issue of building and roadway access is not going to disappear. If anything, the need for barrier-free designs is only going to increase. By promoting the principles of these designs, we're looking to the future and possibly offsetting increased costs down the road. If we don't recognize the needs for alterations at an early stage, and especially now, the result may be a higher financial burden in the future.

Barrier-free designs assist not only those with disabilities but also the elderly. Demographics of this province are changing, as many members also have spoken about today. Alberta has one of the largest senior populations, and it's certainly projected to continue growing. Right now, Mr. Speaker, there are over 323,000 seniors living in the province. Since 1984 Alberta has received on average a net of 721 senior migrants per year. There are more seniors moving to Alberta than there are moving out. According to Statistics Canada since 1971 the province has experienced a 171 per cent increase in the number of Albertans over age 65. During that same time span our entire population has increased only 84 per cent, so that's 171 as opposed to 84 per cent. Therefore, those 65 and older are increasing at a much faster rate than all other age categories, thus illustrating that our population is indeed aging.

It is evident that seniors are increasing their presence in Alberta. By 2026 it is projected that there will be more than 700,000 seniors in the province or roughly 1 in 5 Albertans, and I know that I have seen some figures in the past that by 2030 or '35 it will be 1 in 4 seniors in Alberta. The number of seniors is definitely accelerating and will continue to as the baby boomers approach 65. Certainly, the aging population is going to characterize demographic trends in Alberta. I would also add: don't think only of the aging population and disinclude the disabled population, because to me it's all one and the same.

In previous years the majority of seniors were in the younger age categories. These are just examples of the aging population. Almost 33 per cent were between 65 and 69 years, and approximately 60 per cent were below age 75. But now, Mr. Speaker, we're seeing the numbers increase for seniors in those older groups. Seniors aged 80 and older make up now 25 per cent of seniors in 2001. This figure has increased from 21 per cent in 1971. This group is also expected to increase by 160 per cent by the year 2026.

Just as a personal note at this point, when I visit seniors' housing facilities, I certainly have noticed in the last five years, more so even in the last three, an increasing number of walkers and wheelchairs in these residences. I haven't been in a wheelchair, as the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills has recounted for us. I have not been in a wheelchair myself, but I certainly have watched my mother in the last year with her walker, first walking independently and now with a walker, and without that walker she would not be able to be mobile and to live independently and stay where she is at least for the time being.

The demographic shift is certainly going to have an impact, as I've said, today and tomorrow and very much so for the future. The baby

boomers, again, are entering their 50s and 60s, and some have even chosen early retirement, and along with increasing life expectancy, which I think is something we should all really be thinking about, it makes it crucial for safety code councils to promote accessibility and address the needs of the elderly. Not only living longer or, as I said, increasing life expectancy, we want seniors and we are encouraging them to live healthier, more active lifestyles. So, again, it's important that design principles promote barrier-free ideals and aid in increasing accessibility of roadways and buildings.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is also about updating legislation and making building codes relevant to our current societal situation. The building code ensures safety but strictly deals with safety issues. The code presently does not account for any social concerns. Although the building code wasn't initially written to deal with social fairness, it should be considered now, and it's certainly time to adjust that to reflect society.

Buildings and roadways need to be accessible to everyone. It's not fair to exclude a portion of the population because it will cost money or be an inconvenience to business owners. In fact, increasingly, the disabled and the seniors population as they increase in numbers will drive more and more of the retail and business marketplace, and that's something that today's businesses should take heed of.

Mr. Speaker, barrier-free designs prevent discrimination against people with disabilities. Physical barriers should be acknowledged as a hindrance to a person's freedom. Barrier-free design should influence policies, design practices, and codes to access the building environment. As a member I must say again, as the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills said, that everyone should put themselves in the shoes of someone with limited mobility. He was saying that he imagined himself in a wheelchair; then he was in a wheelchair. I say: "How would you like to be disabled physically? How could you make yourself physically disabled and in a wheelchair?" That is the real trick. Then let's see how well we would do.

Think of just the amount of time it would take to get around and the difficulty of accessing roadways and buildings. You might not even be able to enter businesses or stores – I'm sure you wouldn't at the present time – that you visit on a regular basis. I acknowledge most of us here probably have never had to deal with this type of situation, and I know I haven't, and therefore I really don't fully understand these difficulties. If we haven't experienced them personally, maybe we know friends or relatives who have.

There is one person that I certainly knew for many years personally and still do. His name is Vance Milligan, and I think he's probably known very well. I see Vance fairly regularly. I worked at Bennett Jones for many years and admired Vance. He's a man that over the years has become a leader in the disabled community. I would like to just make note of Vance Milligan as someone that we can all admire, but without his support structure of people and accessibility he would not be who he is today.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to join the debate supporting Bill 201, Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. The Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan has a great deal of knowledge regarding accessibility for disabled Albertans. I hope that this House can pass this legislation to make new and renovated buildings more accessible for more people.

4:10

I think the perception of the disabled is slowly changing. Stereotyping consistently portrays disabled Albertans as helpless and

vulnerable. Increasingly, however, Albertans are realizing that this isn't the case in the majority of instances.

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

Unfortunately, we continue to see an alarming number of disabilities due to workplace injuries or traffic accidents. As tragic as this is, some of these people may understand some of the technical aspects of building and safety codes better than others. I would argue that this is an opportunity to turn a tragic event into an important opportunity. Advocates for the disabled have shown that overlooking or not paying attention to the requirements of the building codes can, no matter how unintentional, prevent disabled or elderly Albertans from living an otherwise normal life. Most able-bodied people cannot relate to these challenges. The greatest tool to open doors to any group is awareness.

Mr. Speaker, last year I had the privilege of joining a blindfolded luncheon with my constituent friend Wayne Turnbull, who is also visually impaired, at the CNIB in Calgary. I also met a few Albertans who lost visual ability and hearing ability as well, so this was a great learning experience for me and also conversation.

Mr. Speaker, many years ago I was a bit younger, and I showed off a bit to our children. I experienced a temporary minor disability due to my wrong gymnastic move. It turned out to be not showing how to do it but showing how not to do it. This experience taught me the need for accessibility at the workplace because I still had to work during this temporary disability.

I represent a large number of seniors in the Calgary-Fort constituency. As we all know, the numbers of seniors in our province will increase in the coming years, so I have a keen interest in this bill that improves safety and accessibility. This bill is moving in the right direction for the disabled in Alberta. My favourite proposed change for the Safety Codes Act is a new position for the disabled on the Safety Codes Council.

Initially, there may be some reaction on the part of a few members about the new position. After all, the Safety Codes Council is a very technical group. One may wonder how a disabled community would contribute to the technical side of building construction. To a large degree accessibility for the disabled is a social issue, and the Safety Codes Council isn't equipped with the tools or the mandate to address social issues. However, a seat at the table may benefit the disabled and move Alberta toward the goal of accessibility for all Albertans.

I think that this new voice will help more people gain access to buildings. This will provide an excellent opportunity to apply practical experiences from the disabled to technical requirements of the code. I understand that there is nothing in the bill that compels the council to listen to the views of the disabled. There is also nothing in the bill that provides a mechanism to stop or reduce the number of exemptions granted for new construction or renovation projects. After these considerations I still believe this new position will succeed. I understand that every part of the council works closely with one another. This will be a great asset for every disabled person because the issues are integrated among all aspects of building and safety codes.

Based on what I've heard from constituents, I think the focus of accessibility should be mainly directed to building architecture. I would like to see an award created that recognizes creative and innovative design that helps the disabled. The legitimacy of an award would be stronger if it were supported from within the Safety Codes Council. I think this award would be great exposure for the award winner. My hope is that this could also raise the bar for future designs. Improving access to buildings increases their market value,

improves the public image of construction companies, and can increase the bottom line. Most companies would be encouraged to improve their image as a responsible corporate citizen.

As some members of the council may be concerned about the perceived cost increase in new construction and renovation projects, advocates for the disabled talked about physical barriers that impede their access. Raising awareness of the challenges facing the disabled is extremely important, and we should think carefully about the financial consequences of this bill.

For example, a low-grade ramp or curb cuts may not be expensive, but a conventional elevator can cost over \$50,000 or even a hand-lift can cost up to \$30,000. Some may say that smaller contractors would be unable to accommodate such changes. I am reminded of buildings in my area that have an elevator, and there are people who must walk down seven or eight steps to the actual elevator door. The point of the new position isn't to create a financial burden for contractors. The goal is to take existing measures and modify them to accommodate the disabled. Using the apartment building as an example, there is little need for an elevator if people are unable to get to it.

The voice for the disabled at the table of the Safety Codes Council would be beneficial to meaningful changes to the building codes. I would be interested in the selection process for sending disabled people to the council. Would it be a selection from disabled people or the advocate groups? Or would it be someone with a construction background who has suffered an accident at the workplace? Or would it be some sort of an election? I think these are important details to be considered in the bill. Anyhow, it's a position that creates a voice for the disabled and having the voice heard is important in our democratic system. There should be a way to ensure contributions from disabled Albertans in an effective and constructive manner.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to talk about relaxing requirements for facilities for the disabled. There are a number of people who believe that this exemption is granted too easily. The application allows some projects to override accessibility requirements because of a lack of need. Some argue that this is used as a loophole to save money rather than prevent frivolous renovations. I think certain cases should be looked at closely, and at the same time this application process should continue to have some prominence, play a role in it.

There may also be some concern regarding administration of this bill. How will this bill work once implemented? Larger renovation projects with big budgets can accommodate future changes to help the disabled. What about smaller projects with smaller budgets? Restricting the exemption clause could delay or even cancel smaller projects. Of course, this theory would depend upon the extent of changes and the financial impact.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, I like the idea of raising this bill, and I agree with the spirit behind this bill. I know that the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan has a great deal of insight regarding the challenges facing disabled Albertans. I share the concern with other members regarding the challenges facing Alberta's large and growing disabled community and seniors. I would like to think that future changes in the Safety Codes Act would moderate enough to please the disabled community without leaving contractors with a substantial financial burden.

I want to tell you of an instance that I heard. Somewhere in the U.S. there is a drive-through bank kiosk that was specified and built with Braille panels. I'm hoping the sponsor would shed some light on this detail, and I urge that members support the bill.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

4:20

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased first of all to commend the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan on his bill, and I want to take a little bit of a leaf from the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. I wish to speak on one provision and that being the inclusion to have some person with a disability on the committee as referenced in section 16 of the act.

A few years ago a gentleman and his wife came into my office, a rather narrow step up. High River is subject to periodic floods, so there was a ramp. They were able to get in. It was very awkward getting into my office, but they were able to do that. One of the things that he said was that these handicap bathrooms are really quite good, but my wife has MS, and I'm her caregiver. So we were in a brand new restaurant, and they said that they had handicap bathrooms. Well, yes, they do. They have some for ladies but not for men and some for men but not for ladies. So how does he take his wife into the handicap washroom? Naturally, she would rather go into the ladies than the men's, and so he has to get some lady, a waitress, to go and check and see if the bathroom was clear. Then he could take her in and get her organized and go out and wait a decent amount of time and get another lady to go in to see that there are no other ladies in there so that he may go in and help his wife out.

That indicates to me that sometimes we can do good things, but unless we walk in the moccasins or, in this case, like the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills actually try the wheelchair and then think of how they are going to be moving around and what condition they are that you move around in it – if they have a caregiver, very often a spouse, maybe a parent, they may not be of the same gender. Some of these washrooms are really well intended but don't work out so well under those special circumstances. So it's very good to have someone who has this situation confronting their life be on the council to advise the others, who can plan all kinds of things, but unless you actually live it, you don't know it. I think they will add a great amount to that board.

So I congratulate you and support the bill.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity also to share in the debate on Bill 201. The simple fact is that last year when I brought forward a motion with respect to wheelchair access for disabled people at gas stations, I also went down to a rehab hospital and got a wheelchair. I got into the wheelchair. It was the last snowstorm last spring. There was some ice built up at the island at the gas station, and unless I had, like my son puts it, Go Go Gadget arms, I really had a hard time reaching the spout. If it wasn't for the actual use of my legs where I could get out and get the spout off and put it in my truck, I wouldn't have been able to have really been doing it. The wheelchair I had had little grips on it, but I really couldn't get over the ice. It would spin, and I couldn't quite reach. I was about a foot short. I couldn't quite reach it, but that was the easy part.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Once I filled up my tank, I went around and tried to get between a car that had decided to pull up for the confectionary part of the gas station, but then I had to backtrack, go around from the other side. When I went up the ramp – this is very odd; I don't know who designs these things – I came into contact with a whole pile of windshield washer antifreeze and oil right on the path of the ramp, and – this was the strange part – the door opened towards me.

Here's another strange part, Mr. Speaker. The attendants were looking at me, standing there watching me. They really looked when I got out of my wheelchair to get around their cans and antifreeze and to get around the door that opened towards me. Talk about not being user-friendly. I went in and paid for my gas and I said: "What if I really couldn't get out of my chair? You guys were going to sit there" – you know, I had some choice words for them – "and just watch me?" They didn't have an answer.

So by bringing Bill 201 forward all it does is bring forward common sense that we misplace because we have our legs and we don't really have those barriers and these impediments in our everyday life to simply get around and buy things like gasoline, go to the supermarket. About 20 minutes of a wheelchair was enough for me, Mr. Speaker, to realize how important it is to do something for other people. Growing up, it was always taught in our household by my mom and dad that you always put other people forward. I guess it was our Christian background, you know, kind of designed everything around the Scriptures, around our livelihood, so one of it was to put everybody else ahead of yourself and do good for others, and it will be returned to you.

I didn't really understand what that meant completely until I was elected in 2001. Now I know what it means to put everybody else ahead of yourself, as an elected official, and it's not by choice; it's just how the nature of the job is. I wish everybody in the public would kind of know what it would be like to be an MLA. There's a misconception that you're on top of the food chain when really, the way I see it, you're at the bottom of the food chain because everybody's problem, every other issue, is your primary concern, being elected.

Even our own private members' bills, like whatever I bring forward or the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, if we can't bring that forward in the way we see it from our own eyes, then when we get our paycheque, return it. Return it to the Treasurer if we can't do our job by the way we see it to be done. I know he brought it forward. The hon. member walks – he doesn't use a wheelchair – but he probably knows somebody who goes through these barriers, just like I had a little taste of it filling up my simple little gas tank for 20 minutes of my whatever thousand hours or seconds of life that I have left, hopefully.

So when you encompass all these things and couple that with some feelings with respect to being the human beings that we are, with respect to being an elected official, with respect to taking taxpayers' money, and combining all that together with the net sum of doing the right thing, I would encourage everybody to vote in favour of this bill. Thus, at the end of the day and at nighttime when we go onto our pillow, we should be able to sleep.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you so much for this moment to speak on behalf of it. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just had a couple of comments that I wanted to share. I do want to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood for just speaking from the heart.

I would like to compliment the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. I've had the privilege of working with him on a couple of committees, and he is a pretty quiet, well-respected good listener, as was previously indicated, to the point that when I first got an ear for the bill, I wasn't really excited about it. I had a lot of bad visions, and for the people that are here, I want to explain that.

I told the sponsor of the bill that our constituency office in a little tiny town in southern Alberta – although it's the cheapest in terms of rent of any of the ones in Alberta, what you pay for is what you

get. This building is a tax recovery building that the village had, and it's two storeys. We let a group of elderly ladies who had a cat store occupy the lower part, and our constituency office is up a set of old rickety stairs on the second level. Well, I could just imagine that somebody, some puffy-chested low bureaucrat, was going to come in once the bill was passed and inform the town and myself that we had to put in an elevator.

This just didn't go along really well because in the time that I've been elected, I've only had three people come to the office that actually couldn't come up the stairs. Without a doubt, the first thing we did was go downstairs because there is a ground entrance. But, unfortunately, this building is probably 87 years old now, and the doorway is the original doorway, and it is not going to let anybody with a wheelchair in, let alone a huge person. So we just go downstairs or we go across the street to the café.

As I was going on to tell the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, to make matters worse, there's one bathroom in the constituency office. Guess where it is: under that rickety set of stairs. You have to kind of duck to get in there, and it's hard for anybody that's totally able, but for a guy like myself with one wonky eye, I can even hit the head on the bottom of the steps when I use the washroom. So it was that first reaction.

I think I'd also pointed out to the member at that time that there were a number of community organizations who had things like curling clubs in smaller communities, and a lot of them are truly volunteers in the truest sense of the word, and for somebody to have to come up with an elevator, whether it was \$15,000 or \$25,000, was going to be a formidable expense to some of our service clubs.

4:30

But after I got finished venting and relaying these things to the sponsor of the bill, he assured me that the intent was to get somebody from the handicapped part of the community to be a representative on the council to give input, which is a totally good thing. So it kind of switched my mind. I wanted to just have that on the record so that everyone knew it, because it wasn't that anyone would object to having reasonable access.

I've been on a small hospital board where we had to change the interior of a building we converted, as the very first hospital in the province, from an acute care to a long-term care hospital back in 1989. The Speaker and I were both involved in a later pilot project that saw many of the fruits of that discussion take place. What we even had to do in the hospital was actually take an older building and enlarge each and every room, each and every doorway, make provisions in all the bathrooms for handicapped access. It took time, and that took a lot of money, but we were able to do it without anyone telling us we had to do it. It just made sense. We wanted to work with the contractors and the government at the time, and it came about.

So my congratulations to the MLA for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. I just wanted to put it on the record, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: No further speakers? Then I would call on the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan on Bill 201.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the people who participated in the debate this afternoon. The comments have been greatly appreciated.

Mr. Speaker, we've heard many comments about the need to have barrier-free design and access experts have input into safety codes to improve access for persons with disabilities. In my initial comments I spoke about wheelchair access. There can be many hazards – and

I appreciated the comments from many of you – for persons with vision difficulties as well. There are many. One of them, for example, is what are called monumental stairs, which may be very long and zigzag across a plaza. They can appear to be a level walking surface to someone with vision problems. Another problem is hanging stairs or escalators, which can create a head-high obstacle. In that case, double railings need to be used to provide some kind of barrier.

In a book on design that accommodates the needs of persons with visual impairments, the authors emphasize that good architecture and design will empower and integrate all people. They provide three key design concepts. First, logical layout, layouts in which users can anticipate locations or facilities such as stairs located next to elevators or men's and women's restrooms being adjacent to one another to help all users solve way-finding problems.

Second is visibility. Environments in which key features such as handrails, stair nosings, and doors have high visual contrast with their surroundings are safer and more negotiable for all sighted persons, including those with low vision.

Third, good lighting. Good lighting enhances visibility of signs and architectural features and does not cause glare or heavy shadows. Although optimal lighting for individuals varies, in general persons with low vision are thought to need 50 to 100 per cent more light than persons with unimpaired vision.

Something of great interest, Mr. Speaker: persons who are 60 years of age need twice as much light as persons who are 40. I thought that was a significant difference for such a small age difference.

Mr. Friedel: Can we put a few more bulbs in here?

Mr. Lougheed: There's a request from one member present to add a few more bulbs to the Assembly, Mr. Speaker.

Objects that protrude into travel paths can endanger persons who have visual impairments as well, and those examples would be telephones and drinking fountains, which could actually be recessed into the wall instead of being stuck out into the hallway. Elevators, of course, pose many other problems.

I'd like to address one issue that was brought forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, and that was relating to what the building code applies to. The drafting of this private member's bill received a great deal of support and help from the people in Municipal Affairs, and I'd really like to thank them for their work on this. I'm advised by that department, who's responsible for the Safety Codes Council and ultimately the building code, that section 3.8 of the Alberta building code addresses all the matters of barrier-free design.

The concerns of the hon. member were that houses, our own homes, are subject to the same regulations as for commercial buildings. This section 3.8 addresses those matters of barrier-free designs, and the requirements of section 3.8 apply to all buildings except for houses, relocatable industrial accommodations, high-hazard industrial occupancies, and buildings not intended to be occupied on a daily or full-time basis. There are some other exemptions as well. It's a fairly long list.

The member is to be commended, and I think we should all take note of the possibility of ultimately needing barrier-free access in our own homes. Many groups are encouraging homeowners when they do build a new house to take into account barrier-free design.

Another term that's been used – and our friend Marlin in the gallery explained this to me when we were over at his place: barrier-free design so that he's able to easily get in and out from the street, from his driveway. When people build houses they're encouraged to make them visitable is the term that's used so that when friends

come over to visit you that are in a chair, they can get in if it's a more visitable house. Not all parts of the house have to be accessible.

So, Mr. Speaker, I thank the people for their comments, and I would ask for all members' support of Bill 201.

Ms DeLong: Can I speak?

The Deputy Speaker: Is it a point of order, hon. member?

Ms DeLong: No.

The Deputy Speaker: You've already spoken on the bill, and when we have an hon. member close debate, that, in fact, does close the debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 201 read a second time]

Bill 202

Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Masyk: Again, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you very much for this opportunity to engage in my promotion of Bill 202. It seems like some of the bills that I present are tough going. I have experience through that, and I don't mind going around the Horn in the wintertime for the third time. It's never going to be smooth; it's always going to be rough sailing.

Usually at the end of the speaking notes is where you ask for support, but I'm going to ask for support at the beginning of my speaking notes. That way everybody will be attentive to the content of them and park them in their minds so they can refer to them throughout the night and throughout the week.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, for time's sake, I would like to continue on with the notes that were prepared and amended by myself and researched. I'd like to start by bidding you good afternoon and rising to the pleasure today to introduce second reading of Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. Bill 202 was conceived to accomplish two things, not one but two. The first is to reduce emissions of volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, hydrocarbons such as benzene, during the transfer of gasoline fuel. The second is to ensure that Albertans and their environment remain healthy and strong.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to run a little tangent if I may on health. We heard lengthy debate during question period with respect to health, and I'm bringing forward part of the solution.

4:40

A step in this direction would be implementing stage 1 vapour recovery systems in all gasoline service stations and storage tanks, fuel cargo trucks, and terminals throughout the province. The requirements of this proposed legislation state that all new service station storage tanks, fuel cargo trucks, and terminals comply with stage 1 vapour recovery control requirements effective January 1, 2005. Mr. Speaker, what difference does it make? If it's going to be new, it might as well be good. Existing facilities would be required to meet stage 1 vapour control requirements effective January 1, 2014. It is also important to note that any new fuel transfer equipment installed at existing facilities would be required to meet stage 1 vapour control requirements effective January 1, 2005.

Mr. Speaker, to understand what Bill 202 is attempting to accomplish, it is necessary to understand what it is we are discussing, otherwise nobody will know. A stage 1 vapour recovery system is used in conjunction with fuel storage tanks, cargo trucks, and

terminals and greatly reduces the amount of vapour released during fuel transfer. The system works in a vacuum, not an Electrolux but a vacuum. Vapours from the storage tank at service stations are vented into the cargo truck during fuel transfer. The vented fuel vapours are then recycled into a liquid at the terminal, and if they're vented off into the atmosphere, guess who's paying for them.

Mr. Speaker, without the assistance of stage 1 vapour recovery there are a number of emissions that are released into the environment, some of which are VOCs. These organic compounds evaporate readily into the air and have no colour, smell, or taste. This makes them dangerous, very dangerous to those who may be subjected to them on a regular basis, because individuals would be unaware that they are in contact with these compounds. To us as adults it may be one thing, but what about the child? What about the young people that are going to school?

VOCs can react with other pollutants from low level ozone and promote the formation of photochemical smog. Mr. Speaker, ground level ozone means just that: ground level, low level. Thus it's in the basements; it's in the ventilation systems in schools, maybe this very building. This can make the air harsh to breathe as well as lead to headaches, eye irritation, coughs, chest discomfort. The result, of course, is much worse for those who already face respiratory disabilities such as asthma.

Ground level ozone doesn't only affect humans; it affects animals and plants as well. Many elements in the environment are dependent on each other. It is therefore necessary that we do what we can when we can. Leaving environmental issues until the problems stare us in the face can often lead to irreparable damage. It will then be up to future generations to remedy what we could prevent and discourage today. Mr. Speaker, are we a government of the future, or are we a government of today only? We can measure that by how we vote.

Mr. Speaker, fuel vapour not only contributes to low level ozone, but it also emits the hydrocarbon benzene, the most potent carcinogen found in the emission. Breathing high levels of benzene can cause drowsiness, dizziness, rapid heart rate, headaches, tremors, confusion, and unconsciousness. Did you guys all know that?

It is possible for benzene vapour emissions to contaminate our drinking water. The vapour can be absorbed by moisture in the air and contaminate water sources in the soil. And we know the pressures that we're facing on fresh water. We read it in the local rags.

Should an individual be exposed to benzene on a long-term basis of a year or more, this exposure would start to affect the blood. Benzene causes harmful effects on the bone marrow and can cause a decrease in red blood cells, leading to anemia. It also can lead to development of different forms of leukemia and lymphoma.

Mr. Speaker, the health risks that can be involved with fuel vapour emissions are an important reason for us to pass this bill. I believe that it is important that we do not put Albertans in a position where these types of health conditions are a possibility and an almost certainty. However, there may be some members who would argue that this level of vapour emission in Alberta does not constitute a mandatory stage 1 vapour recovery, but it can be the same members who think that it's okay to have leukemia. And that's a valid point.

An Hon. Member: Nobody thinks that.

Mr. Masyk: Yeah. I retract it.

It is true that these compounds are emitted from a number of other sources such as forest fires, but last I can recall, I don't think you can legislate one out. We can't regulate all the sources. What we can do is this: regulate for fuel vapour emissions.

As health care providers and Albertan stewards of the environment, I find it important to raise this issue and do whatever possible

to ensure that all Albertans have every opportunity to enjoy the cleanest air that we can provide. As well, as stewards of the environment it is important that we ensure that future generations will have an opportunity to enjoy it as we have.

Mr. Speaker, it is estimated that implementing stage 1 vapour recovery may cost – and this is just a guess – \$25 million. You weigh that against health and the well-being of our young people as well as our seniors. It is suggested that at those costs it could be absorbed by gasoline companies and the stations. It may reflect into higher costs, but what's one-tenth of 1 per cent? We get it anyway.

If we look at the big picture, these costs serve a larger cause. The time frame for implementing these requirements is 10 years. That's a little under \$3 million a year: maybe 2 and a half million a year. As technology moves forward and forges to another dimension, we could probably cut that by one-tenth. What's a dollar today in 10 years' time – with competition and greater technology, we know that it gets cheaper. We know that.

These gas stations replacing their steel tanks – they have an approximate lifespan of 17 years, so either way from today they're changing it, so at least they might as well put an upgraded system in. There's a good chance that a new tank will come with a stage 1 vapour recovery system already. This way, we'll just put icing on the cake and make sure that it happens.

What Bill 202 is asking is that we make a switch mandatory to ensure that this transfer of fuel in Alberta is as safe as possible for Albertans and for the environment and for our children and for our seniors. Some may view these costs as too much for return of emission reduction, but what about the price we pay for health care? What about the price we pay for the education of our young people? What about the price we pay for future Albertans if we don't protect the environment?

Alberta is growing at a rapid rate. People from other provinces and other countries want to share in the Alberta advantage that this government has fostered and created and cultivated. Mr. Speaker, everybody wants to share in the harvest, but we all have to put our best forward to contribute to the sowing. As population rises in our cities, so does the possibility for emissions becoming out of control.

In the Speech from the Throne the government committed to a 20-year plan. This plan is designed to ensure that Albertans remain strong and healthy so that future generations can enjoy the same prosperity that we have the luxury to experience. As stewards of the environment it is up to us to do what we can today to ensure that these opportunities are available to them tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, in closing I would like to reiterate what Bill 202 would accomplish. The purpose of this legislation is to reduce the level of volatile organic compound emissions into Alberta's air resulting in a healthy environment. I would encourage everybody to bring their best foot forward and support this bill as the good stewards they are.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly nice to see the member looking so green here today, and as his speech was progressing, I was wondering if I could now, then, also convince him to support us on Kyoto because it sounds like we're on the same wavelength.

I have to say that it's a surprise to see a bill like this, that's so green in nature, come forward from any member of the Legislature other than the Liberals, but it's a real pleasure to see it come forward from the Member for Edmonton-Norwood, and we certainly support this bill. It's a right step forward. It certainly will help to do many things: improve general health standards for people working in those

areas and green up the environment. That's the step that we need to take. I'm a little worried that this member may not have the support of his own caucus on this bill, judging from some of the comments that I've heard, but I certainly hope that that's not true and that when you take a look at it and reflect on it, the cost of good health is never too much to pay. That's one of the primary reasons you should consider supporting this bill, in addition to all of the environmental factors.

[The Speaker in the chair]

So I urge everyone here today to speak in favour of this bill and support it when it comes to the end of second reading.

4:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do rise to the challenge to speak to this bill, and indeed it is a pleasure and an honour to rise in this Assembly and join in this discussion and, I'm going to say, the debate surrounding Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Bill 202 would require all fuel cargo trucks, terminals, and service stations to implement stage 1 vapour recovery systems by the year 2014. It would also require that any new trucks or upgraded gas stations and terminals would have to install the systems after January 1, 2005. It's my understanding that these systems will reduce emissions of volatile organic compounds or VOCs. Stage 1 vapour recovery would capture the VOCs as well as carcinogenic hydrocarbons that are otherwise released into the air. The recovery system returns the vapours back into the truck's tank and then recycles them into liquid at the gasoline terminal.

Mr. Speaker, I acknowledge that VOCs and carcinogens present in the fuel vapour can have considerable impact on the health of our environment and our community. This vapour can produce serious health concerns if significant amounts are released into the air. I also understand the objectives of this bill, and I commend the Member for Edmonton-Norwood for his very good, strong intentions. I recognize that the member's interests inherently lie in protecting our environment and the health concerns of Albertans, and for that I applaud him. However, I do not feel that this legislation is the most appropriate manner in which to proceed in protecting our environment. Therefore, I must raise some concerns regarding the bill.

I do not believe there is anyone in this Assembly that can deny the importance of protecting our environment and certainly the health of Albertans. However, I believe we must make sound decisions that weigh the environmental impact and the economic cost. Choices should be made that best reflect Alberta's interests and will produce valuable environmental benefits. It appears that the environmental advantages are inconsequential when compared to the cost of installing this recovery system.

The implementation of stage 1 vapour recovery control in Alberta would cost approximately \$25 million for equipment installation. There may also be additional costs for maintenance, updates, and operation. As a result this initiative may force many smaller gas stations out of business. The approximate cost per station ranges between \$10,000 and \$30,000 depending on the number of service bays. Therefore, the cost of retrofitting and bringing service stations in line with the proposed regulation may be too high a burden for some small businesses to bear. While some gas stations may be forced out of business, those who carry out the retrofitting requirements may be forced to raise fuel prices to compensate for their costs, which may translate into Albertans seeing higher prices at the pumps, and I, for one, don't want to see that.

Only 0.053 grams of fuel vapour is lost for every litre when fuelling up at a busy service station. This figure is dependent on temperature and is based on a measurement of 27 degrees Celsius. When the temperature decreases, evaporation decreases. As we are all aware, the temperature reaches the high 20s too few days of the year in this province.

I would also like to point out that VOC emissions from gasoline are minimal compared to other emission sources. In fact, these emissions equal less than 0.5 per cent of the VOC emission in the province. Let me repeat: a half of a per cent of the total VOC emissions.

I question that if this is such an important initiative to improve the environment and health of Albertans, then why haven't other jurisdictions enacted province-wide legislation to require the implementation of stage 1 vapour recovery systems? I view this province as a leader, and I acknowledge that we often embark on initiatives before other jurisdictions. However, the fact that other provinces are not even investigating this approach, to my knowledge, as province-wide legislation should raise some red flags.

Mr. Speaker, I acknowledge that certain regions such as the lower Fraser Valley in British Columbia and the southern Ontario corridor have instituted this measure, but action was taken in these areas because of imminent and eminent problems. Regions that have enforced the installation of stage 1 vapour recovery systems have difficulty with air quality and smog pollution. The air pollution was the main thrust behind the Windsor/Quebec corridor implementation. Major metropolitan areas in the United States also have regulations guiding stage 1 vapour recovery systems. However, these are due to smog and, of course, health concerns.

Mr. Speaker, I don't think we can compare New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Washington, and even Atlanta to cities or regions in Alberta. It appears that this measure is used in certain areas to address an air quality problem. Alberta doesn't have a problem, for the most part, with smog. Ironical that I should say that today, when we did have certainly a little bit of smog. The province's air quality index measures air quality 365 days of the year, and over the last year it recorded 354 good days, 11 fair days, zero poor days, and zero very poor days. This index measures air quality from nine different locations in the province.

I'd like to highlight some of the ways VOC and hydrocarbon emissions are currently being reduced, because there are measures that are underway. The province is already experiencing a reduction in emissions because all vehicles since 1998 have been installed with on-board refuelling vapour recovery equipment, which is actually part of stage 2 vapour recovery. Service stations have reduced fuel vapour pressure during the warmer months. This reduction will decrease the evaporation losses of gas vapours. Also, the fuel dispensing rate has been reduced at the pumps to restrict fuel spills and fuel spit back. In Alberta the utilization of bottom loading for gasoline products at terminals has limited VOCs and hydrocarbons during the filling process. The province has experienced a reduction in benzene concentration in gasoline to less than 1 per cent. Alberta's fuel distribution currently accounts for less than 0.1 per cent of the total provincial benzene emissions.

Mr. Speaker, on the surface this legislation makes sense, but a deeper examination unveils that the environmental payoffs don't seem to equal the implementation costs. This province doesn't legislate for the sake of passing laws. It does not believe in the process of implementing more restrictions on citizens and businesses. We pass laws that are grounded in sound principles and those that are in the best interests of all Albertans.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to emphasize once again that Bill 202 is rooted in protecting both the health of our environment and our community, and I applaud the Member for Edmonton-Norwood

for proposing measures that attempt to protect Albertans. I support the premise and thrust of this legislation, but I feel that I cannot support this bill because I do not believe that the environmental benefits justify the costs. I encourage all members of the Assembly to carefully consider all arguments when voting on Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

5:00

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and just take a few minutes to speak on this bill.

Once again, like the previous member, I applaud the member's intentions. Certainly, all of us wish to enjoy the healthy environment that we have in Alberta today and to continue to protect it and, where necessary and where important, improve the quality of that environment as we move forward. So the member's intentions are certainly — well, he wants to do what's right and what's good, so I congratulate him for that. However, Mr. Speaker, this bill is really not an appropriate way to do that.

The previous member, the Member for St. Albert, has made some very good arguments, in fact made most of the arguments I was going to make. She must have my notes, I think, or some such thing. Anyway, good arguments from the Member for St. Albert. But the point is, Mr. Speaker, that this bill will do little to improve or make any environmental impact. It just won't make much difference.

The issue again: one has to constantly balance economic benefits with environmental benefits. This bill would have very few, if any, environmental benefits because many of the things that this bill requires are already being done; for instance, as the previous member said, the installation of on-board refuelling vapour recovery equipment in all new vehicles. That's been required since 1998, Mr. Speaker, so we've already done that. Limiting the fuel dispensing rate: we've already done that.

Many of us as we stand outside in the winter, you know, when it's 40 below and we're filling with fuel at self-fuelling stations, are saying: why does this thing go so slow? Maybe we need to educate the people and say that one of the things that has happened is that the rate of fuel that you can put into your vehicles has been limited to exactly do what this bill wants: to reduce the number of VOCs that get into the environment. So that's been done. Reducing fuel vapour pressure during the summer period to lower evaporative losses of gasoline vapours. You know, all of these actions have been taken, so we are moving in the right direction. Things are happening, and to try and implement this bill probably isn't appropriate. There is a huge cost involved, as the Member for St. Albert has correctly pointed out. So at the current time, Mr. Speaker, I would ask all members of the House to vote against this bill.

I understand I'm supposed to adjourn debate on this bill at this time, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think we've made some very good progress today. It's a good start to the week, and on that basis I would move that we now call it 5:30 and adjourn until 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:04 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, February 23, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/23

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

Hon. members, before we proceed with the items of the agenda, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure this evening to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung three special visitors who are in the members' gallery. Mr. Aric Sarson and Ms Lisa McNutt are the parents of Aiden McNutt, a grade 4 student who attends Callingwood elementary school. Their concern for public education is what has brought them here this evening. I would ask them to please rise and have everyone join me in giving them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me tonight to introduce a friend and acquaintance of many in this Assembly from my constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, a councillor from the county of Mountain View and a member of the board of directors of the Association of Municipal Districts and Counties. The Member for Little Bow specifically wants to say: hi, Pat. Would Pat James stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this evening and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly 13 visitors from in and around the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. There are 10 Pathfinders and three teachers/group leaders. The teachers/group leaders are Mrs. Jane Shacker, Miss Adrea Simmons, and Miss Sheila Oliver. All these guests of the Assembly are in the public gallery, and I would now ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly a constituent of mine who has children at McKernan junior high school and who is here tonight because of her very strong interest in public education. I'd ask her to rise. She's in the gallery. Her name is Preet Sara, and I'd ask you all to give her a warm welcome.

Thank you.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Education Funding

501. Mr. Griffiths moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the govern-

ment to eliminate the education portion of property taxes and fund education through general revenue thereby freeing up financial resources for municipalities to adequately provide required services.

Mr. Griffiths: Good evening and thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise tonight to introduce Motion 501, which calls for the elimination of the education portion of property taxes.

This motion has two chief intents, Mr. Speaker. The first intent is for the government to eliminate the use of property taxes to fund education and use general revenue as the source for funding education in recognition that all Albertans – all Albertans – share an equal, quality education regardless of where they live or the property tax base in their region. The second intent is to allow municipalities the sole discretion of setting property tax rates and collecting property taxes to service their property owners.

In the year 2003-2004 the education budget was about 25 per cent of the total spending of this government, Mr. Speaker, or over \$5 billion. Of that, \$3.8 billion is directly spent on kindergarten to grade 12. In 2003-2004 fully 36 per cent, or \$1.327 billion, is funded through the education portion of property taxes.

It must be remembered that in 1994 the provincial government took over responsibility for education property taxation. My understanding is that the intent at that time was to eliminate the inequities across the province in property tax bases for funding education, Mr. Speaker. The question is: why should one Alberta student have access to every program imaginable, such as access to a state-of-the-art recording studio in their school, while other students wouldn't even have access necessarily to a qualified math teacher or science teacher because of funding limitations? The rate for the education portion of property tax has declined by 25 per cent since that time, which demonstrates the province's obvious intent to rely on general revenues rather than the education portion of property taxes to ensure full equity for education for Alberta students.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, there is a trend and an intent that's been evident over the last 10 years. This year has been unique. The government will receive \$1.165 billion in revenue from the education portion of property taxes. That's a 5.8 per cent increase from last year. Now, that is not designed from a deliberate intent to increase the amount of money collected on the education portion, and it's not the result of a mill rate increase but, rather, an increase in the assessment base, growth in the province. So that amount, that total amount that has gone to pay for education, is the sole result of growth of the province. But the overall rate was frozen at 2002 levels, and that followed a 17 per cent cut in the year 2001. That built on a 10-year trend of lowering or freezing the education portion of property taxes and, generally, in many years the tax mill rate.

How can we afford to lose the \$1.3 billion that will be lost if we do not collect the education portion of the property taxes, Mr. Speaker? That's the question that every single member of this Assembly is going to ask. There are a lot of options available. To begin with, we could stop sending conditional and unconditional grants and fuel tax rebates to municipalities. That amounts to \$4.26 million which is returned to municipalities. So what we're talking about is \$1.3 billion collected in property taxes from property owners based on the education portion of property taxes and \$4.26 million returned to municipalities that they could have merely collected in the first place. That also allows for a \$700 million growth area for municipalities to collect more property taxes.

Now, I'm not suggesting that that is the answer, the only answer, or the ultimate answer. The point is that there are other ideas. There are other adjustments that could be made in funding priorities,

funding formulas for this government. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Municipal Affairs' council on roles, responsibilities, and resources, which was formed almost two years ago, is a good vehicle for discussing such solutions. My understanding is that they have suggested to phase out the collection of education property taxes but over a longer period, a 10-year period. I'm not saying that that's a worse idea or a better idea, but the point is that this council on the roles, responsibilities, and resources for municipalities is discussing options like this.

In fact, the notion of phasing out the collection of the education portion of property taxes over a 10-year period might be a very feasible idea since it would allow the province time to adjust the loss of revenue that would come from the education portion of property taxes, Mr. Speaker, and allow us to figure out ways to use money from general revenue or, while our economy grows and general revenue increases, to actually absorb those losses on the educational property tax side. But it would also allow municipalities tax room so that they can make up the resources necessary to provide services required of them: essential services, services that are necessary to be provided to their property owners.

Municipalities are not in the same form that they were 90 years ago. They're not the same type of government they were 90 years ago, Mr. Speaker. Municipalities have grown; they have matured. They're accountable to their taxpayers, they're accountable to their tax base, and they're very considerate of the decisions they make. The provincial government moving out of the education portion of property taxes and leaving it to the sole discretion of municipalities would allow the municipalities to be fully and unequivocally accountable to that tax base, to those property owners.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, municipalities are mature, and they need room to manage their affairs. We've heard a lot of municipalities sometimes complain, sometimes legitimately, sometimes not so, about the downloading of services that has occurred or that did occur 10 years ago when this government made the transition to becoming a much more responsible, fiscally accountable government. A lot of services were downloaded to the municipalities, and they didn't feel that they had the proper tax base to grow and develop to meet those responsibilities. We also have municipalities that we hear quite frequently now discussing, sometimes very convincingly, that the high-growth nature of this province, the high-growth areas in this province, cities like Fort McMurray, Red Deer, Edmonton, and Calgary, do not have the tax base or the room to grow their tax base.

Mr. Knight: Grande Prairie.

Mr. Griffiths: Grande Prairie. I'm sorry. I apologize. I should never have left out Grande Prairie. It's a very significant contributor to the provincial economy.

Those areas, those bright lights – the highway 2 corridor, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge – those places sometimes have asserted that they don't have the tax base they need in order to build the infrastructure ahead of the growth in their economies in those jurisdictions. Allowing them extensive, almost one-third more room in the tax base would allow them to sometimes fill the gap, maybe not fully fill the gap but would give them the room to expand their tax base so that they could build that infrastructure ahead of their growing economies to meet the needs of their taxpayers.

8:10

Mr. Speaker, our tendency is to move away from dependency on property taxes to fund education. As I said before, we've seen 10 years of a tendency to rely more and more on general revenues to

support education, a 25 per cent decline, in fact, in the last 25 years, strictly based on the principle that we believe that every child in this province should have equitable education funding, equitable education resources. The best way to achieve that is not to allow regions to rely on what their particular tax base might be. One city that has a strong industrial tax base has twice the revenue to rely on than a poorer jurisdiction that doesn't have the tax base to rely on. We believe that general revenue should fund education.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to say thank you for the opportunity to speak to this motion, to move this motion, and I look forward to the interesting debate over the next 50 minutes. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be able to rise and address the motion that's been proposed by the hon. member. Thank you for bringing this forward and opening up the discussion. I think it's very worth while.

We have an interesting situation here. The member is right: what we are looking at here are two areas. It's around funding of education and its source of revenue, and it's around the municipalities' ability to raise funds to pay for the services for their constituents. Right now we have municipalities collecting a \$25 or \$27 million levy on property taxes for education purposes, and the rest of the cost of education is coming out of general revenue. The proposal here is to have all the cost of education come out of general revenue. It's certainly worth discussing.

I guess my concern here is that we're still talking about the same amount of money. So although we are requiring much more for education – in fact, the government's own Learning Commission is recommending that – that's not being addressed in this motion. It's just where the money would come from but not how much money would be coming. So, in effect, this motion would make the levy zero for school purposes and allow the municipalities more tax room.

Recommendation 94 of the Learning Commission also dealt with this but didn't go quite as far as what the member is proposing here. Recommendation 94 was to "allow school boards to requisition their local residents for up to 10% of the amount raised through provincial education property taxes." This is taking it much further.

My hon. friend from Edmonton-Gold Bar has just pointed out to me: "Examine and implement new sources for additional funds. Every child should have equitable access to education and an equitable opportunity to learn and succeed." On page 17 of the Learning Commission report it's talking about: "The primary source of funding should continue to be the provincial government, through a combination of general revenues and education property taxes." So the Learning Commission didn't go as far as the hon. member is proposing here. "At the same time, the Commission believes that school boards should have the opportunity to raise an additional, limited amount of funds from their residents," which is recommendation 94, that I referred to earlier. "This provides a direct link between school boards and their electorate and allows people in different communities to provide additional support to meet local needs and priorities."

I think that what I'm interested in here is that the government was not able to achieve what they set out to when they took over the complete collection of education property taxes. It used to be levied through the school boards locally. It was collected through the municipalities and went to the school boards. In '94 this provincial government decided to take it all and they would redistribute it equitably, or that was the plan. In fact, that didn't necessarily happen. I've even heard members in here in reaction to the throne speech and during debate on Bill 1 talking about how disadvantaged

their schools were. So, obviously, there's still an inequity, and a great inequity, in the province. So the 1994 solution has not been successful.

One of the things that's been interesting to me is the relationship between the province and the cities, the federal government and the cities around funding and around power and autonomous decision-making. Right now we have a situation where if people do well – they earn more money or they get a raise – the province and the feds without having done a thing get more money because they're taxing on income tax. If someone gets a raise or they take a second job to help pay for things, they're paying income tax on that additional amount of money. The province hasn't done a thing. They haven't requisitioned more money. They haven't asked for more income tax or a higher percentage of income tax. They just sit there. They're collecting the same amount, but the amount the individual is earning has gone up, and therefore more money is going off to the federal and provincial governments. So without raising a finger, those two levels of government get more money.

The municipalities turn out to be the villain in this. They don't get that advantage at all and are stuck in the position with the downloading that the hon. member referred to and in some ways very significant. We've heard a lot about policing costs. Certainly, I've raised a number of times the issue of the cities paying for policing costs that by rights should be paid for by the government: transportation of prisoners, that sort of thing.

So the cities become the villain, the bad guy, because they're the ones that have to overtly raise their mill rate or raise their percentage of property taxes that they collect from individuals, and this is making municipalities rightfully cranky about this situation. They're always made the villain. They're always the last one in line. They're the one that everybody's giving a hard time to.

So we have a situation where those municipalities are not happy. They feel they're being downloaded upon. They don't get the advantage of the instant raise in income tax because somebody makes more, and we now have a situation where the federal government is starting to deal directly with the municipalities. Let's face it; we've got some cities that have a larger population than some provinces, and the cities are increasingly the economic drivers of the activity of any given province. So more and more the cities are becoming very important entities, and how does the province treat them? The province treats them as children. Well, constitutionally the cities fall under the power and control of the provinces, and the provinces are certainly taking advantage of that, particularly here in Alberta. So increasingly those cities, even though they're the economic drivers, even though they're the ones that are making everything happen to a large extent in the provinces, are treated like babies, like children by their very own provinces.

Now we have a situation where the federal government is starting to deal with the municipalities directly. I would venture to say that if the provinces don't start to create a new way, a new relationship with their municipalities, they will make themselves increasingly irrelevant. We will have the federal government; we will have the municipalities. Why bother with the province in between? What does it really do for it? It just takes money.

So just a little warning, a little something to watch for. I think there needs to be the creation of a new relationship between the province and the municipalities before the municipalities just take off and bypass the province entirely and deal straight with the feds. That's the end of it. We don't need a province.

I think this motion that's been proposed, Motion 501, is certainly worth engaging in debate. It's certainly worth further consideration. I think that the municipalities have been asking for a number of ways that they can be able to take up a bit more room in the amount of

revenue they're able to raise through their levies without being made the villain once again, and this would allow that to happen.

I think the issues that are not addressed in this motion are the amount of funding that's required for education and whether, in fact, there would be an increase forthcoming if it came through general revenue. I think we have to address the inequity in how the municipalities are able to raise that additional money without being made the villains, and we have to address the relationship between the province and the municipalities. So at this point I'm willing to support further discussion of this motion, and thank you for the opportunity to address it.

Thank you.

8:20

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak to Motion 501, as presented by the hon. Member for Wainwright. As you've heard, this motion calls for the government to fund education spending out of the general revenue fund thereby ceding municipal tax room that's currently taken up by education taxes to a number of municipalities. The provincial government then funds education solely out of the general revenues, and the municipalities presumably have the opportunity to use the tax room to increase funding for priority areas and other services or else to cut taxes to a level that they feel could be used as part of the education funding. This feeds into a growing concern for many of our municipalities and counties throughout the province that they are unable to continue to provide these services because of a restricted ability.

After hearing the hon. Member for Wainwright discuss this motion, I'd like to put forward an amendment to the wording of the motion which would help to clarify the intended purpose. I have with me the appropriate number of copies of the amendment, and I would ask that they be distributed now. Do you want me to proceed, Mr. Speaker?

The Acting Speaker: Just wait for a few seconds, please.

You can proceed now.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the motion as amended would strike out the words "to eliminate" and substitute the words "to phase out" as well as strike out "and fund education through general revenue" and substitute "over a 10-year period, gradually supplementing the loss from alternative sources."

Mr. Speaker, Motion 501 urges this government to immediately "eliminate the education portion of property taxes and fund education through general revenue." The amended wording would call for the phasing out of the education portion of property taxes over a 10-year period, resulting in its elimination. Doing the same thing, just taking a little longer. While doing so, we would see a gradual supplement to the loss in funding from alternative sources. It's my opinion that the amendment would serve to clarify the intent and philosophy of the original motion by setting out a reasonable long-term plan to accomplish the same proposed goal. The motion as it stands currently calls for the government to absorb a large loss in education funding in a very short period of time. Phasing out the education portion of property taxes rather than directly eliminating it would help the government and municipalities ease through the transition at a manageable pace.

The Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties has recently asked that the government look at the idea proposed in Motion 501 so that we may have the opportunity to look at both its

strengths and weaknesses. The AMD and C supports this motion largely because a number of municipalities and counties have for a long time felt as though they didn't have enough money to supply the services that their citizens demand. Further, when the provincial government takes a large chunk of money out of this property tax for education purposes, it further inhibits the ability of cities, towns, villages, counties, and MDs to supply those services and programs.

This is not a new position for these municipalities, Mr. Speaker. They've argued for quite some time that they do not get enough money, they do not have enough power, and they cannot do everything they want to do. They argue this largely because they feel that they have to take on more responsibilities if they do not receive enough funding from the province to offset the increase in expectations. It remains to be seen whether or not this is reason enough to pass Motion 501. However, the AMD and C certainly makes a strong case.

Mr. Speaker, while I support the motion in principle, I'm of the opinion that it needs to be fine-tuned to take special account of the taxes levied on farmlands, not farmhouses, on farmlands. The proposed amendment definitely adds to the opportunity to accomplish such a goal as it calls for a 10-year transition, allowing government the opportunity to react to transitional woes and ensure that Alberta's education system stays strong, that municipalities receive adequate funding, and that Albertans are taxed fairly.

As I mentioned, one area of concern for many Albertans is the taxes levied on farmlands. Since farmlands are a contributor to the education portion of property tax, they need to be discussed today as well as throughout the phasing out period. Let's make a very clear distinction, Mr. Speaker. My concern is that farm residences are currently being taxed in the same manner as property inside of Alberta's towns, cities, and villages; that is, all farm residences and urban residences are assessed on the same principle of fair market value. In addition, however, the surrounding three acres of a current farm residence are also assessed at fair market value.

Alongside Motion 501 what we need to discuss further as we continue with this policy is that the consideration of the fundamental difference between farmland and residential land is what I am talking about at this moment. We need to consider fairness and especially fairness towards our enterprising farmers and young agriculturists.

Today I'd like to compare our farmers to our oil and gas sector. We know that government offers tax incentives for the development of resources on land from which the oil and gas is pumped. We offer this break as an incentive to the economic development that comes from the money made on these resources and the jobs that are created in this industry. I certainly will not argue against these incentives. The oil and gas industry has meant great things for our province, and it finances much of the rest of the country as well. We always do well to ensure that the industry is profitable for our province and for those who do the work.

We're not just reducing taxes for the oil and gas industry either. We're taking steps to reduce taxes in the name of economic growth. For example, we're eliminating the 1.5 cents per litre, the Alberta aviation fuel tax, for eligible international passenger and cargo flights. The logic behind this is that we're going to make Alberta's major international airports in Calgary and Edmonton preferred destinations for international flights. More flights mean more importing and exporting plus more international tourism. It makes sense, Mr. Speaker, but again it's a case of where a certain sector of the economy benefits from well-placed relief. Again I ask: given the importance of agriculture to Alberta, why do we not provide the same long-term incentive to the agricultural sector?

Agriculture is of great importance to our province, ranking just behind oil and gas in terms of the amount of money that the province

and Albertans earn from the industry. This government has always done well to recognize the efforts of our farmers – and make no doubt about it – through the financial support during the tough times that we've heard about for the past number of years, like drought or the current BSE border closure, but these are not rolled continually from one budget into another. Hopefully, they don't have to, but unfortunately Mother Nature predicts otherwise.

8:30

We always talk about the fact that the current federal government hamstringing our province's farmers by making them go through the onerous and socialist Canadian Wheat Board, so from time to time we have efforts to rid our farmers of the red tape of the Canadian Wheat Board. Through it all we continue to tax the land on the basis that all the land is a residence and, really, when we tax the total farm without paying mind to the financial and the economic importance of those farms to this province.

In 2003-2004 farms were taxed at a rate of \$5.57 for a thousand dollars of assessed value of land. This is the very same rate at which residential property is taxed. Essentially, what I'm arguing here is that there need to be tax incentives to keep our farmers working in that industry like there is in the oil and gas exploration industry.

Some may argue that my suggestion amounts to picking and choosing winners. Well, we're already doing that to the extent that some benefit already in the province from the examples I outlined, Mr. Speaker, just previously. We've achieved industrial growth by providing tax incentives in the way of eliminating machinery and equipment taxes in our manufacturing sector. The logic behind that tax removal is that it reduces the costs of putting up these larger plants and thus gives employers the ability to pay workers more or to grow their industry or simply the tax advantage over another jurisdiction in Canada. In turn, this results in a more qualified or educated workforce in our oil and gas or manufacturing sector. Again, the logic is that the more we pay our employees, the better the employees we'll have in the end.

The same, I would wager, would go for agricultural land. Farms, like other industries, are becoming more and more specialized in that we need to have farmers who have received the necessary training and education as well. Places such as Olds College do an excellent job in imparting this type of training to our agricultural sector, and it's quite well recognized that those young farmers who get a head start on the technology surrounding farming, like they do at Olds, are now more likely to run a far more efficient and successful farm.

As a province we're now just starting to view farms as a place of business not just as a place of tradition.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I believe the allocated time for you has run out.

Hon. Member for Wainwright, you just wanted to make very brief comments on the amendment?

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Little Bow for bringing forward the amendment. It's a friendly amendment, and I agree with it. The original wording tries to accomplish a lot of things over a short period of time while the amendment allows for greater transitions so the idea can be explored more. I encourage all members to support it.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On the amendment as proposed by the hon. Member for Little Bow, the first

thing that caught my attention about this amendment was the fine handwriting from the hon. member. Certainly, the education system that the hon. member enjoyed was excellent, because his penmanship is excellent, and in fact I would have to say it's even better than that that is practised by the hon. Member for St. Albert. This is very good indeed.

In regard to the amendment to Motion 501 one can't, I don't think, talk about the Wheat Board, and we talk about municipal finance, and then we talk about public education. That's a wide range of discussion, and it's a wide-ranging debate.

Certainly, municipalities are looking for sources of funding. They have been consistently told to do more with less. I think this motion and this amendment and the debate we're having this evening is excellent because I don't think there's a member of this House that doesn't recognize the extraordinary efforts that have been done by municipalities across this province to provide more and more services for less and less money. One would only have to look, if we were to leave this Assembly and go to the east on the MacDonald freeway, at the rebar poking out from the cement on the bridge, to know that municipalities all have significant funding difficulties.

Now, this amendment, Mr. Speaker, certainly would be in direct contradiction, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre said earlier, to the Learning Commission, and certainly I hope that all hon. members of this Assembly will give the Learning Commission a chance. If we're going to give students a chance to succeed, well, I think we have to give the commission and its many recommendations also that same chance. If we are to support the amendment to Motion 501, how exactly is that an endorsement of the Learning Commission? Certainly, the Learning Commission was interested in allowing school boards to requisition their local residents for up to 10 per cent of the amount raised through the provincial education property taxes.

I'm not going to go into this in detail, Mr. Speaker, but I would urge all members of this Assembly in their spare time to certainly have a look at that recommendation on page 150 and give the report a chance to be implemented and hopefully to be very successful.

In light of other hon. members who have expressed an interest in speaking to this motion, I will cede the floor to another colleague. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister for Children's Services on the amendment.

Ms Evans: On the amendment, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. Fundamentally, I agree with many of my colleagues in the House about the need for municipalities to have adequate access to revenues for providing services. I think that that is of no dispute. Those of us – and there are many in the House this evening – that have actually spent time in government service at the local level have contemplated all of the difficulties of balancing the budget with the growing demands of the constituency.

However, in both the amendment and the main motion it seems to me to be clear that we are addressing property taxation as if it had a more inherent right to be assigned to municipal services than to the services that parents provide for their children through school. If we, in fact, take the amendment or the main motion to its ultimate, we are making an assumption that the parents themselves should not subscribe at the local level to providing any dollars for the service of their children while they are entertaining school.

That's a position I could take as a municipal politician, but as a parent – as a parent – I'm very aware that he who pays the piper calls the tune, and I don't believe as a parent or as a grandparent that I want any government removed from my immediate contact, which

frequently you feel if it's funding from a further source. I want to be able to talk to that school board about where those dollars come from and where they go in the education of my child and of my grandchildren. When we remove that right of the parent to direct some funding or assign some funding or contemplate how the funding is spent at the local level, we see education move even further away from the local authority.

If you take this amendment and the main motion to their logical conclusion, you could argue that school boards have absolutely no place in the delivery of education because there's absolutely no authority, then, or any funding that would be provided from the local level that would be subscribed to the local schools. So my view as a former school trustee would be that when we remove the responsibility for local funding of some descriptor or another, be it property taxes, user fees, or something that comes from the parents pocket at the local level, they have far less interest and incentive, far less authority and control, and it's their children that are going to those schools.

I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker; I cannot understand why this would be of agreement to anybody who is currently serving on a school board or who is currently sending a child to school. It seems to me that it will further antagonize that rift that occurs when people don't feel responsible for the dollars that are spent for a service they, themselves, are receiving.

So philosophically I cannot support either the amendment or the main motion, and I'm further concerned by the apparent interest of the members of the hon. opposition in pursuit of this motion. Scary.

8:40

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's not often that I rise to speak on a motion, but it's so well crafted and so carefully put together by the Member for Wainwright that I feel compelled to enter into debate.

Let's just review the education fees for a minute. Fundamental reforms that were put in from '92 to '96: achievement testing, charter schools, corporate pooling, parent advisory councils, consolidation of school boards. Those reforms have served education well, as we see. For example, the number 4 school in Alberta, St. Vincent De Paul, is located in Calgary-Varsity constituency. So what we've seen through education, Mr. Speaker, is a change in our positioning on it.

Now, let's also combine education with a sense of what's going on with this province, with this province that's growing at an unprecedented rate, where all the forecasters and marketplaces put Alberta in the forefront of economic growth. Let's just dream for a second and go back to Diane Francis's comment: Alberta has the chance of being the Switzerland of North America, the Hong Kong of North America. Why don't we eliminate property tax? Why don't we eliminate the education and property tax, and why don't we go one step further: why don't we eliminate income tax? That way we could be the only province in this dominion where you do not have an education tax, you do not have a personal income tax. That's about \$6 billion, Mr. Speaker.

I've got to tell you that the stampede of people to come in here, spend their money – whether it be in rural Alberta, urban Alberta, small city Alberta, it doesn't matter. They would even come to Edmonton. That's how enthusiastic they would be. Yes. It's true. I can see opportunity at an absolute rush when you take a look at the fact that there would be no education tax, no provincial portion of education tax, and no personal income tax. So you say: okay; that's a \$6 billion hole in the budget. Well, a little fiscal discipline is not always a bad thing.

But, secondly, there has always been talk about the introduction of a consumption tax in this province, ultimately designed to be the most fair component of taxation in the world. You don't want to pay tax? Don't buy anything. Just that simple. So, in fact, Mr. Speaker, you could still be competitive from a tax position, a consumption tax position, with the rest of Canada, and you would be a tax-free haven that would create thousands, hundreds of thousands of jobs, a better education system, an accountable education system, and for that reason I'm more than pleased to support the member's motion.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, I just want to make an observation. This is a private member's motion; it's not a government motion. So just take that into consideration as you respond to the amendment that is before you.

The chair recognizes the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's quite evident to me that this is a private member's motion, or we wouldn't be hearing the contradictory and, in some cases, very strange comments from different ministers on this matter.

I did want to raise a question. Unfortunately, we don't have the question and answer portion when we're dealing with a motion. But I did want to ask the hon. Minister of Children's Services whether or not it was the type of tax that she felt distinguished the school board or the fact that the school board levied it—now, you've got a tax on property or you've got income tax, and most citizens pay both; even renters, for example, Mr. Speaker, pay property tax through their rent; it's collected by their landlord and remitted to the municipality—or whether or not it's the fact that the school board has some control currently over the property tax.

I'd remind the hon. minister that the school board no longer has that control given the so-called reforms of this government of several years ago that took away the right to levy property tax from school boards and centralized it in the hands of the provincial government. So school boards no longer have the capacity to set a mill rate, and the municipality no longer collects property tax on behalf of school boards but on behalf of the provincial government. It's that move, Mr. Speaker, of the provincial government into the jurisdiction of local government that I think sets the stage for the motion that we're discussing now. Since the provincial government now collects about half the property tax in Alberta and remits it to school boards according to its own formula, the old advantage, I guess, of local control, local accountability of school boards is gone.

So the question is: what should we apportion the property tax to? Property tax was originally envisaged, at least in my understanding, to provide services to property, and that is the property that municipalities deal with. So police, fire, and so on: those kinds of services that a municipality provides are those ones traditionally associated with a property tax. Notwithstanding the comments that have been made about the Learning Commission and some of the recommendations found in that, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association has established some important policy with respect to this.

Now, it's clear that municipalities have struggled, not just in Alberta but across the country, to deliver the services that their citizens demand. I would remind members of the Assembly that they have always done that in a very fiscally responsible manner. They have never run deficits. They're not allowed to run deficits, and they've managed to provide a wide range of services in an efficient way, in a way that provincial governments and federal governments, including this provincial government, can only envy. But it is difficult, indeed, to meet the needs of a modern city based on a tax that is just simply intended to provide services to property, more so since half of that tax is taken up to provide for education.

8:50

So either the provincial government should clear out of the property tax collection—again, it's not the school boards that are collecting this; it's the provincial government. They should either clear out and give the full room to municipalities and fund education exclusively from income tax and other revenues of the province, or they ought to provide some form of revenue sharing to municipalities that would allow them to meet their needs.

As municipalities have developed and changed, the kinds of services they have to provide have become more expensive and more extensive. They are expected to provide recreational programs that go far beyond just the community rink or the soccer field at the local school. They have to provide mass transit; they have to deal with housing. They have to deal with all sorts of things, Mr. Speaker, that were not intended for the property tax, much less half the property tax as the situation is now.

So the province needs to do something. There's been a commitment by the federal government in part due to pressure from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, ably led by Jack Layton, who was the president of that organization and is now the leader of the federal New Democrats and has developed a very, very strong municipal policy. Paul Martin, the Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party, has responded partly with a stronger position, and the hon. provincial Finance minister has rightly pointed out that the cheque is still in the mail and municipalities have yet to see it. So we will see.

The point is that the federal government at least is making noises about helping municipalities meet their financial obligations and their increased demands for services, and so should this provincial government. This motion, I think, goes a long way towards doing that. It's only one way to do it, but it is consistent with the principles established by the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association. They have said as their guiding principle number one that

Municipal Governments must have the fiscal capacity to fulfill their mandate through:

- primary access to the property tax base; and
- other stable long-term and progressive sources of revenue.

Mr. Speaker, it was with some excitement that I saw this motion and was prepared to support it, only to find that the Member for Little Bow's motion will completely emasculate the original motion. Keep in mind that motions are just recommendations to the government and do not require the government to carry them out. So you can be a little stronger in your motion because if the government has other needs it needs to balance, it doesn't have to follow it. To take away the guts of this motion by taking out the words "to eliminate" and substituting "to phase-out" and by striking out "and fund education through general revenue" and substitute "over a 10 year period, gradually supplementing the loss from alternative sources" is to turn this into a completely wimpy motion that says virtually nothing, that gives the government far more wiggle room than the government even needs in its wildest dreams.

So I'm not going to support the amendment, because I think it is an attempt to just rip the soul out of this motion and make sure that nothing really happens. I'm surprised that the mover of this motion has stood here and supported this amendment because it has the effect, quite frankly, of just completely neutering the motion and leaving it meaningless, Mr. Speaker. I would urge hon. members who do believe that we need to give a better deal to municipalities and who do feel that the way to do that is to get the provincial government out of the property tax business and leave the tax room for municipalities to oppose this amendment and then to support the main motion without the amendment.

Mr. Speaker, just to conclude, it is time that we had a new deal for

municipalities. The federal government is making noises of going down this road. Municipalities have fought for this many, many years at both the federal and at the provincial level. It's time for the province of Alberta to get in the game, get with the program, and realize that municipalities provide more value per tax dollar than any other order of government and they need the tools to do the job, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: I just want to say because of the time constraints that we have this evening that I support this amendment, and I also support this Motion 501, and I'd like to call for the question on the amendment.

[Motion on amendment carried]

Mr. Klapstein: Like many of my colleagues I spent a good number of years in local government, both municipal and in education. I think the question is: is property tax a fair tax? I can accept the fact that property tax is probably fair for municipal purposes because generally it relates to services to property.

However, when you look at the education part of it, what is the fairness in the fact that it's the form of the wealth that attracts the tax? If I sell a piece of property and put the money in the bank, it does not get taxed for education, but if I have real estate property, it gets taxed for education. The next step is: it's a deemed value or deemed wealth. If a young couple starts out and pays 25 per cent down on a home, the very next day they're deemed to have a hundred per cent of the value of that house as their wealth, and they're asked to pay accordingly.

The other issue I have with property tax is that it's a tax that you expect people to pay whether or not they have income. If somebody once has some income in their hands and they're asked to give a portion of it in income tax or a consumption tax, that's far more fair than telling someone who's going broke that they have to find some money somewhere to pay for education.

We had classic examples of that in our own experience. The Nisku Business Park was virtually a ghost town in the early '80s. Companies were going broke, but we still said: pay your education tax. Farms, in like manner, were going broke, and we said: pay your education tax whether or not you have money. So I think it's far more fair to take money from people when they have it in their hands when it comes to education.

I guess I can go on and give other examples of how I feel that it's not a fair tax when it comes to the education portion of it. To make the argument that if it has anything to do with school boards – well, that changed in 1994, and since that day the government has collected the money and the government allocates the money. So it's not tied to whether or not there's an education tax on property at all.

So those are my comments on the matter for the moment.

The Acting Speaker: I regret that the allocated time for this portion of the business has now run out.

head: 9:00 **Consideration of Her Honour
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech**

Mr. Griffiths moved that an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank you, Your Honour, for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

[Adjourned debate February 19: Dr. Oberg]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I count it an honour and a privilege to respond to the Lieutenant Governor's Speech from the Throne, entitled *Heading toward Alberta's Second Century: A Proud History, A Promising Future*.

As a recently appointed chair of the Alberta Research Council's board of directors, I was pleased to hear our government identify innovation as a key priority in the provincial throne speech. Unleashing innovation will be key to meeting our goals of improving Alberta's competitiveness in world markets and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. This evening I would like to address the innovation challenge before us and tell you how the Alberta Research Council has been responding.

Before I do that, let me share a definition of innovation. Part of the challenge we face in moving this agenda forward is to establish a common understanding.

Innovation encompasses the process of creating economic value from knowledge through the discovery, development, and deployment of ideas to produce new and improved products, processing, and services. There's no doubt that we've made significant progress to strengthen fundamental and discovery research. Our record in generating wealth from this knowledge investment, however, requires focused effort. Just how big is the challenge before us? The federal government is committed to doubling R and D growth expenditures from \$21 billion to \$49 billion by 2010 to move Canada from 15th to fifth place in terms of world R and D. To get Alberta to the same level, we would have to grow from \$1.1 billion to \$7 billion by 2010.

Our government through the Alberta Science and Research Authority, or ASRA, has been very proactive in addressing this challenge. They have spelled out a four-pillar strategy: life sciences; energy; ICT, or information and communications technology; and technology commercialization. Our increased investment in research through the Ministry of Innovation and Science has moved these strategies forward, but government investment in R and D is still largely focused on basic research. While very necessary, this is not sufficient to unleash the real value of innovation: jobs and wealth.

Successful innovation economies typically invest three to four times the level of fundamental research in industry-relevant applied research. Canada is about one-third that level and Alberta even less. Every successful innovation economy in the world also has intermediary organizations filling the gap between early-stage R and D and commercialization: doing contract work; assisting small and medium-sized enterprises, sometimes known as SMEs, with their R and D and technology needs; and performing research that supports the public interest.

The Alberta Research Council is just such an organization. Innovation is our business. As the first and largest provincial research organization in Canada ARC offers an unparalleled mechanism for this government to move its innovation agenda forward. For more than 80 years now we have worked to capture the value of investments in research to create wealth in the form of new products, processes, and services that enhance Alberta's competitiveness in world markets and ensure our economic prosperity. ARC continues to be instrumental in moving government innovation priorities forward.

I'd like to provide you with some examples this evening of how ARC activities support our aspirations as a government. The February 17 throne speech states that this government will focus on knowledge-based industries and technologies to expand the province's capacity for innovation. The Alberta Research Council is uniquely positioned to bridge the innovation gap between laboratory and marketplace. ARC creates wealth in the form of new products, processes, and services that enhance Alberta's competitiveness in world markets and ensure our ongoing economic prosperity. ARC acts as a strategic agent of ASRA, performing applied research and development focused on energy, life sciences and sustainable resource development, and technology commercialization.

The corporation supports provincial innovation strategies by assisting small and medium-sized enterprises, known as SMEs, with their R and D and technology needs and carrying out research that supports the public interest. Examples include, one, the development of new varieties of native plant species for use in reclamation and horticultural purposes. This work merited both Emerald and Alberta Chamber of Resources awards. The second example: an integrated manure utilization system, sometimes known as IMUS, being developed and demonstrated with Highland Feeders shows the promise of converting manure into energy. Third, the development with Tolko Industries Ltd. of a new container flooring product using Alberta aspen, currently being tested in Asia. A fourth example: a partnership to commercialize a vaccine to reduce the threat of E coli in cattle and ensure cleaner drinking water. Finally, the fifth example: research on blackleg disease in canola, which has an annual potential value of \$180 million to the prairies' agricultural economy, generating \$58 for Alberta agriculture producers for each \$1 invested by ARC.

Now, adding value to our primary resource industries such as forestry and agriculture is key to Alberta's future competitiveness. This is a critical role for ARC in working with these industries. For instance, ARC's work with the oriented strandboard, known as OSB, industry has resulted in a globally recognized centre for excellence in engineered wood products.

The throne speech also talked about expanding on the work taking place through the Alberta energy innovation strategy to ensure that Alberta continues to lead the way in energy innovation and research. ARC's energy programs have an established track record of developing more efficient energy technologies and production processes to recover higher levels of Alberta's energy resources more efficiently and with reduced environmental impacts. In fact, third-party evaluation of the AACI, the Alberta Energy Research Institute/ARC core industry research program, a combined research program, showed a multiple of 12 to 1 on the government investment values, the direct economic impact of this program at close to \$35 million per year, and credits its significant responsibility for creating \$2.9 billion in annual economic output.

The energy industry often demands that unproven technologies be demonstrated in the field before they will risk significant capital or the natural resource itself. In addition to ARC's considerable energy R and D capabilities, the organization's focus includes deploying technologies through field demonstration and larger scale pilot projects. An example is the enhanced coal bed methane technology, which has undergone significant field testing in central Alberta over the past several years.

The throne speech suggests creating a life sciences institute to co-ordinate research taking place across the province in areas such as agriculture, environment, health, and water research. ARC has proposed development of a life sciences technology development centre to position Alberta as a visible and credible location for developing and commercializing life sciences technologies and

products. The centre will provide specialized support to life science companies as they evolve from discovery and applied research through to product and process development, scale up, and market entry in an industrially oriented setting.

The Lieutenant Governor in the throne speech talked about the need for continuing focus on research and technology commercialization directed at providing opportunities for Alberta-grown innovative products and services to be developed. It is in this area of technology commercialization that ARC is really poised to make a significant contribution and, in fact, already stands far ahead of the pack in its ability to move the Alberta strategy forward and unleash innovation. Over the past five years ARC has generated a total of \$12.1 million in revenues from commercialization, a 14-fold increase since turning its attention squarely on this area.

Much of Alberta Research Council's success is due to the strong networks and partnerships that have been built with industries, universities, and governments to capitalize on each organization's respective strengths and deliver the best results possible on our research investments. For example, ARC's work with universities and colleges supports collaborative research projects, commercialization activities, and university internship and co-op programs. Many of ARC's employees are adjunct professors at local universities, and they also provide scholarships to some of the brightest minds for graduate level work in science and technology. ARC is striving to become the go-to organization for Canadian universities seeking to commercialize their research.

9:10

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the Lieutenant Governor in the throne speech committed to establishing a provincial water council this spring to manage water resources for future generations. ARC's integrated resource management program provides a science base, knowledge, and technological support to ensure the ongoing sustainability of Alberta's natural resource industries including water resources and water management strategies. ARC also supports more effective water use strategies through technology development for specific industry sectors. A recent example is the development of an industry-supported water management consortium to help heavy oil and oil sands operators identify and demonstrate more effective water management strategies.

Operating companies are increasingly expected to include water conservation, recycling, reuse, and discharge technology strategies as part of their licence approval process. Working with these companies, the ARC consortium will develop and prove new extraction technologies that reduce fresh water consumption as well as technologies to help capture and recycle process water for reuse in the surface extraction of bitumen from oil sands.

Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to tell you a little about the exciting changes taking place at the Alberta Research Council and how the organization supports this government's innovation agenda. In the short term that I've been associated with ARC, I have been impressed by the depth and breadth of the company's capacity and by their efforts to propose, enhance, and support provincial strategies. I believe the Alberta Research Council represents a natural competitive advantage for this province. All of us need to nurture and support that capacity to move our innovation agenda forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thanks for the opportunity

to respond to the Speech from the Throne. At the outset of my comments I'd like to join my colleagues in thanking Her Honour for her dedication to Alberta and to the sovereign she so gracefully serves. It's always a pleasure when she attends us here in the Chamber, and last Tuesday was no different.

As I sat and listened to the speech, Mr. Speaker, I was struck by several things. Her Honour, of course, is a provincial representative for Her Majesty the Queen, and it is rumoured that Her Majesty will be visiting Alberta next year for our centennial celebration. I cannot help but think of the tremendous changes that have taken place since the Queen's great-grandfather, King Edward VII, was on the throne and oversaw the creation of our province.

At that time Alberta was a struggling outpost of a still young and inexperienced nation, a province that was striving to find itself among the tremendous resources it possessed. In less than 20 years Alberta and her people had already participated in the Great War and were slowly ebbing out of the boom of the '20s into the worst economic crisis this nation and this continent, for that matter, has ever seen. In another 20 years of this young province's history we went through yet another war that left our territory untouched but still managed to affect a whole generation of Albertans.

By 1965 Alberta's future would be changed by the discovery of rare and precious resources, transforming our economy and our government in the process. Over the course of the coming decades our province would strive and grapple with its blessings and curses of our abundant natural resources, which, of course, brings us to today, after a decade of dealing with excesses of the late 1980s and now ultimately positioned among all provinces and territories to shape the course of the 21st century for the better.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, when Her Majesty visits next year, she will find a vibrant, optimistic province, embodied by its past and ready for the future. The Queen will also no doubt find a province that's understanding of how quickly time flows and the need to outline a plan and strategy for the future, which brings me to the centrepiece of last Tuesday's throne speech and the outline of the 20-year plan that will help this province build on the many successes of the past 100 years and create even greater success in the century to come.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to focus my comments today on why this plan is so important to the future of Alberta and why it is a plan that moves beyond catchy phrases and generalities to reality and truly affects in a meaningful way Albertans from across this province.

Throughout the West Yellowhead constituency there are many challenges. The West Yellowhead constituency has coped with the loss of jobs due to the restructuring of many key industries like coal and forestry. It has not been easy, Mr. Speaker, as families struggle to main security and economic well-being, but in this atmosphere of difficult times the people of West Yellowhead turn to find new and innovative ways to make their communities better places. This is where the new plan becomes so important, for it is a plan that helps communities, industry, and individuals succeed. Part of that involves "unleashing innovation," the first pillar of the 20-year plan. Unleashing innovation involves adding value to the natural resources of our province. Instead of exporting our raw resources, it is time Albertans start exporting Alberta products.

In the Edson area two outfits, Talisman and Sundance, will be constructing cogeneration plants to help capture what once was a lost resource. Sundance Forest Industries Ltd., more specifically, is building a nine-megawatt cogeneration plant to help control their costs inside their forest product operations.

In the Edson, Hinton, and Grande Cache area it goes without saying that the forest industry is struggling to cope with the softwood lumber dispute. This is a serious situation, Mr. Speaker, and I will continue to encourage the government to resolve this most difficult

issue. I cannot overstress the real importance of this matter to my constituents and, in particular, to the people of Edson, Hinton, and Grande Cache.

Yet, despite all this, innovation is still happening. In the Grande Cache area the constituents are trying to turn the closing of a sawmill into an opportunity by developing a new log-sort yard. To these people, Mr. Speaker, the government's commitment to a long-term, value-added plan is more than just words. It is the endorsement and encouragement of the valuable work that they are presently undertaking.

In the gas industry natural gas is located up and down the eastern slopes. The communities of Edson, Hinton, Grande Cache are doing well in this area. The pipeline to Grande Cache is helping this community, and we are seeing more and more exploration taking place.

Now, on coal. Cheviot, the replacement mine for the Cardinal River Coal mine, is looking very positive to come on stream later this year. In Grande Cache the Grande Cache Coal Company has received approval to operate number 7 underground, and they are planning to try and do the same thing with the number 8 surface mine and the prep plant, hoping to open this spring. And, Mr. Speaker, Milner Power of Calgary has purchased the H.R. Milner plant and is going to purchase coal from Luscar Ltd. in their Coal Valley operation to help run their coal-fired plant.

Mr. Speaker, unleashing innovation doesn't necessarily involve physical resources; unleashing innovation also involves unleashing human potential. I must applaud the government and the efforts of the departments of Economic Development, Sustainable Resource Development, Human Resources and Employment, and Municipal Affairs, in particular, for helping the people of Grande Cache to develop a plan to diversify their economy. The departments in a meeting on December 11 committed to help the town of Grande Cache, and while there are no easy answers at present, I'd like to sincerely thank those departments for their assistance and their commitment to the town. We are moving things along, and important progress is being made.

The government has also been crucial in helping Grande Cache and Jasper develop tourism industries. Workshops are being developed, and strategies are being developed to help the towns and areas attract visitors to this wonderfully historic and scenic area. In Jasper, for instance, plans are underway now to capitalize on the upcoming centennial year. Interested parties from around Jasper are co-ordinating their efforts under a single theme and structure – Jasper, Wonderful by Nature – to encourage that Jasper is well positioned to capture and expand their tourism potential.

9:20

On a larger scale, Mr. Speaker, communities throughout my constituency are striving to make the fourth pillar of the plan – "making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit" – a reality. The towns of Hinton, Jasper, and Edson have come together in a successful and totally co-operative bid to host the 2006 Alberta Winter Games. This spirit of co-operation is a credit to the remarkable people in the West Yellowhead constituency, and I cannot be more happy that their efforts were successful. I know that the games that will be hosted will be among the best ever.

That spirit of co-operation is also prevalent in other areas as well. Communities from around the West Yellowhead constituency have come together to help form the Grande Alberta Trail. The trail is a 1,200-kilometre circle tour of highway routes through a diverse collection of communities that profile spectacular attractions and adventures and activities.

Mr. Speaker, the other two pillars of the plan – "leading in

learning” and “competing in a global marketplace” – are also prevalent in the West Yellowhead constituency. It is through education that this province will be able to adapt and create the new opportunities in industries that will be necessary for the next 100 years, as well as for the way in which our constituents deal with other people from around the world. In many aspects this 20-year plan is about people and helping them direct where the province will go, and it is to them and their interests that we must always be dedicated.

In 1997 during my maiden speech I pledged to take this opportunity to work with the government and to serve the interests of West Yellowhead constituents in a dependable, balanced, and open manner. I hope that I’ve done so in the best tradition of this Assembly. When it comes to the interests of the West Yellowhead constituency and the entire province for that matter, I firmly believe that the 20-year plan and the specifics that will follow in the course of the next several weeks and months is an important vision that will serve the best interests of all constituents of this great province. I look forward to working with the government and the people of West Yellowhead in making this vision a reality. I would like to thank the people of West Yellowhead for their kindness and support, and thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the Speech from the Throne.

At this time I’d like to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading
Bill 4
Blind Persons’ Rights Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate February 19: Mr. Lougheed]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This bill is one that’s led to a number of calls and meetings at our caucus office and our constituency office. It’s a bill that touches close to the heart of all human beings concerned with those who maybe go through life or face day-to-day life with a disability, in this case a bill that’s focused on the disability of blindness. I know that I myself have two relatives at least and a close friend who are legally blind. One actually was blind from early in childhood, and he grew up with that disability and has coped extremely well. The second became blind in middle age and as a result lost her job. She was a schoolteacher. She’s now on permanent disability insurance and has adapted extremely well with the help of the CNIB and with some other supports including a very supportive family. The third person, my aunt, actually went blind in her late 80s, and what’s particularly sad about that is that it’s really the only thing limiting her even now. She’s 94, I think, and other than her blindness she’s in extremely good health, but because of that disability she’s unable to travel or to do many of the things that she would like to do.

I’m sure all of us have experiences similar to what I’m describing. All of us have friends and relatives who have disabilities with their sight and will be following this bill very closely.

The object of this bill really is to update current legislation, and it does pretty well at that. I think it’s fair to say that we wish it went further and, in fact, brought in other kinds of disabilities so that people who are dependent, in this case, on service dogs to help them cope with their disability but may not be blind – they may be deaf; they may be prone to seizures; they may have other disabilities –

have the same rights extended to them and their dogs that blind people benefit from and will have enhanced through this piece of legislation.

What we’re seeing in this legislation is a broadening of the definition of “blind person,” and I think that’s fine. That allows for some flexibility, and frankly in our rapidly changing medical world it’s wise to have legislation that’s adaptable. I also notice that the bill increases the penalties for those people who use a white cane in public and are not blind, which is a reasonable thing to do. It extends certain provisions to dog trainers, to people who train service dogs for blind people, again a reasonable thing to do. Generally, it ups the penalties for discriminatory practices as well as for people who may be faking blindness.

So these are all steps forward in the legislation. It’s a good start on this whole notion. As I say, though, I think it’s our view that, in fact, this bill would be substantially improved if it went further. If a disabled person needs a service dog to cope with day-to-day life but they’re not blind, why should they be penalized? Why shouldn’t they have the same rights as people who are blind? So there is a shortfall in this bill, and I’m not sure if, in fact, perhaps we should consider some amendments to this bill. I don’t know what the reception to those might be from the government caucus, the Tory caucus, or the New Democrat caucus, but certainly from the correspondence we’ve received, we maybe will consider amendments to take this bill and make it better by applying it more broadly.

Mr. Speaker, with those comments I think I will wrap up for now, and if this goes into committee perhaps next week, we might at that point be able to present some amendments. Thank you very much.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a second time]

9:30 **Bill 1**
Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act

[Adjourned debate February 18: Dr. Oberg]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I’m pleased to have the opportunity to speak in second reading to Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, this being the government’s flagship bill, introduced by the Premier.

I’m just profoundly disappointed that this is what the government chose as their flagship bill for this year. I don’t know how they can be proud of such an idea when it entrenches the concept of winners and losers. It entrenches inequity in the province. It’s not the best way to help our kids either now or in the future. It’s certainly not the best way to help our postsecondary students. Obviously, it’s generating some discussion, even out in public, from the government caucus itself based on my reading of the *Hansard* remarks of I think it was the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

This is a gimmick. You know, there’s an amount of money that’s set aside here, and given the number of demands upon the budget and requests for immediate funding to address gaps or lapses, shortfalls in the current K to 12 budget, it’s unconscionable. “You know, let’s set this money aside today. Let’s not use it for what we need today in the education system. Let’s set it aside for something in the future,” especially when it can’t even address and be fair and be equitable to those Albertans in the future.

I think that for many of us that have constituents who are struggling financially, perhaps even budgeting very close to the line if this is their first child and they’re not earning a lot of money – or perhaps it’s a third or fourth or fifth, and they’re being very careful with their finances. There are a number of constituents who will not have the

wherewithal to be able to open the registered education savings plan with the required hundred dollars. So right there we have the government putting in . . . [interjection] Well, that's what the banks are asking for. I had the Minister of Justice telling me that that was the set-up the other day, so if you want to argue, argue with your own colleague.

We will not be able to offer this across the board to Albertans. This is an unfair situation. The government knows that going into it. This is their flagship bill, which is entrenching inequity, which is entrenching that children that are coming from families in strained financial circumstances stay there because they can't get the account open with the required amount of money. So the account doesn't exist, and the government is not going to put in the \$500 now and whatever additional funds they were contemplating later on.

If the government was really concerned about education for our children, I think they could be investing that money in smaller class sizes. They could be funding the recommendations of the Learning Commission. We had the Learning Commission come forward with 95 recommendations, whatever it was. The government has said that they're accepting 84 of them, but then they don't have the money to fund them. So how is that accepting them? They're not. If they don't have the money to fund it and if it doesn't come out in the budget in a couple of months, then it was a very empty promise to follow through and accept those recommendations. So if you want to look for where to spend money to uphold education K to 12 now, fund the recommendations of the Learning Commission.

The government could eliminate school fees and use the money to cover the shortfall there if you eliminate those school fees. Every September I get phone calls from parents who are going: "How come I just had to write a cheque for \$450 for two kids? How come I just had to write a cheque for \$600 for three kids?" This is the level that parents are now paying school fees for everything from photocopying to lockers, and there's still a question about why that isn't a taxable benefit. You know, we pay taxes already for education, and we pay a levy through the education property tax to pay for education, and then parents are walking in the door in September and they're laying out more money. So I think that eventually that's going to get challenged through Revenue Canada.

If we wanted to make sure that we had children that were engaged and interested and motivated to partake in postsecondary education in the future, then start now by lowering tuition fees so that the current crop of students can get through education without such an enormous debt that they can't afford to have those future children, which is a high likelihood, I think.

I mean, if we're really concerned about Alberta's children, then let's be making sure that no Alberta child lives in poverty, if we're really serious about that. But we're not serious. We want a gimmick bill that the government can wave around and say: see how much we care. Well, I don't think the government does care. If they're not willing to follow through on their own Learning Commission recommendations, if they're not willing to ensure that no Alberta child lives in poverty, if the government is not willing to fund education adequately now, if the government is not willing to make university or postsecondary education tuition affordable for students, I don't think there is a commitment to children now. I've heard some very heartwarming stories of grandparents that are sitting members who started registered education savings programs for their children and now for their grandchildren, and that's a commendable idea, but what this government is proposing here just doesn't measure up to the heartfelt generosity of what I've heard in this House. That's not what's intended behind this bill.

You know, we have a situation currently in postsecondary education where for every dollar in tuition I think it was 10 years

ago, when this government first came in, there was \$10 in government funding into postsecondary education. What did we have in 2002? For every dollar of tuition the government is putting in \$2.43.

Let's talk about individual funding of students. We have student loans assuming that middle-income families or lower income families will be financing students. Well, that doesn't necessarily happen. Students choose areas to go into that their parents or family are not supportive of. There are all kinds of reasons why the family is not able to fund the students, and that means that they're out. You know, because they're supposed to be coming from a so-called well-to-do family or middle-income family, if that family is not funding them, the students are not eligible to take advantage of the government-assisted programs. So they're going to the banks for loans, and we have students coming out of university with \$20,000 to \$40,000 debts on their shoulders. That's an immediate intergenerational transfer of debt, in my opinion, and this government has been very successful in doing it in less than a generation. They downloaded that debt directly onto the shoulders of the students we have in postsecondary educational institutions.

So do I find much commendable in this piece of legislation? No, I don't. Am I willing to support it? No, I'm not. I don't think the government is serious about it either. As I said, if they were serious about supporting children, there were a number of other things they could have done to support children.

Mr. MacDonald: You're not going to wait until you hear the Premier speak?

9:40

Ms Blakeman: I've heard the Premier speak on this, and it obviously didn't convince me that they were following through on any of this. If you're serious about following through with assisting any of our students that are in postsecondary educational institutions, NAIT or SAIT or any of the colleges or the Alberta College system or any of the universities, then that's about tuition, that's about availability of student loans. None of that's happening here. This is just a gimmick bill, and it's unfair. It is picking winners and losers, certainly amongst those that have the luck to be born into a family that can afford to open a registered education savings plan. What's fair about that? It's not. What's equitable about treatment of that child? It's not.

So there are just a number of deficiencies that are created by this bill and deficiencies that have not been addressed by this bill. It's very disappointing in the year 2004 that this is the best that the government can come up with. I mean, this government is a master of propaganda. This was the best propaganda bill that you could come up with? Please. You know, I'm sure that you could have done better if you could have tried a little harder. This is pretty poor.

Mr. MacDonald: What other examples of this propaganda?

Ms Blakeman: Well, you're better at that than I am. I'll let you take a go at that.

The idea that everybody is supposed to pay their own way, that all things come down to a user fee that is such a major tenet of this government's philosophy, does not understand that education is an investment. It's an investment in the future. It's why we all pay property tax, and everybody pays educational property tax understanding that that investment in the future is shared by all of us and for a good reason. We're a better society if we have an educated population. But this doesn't follow through on that because some children are able to take advantage of it and some aren't.

I have a little tickle of a worry at the back of my head that this is

putting in position that in the future there will be no government funding or no government support for postsecondary education, and families will carry the full freight of the cost of sending their children to any kind of postsecondary institution. Is that the glimmer that we see in this bill? Is that what the government is setting up for us, that you better get started on this one because that's the only way that anyone is going to get any kind of higher education in this province? I sure hope not, and I hope that that's not what I'm going to see 20 years from now.

I'm just profoundly disappointed in this bill, and I'm not willing to support it in any way, shape, or form at this point. I appreciate the opportunity to speak against the bill in second reading. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Do we get a chance to comment or ask questions?

The Acting Speaker: Not on this speaker, but from here on.

Mr. Herard: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, the table officer is just correcting me that Standing Order 29 does apply here, so, yes, you can ask a question.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Well, it's more an expression of how disappointed I am that my MLA – when I live in Edmonton, she's my MLA – would speak so badly of this bill. It's just a few comments, Mr. Speaker.

She speaks of inequities. I had a constituent call me with similar concerns until we talked about the heritage savings trust fund. When it began to provide scholarships, Rutherford scholarships, there were similar comments made at that time, that it doesn't apply to last year and the year before and every other child in the province. But I think that if we look at it today, it has distributed hundreds of millions of dollars in scholarships, and I don't think everybody is complaining about it today as they did back then.

I think that the hon. member is confusing a couple of things. You know, there are always more and more and more things that you can spend on, and there's very little opportunity in government to invest, although we talk about investment. Invest in education. Invest in health care. Well, this is an investment. Now in terms of . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, brief comments.

Mr. Herard: Okay. One more quick one.

The hon. member is concerned that there may be a fairly significant segment of the population that may not be able to afford to get into this. Let me assure her that there are at least three plans being considered in regulation to assist those of lower income including and not the least of which one that was announced by Prime Minister Martin, who likes what we're doing so much that he is going to actually create one for low-income Canadians, so we're going to wait and see what he has in the budget with respect to his plan before we finalize ours. But rest assured, hon. member, that this is made for the inclusion of the poorest of the poor.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Well, thank you. Always interesting to see members opposite become engaged in the debate, but I'm particularly

interested in how that member responded to his colleague the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, who raised many of the same points that I did in underlining the inequity that is inherent in the bill: how he can't look his own constituents in the eye and agree that this is a fair bill because of the money that's lacking in the schools there and also pointing out that picking winners and losers because it's not dealing with some of the apprenticeship and other . . . [interjection] Well, the member is welcome to look under February 18 of *Hansard*, pages 44 and 45, if he's wondering exactly what the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster said. But that was certainly one of his concerns: picking winners and losers.

So obviously there's division, at least one dissenting opinion in the government caucus about the importance of Bill 1, and I'll remind you again that the flagship bill of the government has its own backbenchers disagreeing with it.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. I rise to speak to this bill myself.

The Acting Speaker: You have been recognized to speak on the bill.

Dr. Taft: Thank you very much. That's what I'd like to do.

This bill is already memorable for the debate it stirred up within the government benches. I find that my reactions to it have shifted the more I've thought about it. The more I've thought about it, the more concerns I've got, and the more people I've spoken to, the more concerns I've got. Somebody I spoke to likened it to George Bush's mission to Mars in the idea that this is an announcement that grabs some headlines, but it's going to take decades before it pays off, and all the costs are going to be placed on future governments. I'm all in favour of long-term planning, but it should be good planning.

I think there are some serious, serious flaws in how this is going to be enacted. Most of those flaws have already been touched on here. One is the question of fairness, or unfairness, in this bill. The questions of fairness arise from several perspectives. One which has been mentioned before by people on all sides of this House is that suddenly choosing babies who were born in 2005 and leaving behind all the kids who were born before that is unfair. It's certainly not the fault of a baby born in 2004 that they happened to come along when they did and because of that won't get the money.

I think there are questions down the road of the fairness. Who's going to be eligible? Who's going to actually be able to undertake the initiative to apply for an RESP and qualify? I do think that we are going to see that the families who are already better educated and already have higher incomes have a much higher uptake of this program than those families who will need it the most. I'd be surprised, for example, if the uptake on this program by aboriginal Albertans is the same as it is for nonaboriginal Albertans. I'd be surprised if the uptake on this program by children born into families without postsecondary education is as high as the uptake of children born into families where there is postsecondary education. We will be, through this program, increasing disparity in this society, and I think that's a problem and it's fundamentally unfair. In fact, it's the exact opposite of what this kind of legislation should do.

9:50

This bill also raises questions about implementation, and the Member for Calgary-Egmont, who sponsored the bill, mentioned that regulations are in progress. Well, we don't know what those

regulations are. As is typical of this government, we never see the regulations until after the legislation is in place.

But there are a lot of questions to be asked here. What happens to children who are born in 2005 and after, have the plan opened for them, and then tragically die? What will happen to that money? Or what happens to children born in Alberta who qualify, get the money, and then their families move to another province or another country? Or what happens to children whose families qualify for the money and then they decide not to attend postsecondary education? These are all serious, serious questions, and we have no idea how they're going to be answered. So I could feel more comfortable with this bill if there was a bit more detail, but as it is, I'm being asked to vote on something which just has too many unknowns around it.

So with those comments, Mr. Speaker, I will take my seat and watch the debate as it unfolds. I would like to give full credit to all members who stand up and express their views on this, no matter what those views happen to be.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a very brief question. I think that what the hon. member has to do is read up on how RESPs are currently structured in Canada, and you will find that what we are doing is following exactly the federal formulas and all of the safeguards that they've put into RESPs over the years. In fact, the federal government has agreed to administer this whole thing on a single application for both the provincial and federal plans, so the bonus there is that there's going to be very little if any administrative cost to the province. So really, I would suggest, hon. member, that all of the concerns that you raised with respect to what happens when a child moves from here to there are all answered under the current RESP rules that exist today, and I would just ask you to maybe look them up.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, did you want to comment?

Dr. Taft: No. That's fine.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak to Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act. Now, traditionally Bill 1 at the beginning of a session is a flagship piece of legislation. This has been quite traditional in our system across Canada, and many governments have made Bill 1 the focus of the image that they want to create, the focus of what they want to do, what is most important to them, how they want to be seen as a government. So going back many years, one example that comes to mind is when the Parti Québécois was first elected in the province of Quebec. Their Bill 1 was the language act because that was the thing that was most important to them, and we've seen many other examples across the country over time.

So Bill 1, I assume, is supposed to be a flagship piece of legislation for this provincial government. That's an interesting way to look at it, I think, Mr. Speaker, because it is a piece of legislation that contains within it such noble principles yet which fails so abysmally to provide any sense of equality or accessibility to education. It's as if this act is ignoring the entire rest of the government's policy with respect to education since the last election or even going back before that.

What we have, Mr. Speaker, is a government that has starved education. It has underfunded it, and it has allowed strife. It has allowed parents' groups, parents to go out and fund-raise for necessities, and it has allowed considerable inequity in the access to education.

Now, as we approach the election, Mr. Speaker, the government is attempting to rectify that, so we have seen the establishment of the Learning Commission. The recommendations of the Learning Commission have been, so far, generally accepted by the government, even including recommendations that indicate that those of us on this side and among parents' groups and educators who strongly claimed that education was being underfunded – in fact, those claims, which were ridiculed by the government and by the Minister of Learning, have been verified by the Learning Commission, and the government pretends that it never happened.

Mr. Speaker, what does the bill do? Well, the bill purports to help parents save for their children's education, and that by itself is probably a good thing. But what are they saving for? Well, they're saving for a postsecondary education that has become very much more expensive than it was just 10 years ago, and a big chunk of that has been because of the steady increase in tuition fees that the government has permitted – indeed, induced – postsecondary institutions to charge their students. Government policy is in favour of higher tuition for postsecondary education.

In fact, we had the Minister of Learning just the other night in here ask me a question in which he referred to a Toronto-Dominion Bank study that showed that tuition fees, if taken as an investment, produced a good return, as if earning 20 per cent on your tuition fees through your total earnings as an individual in the workplace was some kind of justification in a blanket way for policies that exclude many Albertans from the education that their taxes pay for. That way of looking at it, Mr. Speaker, is part of the problem. Quite frankly, if you look at it strictly as an economic investment, you don't see the full richness and value of pursuing a postsecondary education. It's a very, very one-dimensional view of education.

I just want to I guess indicate that having to save for costs that are too high is not necessarily a bad thing, but when those costs are far too high and when the same government that gives you the \$500 to start saving is also producing a policy that charges you thousands and thousands of dollars for tuition, you know, you begin to wonder if the left hand knows what the right hand is doing or if the right hand knows what the other right hand is doing. So I don't understand it, quite frankly. I don't understand why we should be given money from our taxes to start saving for tuition fees that go to institutions that our taxes pay for so that they can charge enormous and unfair tuition fees.

10:00

Now, that doesn't speak to any of the points, I think, made by the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster in his interesting speech on this bill, and that is the unfairness of only children born in the centennial year and forward being eligible for this benefit. All of our taxes pay for this. We have kids today who are struggling to pay for their education.

I have a 16-year-old son, and he is hopefully going to be going to university. We established when he was born a savings plan for him so that we could afford the education, yet we, like thousands and thousands of other families who want the best for our children in this province, are ineligible to receive this. There are many more families who don't have a savings plan at all, so how will they benefit, Mr. Speaker?

You have to have a certain amount of surplus income to be able to save for your children's education. What about those families that

don't? What about the many, many thousands of families in this province whose income is barely sufficient to meet their costs of living from month to month and who find it very difficult to save for postsecondary education, retirement, or any of those things?

So we have a bill that is supposed to be a flagship piece of legislation. Some of us a little more cynical might say that it's supposed to be an election goody bill. But you know what, Mr. Speaker? It's not even good at that because it excludes the majority of the people of this province, all of whom pay taxes towards education, many of whom are having trouble putting their kids through university or college and are ineligible to receive the benefits of this bill. So it's not even a good election goody bill. It's representative, in my view, of the bankruptcy of this government, the lack of vision for this province, the lack of foresight, the lack of an ability to actually come up with something meaningful for the people of this province as they prepare for the next election. It's a government that's exhausted its ideas.

You know, I don't mean to be terribly negative towards the government. It's had over a 30-year run. It had to run out of ideas sometime. It's a credit to this government that it's lasted as long as it has, but clearly, Mr. Speaker, it's a government that's tired, that's unimaginative, that's old, that's arrogant and thinks that this piece of legislation is actually something to be proud of.

Well, it's not. This is not a bill to be proud of. This is not something to go to the people with. This is not a flagship piece of legislation. This is a flawed, unfair, and discriminatory act that doesn't deal with the basic problem that the government itself has created in postsecondary education, and that is the high costs of a university or a college education that is unaffordable for many of the people of this province, I'd daresay almost a majority of the people of this province, who pay the taxes for those institutions. That's wrong, Mr. Speaker. The government should be ashamed of itself, and I'd ask them to withdraw this bill.

I move to adjourn debate on this, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I think we've had plenty of debate this evening, so I move that we adjourn this Assembly until tomorrow afternoon at 1:30.

[Motion carried; at 10:06 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, February 24, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/24

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon, and welcome.

Let us pray. Grant us daily awareness of the precious gift of life which has been given to us. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we dedicate our lives anew to the service of our province and our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly 30 grades 5 and 6 students and their teacher, Miss Alana Manke, from Overlanders school, which is located in the constituency of Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. Along with the students and teacher are parents and helpers Mrs. Kim Militsala, Mrs. Rose Howitt, and Mrs. Anna Evenson. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I'd like them to rise at this time and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 20 students and two adults, their teacher and a parent, who have accompanied them. They are visiting the Legislature today from Sir George Simpson school in St. Albert. They are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview I would like to introduce a class that's here with us from St. Martin Catholic school. There are 19 students from the St. Martin Ukrainian bilingual program, and it's the only one-track Ukrainian bilingual program of its kind in western Canada. They are accompanied today by teacher Mrs. Natalie Harasymiw. I would ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly 23 visitors from McNally composite high school. This delegation comprises 20 students and three teachers/group leaders. They are Mrs. Tammy Tchir, Mr. Ian Crichton, and Ms Sue Noddings. These individuals are all in the public gallery, and as they rise to receive the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly, I would like to note that also in the delegation is one Mr. Bryn Marsh. I had the opportunity of playing hockey with Mr. Marsh, and he's the individual with the Oilers shirt on. If you'd all please rise and receive the warm welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a parent. Gerry Russo has a child attending grade 1 at McKernan elementary/junior high. He's present in the members' gallery today because he is concerned about the lack of funding for public education and the quality of public education his child is receiving. I would ask Mr. Russo to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I introduced the students from Sir George Simpson school, I neglected to name their teacher, Mrs. Carolyn Gabourie, who has for many years brought her students here to the Assembly, and Ms Susan Johnston, the parent who has accompanied them, who is also vitally interested in their children's education. So I wanted to acknowledge them as well.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my distinct pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly this afternoon two parents, Dr. Robert Wilson and Ms Preet Sara, who are members of a group called Education Watch. Dr. Robert Wilson has a child attending grade 2 at McKernan elementary/junior high school, and Ms Preet Sara has two children at the same school. These parents are concerned about the quality of education offered in this province. I'd like them to now rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: Hon. members, I have a long list of members who've indicated their interest in participating today, so might I ask for brevity in both the questions and the answers.

First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Utilities Consumer Advocate

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Bolger report on electricity deregulation is being treated with contempt by this government. The report clearly states that the government should "establish a consumer ombudsman – providing an independent, government-funded third party responsible for investigating consumer complaints and reporting regularly to Albertans." My first question is to the Minister of Government Services. How can the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate be independent when all its funding comes from the gas companies and the Balancing Pool and not the government, as stated in the Bolger report?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, ombudsman is an incorrect word. The actual term that we're using is "consumer advocate for electricity and natural gas," so let's make that correction right off the bat.

Mr. Speaker, the Bolger report did recommend that a consumer advocate be put in place; that has been done under our department. We presently have set up an office for handling complaints from consumers out there, and we handle complaints, everywhere from billing inaccuracies by companies – and it's being handled by the Department of Government Services under the ombudsman. That's the recommendation that was made, and that's what we're doing.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that a recent standing policy committee meeting confirmed that there's a \$4.4 million budget for the utility watchdog, and that is to be paid for by gas companies and the Balancing Pool, how can this minister state that the Utilities Consumer Advocate is independent?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, this is staffed by the Deputy Minister of Government Services responsible for consumer advocacy, and it is for the consumers out there. It is the consumers' dollars that are actually going through the advocate's office to protect the consumers. So, yes, it should be close to government. It should be close to government, and that's what we're doing. We have to make it effective, and the best way to make it effective is to have them report directly to government.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that this government has handed the utilities consumer watchdog over to the industry – it's not even a short leash; it's a choke chain – what authority determined that the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate would be funded by industry? What authority allowed this to happen?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, it's very appropriate – very appropriate – that consumer and corporate affairs actually handles some of the consumer complaints that are out there, and that's exactly what we're doing with this particular office. We are independent. We are part of industry. We get input from industry. We also get input from the department people that we deal with in the Department of Energy. As well, we work with other consumer groups across this province to make sure that consumers are protected under this.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Long-term Care Facilities

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Staffing cuts at the Bethany Care Centre are to blame for a decline in the quality of care seniors are getting. That's according to the government's own Health Facilities Review Committee. The report also says that even more staff cuts are expected. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: is this minister going to stand by while more staff are laid off and the appalling conditions for seniors get worse?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to refer to a report that hon. members might recall, that was produced by Dr. Donna Wilson, a professor of nursing at the University of Alberta, as she released this report last fall. Dr. Wilson published her research that showed that residents of Alberta long-term care facilities have better health than seniors in the community resulting from the care that they receive. Now, overall, we'd have to say that the 14,000 residents in long-term care centres, some 201 facilities throughout the province, are well looked after.

1:40

What the hon. member here today in reference to the Bethany Care Centre has failed to mention is that the Health Facilities Review Committee does a number of unannounced visits to facilities throughout the province, and Bethany was one of the facilities that they attended, I believe, in July 2003. Mr. Speaker, what the hon. member refuses or neglects to say is that the committee, the Health Facilities Review Committee, made a number of recommendations to Bethany Care Centre, and in fact Bethany Care has made signifi-

cant and positive changes over a period of time, over a number of years, but also in response to the report that was filed by the committee in the fall of last year.

Bethany Care has submitted their response to the committee's recommendations. They've reported progress on all of them. They did that in January of 2004. That response by the Bethany Care Centre is currently being reviewed by the Health Facilities Review Committee, but we have had good co-operation by a good facility trying to improve itself.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Health and Wellness: why did the government keep this damning report out of the hands of stakeholders, staff, and family members?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, I think it's important that we focus on what it is that we're trying to do, which is improve the facility, not politicize it.

Mr. Bonner: That was weak.

Ms Blakeman: Very weak.

My next question is to the Minister of Community Development. Why are the people most concerned about enforcement – that is, residents and their families – excluded from the committee that is reviewing the Protection for Persons in Care Act?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, when I appointed a specific committee of individuals to be part of this review, we considered all the other agencies and all the other stakeholders that are involved. If we were to have had representation from every single one of those groups, we would have had a committee of about 60. That clearly wouldn't have been a workable solution for anyone, so we did choose individuals who have great experience and have shown leadership in this field of protective care to join a committee led by the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, augmented by two other MLAs: Edmonton-Norwood and the chair of the Seniors Advisory Council, Calgary-West, I believe it is. Together they have come forward with a report with recommendations. We are studying those recommendations as we speak, and I have met with many other individuals and groups, and so, too, has the chair of that committee. So we've got a pretty broad, rounded perspective, and we'll be moving forward with recommendations shortly.

Water Management

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Environment disagrees with local residents that the Red Deer River diversion is an irresponsible use of water, and he is turning a deaf ear to their arguments that he is putting their long-term access to water at risk. Nine local mayors are fighting a diversion, but the Minister of Energy says in this House, "Big deal." My question is to the Minister of Environment. When will your government admit that this is a big deal and acknowledge that the concerns of central Albertans about water scarcity are justified?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, I first need to correct an assumption she made in her editorializing in the preamble. She said that I disagreed with the communities and the nine mayors and so on. I have not said that I disagreed or agreed.

It's very clear that the issue is in front of the Environmental Appeal Board. We have a process to deal with it, and as I said

yesterday in this House, I believe we're the only jurisdiction in Canada or the only province in Canada that has an open and transparent process, a semijudicial process, to deal with it. Any decision of any director in my department can be appealed, and that's what's happening here. A director made a decision. It is being appealed in the semijudicial process of the Environmental Appeal Board, where there's complete and public airing of the issues. That is happening as we speak, and 30 days or so from the conclusion of that hearing the Environmental Appeal Board will be making a recommendation to me.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, why didn't this minister delay a decision over the Red Deer River diversion project at least until his Watershed Planning and Advisory Council had made its recommendations? That's what the community wanted.

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have a process in place, and we have legislation we have to operate under. Our director granted a licence. Under the legislation that we have to operate under, anybody, a citizen – she could have if she'd been aware enough to do it – could have made an appeal of this director's decision, and that's what's happened. So we will act according to our legislation, and our legislation clearly outlines the process. It's a very public process, and it's ongoing.

Ms Carlson: This minister knows very well that that decision didn't have to be made when it was. Will the minister admit that his Water for Life strategy won't be worth the paper it's written on if the Red Deer River diversion goes ahead with no regard for the water needs of local communities?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly I won't admit that because it's totally irrelevant to what's happening. As well as having the EAB hearing going on, we have a committee made up of the environmental nongovernmental organizations, the oil producers, the gas producers, and the communities presently meeting, and they are going to give me recommendations by the end of March. One of the issues will be what their position is on oil field utilization of potable water. That is ongoing. The member knows it's ongoing, and as we move forward, we'll be making the appropriate decisions.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Tory government today revealed its grand scheme for saving medicare: selling booze to hospitalized patients. That ought to lift spirits a bit as patients recover from serious illness or injuries. The Premier has obviously learned some valuable lessons in his jet-setting travels around the world. First there were limousines and \$27 a shot orange juice. Now we are going to turn sections of our hospitals into luxury centres for the well-heeled and profit centres for the private sector marketing these services. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What studies did the government rely on in advising the Premier that making wine available to patients would aid in their hospital recovery?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'm very happy to rise in the spirit of debate. I am not an expert on matters as they relate to alcohol since I don't drink, but if I had to listen to this all day, I might think about taking it up.

Mr. Speaker, the core issue here is one of sustainability of our health care system, and the core issue is that our health care expenditures are rising across Canada, not just in Alberta but across Canada, at roughly twice the rate of growth of government revenues, and that's the reason why it's not sustainable. In an effort to look for sustainability, we should be looking at health care systems around the world.

I should say, Mr. Speaker, that there's no person in the world that's probably completely satisfied with their health care system. If you go to the U.K., if you go to France, if you go to Sweden, if you go to Australia, if you go to New Zealand, there will of course be advantages and disadvantages of each and every one of those systems. There are pros and cons to each one of them.

But, Mr. Speaker, it is important for us to be open-minded, to not be ideologues and shut our minds to new ideas that may come from other jurisdictions. We need to strive to find solutions for the core issue of sustainability. I think that there are elements of the U.K. system that are very, very good. There are other parts of it that we would not want to adopt in this province. The same goes for the French system. The same goes for the Swedish health care system. All of them have advantages that we should be able to try and take advantage of, and we should be open-minded to those ideas.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's good to know that the minister is not entirely humourless.

My second question to him: has the government consulted with the medical and nursing professions about patient safety versus revenue-generating trade-offs when it comes to liquor sales in hospital rooms, and if not, why not?

1:50

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's not so much the issue of health care that I find humorous as the manner in which this hon. member is trying to ask a question.

Again, to be clear to the hon. member, the issue of patient safety is a significant one, and I can give a great deal on the subject of patient safety, Mr. Speaker. In fact, when ministers of health met in this province in the year 2002, I asked the chief executive officer of the U.K. National Patient Safety Agency and his counterpart from Australia, Sir Liam Donaldson, to attend a one-day symposium where ministers of health from across Canada would learn about patient safety. Subsequent to that, the federal government saw fit to put \$50 million into a Patient Safety Institute in their federal budget. The Minister of Health, as she then was, the Hon. Anne McLellan, saw fit to locate that Patient Safety Institute here in the city of Edmonton in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, we take the issue of patient safety very, very seriously, and it ought not be politicized and trivialized, as the hon. member has tried to do here today.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister has not consulted with the medical profession or the nursing profession, let me ask him the last question here. What makes the government think that turning hospitals into private profit centres where private companies can market services to captive consumers, namely patients, will do anything to make the public health care system more sustainable?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we are looking at all the options to make

things sustainable, and again the core issue is that our health care costs are rising faster than our rates of revenue. As Premier Lord from the province of New Brunswick said: if the province of Alberta, one of the wealthiest provinces in all of Canada, is having difficulty with the issue of sustainability, imagine how difficult it is for the rest of us.

So, Mr. Speaker, there are some that think that this issue of sustainability of the health care system—I've heard the hon. member himself say this—is a cover for something else, that somehow we created this issue. All I can say again in response to that is that if we created an issue here with the government of Alberta with respect to health sustainability, then apparently we persuaded every single Premier of every other province of every other political stripe across Canada that health sustainability is an issue.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

School Construction

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Medicine Hat public school district No. 76 is currently reviewing its programs and facilities with a view to consolidating a number of existing school facilities and building new schools in communities that currently lack adequate schools. One of the criteria often quoted by the school board is the Alberta Infrastructure requirement of a system-wide 85 per cent occupancy factor before any new construction can be considered. It sounds reasonable until you ask: 85 per cent of what? My questions today are to the Minister of Infrastructure. Given that occupancy is based upon some kind of arbitrary formula that calculates the number of students per square metre, why does the formula not acknowledge the obvious differences between schools with respect to wide hallways or other common areas that restrict the amount of usable space within that facility?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for that very good question. It's a problem that we identified some time back, and we have set up a committee that is about ready to report. It's a committee that involved 12 individuals. There were some staff from the Department of Infrastructure, but more importantly a number of school boards were represented on the committee and an individual from outside in the private sector.

Now, the problem that the member identified is one where in a lot of the older schools, because of the way they were constructed, the area turns out to be larger than what can actually be used for instructional space. So we're trying to get at that particular problem. I believe that the committee is looking at the possibility of a way where school boards could identify those facilities and have us take a second look at them in order that we could modify what we believe is the capacity of that particular school.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, apart from architectural differences, there are differences in use of facilities. For example, can the minister explain why the formula calculates that 4,000 students are required to occupy the Medicine Hat high school when much of that school was built to accommodate vocational and trade programs that require large labs and shops in addition to classroom facilities?

Mr. Lund: Certainly, the hon. member has identified another area where the current formula creates a problem. I can give him another

example where it creates a problem. This is where we build what we call a core school. The idea of a core school is that you put the infrastructure in so that you can then add portables. When the portables are not there, you cannot get the utilization up to what we think is a required amount of 85 per cent to get good utilization of taxpayers' dollars. So that's another area that we need to look at and have the ability to not be rigid when we're applying that formula.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are just over 6,300 students in the entire district of Medicine Hat public. If they put 4,000 students into one school, it's two-thirds of the students in one school. Can the minister explain how these arbitrary and rigid guidelines can be met without significantly jeopardizing the quality of education in my constituency?

Mr. Lund: As I explained, Mr. Speaker, the committee is going to forward their report to me, hopefully, later this week. We will then be taking it through the process, and I can assure the hon. member that there will be modifications to what is currently there and the application of it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Utilities Consumer Advocate (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Government Services: given that ATCO Gas has stated recently to the EUB that they will be required to participate in the funding of Alberta's first Utilities Consumer Advocate, how much is ATCO Gas to pay for the yearly operations budget of the Utilities Consumer Advocate? Tell us how much.

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's one member of a very large industry that benefits from the consumer advocate and the job that it has to do not only for Albertans but also for the industry but, more importantly, for consumers across this province. It's absolutely impossible to go and look at one particular company's participation in that because it's run through a Power Pool. So it's impossible to answer that question at this time.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. If you want to talk about the Power Pool, we'll talk about the Balancing Pool, which is sort of a part of the Power Pool. How much is the Balancing Pool paying in operations costs to fund the Utilities Consumer Advocate?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member is asking for specific questions that might be well served by a written question in this House. That kind of detail can be debated at that particular time.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: what authority determined that ATCO Gas would have to pay for the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate? What authority allowed the industry to be funding this, not the government?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, I reiterate my last answer, which is the same question that he gave in his first supplemental. That should be done in the form of a written question before this House so that we can debate the specifics of it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Foothills Medical Centre

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Several months ago the Calgary health region contracted an independent air quality expert to develop a plan that would address concerns about mould on hemodialysis unit 27 at the Foothills medical centre. Now the Calgary health region has announced its plans to redevelop the unit. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why has the region chosen to redevelop this particular unit?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, unit 27 at the Foothills hospital was first opened in 1976. When it was originally opened, it was intended to accommodate 23 hemodialysis units. It presently holds 42 such units. So the result is that this particular unit 27 is being overutilized, and the design is inappropriate by today's standards.

2:00

So the Calgary health region had made the decision to redevelop unit 27 into a state-of-the-art hemodialysis unit, and they've moved some of their hemodialysis units into the community where people can have better access to them. Of course, Mr. Speaker, demands on our health care system have changed dramatically since 1976, and I should note that this redevelopment will be a much better work environment for staff and will provide much greater comfort for patients seeking that service.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is also to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Nurses who have worked on unit 27 continue to complain about adverse health effects which they claim have been caused by poor air quality resulting from the presence of mould. Has the Calgary health region done anything to address these concerns?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, the executive medical director of the Calgary health region, who specializes in occupational health, has said that staff complaints are multifactorial and may include a number of different issues such as work environment, work practices, use of chemicals, functional space, and engineering design. The region continues to work in good faith with its employees and workplace health and safety to address these concerns in unit 27.

Again, Mr. Speaker, they're confident that the redevelopment of this unit will address many of these concerns. It's important to say that there are a number of units at the Foothills medical centre that have been redeveloped. To this point in time unit 27 is one such unit, and there are, I believe, five other units that will be redeveloped over time because, again, this facility is almost 40 years old.

Government Aircraft

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the government's flight log for April 4, 2002, showed a heightened level of travel between Edmonton City Centre Airport and the Calgary International Airport. There were several municipal leaders, family members of MLAs, and other persons on board these government aircraft that day. Coincidentally, April 4, 2002, was also the Premier's dinner day in Calgary. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: did the government transport municipal leaders to the Premier's dinner, a partisan political event, on the taxpayer's dime?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, what makes this province of Alberta great is Alberta municipal leaders. We work very closely with them. To the hon. member: quite simply, we will use government hangars and government airplanes to in fact assist municipal leaders. In fact, just last weekend I visited Cold Lake and I also visited St. Paul. In that plane if there was any opportunity to allow municipal leaders – because there is only one taxpayer – to in fact enjoy that convenience of travelling with the government members, then absolutely, yes, to the question.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister and my final question, Mr. Speaker: did any of the passengers reimburse the government for the cost of their trip on the government plane to attend the Premier's dinner?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me be categorical. At no time will a government plane ever be used for political purposes, now, ever before, or ever into the future. Second of all, if it is for political purposes, they are charters, independent, with no cents to, in fact, the government or to the people of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Cull Cattle

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With the continued closure of Canadian borders to the export of cattle more than 30 months of age, Alberta producers are on the horns of a dilemma. Even if they could find a buyer for these older animals, they wouldn't get nearly as much for them because there aren't any markets that can take them. This has prompted some within the cattle industry to call for a mass slaughter of all the older or cull cattle. My questions are for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Is there a need for a mass slaughter of cull cattle?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, let me make it perfectly clear, entirely clear, that I would never support a mass slaughter of cull cattle. First of all, cull is a word that the industry uses, and it means very simply in this case an animal that is no longer important to that breeding herd. It does not signify in any way a reduced value for the meat product in that animal.

I had the opportunity and was invited to address a conference on Friday held in Red Deer which had the Western Stock Growers', the Alberta Auction Market and agent buyers, the Alberta feeder council, and the Feeder Associations of Alberta in attendance. It was a full house, Mr. Speaker, and those four very responsible organizations debated this and other issues very carefully.

My message to them was simply this: the government would not support a mass slaughter, and neither would the industry. These people are too smart to do something like that. They don't need to do that. What this government has done since last summer is work with the industry to find a new home for this product, new capacity, because in fact, Mr. Speaker, prior to May 20 60 to 70 per cent of this product went directly to the United States for processing, whether it was in the dairy herds or the beef herds. So in Alberta we put up money to work with product development. We put the Leduc processing centre available to them, and in fact our industry is looking at this as a new opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, if there is to be a reduction in mature animals, it will be done by the industry in a responsible, orderly fashion.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could you tell me, then, what is currently being done to increase the use of mature animals in Alberta and in Canada and to help producers deal with the lower than usual price they are currently getting for their animals?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, we work with the beef industry round-table very closely on these issues, and as I indicated, we have put some dollars available to product development as well as our processing centre, which has a long history of success in development of product. So we're looking at how we can increase our consumption domestically.

We look at the challenges of using that product instead of using offshore product, and in fact the hon. member might recall that the federal government announced the suspension of all supplementary permits for offshore beef, and that was a very responsible decision made to ensure that we could use more of our own product. So we look at using this mature product in processed products here.

As for us helping producers with recouping the money that they would normally have gotten for that animal, I think we've responded in a very responsible fashion by putting the market cattle program and bull program in place and, finally, working with our other provinces, convincing the federal government to remove the slaughter component from there.

So today, Mr. Speaker, although these cattle are selling somewhere from 22 cents to 30 cents at the top in the marketplace, they will be paid a differential of that price and the normal prices of 50 cents, 55 cents, and they will also receive some feed support and market support from the federal government. So, indeed, the cow-calf producer is recouping not as much but a fair value for those animals, and that's eased the situation a great deal.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Postsecondary Education Funding

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since 2001 students at Red Deer College have faced over a 24 per cent increase in tuition. Along with the increase students this year will have fewer program choices, and some two-year programs will be reduced to one-year diplomas. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Why? Why do our postsecondary schools like Red Deer have to face this constant round of tuition increases and program cuts?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will not necessarily speak generically about Red Deer, but what I will do is speak about the system in general. The system in general has seen a considerable amount of money put into it. In the last two or three years it's had upwards of a 20 per cent increase in the amount of dollars that have been funded. Red Deer College, for example, just received a new capital component. They're also looking at developing some of their land on the actual campus, where they're going to be building a senior citizens' home. Red Deer College is doing very well in what they're doing and, in fact, have increased quite

substantially the number of students that are attending Red Deer College.

Just when it comes to tuition, though, there's one point that I want to make, and that point was brought out by the TD Bank a couple of weeks ago. In essence, what it said is that a college diploma, which the hon. member is talking about, is worth about a 15 to 28 per cent a year after-tax, after-inflation increase on your dollars. So that's a wonderful way to spend your dollars, and I would certainly encourage people to go to Red Deer College. I would encourage them to go to the postsecondary system in general, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Massey: No wonder we're in trouble.

How can the minister possibly claim success when schools like Red Deer College, the U of A, and the U of C are in a state of constant financial turmoil?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, financial turmoil? The U of A has increased dramatically the number of students who've gone to it. The University of Alberta received last year between an 8 and 9 per cent increase in their budget, as did the University of Calgary, as did the postsecondary system in general. Those are huge increases when you take a look at what is happening across Canada. UBC, for example, has received zero per cent for the next three years. Try and run a university on zero per cent. Take a look across Canada and see how much money is being put into the postsecondary system and you will clearly see that we are head and shoulders above anyplace in Canada.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister: why has the government failed to replace a policy that leaves postsecondary schools in chronic crisis with a long-term funding plan that provides adequate resources? Why not a long-term plan?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, we are the only jurisdiction in Canada that right now has a three-year business plan, and a three-year business plan is something that we intend to keep. These people are assured of at least what is in the three-year business plan every year. British Columbia just received their three-year increases, and as I just mentioned, it was zero per cent over three years.

An Hon. Member: How much?

Dr. Oberg: Zero per cent over three years.

So, Mr. Speaker, I will reiterate the answer to my last question. The postsecondary system is alive and well and is one of the top postsecondary systems in the world.

Government Fleet Insurance

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, members of Executive Council, senior staff in the Premier's office, and thousands of other people driving government vehicles have their cars or SUVs insured by public insurance. This Tory government, which has categorically ruled out a public auto plan for the rest of us, uses a government owned, not-for-profit risk management and insurance fund to insure its own vehicle fleet. My question is to the Minister of Revenue. Why is public auto insurance good for the government's own vehicle fleet but bad for the rest of us?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to first clarify some inaccuracies in that preamble. We don't have a different way of

insuring ourselves in the government than any other individual or company in Alberta. We do have a risk management insurance division, and we use a form of both private and self-insurance, and that's just like every individual, like every company. You have choices when you select your company and you buy insurance. You do select the amount of property damage you need for collision, and you select also how much liability you cover, the same choices that we make ourselves. So when we buy private insurance, which we do, for all of the risks of the province, property and liability, we assess how much it is that we should buy of third-party insurance and how much we should have in our own deductibles or self-insurance.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister knows that 90 per cent of government insurance is public insurance.

Why does the Premier get to be chauffeured around in a car insured through a public auto plan, but the rest of us are forced to pay the much higher premiums charged by the auto insurance industry?

The Speaker: Hon. minister, the response should not be in response to the debatable kind of nature of the question.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for clarifying that the question was not, probably, an adequate question to respond to. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: why doesn't the government ensure that Alberta families get the same sort of deal on their car insurance that the provincial government provides for itself through its system of publicly insuring its own vehicles?

Mr. Melchin: We take the same approach for insuring all of the assets, both property and liability, that every individual in this province takes. We use a combination of private insurance to ensure that costs beyond our exposure that we wouldn't want to take in risks are insured. Beyond that we self-insure. You for your own car are going to choose how much property and how much liability, and you're not going to take everything. You're going to choose that you will self-insure part of that risk yourself, just as the government.

Speaker's Ruling

Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, *Beauchesne* 428 says that a question must not "be ironical, rhetorical, offensive, or contain epithet, innuendo, satire, or ridicule."

The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Government Economic Policies

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's economy has been performing well despite many challenges like the trade disputes with the U.S. As government we're always promoting value-adding to our agriculture sector, expansion of our exciting nanotechnology opportunities, and a junior mining industry, just to name a few. My question is to the Minister of Economic Development. I understand that you're the lead minister dealing with value-added opportunities and so on. I've heard directly from junior mining companies that they can raise venture capital easier in every province in Canada than

in Alberta. Why is this happening? Do we need to change some of the rules within government?

Mr. Norris: Well, of course, Mr. Speaker, that question could probably go to the government as a whole as a policy issue, but I will attempt to answer it from our perspective at Economic Development.

Mr. Speaker, we spend an awful lot of time talking about the spending ministries in this House, and we should, but without the revenue-generating ministries we wouldn't have the opportunity to have that discussion. So we as the Minister of Economic Development and the Minister of Revenue and others are vitally concerned to continue to find ways to increase revenue and industry in the province.

The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne has brought up an excellent point. Alberta does not operate in a vacuum, Mr. Speaker. It would be nice if we did because we have the best policies in the world. However, there are jurisdictions to the west and east of us who have different views on that. Alberta has chosen to have a low, broad-based income tax policy and does not get into tax credit as much as other jurisdictions. Having said that though, the Minister of Revenue, myself, and the Minister of Innovation and Science have all looked at this question very seriously because access to capital really does choke off economic development, and it's fundamental to the growth of this province. We have some of the best patents being developed at the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, NAIT, and SAIT, and then the access to capital dries up. They go off to Waltham, Massachusetts, or San Jose, California, to be developed, and we want to stop that.

So to answer the member's question, there have been a number of initiatives brought forward. The Minister of Revenue and myself and the Minister of Innovation and Science will be bringing forward documentation to look at how we can get more active in the venture capital game. I can't think of anything more important than that for the next 20 years in Alberta, because we are developing some of the best ideas in the world here, Mr. Speaker, and they're leaving to be developed, and that's just wrong.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you. Mr. Speaker, because we're talking about revenue, I'll ask my next question to the Revenue minister. Given that venture capital is so hard to raise in Alberta and given that our agriculture is so challenged at this time, why not take 2 or 3 per cent of our rainy-day fund, you know, the trust fund, and invest it, not grant it, with our Ag Financial Services to stimulate agriculture?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to clarify, to begin with, that the Alberta heritage savings trust fund is a tremendous vehicle but is not a rainy-day fund. We actually went through a survey a little over a year ago to make sure that we were clear about the reasons why we're saving. Albertans continuously do give us the feedback that they want this fund kept for the future, not taken for even whatever the problems potentially may be of any one particular moment.

Clearly, there are challenges in the agriculture community today, but I would say here's how it is benefiting the agriculture community today. This fund earns more than 2 and 3 per cent of its fund value this year—we'll be able to respond to those answers tomorrow as we release the third quarter—and that money goes back into the general revenues of the government. Those monies have been there to

ensure that the problems with BSE have been resolved, that there have been funds to provide for the emergencies of the province. It's done very well in serving Albertans over its life.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that we can't access that fund, why not use flow-through shares like every other province is using in Canada to access funds?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to flow-through shares, clearly there are some vehicles with flow-through shares in the energy sector. But we have said that it still is a priority, as we look forward to improving the economic climate of this government, to reduce the corporate income tax rate. That still is our priority. We reduced it to 12 and a half per cent this year. In our forecast we showed that this next year it will be reduced again, and that'll be in our budget documents. That continues to be our priority. It's the best thing we could do to strengthen the economic activity of Alberta.

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: To the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, *Beauchesne* 409(1) says: "It must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate."

Roadside Emissions Testing

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, this government talks about reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but they won't take any action. We need mandatory emissions testing on old cars like they do in Ontario and B.C. The average car in Alberta is twice as old as those in Ontario. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. When will this ministry demonstrate its commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Alberta and implement a program of roadside emissions testing?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again I must clarify a false assumption in her initial statement. She said we are not taking any action. We have taken more action than any jurisdiction in this country. We, for instance, have made a purchase of green power so that 90 per cent of the power that this government uses will be green power by 2005. It's the largest purchase of green power in the history of North America. [Dr. Taylor coughed] It chokes me up. I'm so moved by my own words.

Mr. Speaker, I can go through other examples. I will say that we will be releasing our climate change action plan and the actions that we have accomplished within the next couple of weeks. So I won't go into further details. They will be forthcoming.

Ms Carlson: It's hard for the minister to spit those stories out.

Here's my second question. Given that the Alberta Motor Association supports a program of roadside emissions testing with mandatory penalties, why won't this ministry implement a measure that actually has teeth?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, Climate Change Central is an agency at arm's length from government. It is funded some by

government but mostly by the private sector, federal government – a number of agencies contribute to the funding. I must say that it's a very good organization, that it has its own board of directors that makes the decisions for Climate Change Central. Climate Change Central recently did a study on cars and roadside emissions testing, and as a result of their study they concluded that roadside emissions testing was not an effective way to control greenhouse gases. What I will do, because obviously the member has not read that study – I will be sure that Climate Change Central sends her a copy.

Ms Carlson: Then, Mr. Speaker, could the minister address why Ontario and B.C. have stated that roadside testing has proven to be very effective in reducing both the environmental hazard of greenhouse gas emissions and the health hazard of smog?

Dr. Taylor: Well, in the first place, Mr. Speaker, when she talks about smog, we have different situations in regard to smog in Alberta. We're not at risk of smog, as Toronto is or Vancouver is.

I can't tell you how Ontario and B.C. made their decisions. Obviously, they didn't do a study. Obviously, they didn't look at the best economic indicators and decide that they should do what's best for the environment and do what's best in terms of spending the dollars in the most effective way.

The Speaker: Hon. members, momentarily I'll introduce the first of a number of members to participate in Members' Statements, but might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of our colleague from Edmonton-Norwood – I don't know if they're in the galleries at this time, but if they are, may we recognize the presence of the Glenrose Start program and 10 visitors with the group leaders Laura Maddison, Millie Morgan, and Katy Costello. If these visitors are in the galleries now, we would ask them to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly six seniors who are visiting the Legislature today. They're here in support of the tabling of a document from a seniors' newsletter which outlines seniors' concerns. With us today are Bill and Val Osborne, Joan Abramson, Vivian Small, Ed Friesen, and Bob Long. They are seated in the public gallery. With your permission I would ask them to now stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Snowmobile Rally for Breast Cancer Research

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. WOW stands for Way Out

Women. Anna Choquet of Bonnyville, Jackie Pederson of Edmonton, and Gisele Hebert of High Prairie are just such women. They represent Team Alberta in this year's 2004 Polaris snowmobile relay. They picked up their keys and Polaris snow machines in Grande Prairie from Team British Columbia and snowmobiled approximately 1,000 kilometres to Cold Lake where they turned over their keys to Team Saskatchewan.

The purpose of the ride is to raise money for breast cancer research and to profile women in snowmobile sports. On January 6 I was fortunate to be able to join these fantastic women and ride with them from Waskatenau to Desjarlais Crossing, about 120 kilometres of groomed trails along Iron Horse Trail, Jack pines, and the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. The team then continued on to Two Hills and on to Cold Lake.

I would like to thank the village of Waskatenau, the town of Smoky Lake, and the county for their hospitality and generosity. However, this would not have happened if not for the efforts of the Smoky Lake Trail Twisters snowmobile club members Dan Kotylak, Darrell Ketsa, Delmar Huchulak, Dwayne and James Gorenjuk, and Smoky Lake town councillor Vern Billey and other riders.

Last year Team Alberta raised \$24,000 for breast cancer research, and Team Alberta would like to surpass that amount. I offer all members of this Assembly a challenge to open up their wallets and donate to this worthwhile cause. Breast cancer not only affects women but men as well. I will be passing an envelope around.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Alberta Winter Games

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take this moment to recognize a tremendous accomplishment for Alberta and, more specifically, the Peace region. In 2002, the North Peace Games Society won the bid to host the 2004 Alberta Winter Games. The dream of hosting the most regional games ever was realized as 19 regional partners, including four aboriginal communities, came together and hosted this year's provincial Winter Games on February 12 to 15. Never before has a regional partnership of this magnitude hosted a provincial game. I am certain that the overwhelming success of this year's games will open opportunities for other small communities in Alberta to join together and take on projects usually reserved for larger centres.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the pioneering spirit and ingenuity of the North Peace Games Society. The accomplishment of these provincial games has once again proven that all of Alberta plays an instrumental role in maintaining and promoting the Alberta advantage.

2:30

As my colleague the MLA for Peace River indicated last week, I would also like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the 2,526 volunteers, 1,620 athletes, 432 coaches and chaperones, and 211 officials, without whom there could have been no games. They made the weekend exciting and very enjoyable for all those that had the opportunity to attend.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the communities of the Dunvegan and Peace River constituencies, who opened their doors to the rest of the province. The 19 communities involved came together as one and made this year's Winter Games an overwhelming success.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Grande Cache

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize and salute the citizens of Grande Cache. On February 20 I had the pleasure along with well over 60 people of attending the northern opportunities seminar hosted by the Northern Alberta Development Council. They had guest speakers from the oil and gas industry, value-added forestry opportunities, coal industry, West Yellowhead Community Futures Development Corporation, and a tourism panel.

Since the change in demographics in the industries of Grande Cache, the town and its citizens had come together to form the Grande Cache Community Forest Action Committee. Members of the committee soon found that they needed to expand their scope and involve other industries in this initiative. Now they're called the Community Initiatives Council of Grande Cache. The council and its members are looking into where the town could see what each business is doing and how they can capitalize on that to make the community much stronger.

Mr. Speaker, the number of people who came to the seminar last week just goes to show the great tenacity that this community has. They certainly lived up to their slogan, Grande Cache: A Natural High.

On behalf of all of the Members of the Legislative Assembly I would like to wish Grande Cache all the very best in all their endeavours.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Alberta Farmers

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to talk about a group of Albertans who have contributed so much to our province but who have suffered greatly over the past few years. I am speaking, of course, about Alberta farmers.

Alberta has a long, proud history of agriculture and agricultural producers. So many Albertans, including members of this Assembly, have known the life of tilling the soil, giving care and attention during calving season, and many other activities that make farm life so rewarding. Alberta agricultural producers have contributed and continue to contribute so much to our province and our country.

Sadly, however, the challenges of farming and ranching have become so difficult over the past few years. Years of drought, grasshoppers, and in the last year the diagnosis of one case of mad cow disease have hurt the great occupation of farming and the lifestyle of living on a farm. As I glance at this year's 2004 grasshopper projections, I worry for those Albertans who have committed themselves to the land. It is no secret that the concerns which face agricultural producers don't stop at the farm gate. Rural communities as a whole suffer when the farmers and the ranchers do.

Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta needs to do more to make farming more sustainable. It needs to participate actively in developing a live test for BSE. It needs to put monopoly controls on mega slaughterhouses, like they do in the United States. It needs to ensure that ad hoc programs are not the response to farm income losses.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta agricultural producers are a strong and self-reliant lot. They have committed themselves to an honest and decent life. I urge all hon. members of this Assembly to continue their support for Alberta's farmers and ranchers, and I urge this government to invest in proactive solutions to the problems faced today by so many of Alberta's agricultural producers.

Thank you.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Bill 12

Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Bill 12, the Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill will streamline and clarify how government manages and invests funds, clarify the wording and definitions, and make other technical amendments for your consideration, sir.

[Motion carried; Bill 12 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 12 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Bill 13

Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development I'm pleased to move first reading of Bill 13, the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004.

Changes in the Forest Reserves Act will update the current legislation, that's not been revised since 1980. These adjustments will continue to provide Alberta's livestock industry with access to secure public rangeland for grazing in the Rocky Mountain forest reserve.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 13 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 13 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the people of Red Deer are once again proving perfect hosts in hosting this year's Scott Tournament of Hearts, but my job today really is to table five copies of Alberta Ingenuity fund's 2000 to 2003 triennial report. A copy of this document is being sent to all members of the Assembly from Alberta Ingenuity.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to table six reports actually all dealing with radiation protection. The first is the 2002 report of the Alberta Dental Association and College radiation administration program; second, the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association radiation protection program 2002; thirdly, the College of Chiropractors of Alberta 2003 radiation health adminis-

trative organization; the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta 2002-2003 radiation health administrative organization; the University of Alberta 2002-2003 authorized radiation health administrative organization; and lastly, the University of Calgary 2002-2003 radiation health administration organization.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of a seniors' newsletter signed by 59 seniors. The document outlines four requests: that the government "restore the seniors' exemption from paying health care premiums," that the government "restore the seniors' exemption from paying education tax on their homes," that the government "restore reasonable costs for long term care facilities," and that the government "restore medical and dental benefits."

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Lethbridge-East I would like to table the required number of copies of a letter from Dixie Lee-Smerck of Fort McMurray raising the question of removing principals from the Alberta Teachers' Association and questioning why it's even being considered.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Attorney General, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, I'd like to table three letters: one from Heather Gibson regarding the teachers' convention, one from Phil Lister regarding the Bighorn wilderness; and Patricia Worger regarding the Learning Commission.

Thank you.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is the required number of copies of the Alberta Advisory Council on Electricity Report and Recommendations on Consumer Concerns. I believe this is the final report.

The second tabling I have is a very interesting tabling, and I would encourage all hon. members to have a look at this. It is from the *New York Times* dated Sunday, February 8, and it compares the costs of public versus private health care. I would urge all to read it.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling today the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Mr. Dave Burkhart, a resident of St. Albert, addressed to the Premier. Mr. Burkhart is asking the Premier the following question: why should the Premier not consider the introduction of a public auto insurance system in Alberta that has enabled drivers in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, or British Columbia to pay lower auto insurance rates?

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on a purported point of order.

Point of Order Abusive Language

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rose reluctantly earlier during question period today on a point of order with respect to the preamble to a question being put by the hon. third party leader. Perhaps I could shorten my presentation by saying that it was with respect to exactly the same reason for which you later admonished the hon. member's seatmate for the preamble to his question: under 23(h) and (j) making allegations and using abusive or insulting language and under *Beauchesne's* 428, the question must not "be ironical, rhetorical, offensive, or contain epithet, innuendo, satire, or ridicule."

It's perhaps unfortunate for me to raise the point of order with respect to this hon. member because I ought to have raised the same point of order on numerous times in the House over the last week when the members opposite were bringing forward in preambles to questions things which they know not to be true, trying to bring into ridicule and trivialize the whole process that we're doing here.

I'm speaking specifically now about the hon. member's preamble in which he talks about the Premier specifically, making allegations about the Premier jet-setting around the world and buying orange juice at \$27 a shot. Now, I think it's common knowledge among most people in the House that a shot is one ounce. So just on the face of it the hon. member is telling a lie because he knows that the facts have been put on the floor of this House, that the orange juice in question was three jugs.

I don't want to belabour that point. The point that I wanted to make and I think the point of order which is important is that – the opposition has a job to do, and this hon. member has a job to do. I respect that job, and I think other members of this House respect that job. But they ought not put into the preambles of questions such ludicrous aspersions and such falsehoods when they know that the facts have been put on the floor of the House, the aspersions have been corrected and the continued use of these sorts of things to drag down not just the reputation of the minister or the Premier that they're addressing the question to but every single member of this House.

So I would ask, Mr. Speaker, that you rule that the hon. member was using abusive and insulting language, was making allegations, was being rhetorical and offensive in using satire or ridicule in the preamble to his question in an inappropriate manner and in so doing raise the stature of questions in this House in the future from all members opposite and from all members of the House.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, did you wish to participate?

Dr. Pannu: Yes, Mr. Speaker, with your permission. I do want to acknowledge that inadvertent though that reference was, it was based on erroneous factual information. Therefore, I regret making that reference to \$27 a shot and, with your permission, withdraw that portion of my statement.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, there was a point of order. There was a legitimate point of order. It was raised by the Government House Leader, and it was also very honourable that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has basically dealt with that.

I asked hon. members for co-operation today, and I'm going to ask for it every day. Today we had 36 questions and answers, which is 10 per cent more than we had yesterday. This place is for all hon. members to participate, so if we have brevity and pointed questions, we should have brevity and pointed answers.

In the case of the question today from the hon. Member for

Edmonton-Strathcona it was actually five sentences long. I could have said five long sentences, but I said five sentences long. So let's just get that old pencil sharpened tomorrow and reduce it to maybe three and forget about some of the exaggerations with respect to certain items. But the hon. member has withdrawn his erroneous statement about "\$27 a shot orange juices," which is the quote.

So there was a point of order. It has been dealt with honourably.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Consideration of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Mr. Griffiths moved that an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank you, Your Honour, for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

[Adjourned debate February 23: Mr. Strang]

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, what an honour and privilege to speak today on the Speech from the Throne delivered by Her Honour at the start of this session and to highlight and profile for this Assembly the words surrounding the organization of a round-table on family violence in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, last October when our Premier announced the round-table on family violence, it was with the thought that there has to be a better way for us to find solutions to make Alberta communities safer and free of family violence and bullying. So the activities that are currently underway are activities that I dedicate, first of all, to the April 1999 shooting of Jason Lang, to the 2002 killing of Cole Harder, and to the most regrettable recent death of Alex Fekete, a three year old who told his daycare worker: I'm going to get killed'd. Then he and his mommy, Betty, were killed indeed.

Mr. Speaker, it's time for it to stop: family violence whether between a man and a woman, an elder and their son or daughter, a child and his mother; bullying whether it's on the playground, coming to school, or going from a community activity. It's time for us as Albertans to take up the championship and to respect one another sufficiently so that we eradicate the scourge of family violence and bullying.

It is, indeed, a pleasure, Mr. Speaker, to work with the ministries and the ministers of Justice, Community Development, the Solicitor General, the ministers of Learning, Human Resources and Employment, Health and Wellness, Finance, Seniors, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, and International and Intergovernmental Relations to together determine whether this government and the people of Alberta can make a success on the issue of family violence. Wouldn't it be wonderful if one year there were no deaths attributable to family violence? In 2002 there were more deaths attributable to family violence than deaths attributable to gang wars or gang fights. There were six that died.

Bullying, Mr. Speaker, has touched many more of us than we would like to believe. Sometimes the bully is, in fact, a victim himself. Sometimes the victim becomes a bully in another situation. There's a dynamic power and control issue that, in fact, affects everybody. It is well known that children who have adult supervision and who on playgrounds are exposed to a rigorous discipline of adult supervision and monitoring are less likely to perpetrate bullying of their playmates.

But, Mr. Speaker, the very fact that significant absenteeism occurs in our schools in this province every day is evidence that some children are fearful of going to school. They are fearful of the repercussions at the school. Yes, some may fear an exam, but others fear a peer, a playmate, somebody who has turned their back and worse yet laid their fist to them.

2:50

It's more imminently necessary for us to have a solution to family violence because last year there were 7 and a half per cent more women coming to shelters and almost 4 per cent more children, and shelters, Mr. Speaker, are not the answer. Shelters are not the solution to family violence. The solution starts with the growth and development of an individual both as a child and as a young and maturing adult to recognize that power and control, real power and control, mean that you don't have to hit anybody, that you don't have to abuse somebody, that you don't have to put somebody else down.

Mr. Speaker, there have been fears that this is only about something dealing with women. I assure you that it's not. When Hugh Campbell spoke about verbal abuse, he was speaking about verbal abuse that everybody and anybody could be subject to. When native women talk about men that have been abused, they are not talking men abused by their peer group but men who have, yes, also been abused by their spouses. There is no incidence of family violence that should be condoned. Research indicates that at least 4 per cent and even sometimes as high as 10 per cent of seniors in Canada are abused in some fashion: yes, financial abuse, and, yes, from time to time by intimidation.

We must ask ourselves: why is this happening? Why does Alberta have the highest rates of violence against women across the country? Why are deaths in our province attributed to spousal abuse increasing? Why are more women and children being admitted to shelters in Alberta? Why do as many as one in four Canadian children say that they have been bullied? We need to ask these questions, and we need to find the answers.

Mr. Speaker, four of the workshops have already begun. We have had several of these workshops in communities so far, like Fort McMurray – Grande Prairie will be held tomorrow – Bonnyville, and we will go throughout Alberta, and ultimately on May 7 there will be a round-table held in Calgary that will culminate in what we believe will be an action plan to change beliefs and attitudes toward family violence and bullying. We'll need to know then what services are necessary and how a collaborative, co-ordinated community response can be achieved.

Mr. Speaker, last June when I spoke in Prague on the subject of family violence and our new identities for victims of abuse and violence, I spoke to a group of people who at a meeting following my delivery suggested to me that if they could go anyplace in the world and find the place where the best template, the best community co-ordinated response was in addressing family violence, they would go to London, Ontario. What is it about London, Ontario, that makes it special?

Well, number one, it had the foresight and wisdom to have the right leadership. Dr. Peter Jaffe of London, Ontario, is an internationally recognized speaker on this subject dealing with every facet of violence in schools, in the community, in the home, anywhere that people are. He has encouraged us in Alberta to develop that kind of approach where we look at an action plan, not to take place as a snapshot in Alberta but to look at a three- to five-year action plan of changing the culture in every facet of community life.

In London, Ontario, one person in every public-sector endeavour is the champion of eradicating family violence. So the police have

a policeman. The schools under the superintendent of schools have an assistant superintendent. Every single authority, health authority, community advisory committee for individual schools has someone who monitors and evaluates whether or not they're making a significant difference on programs of prevention, on programs to build the capacity of safety in their community. Mr. Speaker, one of the exciting things is that they're not afraid to talk about violence. The day that we were there an NFL coach was coming to talk to a men's Rotary club about the importance of eradicating family violence.

You know, our society is an interesting one, Mr. Speaker. The day that Janet Jackson lost half of her top during the Super Bowl halftime, I was expressing to friends: "What do you think about that? What should we think about that when we're watching that on television with our children?" One of the moms in that audience said: well, what do you think about the entire game when people are forcefully hitting one another?

Now, I happen to be a fan of sport. I'm a fan of rugby, football, and hockey, contact sports, when people know the rules and follow them and pay attention to those rules. I accept that because those that play that game accept that sport and act within the confines of that sport, but it does not mean that that type of behaviour outside that sporting arena is acceptable. It does not mean that behaviour that assaults one other person is ever acceptable, and we have to know when to play the game, how to play by the rules, and how to institute a society and a societal norm that will make bullying and violence unacceptable.

Mr. Speaker, focus groups have been organized so that if the regional round-tables do not capture all of the issues, we have different perspectives being provided by the faith community, immigrant women and children talking about the struggles they face, the gay and lesbian community, the men's community where they have felt they have not been listened to, where they've felt they haven't had a voice dealing with violence that has affected them. Information from every one of these perspectives will be presented at the May 7 round-table.

Discussion in Calgary will build on the good work that's already been done in Alberta and other provinces. Participants will create recommendations for a plan of action in Alberta: a new way of preventing and responding to family violence and bullying, a new co-ordinated approach at the local, regional, and provincial levels so we can one day eliminate family violence and bullying in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank every single solitary Member of this Legislative Assembly who's taken it upon themselves to submit names, to encourage people to come forward to participate in the round-tables, to participate by sending their views in on the web site, and I encourage them still further to look at the questionnaire that's coming on the web site this week and to fill in that questionnaire and provide us with their best ideas for solutions.

This is not an issue that can any longer be contained behind closed doors. Researchers say that family violence across Canada carries an annual price tag of \$4.2 billion in social service costs, education costs, criminal justice costs, labour and employment losses, health and medical costs. Everybody is affected, and not the least of these, Mr. Speaker, are the retired and elderly that watch with faded and sad eyes as our society and our families are crumbling in certain crises.

The time has come for all of us to recognize that we have an important role to play in stopping family violence and bullying. We need to all speak up. We need to hear everyone's voice, and we must focus on solutions. We must all work together to create an environment in our great province where family violence and bullying are simply not tolerated, an environment where our children

have compassion and respect for others, and an environment where they are not scared and not devastated by violence in their homes and communities.

I know that these goals can and will be achieved. The process has already begun, and I am confident that the lives of Alberta's children will be forever changed and improved by the new plan of action that will be formed at the Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege as well to rise this afternoon to offer a response to the Speech from the Throne that we heard last week from Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor. I'm almost tempted not to speak because of the powerful nature of the speech that we just heard, and I want to say to my colleague how profound her comments were and how important they are to the future of Alberta. Domestic violence, family violence, is a matter which must be brought out into the open and must be discussed, and the round-tables which are currently on are a very significant step forward.

3:00

I did also want to talk about the future of Alberta that we want to have and we want to capture and that we can capture if we can have the human capital of our children and our families developed in the manner of which my hon. colleague spoke so eloquently.

So I do want to speak about the Speech from the Throne that was delivered by Her Honour with the grace and dignity that only she can bring to the task, a grace and dignity in which she offered a message of hope and promise for every Albertan. The speech that I heard spoke to renewed commitment to a better Alberta for our children, our children's children, and, yes, for ourselves. The Speech from the Throne sets the stage for an exciting journey not only for government but for all partners in our community, ensuring that Alberta continues to be the best place to live, work, and visit.

I am personally very excited by the government's direction and in particular our 20-year vision and plan. In many ways it speaks to my own very heartfelt beliefs about what is best for our province and how we can go about ensuring that those good things can continue to happen. If I may, I'd like to take a few moments to share some of my own reasons as to why it's so important for us to embrace this vision of our future and make and execute our plans and take that leap of faith into the next two decades.

The opposition may say that we're being unrealistic looking that far down the road. How can we possibly look 20 years hence? They may say that we ought to be dealing with the potholes of today, but frankly I think it's quite the opposite. We must plan for that seemingly distant future. Why? Because that is our children's future, and our children are the promise of everything that Alberta can be.

As many of my colleagues know, I'm a strong advocate of strategic planning in government. I believe that the past year has been one of the most exciting opportunities that we've had for elected colleagues and appointed officials to participate in the most important process of business planning and strategic planning. In fact, the government of Alberta has been a pioneer in planning. It was the first government in Canada to implement three-year business plans and has been a leader in establishing visible measures of success ever since.

In recent years we've refined our approach to accountability and, even further, are now focusing more strategically on the outcomes for Albertans. There is no question that over the last decade this

planned approach to government has worked very well. Thanks to sound strategic thinking and a co-ordinated approach to business we have eliminated the deficit, reduced the debt to a mere fraction of what it once was. Alberta is in an enviable position. As a result of our commitment to hard work and foresight and self-reliance we have some exciting options available to us.

As the throne speech outlined, we're taking the long view in our planning. Over the next 20 years we'll continue to build our communities and foster growth with the same hard work, hope, and optimism that built this province over the last 100 years.

The throne speech outlined four key areas, pillars, that will be crucial to Alberta's continued success: unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. These are all specific areas for action, but they're by no means mutually exclusive. Any action we take in one area will indubitably affect another. That is the nature of the interconnected, pluralistic, modern society that is Alberta.

In the spirit of the time I have available, I don't intend to talk at length about all four pillars, but I'd like to focus my comments on two in particular: leading in learning and unleashing innovation. What better way to ensure a positive and fruitful future for our children than through learning? As the Greek biographer Diogenes said back in the third century, "The foundation of every state is the education of its youth." The same holds true today. Learning is about much more than the acquisition of skills and knowledge. It instills pride and confidence. Learning helps young people achieve their full potential and take on whatever challenges life throws their way. Education lays the foundation not only for future learning but for a life rich with and open to all kinds of opportunity.

The throne speech introduced a truly great initiative. The Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act will help to mark Alberta's 100th birthday with a new program that encourages parents to think about and save for their child's future education, and I hope to speak to that bill in debate in the House, so I won't say more about it here.

I'm also pleased that the throne speech spoke about our young people who are already in the learning system. The increased funding for kindergarten to grade 12 will give our children every possible advantage, and a new community-focused funding framework will enable each school board to more effectively respond to local needs and issues. This fits very well into my view of how we should work in our own communities to address community concerns.

The throne speech also announced new funding for the postsecondary learning system. Thanks to this injection of support we'll have an enhanced apprenticeship system. We'll see new spaces in high-demand programs and greater availability of degree-granting programs. The Campus Alberta quality council is a particularly exciting development, ensuring that the quality of new degree programs will help build an even finer system of adult learning.

That the throne speech talked about education in such detail and at such length speaks to a priority that this government places on learning. We see with great clarity that the future of Alberta and Alberta's children lies in having the best learning system in the world.

Our future health, wealth, and dare I say happiness also lies, however, in innovation. As reiterated in the throne speech, we must unleash innovation in order to continue growing as a province and compete in a changing, increasingly global marketplace. Without a doubt, our children will play a huge role in unleashing the power of innovation. As the future workers, citizens, and leaders of Alberta they hold the key to our creative potential. However, we must also

act in the present. We must not only discover the entirely new but also find ways to make the most of what we already have.

As business guru Peter Drucker has said, "Innovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship." It is "the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth." I think that when Mr. Drucker was talking about resources, he meant all of our resources, including human, natural, social, and other resources. Here in Alberta we're privileged to have an abundance of many. Let's take that abundance and continue to turn it to our advantage.

The throne speech talks about finding new ways to add value to our resources. There are countless opportunities, be they in the more traditional areas of strength like oil and gas or the emerging sectors such as agrifoods. I ask: why would we ship our raw materials before we've had the opportunity to create jobs for people in Alberta? I say: let's keep the money; let's keep the jobs in Alberta for Albertans; let's not be afraid to find new ways to make the most of the great gifts that our land has provided to us. This doesn't mean abandoning our traditions or ignoring the value of things that have worked well and brought us economic reward. What it does mean is being aware of some of the great opportunities that still lie right below our noses.

Innovation has brought us some remarkable inventions and developments, especially in information and communication technology. Where would we be without VCRs to tape hockey games or favourite television shows? How would we get all those wonderful junk e-mails without the great wonder of the ICT world and the Internet?

Seriously, Mr. Speaker, it's innovations exactly like the Internet that have allowed us to unleash our creative powers and reach new heights in innovation. How else could we market Alberta simultaneously to hundreds of countries around the world? We can give literally millions of potential investors, customers, and visitors detailed information about all the opportunities that our province has to offer. We can sell our technical expertise and know-how to any variety of customers globally.

Closer to home ICT has enabled us to develop exciting innovations in education like the LearnAlberta web site, a digital learning environment for Alberta's teachers, students, and parents. Clearly, innovation doesn't have to be about inventing an entirely new product or gizmo. It doesn't have to be about the most amazing thing since sliced bread or about the Internet. Sure, here in Alberta we have plenty of those examples. Just think of the islet transplant program at the University of Alberta and you know what I mean by amazing.

Innovation can simply mean a better process or approach. Our government's three-year business plans are the product of innovative thinking. They may not be thrilling or amazing in and of themselves, but they have led to some thrilling and amazing results. There are endless opportunities for innovation in all parts of our economy and all parts of our society. They lie not only in our traditional areas of wealth generation but in newer areas as well.

The life sciences sector embraces everything from forestry and agriculture to health and water research and bioenergy. Many of these sectors also have, in fact, a long history in Alberta. For example, the forest industry has long been a foundation of Alberta's economy. So has agriculture. How many of our ancestors, the founding fathers and mothers of the province of Alberta, were farmers? But what is new and innovative is how things are being done. Thanks to groundbreaking research and truly creative thinking some of the most exciting innovations we're seeing today are coming from these sectors.

Forestry has evolved from a commodity-producing industry to a highly diversified economic sector that exports a variety of value-added products around the world. New technologies have played an

important role in that diversification by enabling the automation of manufacturing processes and, indeed, in new products.

3:10

The agriculture sector, the true life part of our economy, is continuing to branch out into exciting new areas of research and food and agricultural product processing. These industries are growing and thriving thanks to the spirit of innovation. They are pursuing new knowledge, ideas, and markets with the firm belief that we can compete in a changing world. Mr. Speaker, that's why I was delighted to hear the throne speech refer to a new life sciences institute that will co-ordinate research in these sectors. What better way to ensure that the innovative power of Albertans can be successfully unleashed? What better way to continue our evolution towards a knowledge economy than to support the creation of new knowledge?

Which brings me back to my original comments about education and learning. Education and learning are the foundations for all of this. Whether it's the scientist investigating the potential of nanotechnology in fighting diseases or the entrepreneur looking at new business processes or the child learning how to read and write for the very first time, learning is ultimately the key to our future success as a province. Yes, it can be difficult to keep an eye on the long term while we're busy fixing potholes or reacting to the latest crisis. Learning is a lifelong process, and I think we can learn to be an even better Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, as the throne speech showed us, we can learn to be a better Alberta by taking the long view, by looking ahead to the next generation, by having the courage to face the future with optimism and hope. Alberta is already a great place to live, work, and visit. It is a land of opportunity that competes successfully in many areas of the world stage. It is a province where we embrace innovation and know that learning is paramount. Thanks to our strong convictions, a formidable work ethic, uncompromising values, and self-reliance we've done exceptionally well over the last 99 years and especially well over the last 10.

Thanks to our very recent efforts we now have in place a 20-year plan for the future of Alberta and the future of our children. It's a plan to guide government, business, educational institutions, communities, service providers, and all partners and, most importantly, everyday Albertans. It's a tool to help us all understand where we are going and what we have to do in order to get there.

Twenty years? The throne speech is talking about two decades. How can we possibly think that far ahead? It's easy. We look to the horizon. We take our inspiration from the generations of Albertans who have gone before us and, may I add, a truly inspirational Albertan among us now, Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor. We take that leap of faith. We shoot for the stars. We look to the heavens for guidance and inspiration while sowing the seeds of success with our feet firmly planted on the ground.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I take it that the hon. Government House Leader adjourned the debate with the words at the conclusion of his debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 5
Family Support for Children with Disabilities
Amendment Act, 2004**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North on behalf of the hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to begin debate on Bill 5, the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004. The act outlines five minor amendments to the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act brought forward during the spring session in 2003. The amendments address minor issues that were identified while regulations were being developed for implementation of the new act.

As you know, this legislation is the first of its kind in Canada because it provides separate and distinct legislation to cover services for children with disabilities. The first amendment is to the definition of disability. This amendment will clarify and broaden the definition. Currently, disability is defined as a chronic developmental, physical, sensory, mental, or neurological impairment other than a condition or impairment that is primarily a medically treatable illness. The proposed change is to clarify that a medically treatable illness means a condition for which the primary need is for medical care or health services to treat or manage the condition. However, when that medical condition significantly limits the child's functioning in daily life, then the child would be eligible for services. An example might be where a child has cancer and is undergoing treatment. The child's functioning in daily living might require additional supports and services.

Another amendment includes changing the phrase "therapeutic services" to "child-focused services." The word "therapeutic" is more commonly associated with health-related services, which is not the intent of this act. "Child-focused services" more accurately describes the kinds of supports and services that will concentrate on a child's individually assessed needs.

A new addition will require that the director appointed under the act and the appeal panel consider a family's specific circumstances as set out in regulations when making decisions that affect services to be provided. The amendment provides candour respecting the factors that are to be considered when the director and a family negotiate the levels and kinds of services to be provided.

Another new addition to the act will stipulate a residency requirement for children and families receiving services under the act. To be eligible for supports and services under the act, the director must be satisfied that a child has Canadian citizenship or permanent residency within the meaning of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (Canada) and ordinarily resides in Alberta. This includes refugees because they can apply to become permanent residents.

A further new addition to the act will provide that a parent under the age of 18 may enter into a valid contractual agreement regarding supports for their disabled child. This amendment ensures that young parents have access to the same supports and services.

These are the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act amendments proposed in Bill 5.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North participated in second reading. Unfortunately, the hon. member has not moved the motion for second reading, which would be helpful. As 20 minutes is allocated, I will recognize the hon. Member for Red Deer-North again to perhaps exercise that motion.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move second reading of Bill 5.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to make a few comments on Bill 5, the Family Support

for Children with Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004. I think that as the Member for Red Deer-North has indicated, the proposed changes to the act are minor although not insignificant, especially with respect to the first amendment, which has to do with the definition. We had some discussion about definition when Bill 23 was before the House and had raised some questions at that time in terms of the narrowness of the definition and so are pleased that what we have before us is a broadening of the definition and the youngsters that can now be included as part of the act.

For those who are not working with the act on a daily basis, I think it can still be somewhat unclear as to exactly who the definition applies to. The speaker from Red Deer-North gave us an example of a youngster with cancer as being someone who would be included under a chronic condition that "significantly limits a child's ability to function in normal daily living." The way the definition is written, it almost requires an accompanying list of examples so that it is clear to parents exactly where their youngsters fit into the act. I'm assuming that "disability" means, for instance, cerebral palsy, that those are ones that we intended originally to have included under the act. I have questions, then, about youngsters with autism. Are they, too, included under the first part of the act?

As I said, it does raise some questions. In trying to make that distinction between those that are getting medical care yet it's a condition that's chronic and the other youngsters, I'm not sure that it still is as clear as it potentially could be, Mr. Speaker.

3:20

The other changes. It was really around the definitions of "disability" that we had some concerns raised by some groups that were interested in the legislation the last time, Mr. Speaker. The concern then was that it medicalized disabilities and re-established a medical model of dealing with disabilities, and I think that the intent and the impact of what happens when this bill is passed will allay those fears, that there will not be that same concern. But I'm still worried that when a parent reads this act, there are going to be some questions in their minds about which children are eligible.

Another comment, Mr. Speaker – and it's more of a question, I suspect – is about the notion of residency and the qualifications of what is a resident of Alberta and how this affects, for instance, youngsters from the Northwest Territories, those jurisdictions that have youngsters that receive services in the province at this time. Does it in any way affect any of those agreements? Is service to those children still going to be available?

I think that other than those two concerns, still some concern about the clarity of the definition and concerns about residency, the other changes are minor. I think there's some benefit to changing the term to "child-focused services" and removing "therapeutic services."

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, if I recognize the hon. Minister of Children's Services, this now closes the debate on second reading of this bill. Are there any other additional members who wish to participate at second reading? There being none, then the hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to respond to the questions that have arisen from the Leader of the Opposition in this way. "Child-focused," in light of the protocol that has been signed between Children's Services and the health minister and the Learning minister, incidentally, will help in the following way. If a child is sick, acutely ill with cancer or with any other disabling circumstance, then they are treated under the health model, under the

therapeutic model, but when at such time they are no longer acutely ill but considered chronically ill, then they will move to the Children's Services supports for their lifestyle on an everyday living basis.

So the circumstances will be that the child doesn't have an overlap in care but has the appropriate health care where Health and Wellness is the dominant provider, and then when Children's Services would retain the respite capacity assistance for counselling and therapy, those kinds of ongoing circumstances that would help children with disabilities, that's when Children's Services will be involved. The fear of having it too confined to the therapeutic model is why, as you have properly noted, the broader, child-focused model. We have spent an extensive period of time, in fact extended that time to the end of February, so that we can consult with not a few parents but all of the parents. All of the parents, through either their association or through focus groups or through regional discussions, have been contacted asking them for their comments and feedback on it.

Now, here's what I expect at the end of the day. Prior to proclamation we have to do a proper assessment to make sure that we are looking after each child. There are many children that receive smaller amounts on a monthly basis in support to the families that I would call respite or some babysitting assistance, sometimes some transport assistance for particular situations, but by and large their amounts of reimbursement for handicapped services are small. On an annual basis they would probably equate to between \$6,000 and \$8,000. That is by far the bulk of the children that will be served by this legislation.

Then there is another group that I would define as certainly needing more supports, certainly needing a greater level of support on a consistent basis, and with every one of those groups and those in that group – there may be probably about 1,500 of those children – I think it's imminently reasonable for those parents to expect that we would look at their circumstance on an individual basis, see whether the supports were sufficient to enable that child to achieve to his or her full potential, and make sure that whether it's an occupational therapist or counsellor, speech pathologist, they have the supports that were required for their own unique, special disability.

We have probably in the neighbourhood of 300 to 400 that would be severely complex cases, that would really require some intensive review. Now, for those children, while there will probably not be very much change at all that might happen with them, some might receive a little more service. It's not intended that people would receive less service under this legislation but child-appropriate services and provision for those services.

One in the area of the hon. member representing St. Paul, for example, was a child that was coming back and forth to Edmonton, and because they hadn't received the proper rejection by the school authority, they weren't eligible for certain supports from Children's Services. Well, we changed that. There's no reason to punish parents because they deserve something but haven't followed the process or don't have an understanding of the process. That to me is not the way to administer a program.

So this piece of legislation, along with an implementation plan, we are making very specific in two ways. One, to support the parent and the child. That is a given. Second, to support the culture within that children's authority so that the people that are performing the assessments of children that need supports have an understanding, a compassion, as comprehensive understanding of the medical needs as they should have in order to make a proper assessment, and extra supports to make that assessment workable for the child. I would say to all members of this House that if you find out that that isn't

being done in any situation, well, I will be very pleased to make sure that it is done, because I think we're making it eminently clear that those people need to have that support.

Mr. Speaker, if I may for just a minute. These are God's children, and whether we chose to have a child with a disability or not, they deserve every bit the same opportunity that any other child does in Alberta. I am proud that this legislation and the support by this Assembly, by everyone, is going to enable us to get that in the future.

On the matter, finally, of the immigrant child this will not affect those coming out of the Northwest Territories. Our agreements will stand; our supports will stand. This will simply mean that people can't shop for Alberta because they suddenly realize in another state, another country that this is the best place if you have a child with some kind of disability to land and to get those services. We want those families to be resident, to be contributing members of society in Alberta, to understand that their child, then, will qualify but certainly not just to ferry themselves across the border for services by what used to be handicapped children services and now will be resources for children with disabilities.

So I can assure this Assembly at the close of second reading that the intent of these amendments is to clarify; the intent of these amendments is to be inclusive, of making sure the children receive the proper supports for their medical condition; and the intent of these amendments is to be sure that they serve Alberta children and Alberta children only unless there is an agreement that has been accepted by the government of Alberta either through Health and Wellness or through Children's Services to serve those children that we have so many of in the Northwest Territories and beyond.

3:30

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, rather unique. We now have a question and answer/comment period under Standing Order 29(2)(a), should there be questions you wish to direct, in this case, to the last speaker, being the Minister of Children's Services.

[Motion carried; Bill 5 read a second time]

Bill 11 Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to move second reading of Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004.

The Alberta Personal Income Tax Act gives the province the authority to collect personal income taxes in Alberta. These amendments will make some technical changes to the provincial act so that it stays consistent with federal legislation and will make some clarifications that ensure that the act reads the way it is administered and meets our policy goals. There are three aspects that I wish to address in particular: the wording used to calculate the tax liability of nonresidents in section 6(5); the administration of the foreign tax credit, particularly as it is affected by the federal Income Tax Act; and thirdly, changes needed to reflect changes made to the Alberta Corporate Tax Act, as there are some references that cross over between the two pieces of legislation.

Calculating the tax liability. The Personal Income Tax Act in section 6(5) calculates the tax liability for nonresidents. The term "taxable income earned in Canada" is defined earlier in section 5. We need to clarify in section 6(5) that the tax liability of nonresidents should be based on the term in section 5. So the same wording

should be used in both sections. Section 5 uses the words “individual’s taxable income earned in Canada.” Section 6(5) reads: “the individual’s taxable income for the year earned in Canada.” It needs to be amended to ensure that the defined term “taxable income earned in Canada” is not separated by the words “for the year.” So the new provision would read as follows: “the individual’s taxable income earned in Canada for the year.”

The foreign tax credit in section 23 will be amended in a number of ways including: to parallel federal amendments and legislation to ensure that the credit is not denied unintentionally when an individual pays tax in more than one foreign jurisdiction, to prevent the credit from being unintentionally reduced by business income taxes paid to the federal government, and to ensure that individuals are not disqualified from the credit due to death.

The first issue to address relates to calculating foreign tax credits when an individual pays tax in more than one jurisdiction. Under section 126 of the federal act an individual is required to calculate a separate foreign tax credit for each country. However, some of Alberta’s legislation treats all the foreign countries as a single group. As a result, the nonbusiness income tax paid to one particular country is reduced by the total of all federal foreign tax credits that have been claimed under the federal act for all countries. This has an effect of reducing the provincial foreign tax credit and causing a person to pay higher taxes than they should be paying under the intent of the policy.

The proposed changes ensure that Alberta’s foreign tax credit, like the federal credit, is calculated on a country-by-country basis so that the provincial foreign tax credit for a particular country is not reduced by the foreign tax credits claimed for other countries. Changing our legislation in the way proposed ensures that an individual who is due a foreign tax credit receives it.

The second issue to address under the foreign tax credits will ensure that an individual’s Alberta foreign tax credit deals only with nonbusiness income taxes as was originally intended. Under the present wording of the Alberta act, businesses’ income taxes included in the calculation of an individual’s special foreign tax credit will reduce the amount of an individual’s Alberta foreign tax credit. Given that the provincial credit does not include taxes paid on business income, reducing our credit by the portion of the federal special foreign tax credit that relates to business income unduly penalizes Albertans.

These changes would ensure that an individual’s Alberta foreign tax credit for a year is worded in such a manner that any business income taxes included in the calculation of an individual’s special foreign tax credit do not affect the calculation of an individual’s Alberta foreign tax credit. This will ensure that an individual’s Alberta foreign tax credit deals only with nonbusiness income taxes as was initially intended.

Finally, the current wording around a foreign tax credit may unintentionally deny the credit in the event of an individual’s death. You know the old saying that only two things in life are certain: death and taxes. I admit that this is the odd part of the law, but from the point of view of the tax collector you’re not officially dead until your last tax return is filed. It’s a fact of life.

Suppose that Bob Jones, an Alberta entrepreneur, earns nonbusiness income in United States and pays \$300 tax on this income to the federal and state governments in the United States. Bob also pays federal and provincial tax on this income in Canada. To remove this double taxation, the government of Canada and Alberta provide foreign tax credits. Assume that if Bob lived till December 31, he would qualify for a federal tax credit of \$250 and a provincial credit of \$50. Under the current wording in the provincial act an individual must be a resident of Alberta on December 31 to qualify for the

provincial credit. The way the act reads now, if Bob died on December 30 of the year, he would not be a resident of Alberta on December 31. He would receive his federal credit, but he would be denied his \$50 provincial credit. This amendment ensures that Bob will receive the provincial credit. I should mention that the act has been administered as though this change were already in effect, so there have been no denials of credit that we are aware of.

Changes to the corporate tax calculations made under the Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2003, Bill 41 of last session, will need to be reflected in the Personal Income Tax Act. Currently, the Alberta royalty rebate in the Personal Income Tax Act is based on the royalty deduction in the Corporate Tax Act. In particular, the personal act directly references the definition of attributed Canadian royalty income in the Corporate Tax Act. The royalty tax deduction was amended to replace the attributed royalty income definition with the new pooling type concept.

3:40

Further, the act unintentionally denies the rebate to nonresidential individuals. Due to the changes in the Corporate Tax Act the methods of calculating the royalty rebate in the personal act is unclear as the act references concepts that no longer exist in the corporate act. Consequently, amendments are required to reflect the changes made in the Corporate Tax Act. These changes will ensure that nonresident individuals are not intentionally denied the tax credit.

Mr. Speaker, the changes proposed in this amendment act will serve to clarify aspects of the Personal Income Tax Act and will ensure that tax credits are not denied to individuals unfairly. I urge all members of this Assembly to support Bill 11.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms. Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’m happy to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004. It’s such a good example of how this government has participated in sloppy legislation over the years. If they had done their work properly in 2000 and gone through their reviews . . . [interjection] It’s very true. You can get up and debate this if you want to.

Had they compared it to the federal legislation at the time, had they even just had a grammar check on their computer systems, they would have seen that they needed to make some necessary changes at that time. We don’t need to be coming back here four years later to close loopholes that should have never been put in place in the first place. It’s a matter of taking all those great numbers of people that you have in the departments over there and having them take a look at the legislation closely. Time after time we come into this Legislature and waste our time by having to clean up sloppy legislation, and this is just another example of that.

We will support this bill because it’s very necessary, but I can’t, in principle, not speak to the problems that are in this bill for no other reason than that someone didn’t do their job.

So that’s all I have to say on this piece of legislation.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wasn’t intending to participate in debate, but I can’t let those comments go by without indicating that in Alberta and particularly within this government we have some of the finest draftspeople and legislative planners that there are. They happen to be resident in the Department of Justice,

and the staff is led by Peter Pagano, an incredibly talented group of people who work very, very hard for the people of Alberta in drafting legislation.

I've had the opportunity of chairing Leg. Review over the years, and now it's chaired by the Deputy Government House Leader. I still attend it, and I'm constantly amazed at the ability of the people in legislative drafting to be able to do the intricate work and the detailed work that they do. I don't think it's appropriate to malign their work in the manner that was done just now in this House.

In fact, federal tax legislation changes almost yearly, and it is a constant of every provincial government in this country to constantly work to align provincial tax statutes with federal tax statutes. There is no sin in that. There is no sin in the timing. There is no sin in the question of whether or not we are bringing an act forward now to align with the federal act.

It is entirely inappropriate, Mr. Speaker, to malign the good work of the people who work for this province in a very, very strong and ethical manner, a very competent manner in drafting legislation.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for five minutes should it be requested by any hon. member.

There being none, we can proceed with the continuation of the debate.

There being none, I call on the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul to close the debate.

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that I believe that the legislation that is being proposed is to have increased clarity and to parallel current administration and ensure consistency with federal legislation, and I think that's what this does. So with that, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a second time]

Bill 3

Architects Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to move second reading of Bill 3, the Architects Amendment Act, 2004.

I'd like to acknowledge the significant contribution of the architect profession in the development of the proposed amendments. Representatives from the Alberta Association of Architects worked closely with the staff of Alberta Human Resources and Employment to identify these amendments, that improve the Architects Act.

The proposed Architects Amendment Act was developed to allow licensed interior designers and members of the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta, or APEGGA, as most of us know it by, to have a restricted scope of practice within this province's architectural profession. The Alberta Association of Architects supports the amendments proposed in this bill. In addition, stakeholders from government, private industry, other professional associations, and academic institutions all support the proposed amendments. These amendments ensure that licensed interior designers and those APEGGA members who perform such restricted architectural services adhere to the high standards of professional practice and safeguard the interest of all Albertans.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The proposed Architects Amendment Act has eight sections, which are as follows. Section 1 provides the authority to amend the Architects Act. Section 2 includes definitions for persons who are either a licensed interior designer or a restricted practitioner in the act. Section 3 authorizes licensed interior designers to perform specific architectural services as defined in the Architects Act supporting regulations. Section 4 amends the council membership provision by adding that a licensed interior designer shall be elected to serve on the association's governing council. Section 5 establishes regulation-making powers in defining the practice of interior design and specifying the registration, continuing education, and professional conduct requirements for licensed interior designers. Section 6 provides for persons who are restricted practitioners to be included in the association's register of members. Section 7 establishes the registration, certification, and licence renewal requirements of APEGGA members who are authorized to become restricted practitioners. Section 8 specifies that this act comes into force upon receiving royal assent.

So, in conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the amended Architects Act establishes clear registration, certification, and accountability requirements for licensed interior designers and other restricted practitioners providing specific architectural services to Albertans. I would ask for the support of this Assembly in passing this act.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to make a few comments about Bill 3, the Architects Amendment Act, 2004. The substance of the bill deals, as the mover has indicated, with the profession of interior design, and I think it's a long overdue move to have this section of the act amended and for the inclusion of interior designers to be here.

If you look at the profession and the responsibility that they hold with respect to improving the quality of life and the responsibility that they take on with respect to designing spaces that protect the health of citizens and the public, and that they have a responsibility with respect to safety and, as I said, the welfare of the public, it's a rather large responsibility, and it's appropriate that they would be governed and conduct their affairs as many other professions in this province do.

They conduct a wide range of services, and rather than the view of the current television craze of the Designer Guys and the others that we sometimes get from television, I think they provide a very serious and much-needed service to the province.

3:50

They, as I said, have the responsibility in terms of preparing drawings and specifications for interior construction, the selection of materials and finishes, the space planning of furniture and equipment. They have to collaborate with other professionals with respect to mechanical, electrical, and load-bearing design. They have to be aware of regulations that affect the environment of the building, and they have to be deeply involved in trying to evaluate and solve environmental and space problems.

So they have an important responsibility, and as I said, it's appropriate that they will now be under the act and that the provisions for the governance of their profession are included in the bill before us this afternoon.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also support this particular bill. It certainly is something that the Association of Architects has been asking for, and we've been seeing some requests from the interior designers associated with this association to also have this legislation brought forward.

It's good to have the rules outlined in terms of what they can and cannot do, and it's also very good now for interior designers to be a part of the council. One can now be elected to be a member, so that brings a perspective that will represent all of those people who are members of the Alberta Association of Architects.

We have not received a single complaint from anyone, either architects or interior designers, on this particular bill, and it will receive support.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

Anybody else wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills to close debate.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have nothing to add except to thank the previous speakers for their support of the bill and hope that all the other members would support this.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a second time]

Bill 2

Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act

[Adjourned debate February 19: Mr. Mason]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to respond to Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. We heard some eloquent speeches from the Minister of Community Development and the Minister of Government Services on this bill Thursday last. They spent a great deal of time talking about and congratulating themselves on what a great job they'd done in the area of protecting the land. Inasmuch as the land is protected, it was a great job. So I would like to congratulate them on having created a nationally significant protected area in the Whaleback and designating the Black Creek as heritage rangeland and also the other piece of rangeland that's adjacent and somewhat inserted into the Black Creek heritage rangeland, which is the Bob Creek wild-land.

Good work was done on that. They worked on this for a number of years starting in 1999 to get these areas designated under the special places program. Since then, they've put a management plan in place, which was also a very good thing. It states that

the primary goal of the Wildland and the Heritage Rangeland is as follows: To preserve the natural heritage (i.e., soil, flora, fauna, landscape features, and natural/ecological processes) of the two protected areas in perpetuity. Other provincial protected area program goals (i.e., heritage appreciation, outdoor recreation, heritage tourism) are [very much] of secondary importance.

And that's as stated in the government's own documentation with respect to these particular protected areas. "The heritage appreciation and outdoor recreational goals may be met" – not must be met; may be met – "but only to the extent that their attainment does not conflict with or impinge on the preservation goal."

So that's where we see a problem come in with this particular bill, because what Bill 2 does is propose to allow off-highway vehicle access on designated trails through one particular protected area, which is the Black Creek heritage rangeland. They're saying that

that's necessary because as the Minister of Community Development, who's responsible for this, stated in his comments, they virtually eliminated any other possible access points, so they need to be able to allow these off-highway vehicles into this protected area.

Well, that's a real problem for us because it sets a couple of precedents that we didn't want to see occur. First of all, this area was supposed to be protected and protected for a good reason. It's ecologically sensitive, and the flora and fauna in the region will be greatly disturbed by off-highway vehicle access.

They need to find a different solution to this problem. This is not the right way to go about this. If they have to allow those off-highway vehicles in this area, then there have to be different ways for them to get in there. They can't go through this protected area. It was protected for specific reasons, and this government protected so little land in this province in this kind of a capacity, so much less than what we actually need in order to preserve the natural beauty of the region and the ecological integrity, which is at least equally important.

Protective legislation is originally brought into place as more than a convenience. It's brought in for specific reasons, which the government clearly outlined at the time, and they shouldn't be overruled whenever it's the most convenient way to allow access.

So we don't like this particular bill. We know that off-highway vehicles have a very detrimental effect on wildlife habitat. It disturbs them. It increases water, air, and noise pollution in the area and certainly has been known to cause significant soil and stream erosion.

There has to be significant policing put in place if this is even to be considered, and I don't think that the government is prepared to put people on those trails to ensure that the people stay on them as they're supposed to. Anyone who has travelled in the backcountry, particularly where there is OHV access, knows that it doesn't take many bad players to completely destroy an area. I've seen so many hillsides completely wrecked by people coming off the trails and going up and down the hills. The habitat is destroyed in the first place, initially, and then over the long term because what those trails do with those tire treads is create stream beds that cause a great deal of erosion when there's either rain or snow.

We have received many, many letters of concern about this particular bill, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to read a little bit of background from the Alberta Wilderness Association, who put out an action alert on this particular bill to its membership to give them an outline of what's happening. They talk about the proposed changes to the area allowing access into this newly protected area, and that's what the real problem is. We fought so hard to get these areas protected, and the Whaleback was shrunk and shrunk and shrunk, and the actual significantly protected areas were greatly reduced from what the original expectations were, and then just a few short years later we're seeing off-highway vehicle access going to be allowed even though it's currently banned. So this is a real problem.

What we're talking about here is this area having been protected was over 20,000 hectares from the Bob Creek wild-land area, which is where the off-highway vehicle access is allowed. It's surrounded on two sides by the Black Creek heritage rangeland, which is a much smaller area. It's one-third of the size. This specific region is the most extensive, least disturbed, and least fragmented montane landscape in Alberta, so it's really a unique piece of land. It's been extremely important for bears, wolverines, lynx and is one of the most crucial wintering areas in the province for elk and moose. So to keep this protected is very important.

4:00

Last year when the draft management plan for the two protected

areas was produced, the plan stated that the primary goal was as I read, and this is what the Alberta Wilderness Association was sharing with their membership. So now in direct opposition to that prime protection we are getting proposals for OHV trails. While the government members talked about this only being 3.5 kilometres of trail, that's very significant in an area this size and in an area that's this crucial to wildlife and the habitat itself. So they're asking for action against this bill from their members.

I have received a great many letters and phone calls on this issue, three more today, just this morning before coming in here. We definitely are not supporting this, and I would hope that the Minister of Community Development would share the concerns that he's hearing from people. One of the letters that came was from Christy-ann Olson from Calgary, who was very alarmed to find the legislation being proposed allowing this vehicle access through the Whaleback. She states that it's very disappointing to realize that the management planning process hasn't been officially completed yet and the government is "surging forward eroding the intent of the process and the desire of the public of Alberta." She also wants full protection in the Whaleback because of the reasons that I have previously cited.

I would hope that members would reconsider their position on this particular bill. It's not enough just to go to the off-road vehicle users when taking a look at whether or not new trails should be put through highly sensitive and well-protected areas, changing how the area is, in fact, protected. There needs to be extensive consultation with those whose primary concern is to keep the area protected and viable into the future, and that wasn't done here.

So, Mr. Speaker, we will not be supporting this bill, and as the days go on, we'll be tabling more letters from people who have concerns about it.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

Anybody else wish to speak? The hon. interim leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to voice my concern about the bill before us, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. The rangeland is the only rangeland set aside in the province. The Black Creek area is unique, an area of about 20,000 acres. It runs adjacent to the Whaleback ridge, an area that's been of great concern across the province in terms of what happens to the area. It's already traversed from north to south by a power line right-of-way, so in terms of having it a truly preserved area, it already has incursions with respect to a right-of-way for power.

I think it's unfortunate that we would have the bill before us. The fight in the province to have land set aside has been a long and hard one, fought by a number of groups and individuals. They've been successful, but I think we have to keep in perspective that protected areas make up less than 9 per cent of provincial Crown land that is set aside for nonmotorized access, Mr. Speaker. If you look at the grandeur of this province and the possibilities, something less than 9 per cent of the Crown land is a very small portion of the land that has been set aside. To think that once having set aside an area like this, we can't then protect it from off-highway vehicles just somehow or other doesn't seem to fit, that for a small population that would actually traverse the area, we would be willing to sacrifice the principles that underlie the preservation of wilderness land. It seems somehow, again, so very, very inappropriate.

I think the proponents of the bill have indicated that it's not a long trail, but any incursion violates what the understanding was when this area was put in place by this province and has to be resisted. The scale is much different, but I can't help but look south of the border and to the great debate that's going on in Yellowstone over

the use of snowmobiles in that park. Although, as I said, the scale is not the same, it may be an omen in terms of what is to come with respect to wilderness areas in this province. I think that the province has done well in terms of the kind of progress that we've made, and for this kind of bill to come before us to attempt to modify or to reverse that progress is, I think, as I've indicated, Mr. Speaker, very, very unfortunate.

If you look back at the preservation goals, one of the important goals was that any kind of activity does not conflict with or impinge upon the goal of preservation, and this proposal before us certainly does just that. It impinges upon that preservation goal. I hope that the Assembly will take a long, hard look at the bill and do the right thing by the area by turning this bill back.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would also like to add my comments to Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. Like the previous speakers from our caucus, this is a bill that I can't support.

Certainly, one of the reasons that we cannot support this bill is because of the very sensitive nature of the Black Creek heritage rangeland. Now, this is situated on the eastern slopes of the Rockies, and we all are aware that over the past few decades there have been quite a few climatic changes in our weather, and certainly on the eastern slopes we don't get the rainfall we once got. We certainly do, if we look at this particular year, get the possibility of a huge snowpack, which is roughly twice the size that we've had in previous years, as I understand.

4:10

If we do put off-road vehicles into the Black Creek heritage rangeland and they damage those sensitive areas and the grasslands in that area, then certainly we are going to expose that particular section of our province to erosion. Certainly, when we look at the snowpack, for example, of this year, a quick thaw and a huge runoff would certainly cause extensive damage due to erosion. By allowing off-road vehicles to use the Black Creek heritage rangeland to access the Bob Creek wild-land, then we are putting a very sensitive area under even greater stress.

So I think we have to go back and we have to look at the goals to preserve these sensitive areas, and we realize that the goal is to preserve the natural heritage, and that includes the flora, the fauna, the soils, the landscape features, and whatever. Certainly, one of the reasons that people wish to use this is the very nature of the fact that access to the area is limited. We also have a very sparse population there. When we look at enforcement of off-road vehicles using the approved route, it would be virtually impossible, and it would not take long with the equipment that is available to people today to do extensive damage to the Black Creek heritage rangeland. Also, the opportunity for this damage to repair itself is limited, and certainly we could, with the examples I gave earlier, see extensive damage to the natural ecological process that does occur in this protected area.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I certainly would urge all members of the Assembly to vote against this bill. It is not a bill that is going to preserve the 9 per cent of provincial Crown land that is set aside for nonmotorized access. I certainly cannot agree with the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, that made the comment that we have lots of land. Well, we don't have a lot of land when we look at land such as the Black Creek heritage rangeland, that is very sensitive.

I think, as well, that when we look at the rangeland that is in this particular section of the province, it is home to elk and moose populations, and certainly any destruction of their food chain will diminish the numbers of those large, beautiful mammals that grace our province.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to make some comments on Bill 2, and I look forward to further debate on this. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Government House Leader to close the debate on behalf of the Minister of Community Development?

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:16 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Abbott	Goudreau	O'Neill
Ady	Graham	Ouellette
Amery	Griffiths	Rathgeber
Broda	Haley	Renner
Calahasen	Hancock	Shariff
Cao	Herard	Snelgrove
Cenaiko	Hutton	Stelmach
Danyluk	Knight	Stevens
DeLong	Marz	Strang
Evans	McClellan	Tarchuk
Forsyth	McClelland	VanderBurg
Friedel	McFarland	Vandermeer
Gordon	Melchin	Zwozdesky

Against the motion:

Bonner	Mason	Massey
Carlson		

Totals:	For – 39	Against – 4
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[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a second time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 5 Family Support for Children with Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, interim leader as well.

Dr. Massey: Yes. Just a couple of comments, Mr. Chairman. First, to thank the minister for the explanation about the definition under section 2(c). I think that was a useful clarification as was the information with respect to nonresident children. I don't think that

we need to labour the discussion this afternoon. We'll be supporting Bill 5.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a question for the minister on the bill. It's in section 2, where you're redefining disability in the current act to not include a condition that is primarily medical unless it is a chronic condition. Who determines that, and is there an appeal process? We've dealt with some situations in our constituency office that would be, if not borderline, at least something that could be considered potentially not to be chronic.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. This is an excellent point raised by the hon. member opposite. Who is in determination of that? Parents frequently feel like they are the ones that are best able to assess the disability. But, in fact, there would be a different assessment perhaps required for every child. Although that sounds like a fairly strong statement and an unachievable objective, it would depend on whether it was a doctor and perhaps some occupational therapists, some other type of specialist, a speech pathologist, and so on. So the definition, we believe, will enable us to use a multidisciplinary team when that is appropriate, to use the assessments of more than one individual, and to provide an opportunity, which I think is most important, for the parents to be involved in defining that assessment for the objective of bringing forward a program. In other words, you can't have a clinical assessment without the view of the parent, the observations of the parent, and the observations of other people.

4:30

I think what's become most difficult with the severe cases, probably some which the hon. member opposite is talking about – and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has similarly raised some of those types of cases for me. What I understand is that when there are multiple disabilities that affect a child, what Children's Services has to be satisfied with at the end of the day under this legislation is that the family is given supports appropriate to the disabilities and appropriate to the symptoms of those disabilities so that the family has some assurance that the wellness of the child as much as possible is being achieved. I think this broadens the definition in a way that the families wanted so it's not so clinical to fit into one clinical definition, such as cerebral palsy or autism, or the other. It gives it a broader focus, and it broadens, in my view, the assessment tools that can be available.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I like what the minister has to say. It's been the primary concern of parents that I've been involved with that it's a yes/no kind of decision decided by someone at the top. If the intent is to go to building more of a panel of caregivers and those who've been directly responsible for the child, I would very much support that as a way of deciding for these children. I'm not saying that the parent has to be involved at every step of the discussion, but they have to have some input and then more than one person analyzing the data and being a part of the decision-making process.

I still hope that there's an appeal process. I would expect that at the very least we could appeal directly to you if the situation arose, but it seems to me that I'm pretty satisfied with this bill, and I'll be supporting it.

Ms Evans: Well, I could just make one observation. One of the things that has been problematic for many of the parents with children requiring support is that they've had to go right through the child welfare appeal process. They have spoken to me through the consultations and said: "Why can't we have an administrative appeal process where there's a resolution to the situation without putting them through unnecessary legal and emotional constraints? Sometimes the child has a lapse in delivery of care during this period." I agree wholeheartedly, so we will also be looking at that so that where people have a concern, ultimately, obviously, the Child Welfare Appeal Panel is there, but we should be able to resolve most of those concerns up front within the department resources as well as the director of child welfare.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I also have a question that's similar to the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's, and that's with regard to children with disabilities that may be considered chronic and not permanent. For example, I have a situation in my constituency. I recently sent a letter to the minister. I have a mother of a very young child in my constituency who has a very chronic disability. They're basically one hundred per cent disabled, but there is possibly a cure 10 or 12 years down the road. So the mother was concerned that perhaps with some of these changes this child would be cut off, and as I read the bill, I don't think that this child would be cut off. I know that in the discussion guide it seemed to talk about a permanent disability versus a chronic disability, so I'm wondering if once again the minister would just clarify that.

The other question that I have, Mr. Chairman, for the minister is: is there any kind of a grandfathering clause for those families who are currently receiving support for a child who may be affected by this definition change?

Ms Evans: Mr. Chairman, I think that through the process of looking at the legislation there may be some concerns that have been raised by parents who haven't had an opportunity to talk to someone in Children's Services or somebody above the definition of their caregiver or their social worker. There's not an intent to use this new legislation to be more restrictive for parents in receiving services, and for anybody that might feel that that has come forward, no, that's certainly not the intent.

I think that what you have to recognize and what so often hasn't been recognized in the past is that when you have a disability – and let's take a disability like cerebral palsy – you're not going to grow out of it. You might change; circumstances might change. There might be some clinical redefinition of your own particular capacity to deal with what you've got, but too often in the past, in the way of making sure that we were being accountable in the service delivery for children with disabilities, there were frequent assessments and there were certain sunset periods for re-evaluation, and parents have found this sometimes to the point of ridiculous; you know, in six months you will have another assessment and so on. So when something is chronic and has been defined medically to be chronic – well, it's chronic in terms of a health definition – it becomes a permanent disability in terms of the Children's Services definition. It becomes something where we will be, I think, compelled and rightfully so to provide supports for the delivery of services that are age appropriate for that child.

I very much appreciate when members do come forward with some of these circumstances, as other hon. members have done in the past, where parents might have some temerity because of this flux of decision-making to come forward. We will be in Red Deer

later this month actually doing another parental review of the terms of the new legislation, going through the discussion guide, but the most important thing we'll be doing, Mr. Chairman, is going and sitting with those parents with, hopefully, a compassionate ear to see: have we got the right program in place, is this being able to help that parent with this disability, and are we making a positive difference?

I thank the hon. member for his question.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I welcome the opportunity to rise and ask a question of the minister and make some comments. Not too many years ago this minister stood up in this House and made a commitment to all members that if they did have difficulties with a situation involving children to certainly give her a call and she would personally look into it. On the occasions that I have done that, you and your department have done a marvellous job, and I thank you very much for that.

One of the cases that I did talk to the minister about was a family with children with multiple disabilities. In fact, one of the children had died from one of their disabilities. I had a call from the father again last week, and we've been talking. We talked again today. He has a struggle because it is a huge, huge responsibility for him and his wife to take care of handicapped children, children with many disabilities. Along with that struggle, he also is having troubles at the end of the month when he submits receipts for these children that have been cleared for a number of months and then all of a sudden he's denied again, so he has to go back and fight the same battle over and over.

Now, then, in this particular case he did go back. Everything is now taken care of, but he's tired. He's very tired of having to go through the same process over and over. So his question to me today was: you know, I fear the end of the month. Is there any way that we can get consistency in a case so that someone who is in his position and clearly has children with identifiable multiple disabilities does not have to fight the system month in and month out, doesn't have to worry about whether things are going to be approved or not approved? This is what his question was of me today. I told him we'd have an opportunity to talk to you today and that I would get back to him, so if you have any comments, I'm sure he'd be more than welcome to hear them.

4:40

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Chairman, if you've ever lived for a week on five baked potatoes and half a loaf of bread and tried to make sure you have enough money for your kids, you understand the absolute ridiculousness of having to wait for a government cheque to cover the costs of a child who has a handicap. So I will give my word to the member opposite that if I can find out who that is, we will make sure that we do something to make sure that these processes change, because that is not the intent. That is not what should happen, and if that does happen, I think we have to know about it. Our practice should not be to punish people or put them through the wringer and make them worry about the end of the month and whether or not they can pay that respite caregiver for their child. I thank you for bringing that forward, and I fully understand the problem and will get it solved.

[The clauses of Bill 5 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

**Bill 11
Alberta Personal Income Tax
Amendment Act, 2004**

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

Mr. Danyluk: Mr. Chairman, I just want to say that the amendments that were brought forward in second reading and now in Committee of the Whole will just make technical changes to the provincial legislation so that it stays consistent with federal legislation. There are also technical changes for clarification purposes and changes to ensure consistency with the current administration.

I think that's all I need to say, Mr. Chairman.

[The clauses of Bill 11 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report bills 5 and 11.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: bills 5 and 11. That's the report.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I would move that we adjourn until 8 tonight.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:46 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, February 24, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/24

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Good evening. Please be seated. Before proceeding with the Routine, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour this evening to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 10 members of Toastmasters International who are seated in the members' gallery. I'd like to acknowledge each of them by name and ask them to stand as I call their names. They are Gordon King, Judy Dunn, Kevin Wenger, Barb Williams, David Paré, Ron Chapman, Peter Kossowan, Sharon Ferguson, and Tina and Wiggert Hessels. As I said, they are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask everyone to give them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, my guests haven't arrived so if I can just wait a bit and then introduce them.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Okay.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly someone who is becoming very well known here in this Assembly, and that's Melanie Shapiro. She's here this evening along with two other people from Windsor Park school: the school council chair, Linda Telgarsky, and a parent, Scott Delinger. They are here because they're concerned about the quality of and funding for public education offered to their children. I'd ask them to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 1

Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act

[Adjourned debate February 23: Mr. Mason]

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to make some comments at second reading with respect to Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act. It's a bill that I'm reluctant not to support. I'm reluctant for a couple of reasons. One, I think anything that will bring some additional resources into the cash-starved postsecondary system at least must be looked at critically, and I guess at another time and place I would have supported it. I think anything that will help overburdened students who are facing great tuition increases – we've seen the case of Red Deer College where since 2001 tuition there will have increased 24 per cent by this September – and anything that would

offer some relief to their parents and guardians who are trying to finance postsecondary education I suppose we should support.

We are in second reading, obligated to look at the principles that seem to rest under the bills that are before us, and one of the principles that seems to have been important in the drafting of Bill 1 is the need to encourage more high school graduates to go on to gain postsecondary qualifications of some kind. I think that's an admirable principle to have in place, but it seems to me that before we get too carried away with that principle, we have an obligation to make sure that the students we now have in high school finish that high school education, and our record with respect to that in this province, Mr. Speaker, is not going to be envied. There are a large number of students, a high percentage, 30 per cent plus, who never do finish high school, so any thought of them immediately going on to a postsecondary education and being able to take advantage of the provisions of Bill 1 I think is fairly remote.

Part of the problem, of course, is that we and our high schools have failed to really establish the kinds of standards that we want met and, secondly, to have one to put those standards in place, to adequately fund those high schools. I look at other jurisdictions and how they have approached the whole problem of high school completion, and it differs dramatically from the kinds of things that we're doing. I look at states like Oregon, Maryland, and Wyoming, and they have taken steps, very deliberate steps, to increase the number of students that complete high school and are thus eligible for postsecondary education programs.

The programs they have put in place have not been inexpensive. The Oregon model, which would have as a standard 90 per cent of their 12th grade students being able to accept a suitable standard on a reading test, has required that they put into place summer programs for students, that they hire students for high schools, that they hire additional teachers, that they work and put more resources into professional development, that they reduce the number of class sizes, but it's all in this effort to have high school students complete their programs. The state of Wyoming, south of us, has in place as their adequacy that every high school student must be eligible for a postsecondary program on completion of high school. So that would be a vocational program, an extended education program of some kind, a technical or university or college program. They have to leave high school qualified for that. As I said, we have a long way to go.

So as important as it is that we encourage more high school graduates to go on, as Bill 1 would purport to do, the prior program is to make sure that those high school students get out of high school so that they're eligible for some of the provisions that are found in Bill 1.

Another principle that I would think we would want to follow in any legislation that we propose in this province is that it needs to be fair to all Alberta students. In the year 2005 there will be 40,000, I guess the estimate is, babies born who will be centennial babies and eligible for the Alberta centennial education savings plan. That leave a whole lot of Alberta students who have been born in the last 20 years who are not eligible, and this seems to violate the principle of an act being fair to all Alberta students and treating all Albertans the same way. For a number of students and for their parents, for the pre-2005 babies, centennial year is going to, I suspect, be known as the year that they were left out, that there were provisions made for students born in 2005 that they were not eligible for. So in terms of a test of fairness to all Alberta students it seems to me that Bill 1 misses the mark.

We had discussed an amendment, Mr. Speaker, that would have made it retroactive to 1982 and thus made it fair so that all Albertans would have access to it. Of course, given the provisions of that bill,

that amendment was impossible for us to make, but I still think it is the kind of consideration that the government should give in terms of truly celebrating the centennial of the province, by making sure that whatever is done is fair and that all Alberta students are treated equally under the law.

The third principle that I think is important is that whatever is enacted needs to be open to all Albertans, and if you look at the history of registered education savings plans in the province, those plans are accessed primarily by parents and families that have middle-income or upper-income salaries. People who are barely getting by, who are at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, do not access these kinds of programs and for very good reasons. They don't have the kind of money that's needed to put away for the future of their children. Again, it seems to be a bill that is designed and targeted at a certain economic group in the province while excluding another economic group. So, again, I would suggest that in terms of fairness, Mr. Speaker, the bill has some shortcomings.

8:10

I have fears that by making this proposal, there may be an attempt to substitute an action like we see in Bill 1 for properly funding postsecondary education in the province, that the more of the burden that can be shifted to parents and to students, the less obligation the government feels to properly finance and plan for the financing of those institutions. If you look at the history, Mr. Speaker, of the last 20 years of financing postsecondary education in this province, there's been a massive withdrawal of provincial government funds from the system. The president of the University of Alberta gave some figures that they reported to the public recently and indicated that 20 years ago a dollar that students put in in terms of tuition was matched by \$10 from the government and today for every dollar that a student puts in, that's now matched by only \$2.34, so a massive withdrawal of support for postsecondary programs.

I would really fear that by putting something like this in place, the message to parents is that you are going to pay more and more of the freight, so you better start getting ready for it now, and I don't think that is the role or the proper stance for a government that purports to support education the way that this government does. So, again, the fear that this not become a substitute for properly funding postsecondary schools and shifting more and more of the load to parents.

I looked at the *Hansard*, and I was disturbed. I guess I've heard it twice in the last little while now that today's problems are being described as potholes in the road. I heard it again earlier this afternoon, and I don't believe that the problems surrounding the financing of postsecondary education today can be called just a pothole, Mr. Speaker. I think it's a major rupture in the highway.

Mr. Speaker, I think the bill would have been looked on much more friendly had there been some attempt to put in place a long-term plan, and I know the provincial government shouldn't have to do this on its own. There's an obligation from the federal government to be involved, and it's not a problem that's peculiar to Alberta. Across this country provinces are all facing similar difficulties with funding postsecondary education, yet none of us seems to have come to grips with putting in place a long-term plan that would see adequate resources in place so that we don't have a yearly outrage with the kinds of tuitions that have to be levied against students and the kinds of cuts that are having to be made at institutions because they don't have adequate resources to carry on the programs and to accommodate the students that appear at their door. So, again, this would be much more palatable were there such a plan in place.

In the preamble the government states that "it recognizes the

benefits of post-secondary education," and that being true, Mr. Speaker, I wonder with the kind of emphasis we've heard from the ministry with respect to the individual benefits that students derive from having attended a postsecondary program if there might not be some more emphasis in terms of how the total community benefits from having students enrolled in postsecondary and being successful in postsecondary programs. It goes back almost to the kind of argument we often get in our constituency office by some people who insist that they shouldn't have to pay one or another of the taxes in the province, that you can treat democracy as a bit of a cafeteria and pick and choose those services that you want to pay for, but that's not true.

If the government truly did recognize the benefits of a postsecondary education, I think that they would be trying to underline not just the individual benefits for the students that complete those programs but how we as a total community benefit from that in terms of qualified health personnel, engineers to build our highways, nurses, teachers, qualified people in almost every profession, and that we're all the benefactors. To single out the students and try to somehow or other construe the situation so that students should be held accountable for financing education on their own I think misses the point of what it means to have an educated citizenry.

So I think, Mr. Speaker, that those are my major concerns as we look at Bill 1. I'm pleased that the government would look to education as a way of marking the centennial. It's an investment in the future, but I think that also we have an obligation to make sure that if the government is going to make that investment, it's done fairly and that it's done to the benefit of all students in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) now provides for a five-minute question and comment period if individual members would like to participate. The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've always had a great deal of respect for the hon. member that just spoke. He always brings some thought to what he says, and I want to thank him for that, because it's not just a bunch of political rhetoric that we've been hearing from some other members.

One of the areas that he seems to be concerned with – and I'll be very brief on these comments – is that there may be some exclusions or targeting at the middle and upper classes. I must say yet again that there are essentially a number of ways in which we can make sure that even the most disadvantaged people in this province can qualify for this. However, we do have to wait to see what the Prime Minister will do with respect to what he's announced, which is providing a grant for low-income children to be able to get into RESPs. So I can just assure you that there is no targeting to the middle or upper class, and I thank you for your comments.

Mrs. O'Neill: Mr. Speaker, I wish to speak to the bill.

The Speaker: Well, we're still under the Standing Order provision, so I'll have to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona first, but I noticed the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member mentioned early in his comments that we need to be sure that all Alberta students complete high school, and I think that that's a very reasonable and achievable goal. However, some of the numbers that he quoted are historical numbers. I had a question, and I wondered if the hon. member could elaborate a bit on whether or not it's been

a rather common practice for a reasonable number of young students to leave grade 10 or 11 to take up trades where they're qualified to enter at that level. Also, are there or have there been a reasonable number of returning students that upgrade in conjunction with their trade's entry so that, in fact, they are completing and getting a postsecondary education but perhaps not in the manner to which the member alluded?

Dr. Massey: I guess that the first point I would make, Mr. Speaker, is that I believe a high school education is now the minimum standard that we should expect from young people in the province. I can remember the time when leaving school at 10th grade and even at eighth grade in this province was acceptable. That bar has been moved up for a number of years, and in my mind we should be getting everyone to an acceptable level of high school graduation.

What the member indicates in terms of students leaving and going out and working or gaining a trade – I think that, yes, it has been a practice. I am not privy to those numbers. But having said that, I would still feel more comfortable with our goal of getting every student through high school with a diploma and then to set them into the workplace.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

8:20

The Speaker: Others? I had recognized the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the most important bill for this session, Bill 1, Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, introduced by the Premier of the province of Alberta.

The discussion of the bill must be put in the context of the challenges that public education both at the K to grade 12 level and beyond has faced on the watch of this Premier and his government. We have seen over the last 10, 12 years, Mr. Speaker, the underfunding of education in this province grow more severe, creating absolutely huge problems at the classroom level from kindergarten all the way up to grade 12. It's during this same period that we have seen the tuition fees in the postsecondary sector skyrocket.

Student debt burdens have become crushingly heavy for most of our students. Furthermore, many students who graduated from high school over the last several years now have to ask themselves if postsecondary education is accessible to them, not in terms of whether or not there are enough spaces in our institutes and colleges or universities but because of the amount of money that it costs every year thanks to the unending rise in the tuition fees and other associated costs of going on to postsecondary education. Many of those students, the high school students and graduates, have been turned away because of the fear of the debt loads, the enormous costs, the unbearable costs from their point of view, to go to school.

So that is the context, Mr. Speaker. It's also, I think, worth reminding ourselves that the crisis in our education system, caused by chronic and continued underfunding and the government's deliberate policy to not only allow but, in fact, encourage annual increases in the tuition fee rates across this province, has caused enormous, enormous problems and hardships. We had the spectacle of one of the largest teachers' strikes in this province less than two years ago, leading to the bill which returned them to work and imposed an arbitration settlement on them. It was the act of this Legislature, an act that was initiated by this government, which resulted in the arbitration award. Yet the government at the end of the day decided to walk away from accepting the consequences of the arbitration award that was mandated by its own legislation.

Mr. Speaker, this is a bill that's receiving a great deal of attention across the province. I notice that even tonight there are concerned citizens, parents, students, and others who are sitting in the members' gallery and perhaps a few in the public gallery who are here to watch us debate the so-called flagship bill of this government. They also know that this is perhaps the kind of bill that one would only see in the final stages of the election cycle that's upon us now. Now the government is beginning to worry about the fallout of its three years of policies, which have meant, as I said, a great deal of hardship and denial of opportunity and accessibility for close to 50 per cent of the population of young men and women in this province who have to look at the bill associated with going to school every year before they make a decision. In many cases, unfortunately, they have made the decision to forgo the opportunity to go to postsecondary institutions because they have concluded that they can't afford the cost of going to school.

There have been campaigns run by college students, technical institute students, university students over the last year to convince this government that it's about time to put a halt to its regressive policies of substantial tuition increases every year, where postsecondary institutions, because of the manner in which they are funded year after year, are told – and there are clear signals that they read in the government's policy – that they must raise at least 30 per cent of their operating revenues from tuition fees and associated user fees that are the experience of students in postsecondary institutions from year to year, from month to month.

So there is public interest, a great deal of public interest, in this bill, because the hope was that at least during this year, the year before the centennial year of the province begins, the new century that the province will be entering, this government will take a bold step forward and first of all realize that its own policies have created huge barriers to open opportunity for all in this province. Therefore, they were expecting that this government as a matter of contrition and generosity would start the new century of this province with a clear statement that it's going to freeze the tuition fees because they're already beginning to discourage lots of young men and women who are Albertans, whose families have paid taxes in this province and continue to pay taxes, from moving forward.

We know that the next century, Mr. Speaker, in this province and in this country and in the world in which we live is going to be the century of those jurisdictions, those provinces, those societies, those communities which invest generously in creating opportunities for people who are going to transform our society into a creative society. By denying that opportunity, either inadvertently or deliberately – and the latter is the case in the case of this government's policies – to people to become more creative by taking advantage, to the best of their ability, of the opportunities that postsecondary education experience provides, regardless of whether it's in the arts, whether it's in the field of culture, whether it's in the field of sciences or humanities, that experience is absolutely essential to the production of a substantial proportion of our society's people who have the special creative ability on which the successful societies of the future, of the next century in this province, and other places are going to have to depend in order to remain prosperous, in order to flourish.

8:30

So, Mr. Speaker, Bill 1 is seen for what it is by people, including among them some who are sitting on the government side of the benches, as no more than an opportunistic move to do no more than make a symbolic gesture to give the appearance and to create the perception that this government cares about postsecondary education for young people.

This particular bill, Mr. Speaker, if passed by this Legislature, will begin to put some money in the registered educational plans of those students who have the good fortune of having families who have the economic capacity and the foresight to start some sort of registered education plans for their children, but only those who will be fortunate to be born next year and born only to families which will have that capacity to start the registered plans will be able to provide this advantage. Remember, we are talking about \$500 next year and \$300 over the next several years that a child who is born next year would get.

In the meantime, tuition fees at our universities increase by at least \$250 to \$275 a year. The so-called advantage that this bill creates, even for those who will be born only during the year 2005 and after, is an illusory advantage. The tuition fees by the time the advantages of this particular bill will begin to flow to the students will be – one will have to wait for close to 20 years. Eighteen years from next year, Mr. Speaker, is the first time that the provisions of this bill will in any way influence or help or assist students who want to seek postsecondary education in this province.

What happens to those who were born on December 31 of this year? What happens to those who are born on January 1, 2006, or the ones who were born a year ago? What happens to those thousands who are in kindergarten classes this year, who started school this year and will be ready to go to postsecondary schools 12 years from now? Why are they being excluded?

This bill is extremely discriminatory, Mr. Speaker: discrimination based on age, discrimination based inadvertently on family income and family capacity. We know that close to 45 to 50 per cent of the families in Canada and in Alberta I'm sure too do not start registered educational savings plans for their children. The reason is very simple. Why don't they do it? Because they cannot afford it.

So what happens to that 45 to 50 per cent of the families with children who are either in school this year or were born last year and the year before? As the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster said, he is going to talk about the children who were born before 2005, and there are lots of them. To exclude them from any consideration shows how opportunistic this bill is, how flawed this bill is.

Mr. Speaker, it's a bill that also I think draws attention to the indifference with which this government, this Premier and his cabinet and his colleagues in the caucus, have dealt with the complaints, the requests, the pressure that comes from parents, that comes from students to make changes in their commitment to continued underfunding of our educational institutions. If a government that's using our taxpayers' money decides to underfund and withhold money from our institutions and then requires our students to pay more as they want to go to school and then turns around and for children starting next year says, "We're going to give you a little bit of money, the advantages of which will be cancelled in two year's time by the increase in tuition fees," I think it's making a statement which doesn't deserve our support. This is a bill that needs to be defeated; this is a bill that needs to be withdrawn, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) goes into effect. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona is a member of the opposition, and we understand that there is a valid role to play in opposition in opposing if for no other reason than that the member is in opposition. But I would ask the member opposite to reflect on Bill 1 and the capacity

that Bill 1 has to inculcate a sense within families that postsecondary education is an important element of life and of family responsibility. Is it not appropriate, whenever we can as a government and as a people, to look beyond the horizon?

It would have been nice if 18 years ago those of us in the Legislature had recognized this as a potential need, and the people entering university today could benefit from it. But would it not, Mr. Speaker, be appropriate that 18 years from now citizens of Alberta will look back and say: "My goodness. Am I ever glad that that Legislature had the foresight and the vision to look beyond the horizon to do what was right for future generations of Albertans?"

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, looking beyond the horizon is a matter of political will. In this province to wait for 18 years before delivering any benefits to anybody in fact makes a big statement about the lack of capacity to look beyond the horizon. To look beyond the horizon next year, in my view, would be an act of courage on the part of the government, and that would be, I think, demonstrated if this government said, "Starting next year we're going to freeze the tuition fees in this province," and that's where, I think, the horizon lies, not 18 years from now. It's next year, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'm wondering if the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona understands the inherent contradiction in the argument that he put forward with respect to this bill when he says that it was brought forward as an election ploy and talks about it being an election ploy and then says that it won't actually have effect for 18 years.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, this government sort of relies on its ability to create illusions – to create illusions – and I never underestimate the capacity of this government to be able to do that. It spent \$4.2 billion just three years ago to create a similar illusion. It became very generous, opened the purse strings, won the election, came back into the Legislature; within weeks after the election was done and over with, it began talking about fiscal constraints again. It began to draw attention to the fact that we are at a very serious risk of running into fiscal problems.

So, Mr. Speaker, there's no contradiction as far as I'm concerned. It is an attempt to create an illusion that this government is now changing its mind, that it's changed its heart, that in fact it is committed to funding public education adequately.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There's no illusion in giving each and every child born in Alberta \$800 towards their postsecondary education.

My question for the hon. member is this: if he thinks it would be better to take this proposal off the table and not give the children any money towards their postsecondary education, then why doesn't he stand up and say that?

8:40

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, I stand up for freezing of the tuition fees starting with this budget, this year. I ask the member to consider the alternative, not to engage in empty rhetoric but in fact pay attention to the alternative proposal that I put on the table, and that is to freeze tuition fees for everyone. That will give a great deal of hope to

children already in school, young people already in universities and colleges, and parents who are planning to have a family.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, are you participating?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Somewhat.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you. Well, Mr. Speaker, speaking of empty rhetoric, the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in the course of his comments indicated that health care, among others, was chronically underfunded. At present, health care is funded to the tune of 36 per cent of the budget expenditures. It's been going up at more than twice . . .

The Speaker: I regretfully interrupt the hon. member to say that time has now expired on this segment.

Before I call on the hon. Member for St. Albert, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Speaker: Well, the hon. Solicitor General first, to be followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, to be followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to stand up and introduce three gentlemen who have given their heart and soul over the last few days working very, very hard. I understand that members of the Assembly have had the opportunity to meet these gentlemen and be prodded and needled by them, and they've done a really good job. Mr. Speaker, I know that this is an initiative that you've put forward from your office, and I thank you for that. I'd like to introduce to you, if I may, please, Gary Payne from the Calgary fire department, Dennis Tario from EMS Calgary, and Dennis Rabel from the Calgary fire department. I'll ask everybody here to give them a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through you to members of the Assembly. I understand that in the members' gallery tonight is a lady by the name of Anita Sherman, who has two children at McKernan elementary junior high school. She's here as part of Education Watch, and her duty here tonight is to observe the affairs of the Legislature as it relates to education. Through her we want to acknowledge not just Education Watch, but the Whitemud Coalition and others who have done great service from a citizen perspective in education and do so on a continuing basis. We would ask all members to give them the traditional welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sitting with us today in the members' gallery are two friends of mine, an employee of Economic Development Edmonton, Mr. Chris O'Brien, and his sister visiting us from British Columbia, Ms O'Brien. I would like

both of them to rise and accept the usual warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 1
Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act
(*continued*)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to stand here this evening in this Assembly and speak to the merits and the strength of Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act.

I'm going to speak to it as the representative, of course, of the community and the constituency of St. Albert, but first I'd like to profile for the Assembly a number of characteristics of my community. Contrary to the provincial average I would point out the fact that in St. Albert more than 80 per cent of our high school students complete their high school certification. That's a very nice number. We want to make it a hundred per cent.

Indeed, a good portion of those students who do graduate, the incredible number of them, go on to postsecondary education. So to speak to the benefits of postsecondary education, as is the first item in the preamble of this bill, I know that my community and those young high school students who work so hard to accomplish so much in high school by attaining a number of Rutherford scholarships, by earning a number of Jason Lang scholarships, by receiving a number of Louise McKinney scholarships, by being the recipients of a number of bursaries that they apply for, and by being attendees and active students in a number of our technical and community college institutions as well do see the value of a postsecondary education.

It was not so long ago that a high school certificate was considered sufficient to enter into the adult world of independence. It was truly appreciated as a ticket, if you will, to be able to gain and to work at a job that required that level of education. But that's no longer true. In fact, if you read some studies, you will find that it's not only one degree or one postsecondary certificate, but it's two and perhaps three that are the tickets that are encouraging people in the workforce these days to move ahead. When I speak to the benefits of postsecondary education, I must say that I'm very pleased that on the whole my community embraces the idea of a postsecondary education and its value in particular, of course.

I'm going to speak a little bit to the bias that I have. I am not a science major. I'm not an engineer, nor would I dare say even that my strength was in the study of math and science. But I do feel that there is a great deal to be gained by individuals who go to a postsecondary institution, take courses of a liberal arts nature, and learn further to hone their skills of critical thinking, of creative expression, and their ability to think beyond the traditional patterns or the skills that are required to practice certain professions. I do believe in this idea, this appreciation of postsecondary education, in whichever form it is.

I'd like to pay tribute to those who are engaged as apprentices, learning in particular and working alongside very skilled tradesfolk in our province. Indeed, they contribute not only to the economy and to the progress in this province and in this country, but they also contribute to the quality of life, to the strength of our communities, and to, I would say also, the volunteer aspect that so generously builds our communities either through the school communities or

through any of the other activities that we engage in.

When the bill highlights as its first preamble “whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes the benefits of post-secondary education,” it leads into the second whereas of the bill that says that the Alberta government also “wishes to raise awareness of the benefits of post-secondary education among children and their parents.” This raising of awareness of the value of it is exactly the reason why Bill 1 is so important to me and to this government. It is to raise the awareness among our families that this is a wonderful investment in the minds of their children, a wonderful investment in the economy of this province, and a truly wonderful investment in the quality of individuals whom we wish to lead this province right through this second century of our membership in the great nation of Canada.

8:50

Raising awareness also asks for a buy-in, and that buy-in is that the parents will establish an educational savings plan to which the people of Alberta will contribute along with the immediate beneficiaries, being the family of the children born in the second century of this province. That buy-in engages all of us in participating and engaging in building the future as we envision it to be or as we envision its potential to be. So that’s why I think this bill is a call – a clarion call, I’d even say – to those families who will become participants. In the case of my family when our children started earning a little bit of money, they were able to add into their education savings plan, and they were able to participate in what they would ultimately enjoy, and that is a postsecondary education and all that that brings with it.

Many years ago and perhaps many lifetimes ago, I taught a very dead language called Latin, and one of the pieces of poetry that I had the students memorize included that phrase “carpe diem.” Why I had them memorize that particular ode was simply: it expressed the willingness of the author, certainly the instruction or the exhortation of the poet to other people, to seize the opportunity of the day. I think that’s exactly what Bill 1 exhorts the people of Alberta to do, and that is to seize the opportunity to invest wisely, appropriately, and broadly in the future of this wonderful province.

Contrary to what other people like to think that I think, I will tell you what I think, and that is that this bill is genuinely directed to assist Albertans in planning for the future, and it’s doing it with our most precious resource, our young children, and building for their future and their children’s future. I commend the sentiments that have driven this bill to become an issue of debate, and ultimately I trust it will become an act and a statute of this province. It does not truly dictate from the government to the people; it also asks the people to be involved in enacting the true spirit and intention of this bill, which is investing in our young people for the future.

Something else has been mentioned here tonight. In fact, it was mentioned too often that this is not a fair bill, so I’d like to speak to the fairness of this bill as I see it. Many years ago when I was younger, when I was griping about my brother getting something and I didn’t get it because he was older and I was younger, my mother said to me: you better remember that life isn’t fair. And it isn’t fair in many ways. It’s our responsibility to infuse so much of what we do with a sense of equity of opportunity.

So for those who dismiss it as not being fair in their minds, I would say that then they should take that to its logical conclusion and say that it isn’t fair that some of us grew up without the advantages of medicare, that it isn’t fair that some of the people in this land grew up without having a postsecondary education institution to go to. This whole question of fairness needs to be analyzed in the context in which we address issues today. Quite frankly, I’m tired

of this diatribe about this bill not looking after and not fairly treating children born before January 1, 2005. It just, indeed, is not applicable when we analyze the strength of this particular bill.

If there is any group of citizens whom this bill does address, I’m going to say that it is what some people feel is the forgotten group, the middle class. It addresses and asks the middle class, if you want to classify people, which I think is not fair and not right, but if you want to do that – this bill gives people who value education, who want to invest in it, the opportunity to do so for their children who will be born and will be learning in the next century of this province.

So I do feel that, yes, it does require the families and, I’m going to say, when they get a little bit older, the young people themselves to participate and be partners with the government in this investment. We will all benefit through that, but it does mean that they’re going to have to identify their priorities. For many of us, putting aside some money to contribute to the cost of postsecondary education is a very high priority within our family budgets.

This bill I choose to laud for its raising of awareness and for its responsiveness to the fact that the province, the people of Alberta, will be contributing to the depth and the breadth of knowledge and education of those citizens who will build this province for the next century.

So, Mr. Speaker, Bill 1 gives us the opportunity to be there when possibly some of us didn’t have that opportunity. It gives us the opportunity now to look to the future and not cry over spilled milk or the so-called unfairness of other circumstances that people might have found themselves in.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. But, hon. member, you’ve already participated, according to my notes.

Ms Blakeman: Are we not on Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

The Speaker: Oh, yes, we certainly are. Standing Order 29(2)(a). Please proceed. Absolutely.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you so much. My question to the Member for St. Albert, given her comments on Bill 1, is: how does she reconcile the comments that are made by her colleague the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster that we heard in this Assembly the other day on exactly the same bill giving very much the opposite argument? How does she reconcile that from within her own caucus?

Mrs. O’Neill: Mr. Speaker, I speak for myself. As I said here when I rose, I am speaking as a representative of the people of the constituency of St. Albert and representing them. They are a very astute group of citizens, let me tell you, and I will continue to speak on their behalf.

9:00

The Speaker: There’s still time for 29(2)(a). Additional participants? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs on the Standing Order 29 provision?

Mr. Lukaszuk: No.

The Speaker: No further?

Then I’ll recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs to continue with the debate on Bill 1.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the activities that I partake in as a member of this Assembly that I particularly enjoy and find utmost intrinsically rewarding is participating in the

University of Alberta convocations, and I make a point of always attending as many convocations as I possibly can. What one notices when one sits on the stage looking at all the smiling faces of graduates walking by is that the group of graduates is getting older and older and represents all walks of life. There are really no trends any more to who graduates. No longer are they only young men and women who graduate from the University of Alberta, but we have, indeed, individuals who have returned to learning some time later in their lives. What it shows is that postsecondary education right now in this province is not something that you do right after you get out of high school, but very often many of us go on and acquire some life experiences and then return to postsecondary education. That is a fact of life, and that Albertans can enjoy this is a good thing.

Now, if one were to follow the train of thought that seems to be arising on the opposition benches, one would imagine that they would be proposing, as a matter of fact, never mind imagining, that we now make this bill retroactive and somehow retroactively apply the monies, the dollars, which are being now afforded to the children who will be born in 2005 to anyone and everyone who convokes from the University of Alberta, who can be perhaps 50, 60, or even 70 years old. I think any rational thinker would imagine that that is simply ludicrous. You can't go retroactively 50, 60, 70 years, but what you can do is make learning for the people who will be entering the University of Alberta more affordable and more accessible into the future. Indeed, if monies were not an object and if monies were not a finite number that this government has to deal with, we could make it retroactive to any time in history and simply give everybody \$800 and perhaps even the accrued interest that the children will enjoy in the future. Simply, that is not logical, and I hope that that's not what the opposition is proposing.

As someone who has had the privilege of obtaining postsecondary education and as someone who has funded his own education in the past, I can tell you that I would have been very appreciative to know that my government has invested in my future and has had the foresight, 18 years prior to my enrolment into school, to put some dollars aside so that I can not only enjoy the principal of the dollars but also the accrued interest to make my studies that much more accessible and easier into the future. Unfortunately, when I and many of my peers entered university, all the members of this Assembly, the governments of the past didn't have that foresight. This government does, and I believe 18 years from now when young adults are entering the U of A or the U of C or any technical institution in this province, they will be quite glad to know that this government right now has had that foresight and invested today's dollars into tomorrow's future, because let's face it. Our economy and the whole future of Alberta is based on learning, and it is based on knowledge.

I see a lot of skeptical faces across the floor, and I know that they're more than eager to criticize this bill. Somehow I have a feeling that most of them will be voting in favour of this bill when the vote drops, but I stand to be corrected. Perhaps it will be an interesting exercise to review the *Hansard* less than a month from now.

One thing that is missing, Mr. Speaker, is even though the members from both of the opposition parties are so eager to criticize this bill – they say: lack of foresight, unfair, it's not equal. I know that the NDP feels that everybody should be equally poor. I'm not sure about the Liberals, but they definitely believe in this intrinsic value of equality. Whether it's good or bad, it has to be equal. I have yet to hear one comment that would be constructive and tell us, if they were the government, which, granted, probably won't happen, will never happen, what they would do. What amendments would they bring to this bill to make it more fair, more palatable, and even

better for Albertans and the young adults of the future? I haven't heard one thing. All I heard is that it is not fair, and if it's not fair, say how you would correct it.

Indeed, any legislation that has passed through any Legislature may have some intrinsic unfairness, and our role as legislators is to minimize that unfairness to any degree that's possible. It would be absolutely Utopian to feel that we can pass legislation in this House that is patently fair and can stand any test of fairness and then satisfy any Albertan no matter what walk of life they may come from or whenever they have been born.

So I challenge the opposition that if they honestly feel that this piece of legislation is so patently unfair, either (a) come up with constructive criticism or (b) stand up, go on the record and say that we oppose this and we don't want Alberta's children born after January 1, 2005, to receive the \$800 from this province. Perhaps the opposition will do so.

I thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: To speak, Mr. Speaker, not for questions.

The Speaker: We still have provisions, though, for the questions and comments sector.

Then the hon. Government House Leader. Oh, sorry. Does the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry have a question?

Mr. Bonner: No. I was going to speak.

The Speaker: No. We've already recognized the hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe that I'm an incredibly fortunate individual to be here today, to be an Albertan, to be a Canadian, to have the opportunity to speak my mind on any subject that I'd like to speak my mind on at virtually any time, to have the freedom to participate in debate, and all of that comes because I was extremely fortunate to be born to parents who believed in education.

In 1936 a young lady of 24 years of age left Edmonton and journeyed north by train to Peace River and then got on a boat and went down the Peace River to the hamlet of Fort Vermilion to teach school. When I think of what my mother went through as a young lady and think about the advantages and the privileges that we have today and think about the things that we consider to be hardships today, I just can't imagine it. She did go up there in 1936 to teach in a one-room schoolhouse, to teach children from many backgrounds, most of them First Nations, or aboriginal, native as they were called then, because Fort Vermilion was essentially a native community, and farm families as well in the Peace River district. Up there she met my dad, who had also left Edmonton as a young person to take a job with the Hudson's Bay Company, where he served for 45 years buying fur and running stores in communities and posts all over northern Canada, northern Ontario, places like Pikangikum and Sioux Lookout and Pickle Crow and Osnaburgh House, Fort Vermilion, Hazelton in northern B.C.

During the 45 years that he served in those small communities – and in many of those small communities my mother taught school – they raised seven children. I'm the youngest of those seven children. Every one of those seven children has a postsecondary education, and whether it was from the U of A or from NAIT or SAIT, we have that postsecondary education because our parents cared vitally about education and believed vitally that the most important thing they

could give their children and the most important thing they could do was to ensure that their children had a good education. I have that belief from them and, in fact, that belief in the necessity for a good education for all citizens, particularly a good liberal arts education, but then the ability to move on was something that we needed to have as a fundamental to our society and our community.

9:10

So I am absolutely delighted that in our strategic plan as it's going to be unfolded we put such an emphasis on leading in learning and that vital component of education in our system and how that leading in learning is used in unleashing innovation. I think it's important because it builds on that concept that Albertans have always had of self-reliance, of taking care of your family and contributing to your community and that value that many of our parents – not just my own because I don't think my parents were unique in this – placed on ensuring that their children were well-educated and had that opportunity for the future because, Mr. Speaker, education lays the foundation for the future, not only for future jobs but also for a life rich with and open to all kinds of opportunity.

When the throne speech introduced what I consider to be a truly great initiative, the Alberta centennial education savings plan, which is now the subject of Bill 1, to mark Alberta's 100th birthday with a new program that encourages parents to save for their children's future education, I think that that was a fundamental, far-sighted step in the right direction to encourage all Albertans to have that opportunity that I've had, that opportunity to be the best you can be, to contribute in the best way you possibly can.

This legislation, Mr. Speaker, will encourage parents to set up educational savings plans for their children, RESPs, and in return government will invest \$500 at birth and three payments of \$100 over the years to encourage that continuing saving towards education, that continuing commitment towards education, that continuing understanding that education is fundamentally one of the most important things that we as parents – because I am a parent now – can deliver for our children and can do to make sure that our children succeed.

The government's contribution to the RESP is clearly not going to cover all of a child's tuition. Tuitions go up. Costs go up. That's not the intention. The intention isn't to cover all the costs of an education, but it does provide a foundation, Mr. Speaker, a starting point upon which parents and children can build over the years. More importantly, because it starts at the child's birth, it encourages people to think strategically and to work towards the long-term goal of having that most important postsecondary education.

As we move from a carbon-based economy, from a commodity-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, the gap between those who have and those who do not have is going to get wider and wider. The only way we can narrow that gap, the only way we can ensure that there is fairness in society, the only way we can ensure that everyone has an opportunity to succeed and be the best they can be, is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to get a good, solid education and to have that opportunity to go to a postsecondary institution of their choice, whether it's technical or at a university, in the trades, whatever path they choose to have that opportunity to get that education so that they can not only have a job but a good-paying job, and the statistics show that people who graduate from postsecondary education have a far higher rate of employment and higher incomes than those that don't.

But it's not just about getting a job. It's not just about having that success on the economic side. It's the opportunity to have that life that's rich and open to all kinds of opportunity, that ability for Albertans to really seize any opportunity that's available to them.

So we have some who would criticize that dream, would criticize that concept that Bill 1 and the centennial education savings plan – which provides an impetus for parents to help develop, help start as soon as a child is born the concept that that child should have every opportunity to succeed. And they say that that process is unfair.

I listened to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, and like my colleague before me who commented, I like to listen when the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods speaks because there are usually some nubs of wisdom in what he says, and I believe that he's a very thoughtful contributor to debate in this House. He commented about making sure that children have the opportunity to move from high school to university. I think that Bill 1 does speak to that in the future. One of the things that we need to try and do is raise that level of encouragement for all our children in this province to move from high school into a postsecondary education of some sort so that they can be a participant in that knowledge-based economy and so that they can be successful in the future.

I think Bill 1 does speak to that kind of a dream. It doesn't create that dream in 2005 for a child that's already in school, but it does point that direction. It does make that a part of every family's life that wants to participate in it. That's not only a benefit to the children who have the educational savings plan in place, but it's also a benefit to the other children in the family when the family has that focus on education.

One of the comments that's been made – I think the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods made it, and I think the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona also indicated that not everybody has an RESP. That's true. That's another very good reason to have this bill, because this bill will encourage every family to consider opening an RESP.

I hope that every family will get a package with their birth certificate that says, "Fill in this form, and get to your local bank or institution," or wherever else they may go. "Here's where you can go. Here's how you can do it. Here's how you sign your child up. Make your modest deposit," whether it's a dollar to open it or \$100. Quite frankly, I hope there's a program so that if you can't afford the dollar, you can get the dollar, because it's that important that each family open an RESP and consider starting to save for their children's education and start to put that importance on education.

The low rate of contribution to RESPs is absolutely abysmal given that the federal government in its wisdom has agreed to contribute 20 per cent of a contribution each year up to a maximum of \$400. We should be encouraging more people to take advantage of that. Now, not everybody can. Not everybody can donate \$2,000 to an RESP every year and achieve that \$400. But we should have that opportunity for people to open their RESPs, to get the \$500 contribution from the government, to make that start and to make it a focus.

There were other comments about it not being fair to all Alberta students because some students won't be able to use this because they were born before 2005. Well, Mr. Speaker, there are all sorts of programs available now that are not available to all students. The Rutherford scholarships were mentioned. They're available to students who achieve 80 per cent averages. That's a good program. I don't think anybody here would suggest that we cancel the Rutherford scholarships program because it's not available to all students. It's an excellent way of encouraging academics and encouraging students to achieve through grades 10, 11, and 12, and it provides a sum of money which will assist those students at university.

There are northern bursaries if you live in northern Alberta. I came from Fort Vermilion to go to university years ago. I didn't take advantage of a northern bursary. I wish I could have. I had to

pay off my student loan over 10 years, and pay it off I did. The best investment I ever made in my life. Northern bursaries are available to students from northern Alberta to come to a university or postsecondary and make a commitment to go back to their community and contribute for a few years. That's not available to everybody, just those in northern Alberta.

Student loans. I spent seven years, Mr. Speaker, on the Students Finance Board, one of the most productive times that I've had in terms of my feeling that I was making a contribution towards students getting an education. The informal motto of the Students Finance Board, at least when I was there, was that finances ought not be a barrier to a student getting a good education. In Alberta finances have not been a barrier to a student getting an education. In fact, there's a remission program attached to our student loans, so if you get a student loan, you're likely to get 50 per cent of it remitted. In other words, you don't have to pay that back. Well, if that's not a contribution by the government on behalf of the people of Alberta to certain students, not all students but certain students, I don't know what is, and certainly in most cases it's far higher than \$500.

So to suggest that we ought not start a new program because it would be unfair, when we've got all sorts of other programs that people take advantage of, doesn't make sense, Mr. Speaker. In fact, you have to start good ideas sometime, and now is the time for us to start, in the year of the province's centennial, with this wonderful idea, which was first brought forward by the Member for Calgary-Egmont to encourage self-reliance, to encourage families to save for education. To encourage the concept that families are responsible with their children for a portion of the costs of education is very important. And it is a portion of the costs, because there's a real balance.

9:20

The community does benefit when somebody gets a good education. I think that's another message that the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods put on the table, that there is a benefit to the community in everybody getting a good education. An engineer not only benefits himself by earning a good income, but he benefits the community by using his talents in contributing to the community. You could say the same of every profession, of any person even with just a liberal arts education, that there's a benefit to society. So there's an obligation for society to . . .

Mr. Lukaszuk: A small "I" liberal education.

Mr. Hancock: A small "I" liberal education.

There is a benefit to society in people having a good education and having the ability to take advantage of opportunities and help to make this province of ours even greater, to unleash innovation, to be a part of building the future, and there's an advantage to the individual in terms of the income, in terms of the ability to get a job, particularly with postgraduate degrees or degrees in law or medicine or engineering or those areas where you end up with a better education or a better income than average. There's clearly a benefit to the individual, and so there's a cost sharing. So it comes back to the concept that in the spirit of self-reliance and in the way in which our . . .

I'll just end there, Mr. Speaker, because my time is up, by saying that you can't emphasize too much the value of education, the value of developing the human capital in this province, and this program is one of those which I think is far-sighted and will do that better than many others we've seen.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) kicks in for five minutes. Comments? Questions?

Do I now recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry?

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise this evening to speak to Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act. Like so many pieces of legislation that we do debate in this House, there are many different ways we can view it. This is certainly one of those bills where we can view it from many, many different angles.

When we talk about the benefits of postsecondary education, that has been a commitment that has been made to Albertans since 1905 when we formed the first government under Premier Rutherford. He felt that education was so important that he also named himself minister of education and minister of finance. He saw the benefits of a strong public education system and how it would help the people of Alberta and their neighbours.

In Bill 1 we have set aside in the neighbourhood of \$20 million for the 40,000 children who are going to be born in 2005. We talk about the fairness of setting this amount aside for these future students. I've had the opportunity to teach in St. Albert, and it was a delight to teach there. The quality of student from an academic standpoint was amazing, and it was a pleasure to work with those students. I've also had the opportunity to teach in Edmonton in a different situation, in a purely blue-collar neighbourhood, and again it was exceptional.

When we start looking at students across this province, we also have to start looking at high school completion rates. If we look at the results we get from student achievement and the results from Alberta Learning on student achievement tests, it certainly shows that we have a great disparity in students who complete their high school education. So to think that these dollars that are going to be set aside are going to be available equally to all students is not correct. It is great, but it is not correct that it is available to all students.

When we also look at commitment to education, many of us in this Assembly that did attend postsecondary education benefited from student tuition fees that were incredible. But just 10 years ago, when my oldest daughter started university, by the time she completed her four-year degree in four years, her student tuition had doubled. That was not a commitment to education at that particular time.

I think we see what we have done with students over the past decade by allowing costs of university to increase, with great results. I have an article here from the *Edmonton Journal* dated Saturday, July 5, 2003. It goes on to state: A Statistics Canada study which reveals Alberta has the lowest number of students who attend postsecondary institutions right out of high school shows the province needs to do a better job of educating its own, says a top University of Alberta official. Now, certainly we can argue either way, again, that this bill will not help or that this bill will help. But the one thing is that we have a problem in this province, Mr. Speaker. If this bill does raise the awareness amongst the parents and students of this province of the importance of a postsecondary education, then certainly that is one of the good points of this particular bill.

As well, we have to look back at what happened prior to 1993. We had the Liberal government in this province, we had the UFA government, we had Social Credit, and we even had Conservative governments that up until 1993 paid a tremendous amount of money into our public education system. Those were the statistics that were brought to the front by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. Twenty years ago for every dollar that a student put in out of their own pocket, the province contributed \$10, whereas today for every

dollar a student contributes, the government only supplies \$2.34. So, yes, we have seen tremendous changes in the amount of commitment to Alberta postsecondary students in the last decade.

We do have those students in the province who have a much higher debt load when they do graduate. It is not uncommon now for students to have a debt load of \$20,000, and if you're one of those unfortunate students who has to leave home in order to study and seek room and board in a residence or whatever, that debt load is even going to be more.

One of the things the hon. Member for St. Albert brought up that I like was that certainly we are trying to raise awareness and that education is a tremendous investment. But if this government is truly saying that, then why did this government with its actions not fund an arbitrated settlement to teachers? Why, if this government is so committed to education, did we see the layoff of a thousand teachers? These are a thousand teachers of whom the majority would have been educated right here in Alberta. They went ahead and they got their education, and then they were told: sorry; there's no room in the inn because we will not fund an arbitrated settlement.

So we cannot speak out of both sides of our mouth, Mr. Speaker. We cannot say that we're going to raise the level of awareness of a postsecondary education and then on the other hand lay those people off. So what we do need here is a long-term commitment to our postsecondary institutions to properly fund them in order to keep down costs for students, and certainly that would assist all students who are attending a postsecondary institution.

9:30

Now, as well, we were offered a challenge here earlier: how could we make this bill better? Well, there are a number of interesting things that are happening in the province right now, and certainly one of them is what is happening with Edmonton public. The best way that we can track high school completion rates for students in the province is certainly by looking at results from Alberta Learning. We looked at those over a five-year period, and in doing so, Mr. Speaker, we can look at the systemic changes and see what is happening with student achievement.

What happened when Angus McBeath became superintendent of Edmonton public schools? He indicated at that time that his goal was to raise student achievement. So what he did was he centralized the whole aspect of student achievement in Edmonton public schools. One of the cornerstones they did was that they were going to make certain that every student was identified as to what grade level they were reading at, and their goal was to get every student reading at that grade level. One of the reasons they did that was because they knew from their statistics that students who entered high school and could not read at a grade 10 level have a 99 per cent chance of not completing high school.

So this is definitely one of the ways that we can improve this bill, and that is certainly to make student achievement in the lower grades one of our priorities and certainly to build the cornerstones so that we can improve the high school completion rate for our students.

Now, what also happened in Edmonton public – and again it's a great change from what they've had – is that over the past three years their completion rate in high school has gone from 62 to 69 per cent. That's 7 per cent in three short years. That is phenomenal in a school board of that particular size. They're also looking, Mr. Speaker, at having a high school completion rate of 75 per cent by the year 2005. So, again, that is another 6 per cent in a very short period of time, and I have no doubt that they will do it. When we see results like this, that are directly tied to student achievement, then certainly this is one of the areas that Bill 1 could focus on so that we bring all students along when we work.

As well, when I was on holidays, I came across an article in the *Arizona Sun*, and this article was dealing with teachers. The title of the article is Let the Best Teach the Rest. What they did at the Rodel exemplary teacher academy was they identified characteristics in very successful teachers which made them better than the rest, and those were quite simple. One was a passionate belief system. Another quality that excellent teachers had was motivation and student engagement. A third was that they would focus on subject matter. Another quality that excellent teachers had was effective classroom management strategies. A fifth one was positive communication and leadership. They found in their studies that successful teachers shared all of these.

They wanted to take this one step further, so what they did was this. Over the next three years they took 10 of these teachers and each one of them is going to be assigned six teachers, so at the end of three years we'll have 60 more teachers who have had the benefit of being mentored by these excellent teachers. So if we wish to do something for all students in this province, then certainly one of the ways we can do it is by establishing a mentorship program in our school systems here in the province so that all students will get the benefit of those excellent teachers.

There were a few of us that attended the state Legislatures conference in Chicago a few years ago, and one of the key topics that was discussed at that particular convention was: how do they improve the education system in American schools and particularly in American schools in their large cities? They have the opposite problem in their large schools. Teachers do not want to go into the inner core of large American cities to teach school. They want to get out into the suburbs, where many of the problems that they'd encounter in the inner city they would not encounter with suburbs. What they found in that particular situation, Mr. Speaker, was that if they wished to improve student achievement, the cheapest and most effective way to do that was to increase the quality of the teachers going in there. They were able to do that through professional development. So those are definitely things that we could do in this province. Those are things that we could be spending our money on that would benefit all students in this province.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, it's great. I wish my students had had some more money when they were attending university. It would have helped them out. From that aspect this is certainly a good bill. Some people are going to get some money. On bringing awareness, yes, it does bring awareness to the needs of postsecondary education. It also brings awareness to the fact that the sooner families start to save for the postsecondary education of their children, the better off we are. But the bill falls so far short of the many good things that we could be doing in this province to benefit all students.

So I'm going to reserve how I will vote on this bill. It certainly isn't all bad, and it's certainly not all good. Thank you.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry makes some points that certainly there is always room for improvement and certainly there is room for improvement in Alberta in learning, particularly in participation rates and graduation rates, and we're working on that. But it was interesting that yesterday the Legislature was honoured by the presence of the minister of education from the state of Saxony in Germany. They were here to witness our education system, which has been in many instances considered to be not among the best but the best in the world, which is a great credit to everyone associated with education and the learning system: Alberta Learning, the

teachers, the students, parents, even legislators with the foresight to do what has been done to make education in Alberta so important, and in particular the Edmonton public school board.

It was interesting in the comments that the Member for Edmonton-Glenarry made that tuition was a major deterrent for postsecondary education when, in fact, Ireland found that not to be the case when tuition fees were completely eliminated, and it was determined after the fact that the single most important indicator of whether or not a child would go to postsecondary education was the family experience that the child grew up in. So would not this bill and the sense that from the moment of birth each child in Alberta and each family in Alberta will be inculcated with the sense that education and postsecondary education is a vital part of the foundation of life – is that not an extension of Alberta's Promise, which is already so manifestly delivered in education but even greater for the future?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

9:40

Mr. Bonner: That's an interesting point that the hon. member has brought up. Certainly, it's one of those points that, again, depends where you do live in this province. When I grew up in Jasper, it was a railroad town. We had great emphasis on education by people in that town. They knew the benefits of it. Yet we had a situation where we could leave high school at the end of grade 12, go start working for the railroad, and make \$10,000 more per year than the principal of the high school was making. So to try and impress upon some people the benefits of continuing in a postsecondary education was rather difficult.

I would suspect that if we were to go up to Fort McMurray today, where wages are extremely high, where work is available, it is much more difficult to motivate students in that particular situation to attend a postsecondary institution than to go to work and make some big dollars.

I also think that particularly for students who have to leave home, to travel from a small community to a big city to live in residence or to seek room and board somewhere, it is also intimidating to a degree for many students. So I think there are many factors why students would not attend postsecondary institutions.

As I said in the debate, this brings awareness. If it does encourage students to think more about a postsecondary education, then certainly it's done its job.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a second time]

Bill 6

Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to move second reading of Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act builds on Alberta's success at helping people move from income support into the workforce. It is the legislative authority for Alberta Works, which will provide more co-ordinated access to employment

and training services, income support, health benefits, and child support services. The goal is to help people become self-reliant, help employers meet their needs for a skilled workforce, and help individuals and families meet their basic needs. Alberta Works implements the main recommendation of the MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs to move on integrated systems of income and employment supports.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 6 amends the Income and Employment Supports Act to make it easier for government to help low-income parents get the child support they should be receiving from the noncustodial parent. The child support services program assists parents to obtain child support agreements or court orders which are enforced by the maintenance enforcement program. Extended family, employer, landlords, or other third parties may be asked to provide a phone number or address so the noncustodial parent can be contacted to discuss child support.

In the past some people have been reluctant to provide this information for fear of their names being disclosed. Mr. Speaker, Bill 6 allows government to protect the privacy of third parties in such circumstances and helps ensure parents meet their responsibility to support their children to the best of their ability. This approach is consistent with other government programs that rely on third-party information to carry out their mandate.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Bill 6 makes minor wording changes to the Income and Employment Supports Act. To name a few, section 12 adds that employment and training benefits may be provided for a person with disabilities. This change clarifies that the department can provide such assistance either directly to the person or indirectly through the employer or school.

Section 24, Mr. Speaker, provides that the department will notify the training provider when the department imposes an administrative penalty.

Section 43(1)(a) clarifies that appeals may be either relative to eligibility or relative to the amount or value of assistance.

Section 49(2), Mr. Speaker, includes two changes. The first clarifies that three conditions in the act are additional situations in which personal information can be disclosed, and the second ensures that the minister's power of authorization for disclosure must be exercised for an identified purposes.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, section 49(5) allows the department to refuse to disclose the source of information when investigating a child support case.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Bill 6 makes minor wording changes to the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act and makes it easier for the child support services program to carry out its mandate.

Mr. Speaker, at this point I move to adjourn the debate on this bill. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:48 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, February 25, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/25

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon, and welcome.

Let us pray. Let us keep ever mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work let us find strength and wisdom. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly His Excellency Otto Ditz, ambassador of the Republic of Austria. Mr. Ditz is accompanied by Mr. Nikolaus Demiantschuk, our consul general from Calgary. Over the past five years Alberta's exports to Austria have averaged almost \$21 million per year. In the same period of time we have imported approximately \$76 million worth of products from Austria. However, our relationship with Austria goes far beyond strictly trade. The Austrian government has played an important role in establishing the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies. This institute focuses on social sciences, the humanities, and the arts, and links postsecondary institutions in Austria with those here in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, this is the ambassador's first visit to Alberta, and I would ask that our honoured guests please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Klein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly four prominent members of Alberta's business community whom I had the pleasure of having lunch with today: Robert Rosen of City Lumber; Dave Snyder of Sterling Cranes; Dr. Eric Newell, retired chair and CEO of Syncrude Canada Ltd.; and Dwayne Hunka of Waiward Steel Fabricators Ltd.

Our lunch was an auction item at the Canadian Diabetes Association's fifth annual Flame of Hope golf tournament, and it was a truly worthy cause. Over 100,000 Albertans currently have diabetes, and it affects thousands more of their friends and family. I was pleased to support such an important cause, and it was more than a pleasure to dine with these gentlemen, although we dined on sandwiches. I'd like to thank each of these men for their generosity and for their excellent company and their spirited conversation today and ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my great privilege to ask Blake Robert, William McBeath, and Dennis Laurie to please stand. As these three gentlemen are recognized, the Liberal and the New Democrat colleagues will take heart because this represents the past, the present, and the future of the presidents of the PC Youth in Alberta. It's our great pleasure to welcome them here today and to thank them for their efforts on behalf of all Albertans.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today and introduce to you and to the members assembled 35 people from Fort Saskatchewan: the students from Our Lady of the Angels school represented here and their teacher, Ms Shauna Sabourin, assistant Mrs. Carolina Mayner, and parents Troy and Teresa Gates. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly eight members of the Emmanuel Home along with their group leader. The Emmanuel Home is a great place to live in your retirement years, and I know that full well because my wife's opa lived there for around 28 years. Currently, they are planning for a major expansion to their seniors' complex and have already fund-raised the amount of \$2.4 million. Congratulations and best wishes with that project. I'd ask that my guests rise as I mention their names: Mrs. Ann Helder, Mrs. Doris Nelson, Mrs. Gerrie Vandenberg, Mr. Ulbe Sandstra, Mrs. Dorthea Roess, Mr. Henry Noppers, Rev. Jacob Binnema, Mrs. Hilda Binnema. They are also accompanied by their group leader, Denise DeVries. I'd ask that we give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you five constituents of mine from the Yeoford area. They are Maureen and Bob Webster, and with them are three lovely young ladies: Natasha, Danielle, and Esther Schmale. They have toured the Legislature today. I took them out for lunch, and now they're going to enjoy question period. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've got two introductions. For the first introduction it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 24 visitors from Garneau school in my constituency. They are accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Brad Glenn, and parents Ms Beverly Wilson and Mrs. Brenda Richardson. Garneau school is a landmark in the history of teacher education in this province. The Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta started its work from the building in which this school is located. I think my guests are perhaps seated in the members' gallery. Assuming that they are around, I'll ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Ms Jette Badre. Ms Badre is the chair of Parents of Kids Experiencing Diabetes, a member of the Mill Woods South East Community Health Council, and a member of the advisory committee for the Edmonton student health initiative partnership. As a parent and an engaged citizen she is here today to watch the proceedings of the Assembly. She is seated in the public gallery, and I'll ask her to now rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you a number of individuals who are seated in the public gallery. They are some of the men and women who are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union local 1900. They are Dave Malka, Terry Dekker, Adrian Pearce, Peter Hill, Shane Blyan, Dave Valentine, Darren Scott, Phil DesRoches, Chris Peterson. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: Hon. members, today we have 17 members who have identified their desire to participate, so may I make my plea once again: brevity in questions, brevity in answers.

We'll proceed with the first Official Opposition main question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Liberal opposition released a report that the government is too embarrassed to release itself. The report of the Premier's Advisory Council on Electricity is so sugar-coated. The Consumers' Association of Canada in Alberta withdrew its unqualified support for the report. The government's own MLAs on the committee continue to express doubts about whether electricity deregulation is working for consumers, and even some distinguished Albertans are continuing now to speak out about the reasons why the government deregulated the electricity marketplace in the first case. Now, my first question is to the Premier. Why is the government telling Albertans that we needed more generation when electricity expert John Davies said, and I quote, that there was ample electricity before deregulation?

1:40

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, John Davies, I guess, is entitled to his opinion, but according to all the experts at that time and, indeed, the evidence that has come to light lately, there was a shortage of electricity in this province, and it was due to deregulation that more electricity generation has been brought on stream.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: why is the Premier telling Albertans that we are short of power when Herman Schwenk, the past president of the Alberta rural electrification association, said, and I quote, that the only reason we were running short of generation by 1997-98 was because the government decided to deregulate the industry?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, the gentleman, of course, is entitled to his opinion, and he expressed an opinion. The simple fact is that this province was facing a shortage of power, and the government was not about to go into the generating business. We had to make it possible and feasible for the private sector to bring on more generation. That, indeed, has happened to the point now where we have, I believe, about 3,000 megawatts of power that is deemed to be surplus to our needs, and that has come about due to deregulation.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: what will it take for the Premier to come clean with all Albertans who have been burdened month after month with high-cost electricity and admit to these consumers that electricity deregulation has been a total and dismal public policy failure?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, deregulation has not – has not – been a total and dismal failure. It has been a success. With or without

deregulation there could have occurred some problems with billing, and those problems became evident on the consumer or the retail side. It had nothing to do with generation and bringing more power on stream. That component of deregulation was highly successful indeed, notwithstanding what some people have offered as their opinions. The report of the advisory committee deals with the retail side, deals with the consumer side, and makes recommendations to fix the problem, and indeed action has already been taken by both the Department of Government Services and the Department of Energy to address this issue.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Provincial Fiscal Policies

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today's budget update showed that this government has billions of dollars in surplus funds, yet we have seniors stranded in understaffed nursing homes, children in overcrowded classrooms, and municipalities closing basic facilities for the public. Under this government Alberta is a have province with have-not services. To the Premier: given the multibillion-dollar surplus, what excuse does he offer to the little children who sit in schools hungry because there is no school lunch program?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that comment is totally unfounded, is absolutely unfair, and is simply not true. You know, while the opposition is sitting over there twiddling their thumbs and basically counting pennies and talking about a \$2.70 glass of orange juice, we're counting the billions of dollars of new infrastructure in this province. Since the year 2000-2001 this government has funded 774 new or renovated schools totalling \$1.1 billion, more than 60 new or renovated health facilities totalling more than \$1 billion, 38 new or renovated colleges and universities totalling more than \$500 million. Speaking of seniors, as the hon. member was speaking, we have funded 121 separate upgrades to seniors' lodges totalling \$65 million.

You know, their focus, as usual, is on the negative. I would like to remind them that we're focused on the 5,000 kilometres of highway this government has paved and the \$3 billion spent on roads in the last five years, needed infrastructure to sustain economic growth and prosperity. We're focused on the world-class student achievement results across the province and praise our school districts, the praise that they are receiving from jurisdictions across the world. I met with the Deputy Minister of Education from Saxony today, who admitted that they have a lot to learn from our school system and our achievement tests and the results that we obtain. We're focused on the 85 per cent of Albertans who rate the quality of their health care services as good.

The Speaker: I think we're going to go with brevity. The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Too bad he's not answering his own telephone.

Given the multibillion-dollar surplus, what excuse does the Premier offer the stroke victim who sits 10 hours in the Foothills emergency room without seeing a doctor?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, the Liberals will search high and low and mainly low to find something wrong in this province. Not everything is going to be perfect 100 per cent of the time. That's why we operate on about a 70 per cent success rate. You know, if we have a 70 per cent approval rating, that is pretty good. There are

going to be 30 per cent of those who believe in the Liberals or the NDs or other, no matter how well we do.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to concentrate again on those things that are positive, like the practical health reforms that make a difference to patients, like electronic health records, new physician funding models, an on-line wait list registry, and around-the-clock access to over-the-phone health advice when he's speaking about health services. We're focused on the record number of MRI scans, heart surgeries, and joint replacements being performed in this province and the 600 doctors and 1,500 nurses who have moved here to Alberta in the last three years.

Dr. Taft: Again to the Premier: given the multibillion-dollar surplus, what excuse does he offer vulnerable seniors who, according to his government's own report, sit unattended in nursing homes because of staff cuts?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, he is again focusing on the negative – focusing on the negative. I would focus on the \$225 million in seniors' programs funded by this government annually, providing some services for nearly 60 per cent of seniors in Alberta who are in the low-income bracket. These are the kinds of things this side of the House, the government side of the House, is focused on. The opposition, well, of course, they're focused on trying to manufacture bad news in whatever way they can. And Albertans are not buying it.

1:50 Utilities Consumer Advocate

Mr. MacDonald: Speaking of bad news from this government, Alberta electricity consumers are going to get more of it, unfortunately. One of the top recommendations in the report from the Premier's Advisory Council on Electricity is to create an independent, government-funded consumer ombudsman. My first question is to the Premier. Why is the Premier allowing the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate to be fully funded by the gas companies and the Balancing Pool?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't have the precise answer to that. I will have the Minister of Government Services provide a response.

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, this is an exact duplicate of the question that was presented yesterday in this House, and I have advised this House that, yes, the Bolger commission set up the idea of an advocate's office. That recommendation has been approved by government, and our department, responsible for consumer protection, has set up the advocate's position under the auspices of a deputy minister. It is important to make sure that government is close to this issue because Albertans have to have an open door, an open portal, to provide us with the information that Albertans are seeking when they want to know exactly how the energy restructuring has been done and what their rights are and how it is progressing to this point in time. The advocate's office does that for Albertans.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Government Services. Given that the minister has had 24 hours to consult with the Public Affairs Bureau regarding this matter, I will ask again: how can this government call the Utilities Consumer Advocate independent when his paycheque and his office expenses are being signed by the utility companies?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, the department of consumer services under Government Services is funded by the taxpayers of

the province of Alberta. The advocate's office is also funded by the taxpayers of the province of Alberta through their utility payments, through the Balancing Pool, and indirectly back. [interjections] They don't like this, but it's a better direct access to government than through the other means. There was actually no access to government other than through MLAs, and we heard MLAs respond through the Bolger report that the advocate's position be put in place to be that avenue to government, and that's what we did.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, this time to the Premier. Given that this is a clear case of payola, who in the government decision-making process made the decision? Who in cabinet made the decision that the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate should be fully funded by industry?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to have the hon. Minister of Government Services supplement, but I will take very strong exception to the suggestion that this is payola. Payola is the thing that their Liberal cousins in Ottawa are accustomed to with the sponsorship program scam that is going on, that they seem to endorse and have thrown up smoke screens to cover up by, you know, focusing on \$2.70 glasses of orange juice here in the province of Alberta.

Relative to the question minus the suggestion that there is payola, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Premier. The Alberta Energy and Utilities Board funds interveners. That is their responsibility when they look after the public interest in this province, and thank goodness we have an independent body that can do that. Thank goodness we have the industry that supports that EUB in helping to make those decisions.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of how the government is involved in this and the authority by which we as government, through the utilities advocate's office – the funding through the Balancing Pool is permitted under section 148 of the Electric Utilities Act, which was amended in this House in the year 2003. That amendment was provided for the development of the retail market in this province. Our department, through the advocate's office, is to help with that development of the retail market and to inform customers and consumers, small businesses, and farmers exactly how they can access this system properly.

Mr. Hancock: Point of order.

The Speaker: To the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar: after being recognized by the chair to ask the question, it might be appropriate then to listen to the answer instead of heckling.

The hon. leader of the third party.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. During the past week the Premier has been peddling old wine in new bottles, Mr. Speaker. Instead of Hotel de Health, the Premier is promoting Hotel de Wealth. Allowing patients who can afford it to buy a better level of care in hospitals is a two-tiered health care system. My questions are to the Premier. While all Premiers agree that managing health care costs is a challenge, why does the Premier stand alone in advocating ill-advised user-pay schemes that lead to two-tier health care in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, indeed, perhaps Alberta stands alone, as it

has on a number of issues, issues that have made this province very unique but, on the other hand, very prosperous and the envy of other provinces in Canada, because we've had the courage to think differently and to do things differently. Yes, I have said – and I will say publicly – that if all else fails and we can't reach consensus relative to meaningful reform to achieve sustainability in health care, then we will consider going it on our own.

But having said that, we will abide by the fundamental principles espoused by his late departed friend Tommy Douglas – well, I don't know if they were friends, but the late departed Tommy Douglas – who basically said that no one should lose their dignity and their home and their livelihood because of illness or sickness. That's what medicare was all about. [interjections] Well, it was. It was. It was brought about so that people who were sick or injured wouldn't lose their homes and their businesses because of illness or injury. That's why it was brought about.

The system has grown to be all things for all people for all causes, and we have to address that. Indeed, every Premier – every Premier – and every territorial leader has said that health care costs are driving their jurisdictions into bankruptcy, and it was unanimous in the letter to the Prime Minister that unless something is done to achieve sustainability, the health care system as we know it today will not be here 10 years down the road. Now, you may think differently, but I'll tell you that your friend in Saskatchewan, Mr. Calvert, your friend in Manitoba, Mr. Doer, agree – agree – with me on this point.

2:00

The Speaker: Do I take it, hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, that you rose on a point of order?

Mr. Mason: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Okay.
The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary question to the Premier: why is this Premier out of step with his fellow Premiers, including Conservatives like the Premier of Nova Scotia, who are urging the federal government to implement the blueprint for health care sustainability contained in the Romanow report?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I am not out of step with the other Premiers. I agree with the other Premiers that that portion of the Romanow report should be adopted; that is, there should be more federal funding. But that is only one piece of the puzzle. That is a small piece of the puzzle. We need to look in a meaningful way at things we can do that won't undermine public health as it relates to those who are truly sick and injured in society but, at the same time, will give the regional health authorities and others the opportunity to generate revenue.

Now, relative to the wine situation, let's get it on the record and let's get it straight. A reporter from the *Edmonton Journal*, Kelly Cryderman, asked me about a situation in terms of sustainability, and I related to her a situation that was passed on to me by a person in Calgary. That person said that he travelled to Birmingham, England, where he wanted to get a hip replacement using the Birmingham hip, which I understand is the latest in technology.

He mentioned to me that he rented a room in association with the hospital. There were 10 rooms, five of them, by the way, occupied by Albertans – 10 rooms, five occupied by Albertans – and these rooms were like hotel rooms, but they were attached to the hospital.

Yes, those people who could afford it paid to have those luxury rooms, and yes he could order wine to his room because it was operated like a hotel, but the public hospital was still in place, was still doing hip surgeries. The doctors there contracted to do a certain amount of procedures under the national health system in Britain.

We have never looked at the system in Britain; we have never looked at the system in France; we have never looked at the system in Sweden: all of them social democratic countries. We have never looked in detail at those systems where they do have a mix of public and private. We have to ask ourselves: why are we number 27 in the world? Why are we not number one?

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Granted that this Premier keeps interesting company, why won't he level with regular Albertans and admit that the flexibility he seeks in interpreting the principles of the Canada Health Act is code for introducing health care user fees?

Mr. Klein: No, it's not code for introducing health care user fees, although user fees may be part of the answer. May be. You know, user fees is a sexy 15-second sound bite, but it may be a multitude of things including closing the Romanow gap, including looking at ways to allow regional health authorities to be more flexible, including recommendations contained in the Graydon report talking about deductibles and to some extent user fees. All of these things need to be looked at, and we need to look at them because the health care system that he cherishes so much will not be there. It will collapse totally and completely.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mature Cattle Marketing and Processing

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The partially lifted borders were excellent news for our cattle industry, although news reports today say that Montana is asking for a seven-year ban on live cattle exports, which is nonsense, and restrictions imposed by other countries limited the beef that could be exported to cattle less than 30 months of age. This has meant an overabundance of cattle more than 30 months of age with no other market than the domestic one. My first question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What is being done to help deal with the overabundance of mature beef in Alberta?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I don't believe that Montana is asking for a seven-year ban. There are a few people in Montana that have mentioned that. I spent some time with the Director of Agriculture for Montana in Washington earlier this week, and there was no suggestion of that. In fact, what all the directors of Agriculture across the U.S. and the ministers in Canada are searching for is a way to resume normal trade.

Mr. Speaker, when we were faced with the issue of BSE in our country, we quickly came to a conclusion with the industry that there were some things that we were going to have to do differently, and one was the handling of mature cattle. In spite of our being successful in having the border opened for boneless beef under 30 months in seven months, not seven years, we have a supply of mature cattle and bulls. Prior to May 20 about 60 to 70 per cent of those animals went live into the U.S. and into Mexico to be processed. So we realized that we were going to have to deal with this on a long-term basis in our country.

So the government of Alberta being visionary, working with the

industry some months ago, put three programs in place to deal with this issue. We realized that we had to have capacity to kill these animals, which we don't have today. We realized we had to have a home for the product within our country, which we don't have today, so we put three programs in place. The \$4 million beef product development program, which looks for new ways to use that material and, in addition, a \$25 million loan program with Ag Financial Services Corporation to help processors process that in our province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is for the same minister. Given that many farmers and ranchers are asking me how they can process and sell their own beef, what is your department doing to make it easier for small producers to develop value-added opportunities on their farms?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have something in this province that's the envy of many provinces in Canada and, in fact, many places in the world.

Mr. Mar: It's our Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: It's our Premier – you're right – and the vision of this Premier.

We have in this province the Leduc processing centre, and I've often said that this is probably the best kept secret in our province, but, Mr. Speaker, it is becoming far better known, and many members would remember that we introduced, also, an incubator addition to that project.

What we have done with the programs that we have for funding, which are modest but are what our processors told us they needed to change their plants to handle more of this product, is put the Leduc processing centre at their disposal and also purchase some additional equipment that would be needed there to develop that product. That's what our producers told us: we need help with product development. Obviously, each one who wants to do this can't go out and purchase the equipment on a trial basis. So that is occurring, Mr. Speaker, as we speak.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's good news.

My final question is for the same minister. Is your department considering changing any regulations to make it easier for producers to develop value-added opportunities on their farms?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, if the experience with BSE has taught us one thing, it's the importance of having good food safety rules and regulations in place, the importance of having good livestock transportation rules and regulations in place, and having regulations in place that allow us to identify animals and/or, indeed, product readily. So as has been our practice, we sit with the producers. We'll talk about regulations that they might see that are inhibiting them from moving ahead, but we will not reduce regulations that in any way compromise the quality and the safety of the food products we produce.

2:10

Government Aircraft

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, yesterday we seemed to have some confusion about whether or not the government uses its planes to fly persons not in government to partisan political events. When I asked

if municipal leaders were flown in a government plane to a partisan political event, the Minister of Municipal Affairs replied: "Absolutely, yes, to the question." When I asked if the persons in question paid the cost of their trips, he answered: "At no time will a government plane ever be used for political purposes." This is a great contradiction. To the Premier: will the Premier help his minister out by confirming that the government does transport people to partisan political events such as a Premier's dinner?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we're very careful about that. As a matter of fact, I know that those who attend Premier's dinners, whether it be in Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, or Red Deer, are transported on chartered planes. Now, it may be that a minister or officials of the government have government business in that particular city and might have taken the plane down earlier to attend to that particular business, but in no case are any members of government allowed to take government planes to Premier's dinners or to other fundraising dinners.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, since the operation of the aircraft is in Infrastructure, I would like to supplement. I think that what is going on in here and what happened yesterday is actually very, very distasteful. From *Hansard* on page 117 just let me read a little of what the hon. member asked yesterday.

There were several municipal leaders, family members of MLAs, and other persons on board these government aircraft that day. Coincidentally, April 4, 2002, was also the Premier's dinner day in Calgary.

And then:

To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: did the government transport municipal leaders to the Premier's dinner, a partisan political event, on the taxpayer's [expense]?

Well, I happen to have in my hands right here – and I will file it later, at the appropriate time – the manifest from that day. It reads that the plane left Edmonton at 8:15 in the morning. There was one MLA and four other individuals aboard that aircraft. They were going to Calgary for a Roles, Responsibilities and Resources meeting sponsored by the Minister of Municipal Affairs. At 1 p.m. the plane left Calgary and came back to Edmonton, and on that plane there were the five people that went down in the morning plus two municipal leaders.

For the member to suggest that there were family members aboard the plane, that there were municipal people going to the Premier's dinner in Calgary that evening – you should be ashamed of yourself for making those kinds of accusations. They are absolutely false, and you should apologize to the people of Alberta for trying to make the people believe that, in fact, this is happening, because it is not happening.

Mr. Bonner: Again to the Premier. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry has the floor.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: can the Premier explain why on October 1, 2002, the government plane transported to and from Edmonton and Calgary six members of the Getty family?

Mr. Hancock: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea, nor am I compelled to answer any questions relative to the activities of the former Premier.*

*see page 154, right column, paragraph 5

Mr. Bonner: To the Premier: will the Premier tell us if any persons transported on government planes have reimbursed their costs for their trips?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there was a time when we used the government airplane to attend things like the Western Premiers' Conference and other events where we have charged members of the media and members of the business community, the trade mission to Houston where we used the Dash 8.

Transport Canada has since ruled that you can't do that. Now, that was unbeknownst to me, so there was nothing untoward about doing that at that particular time. So, yes, indeed, there have been charge-backs. We're looking at that policy now. Much to my chagrin and my disappointment, apparently it can't be done. I think it's a courtesy, to say the least, and it's a convenience for members of the media and others who might want to travel to these conferences to go on the government plane if there's room, providing they pay. We usually charge what they would pay on the lowest cost excursion. Basically, it's the cost of fuel.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, under the terms of our licence, we are not allowed to charge for trips. So, as the Premier has indicated, that procedure has stopped.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Federal Health Care Funding

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the first ministers' meeting in January the Prime Minister finally followed through on his predecessor's commitment for an additional \$2 billion to health care. Alberta's share of that money is approximately \$200 million. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Can the minister tell this House if he has had any indication yet from the federal government and the federal Minister of Health that it will annualize the one-time commitment to health care?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, across Canada health care costs have gone up at roughly twice the rate of the rate of growth of government revenues, and that's the reason why at yesterday's news conference from the Council of the Federation our premier and premiers from across Canada unanimously urged the federal government to annualize the \$2 billion that was announced by Prime Minister Chretien and repromised a number of times since then.

Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member indicated, Alberta's share of that money is \$200 million. Let's put that in perspective: that will only pay for about 10 days of health care in this province. Now, every dollar of that is welcome, and I know that regional health authorities will put it to good use, but to this point not Alberta nor any other province of Canada has had any hint at all that the federal government is planning on annualizing that funding, which is much needed.

Mrs. O'Neill: Well, my supplemental to the same minister then: has the federal government given any indication that it plans to pay more of its fair share of health costs?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, a bit of history on medicare in this country. When it started out as a provincial/federal partnership with Tommy Douglas introducing a universal hospital insurance system in Saskatchewan, the federal grants for that were 50 per cent. So it was a 50-50 cost-sharing arrangement. Now, that model stayed in place until 1977 when a Liberal Prime Minister replaced it with

block funding for health and postsecondary education. That is what eventually turned into the Canada health and social transfer in 1996.

Right now nationally the federal government contributes just 16 cents on the provincial health care dollar. All provinces across Canada are demanding that the federal government move to the 25 per cent recommended by the federal government's own royal commission. So far, Mr. Speaker, there has been no federal intention expressed of doing so.

2:20

Water Management

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, the government's ministers can't seem to agree on the Red Deer River diversion. The Minister of Energy seems to think it's no big deal, while the Minister of Environment isn't so sure. Yesterday that minister said he is not even sure whether he disagrees or agrees with the appeal. To the Premier: is the Red Deer River diversion, where fresh water will be taken out of the water cycle forever, a big deal, or isn't it?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, if you'll permit me, I would like to answer that question, but something's been playing on my mind relative to a question asked by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry. It alluded to the former Premier and his family using the plane. I wasn't paying that close attention. It was in 2002. Indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Getty were on a plane as well as members of his former staff, and that was to transport him for the dedication of the Getty wild-land park. Just to have that clarified.*

Mr. Speaker, in answer to the hon. member's question: is it of importance to me? Yes, it is. It's of extreme importance to me. It's of extreme importance to, I believe, both members representing Red Deer and the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler and the hon. Member for Ponoka-Rimbey, probably the hon. members for Rocky Mountain House and Drumheller-Chinook as well. The reason it's important is that some of the communities surrounding Red Deer are running short of water. Aquifers are drying up, and a diversion is deemed to be one way in which these communities can be assured of a secure supply of water for the future. Where that process is right now, I really don't know, but I am very keen on this particular project.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, then why would the approval for the diversion be given before the Water for Life plan has been completed? That seems to indicate to the communities in those areas that their concerns over long-term access to water are unfounded and going to be ignored. You can't just let companies take water out of the life cycle.

Mr. Klein: I think we're talking about two issues here. One is the sustainability of supply for communities, potable water, and the other is the whole issue of water being used in oil field development, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps the hon. member can clarify for me the point that she is trying to make because I, quite simply, don't get it.

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to point out that I believe the member opposite is once again recycling a question. Although as Minister of Environment I like recycling, I don't necessarily like recycled questions. She's recycling the question she asked yesterday, which I assume is dealing with the Environmental Appeal Board hearing that is going on as we speak. That has to do with the Capstone request to divert water out of the river for the Capstone Energy company. I assume that is what she is speaking towards.

What I believe the Premier was referring to was – if you remember last session, I believe, we passed an interbasin transfer act that would

*see page 153, right column, last line

allow Red Deer to supply water to all those various communities that the Premier was referring to. But I believe the member was referring to the Energy hearing that's going on. As I said quite clearly yesterday, there's a process. I will have a recommendation from that hearing within 30 days or thereabouts, and we'll make a decision at that time.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the Minister of Environment. Does this government believe that using fresh water for injection is a sustainable use of water? Please don't recycle your "I don't know" answer.

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out when the member asked that question yesterday, we have a committee that is made up of the environmental groups; it's made up of the energy industry, the gas and oil producers; it's made up of the Alberta municipal districts and counties; it's made up of the AUMA. We have this group that is currently meeting, and they expect to have their initial recommendations back to me by the end of March or in that time frame, and they will be making recommendations on utilization of water that removes it from the hydrological cycle. That's what the committee is designed to do, and that's what we're waiting for recommendations on.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Education Agreement with Saxony

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on Monday, February 23 an agreement was signed between Alberta Learning and the German state of Saxony's Ministry of Education and Sports. The free state of Saxony in Germany also has an agreement of co-operation with the province of Alberta. Besides government agreements we have agreements between Lindsay Thurber high school in Red Deer and Harry Ainlay high in Edmonton that are twinned with high schools in Hesse, Germany. Could the Minister of Learning please explain how the agreement between Alberta Learning and the Saxon Ministry of Education and Sports will benefit the students and teachers of Alberta and why the Saxon ministry has chosen Alberta Learning to partner with?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to start off on that question, I feel very strongly that any time we can sign agreements with countries across the globe, students in Alberta benefit. We benefit by sharing experiences. We benefit by sharing education systems.

This particular MOU, in specific, signed in five areas, basically. The first one was an educator exchange, which enables us to have teachers go back and forth between Saxony, Germany, and Alberta.

The second one was school partnership, which will be adding more to the twinning arrangements that the hon. member just asked about. Again, I feel that this is an incredibly good use of these agreements, where we can get students in our province of Alberta talking to and having good dialogue with students in other parts of the world.

The third thing will be information on education-related issues. Quite simply, Mr. Speaker, this is an agreement that allows us to talk about education, to talk about what each of our partners is doing.

The fourth thing will be the foreign language assistance program. Mr. Speaker, as I've said in this House many times, in the year 2006

we will be making second languages very, very important to our system. The German language will be one of them, and we will be counting on sharing expertise with areas such as Saxony in order to do this.

Mr. Speaker, the last thing that we signed was about teacher in-service training opportunities. Quite simply, this agreement entails that when there are in-service opportunities for either Saxony teachers here or for our teachers in Saxony, Germany, we will make those opportunities available and communicate to Saxony on this.

Mr. Speaker, again I'll reiterate that any of these agreements that we sign with foreign countries, with foreign states, truly add to the educational experience for our students.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, my last question to the Minister of Learning: what areas of best practices in Alberta Learning were the delegation from Saxony most interested in?

Dr. Oberg: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, the reason that Saxony came over here is our rankings in the OECD. As everyone in this Assembly and everyone in Alberta should know – and many people do – we finished number one on the exams in the OECD in the year 2000. What this has done is given us truly a world-wide reputation for our learning system. Quite simply, what Saxony, Germany, wanted to do was come over and see exactly what we were doing in curriculum development, in technology, in teacher in-servicing and teacher professional development, essentially the whole elements of our learning system.

Mr. Speaker, through to the hon. member, they also had an opportunity to tour the Nanotechnology Institute at the University of Alberta as well as see several of our great projects at the University of Calgary. So in a space of about three or four days they saw an excellent cross-section of what we're doing in Alberta for education.

2:30

The Speaker: Hon. members, just a comment about question period today. It seems that the Speaker should never ask for brevity in questions and brevity in answers. Every time I do that we get less productivity, so I'm going to learn and never say that again.

My apologies to the eight members who could not participate today, but nine did participate with questions and answers.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: In 30 seconds I'll call on the first of several members. The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Alberta Union of Provincial Employees

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Positive employer/employee relationships are something that every organization should constantly strive for. The government of Alberta is no exception. One way to maintain a positive working relationship is through face-to-face contact between front-line workers who apply public policy and MLAs who develop the policy.

This Monday I was pleased to participate in an educational seminar sponsored by AUPE, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. The purpose of this seminar was to assist union representatives to develop positive working relationships with government officials and legislators. I found the meeting to be enlightening and encouraging not because we agreed on every issue, because quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, we may never agree on every issue, but because we were developing a process so issues can be presented in a meaningful discussion that respects both the deliverer and the developer of public policy.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the AUPE leadership and members for presenting me with a union hat and sweater after my presentation. As promised, I was pleased to model both on my way into question period this afternoon.

I ask all members to join me in congratulating AUPE on this positive training initiative.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Dr. Gary McPherson

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to acknowledge an Albertan well known to this Assembly. Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada, presented the insignia of membership to the Order of Canada to Dr. Gary McPherson, Friday, February 20, 2004, at Rideau Hall in Ottawa. The Order of Canada is our country's highest honour for lifetime achievement.

I've had the privilege of knowing Gary for many years. He is a man of incredible strength of character and is a testament to the human spirit. For nearly 35 years Gary lived in a long-term care facility after childhood polio left him quadriplegic. His mind and his heart more than make up for his physical challenges.

Gary broke from the bonds of institutional living to become a voice of social change that has inspired others. He is a community activist, an administrator, and a role model for us all. As many of you know, Gary was the first chair of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. He remains active in our community to this day, providing strong, articulate leadership to the Alberta Paraplegic Association, the Rick Hansen Centre, and the Steadward Centre.

Behind every successful man is, of course, a happy and stable home. For that, we recognize Valerie Kamitomo, his lovely wife and mother to their children, Keiko, 14, and Jamie, 13.

Dr. McPherson is a remarkable Albertan embodying the values we hold dear, independent of mind, caring, and committed to building a just society for all.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Kim Evanochko

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to rise today to formally extend my congratulations to a very special young lady, Kim Evanochko, from the community of Forest Lawn in the constituency of Calgary-East.

Mr. Speaker, Kim has competed for some time in speed skating and earned the right to represent Alberta at the Special Olympics Canada Winter Games in Prince Edward Island. Today I'm very pleased to recognize Kim's very exciting finishes; namely, two first-place finishes, two second-place, and one third-place finish.

Truly, all participating athletes are to be commended. I especially want to applaud Kim's Olympic spirit and her contribution to Alberta pride.

I ask that my hon. colleagues join me in recognizing Kim Evanochko, athlete and Albertan extraordinaire.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Greater Edmonton Teachers' Convention

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I recognize the teachers attending the greater Edmonton teachers' convention. This

has been a trying year for many of those teachers. Many are worried about the recommendations of the Learning Commission that may seriously rupture their professional association. The convention is an opportunity for them to set the problems of crowded classrooms, fewer resources, and colleagues who are no longer with them aside.

Renewing the Spirit is appropriately the theme of this convention. For many, given the trials of the past year, the theme will have special meaning. But renew their spirit they will. They'll explore new ideas, share successes with each other, and be inspired by internationally rated speakers. The topics range from a keynote speech on school bullying to a smorgasbord of panels, demonstrations, lectures, and debates that will help make them better teachers when they return to their classrooms. There are literally hundreds of topics to choose from spread over some of the best venues in this city.

We wish them well as they go about becoming better professionals. Our children will be the benefactors.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Pierre Lueders and Giulio Zardo

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pride that I rise today to recognize Pierre Lueders, an outstanding Albertan who recently won a gold medal in the 2004 World Cup two-man bobsleigh championship in Germany. His achievement on the world stage is a testimony to his athletic ability, determination, and commitment to excellence that serves as a powerful example to young, aspiring athletes throughout Canada and around the world. Like all athletes he has worked long and hard to reach such an exceptional level of success and, in doing so, has brought pride and honour to our capital city, our province, and our country.

Pierre and his teammate and brakeman, Giulio Zardo, are recognized as one of the best teams in the world. Their recent success builds on Alberta's rich tradition of excellence and demonstrates that effort and dedication have their rewards.

I know that all members of this Assembly are extremely proud of Pierre and will join me in extending our congratulations and best wishes to him and his teammate on winning a gold medal. I should add, Mr. Speaker, that Pierre is the brother-in-law of our Minister of Economic Development.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Dr. Robert Lampard

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on August 2, 2003, Dr. Robert Lampard of Red Deer and his son Geoffrey led a group of Rotarians with little or no mountaineering experience to the peak of Mount Davidson on the first documented climb of this 2,909 metre high mountain located on the eastern slopes of the Rockies near Devil's Head north of Lake Minnewanka. Mount Davidson was named after James Wheeler Davidson, an explorer, a community leader, and a Rotarian who chartered 32 Rotary clubs from Banff to Bangkok and from Athens to Auckland from 1920 to 1931.

At noon on that historic day the group of Rotarians, that included Davidson's grandson Tom Abramson, convened the highest organized Rotary meeting ever held in North America. They built a cairn, buried a time capsule, and toasted Davidson with champagne.

Davidson was a remarkable man and Rotarian, who had a mountain named in his honour. Dr. Robert Lampard of Red Deer is also a remarkable man and Rotarian, who made sure that the world

would not forget the generous and energetic contributions of a man who lived by the Rotarian ideals of making new friends and service above self.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, local 1900, some of whom I introduced earlier, who recently achieved a first collective agreement with Craig Media and A-Channel Edmonton. These union members – broadcasters, reporters, camera operators, and technicians – refused to give up even as the warm fall days turned into bitterly cold weeks and then into months during this long and difficult strike. My colleague and I from Edmonton-Strathcona along with many other Edmontonians were privileged from time to time to walk the picket line with them.

The members of CEP local 1900 are going back to work March 1 having ratified a first collective agreement with their employer. I send them our congratulations and our best wishes and our sincere hope that they can now start to reap the benefits of their employment that they so deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: 2:40 **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm tabling today a report required under the Universities Act. The report on university animal facilities for 2003 covers inspections of facilities at the three Alberta universities that use animals in research and education, these being the universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. The report does conclude that the animals are being cared for appropriately.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister for Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly today five copies of a recently printed report of the Endangered Species Conservation Committee, which is chaired, of course, by my colleague the Member for West Yellowhead. The committee reports to me on the progress of their efforts on behalf of Alberta's species at risk. The 11-member committee represents the academic community and organizations of land-use managers, resource users, conservation groups, and government departments. The biannual report covers the period of June 2000 to June 2002 and sets the stage for ongoing activities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of the Alberta government aircraft passenger manifest, and these are for the date of Thursday, April 4, 2002. The first flight on this manifest is the King Air. The department is Infrastructure, from Edmonton city centre to Calgary.

The Speaker: Hon. member, we just table and move on.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, I think this will help clarify one of the issues brought up earlier on the floor.

The Speaker: Right now we're in Tablings. Is the hon. member finished?

The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I want to table answers to Written Question 15 from last session and the manifest that I referred to earlier that clearly was the basis of the question from the hon. member.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I table the appropriate number of copies of a speech given by Christien Gauld. It was a very touching speech about the effects of cutbacks in speech therapy on her child.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling this afternoon, and that is a letter to the editor of the *Eckville Echo*, and it is signed by Herman Schwenk from Coronation, past president, Alberta Rural Electrification Association, and this is in regard to electricity deregulation.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got one tabling today. It's appropriate copies of a letter from Mr. Tim Belec dated February 25, 2004. He's a resident of Westeros, and the letter is addressed to the Premier. He urges the Premier to seek a mandate before opening up our hospital wards to "silver-trayed room service to foreign 'customers'."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'm not sure if there's a full moon out today or not, but we've three points of order. So the first from the hon. Government House Leader.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I hope by that reference that you weren't suggesting already that I was crazy.

Mr. Speaker, today in this House we reached, in my view, a new low, and I'm going to speak to the first of the new lows in my first point of order and then my second point of order presumably after Edmonton-Highlands has put his point of order.

The first point of order I raised was with respect to the third question put today, in this case by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I don't have the Blues, but during the process of putting his question, he used the term "payola." I would refer members to the Standing Orders of this House – 23(l), where a member "introduces any matter in debate which offends the practices and precedents of the Assembly," and 23(i), imputing "false or unavowed motives" would apply – but more particularly to *Beauchesne's* 493(3) and (4).

(3) The Speaker has traditionally protected from attack a group of individuals commonly referred to as "those of high official station". The extent of this group has never been defined. Over the years it has covered senior public servants, ranking officers of the armed services, [et cetera].

(4) The Speaker has cautioned Members to exercise great care in making statements about persons who are outside the House and unable to reply.

Now, Mr. Speaker, when one uses the term “payola,” I think there’s a fairly clear understanding that one is suggesting impropriety and more than suggesting impropriety, but let’s go to the Oxford dictionary definition: “bribery in return for the unofficial promotion of a product in the media.” I don’t think it’s necessary for anyone on this side of the House to understand what the term means, but the people on the other side appear not to have a very good education; therefore, the Oxford definition of bribery: “dishonestly persuade (someone) to act in one’s favour by a payment or other inducement.”

Mr. Speaker, that is probably the most heinous thing that one can say of another person in government and public service, and in this case there can be no doubt as to whom the member on the other side was referring in his question. He was talking clearly about the public’s advocate, the deputy minister level employee of the government who has been named as the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

Basically, the gist of the question today, the questions that have been raised earlier in the House – and I don’t for a moment raise any concern about opposition members or any member of the House questioning how monies are applied to any particular project, who ought to be paying, who ought not to be paying. But to go so far as to suggest that there’s payola, bribery, dishonesty with respect to a public official goes way beyond the pale, and that hon. member ought to stand in his place and state that he had no intention to impugn the integrity of senior public servants in this province and to acknowledge that by saying that there’s payola involved, he’s taking it above the normal propriety of this House in which the opposition has the right, indeed the obligation, to question the way in which government operates and went far beyond that. He should withdraw the comments which clearly impugn the integrity of the utilities commissioner of this province.

The Speaker: Hon. Opposition House Leader, are you participating on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar?

Ms Blakeman: Yes. In my inaugural response as a House leader to the point of order raised I will be arguing in defence of the questions from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. In looking at the question that was asked, there was no clear reference with the use of the word “payola,” unlike what is being argued by the hon. House leader on the other side. He was questioning why the government had chosen to make other funding arrangements than what were clearly outlined in the government’s own policy. The question of the use of the word “payola,” which is an informal bribe to get special treatment, especially to promote a commercial product – in the question asked by the member, he’s not making reference. He said, “Given that this is a clear case of payola.” He does not attribute it to any given individual or entity at all.

Now, the House leader also raised but didn’t argue the point of offending the practices of the House under 23(1), and he also raised *Beauchesne* 493(3) and (4), which is referring to “those of high official station,” and in fact that has not been determined. “The Speaker has traditionally protected from attack a group of individuals commonly referred to as ‘those of high official station.’ ” It’s never been defined, but it gives suggestions of “senior public servants, ranking officers of the armed services, diplomatic representatives in Canada, a Minister who was not a Member of either House.”

2:50

Well, we’re here talking about independent businesspeople. [interjection] Yes, we’re talking about who pays the utility commission, and the people that are involved in that I don’t think are

covered under any of the groups that I have just named: “of the armed services, diplomatic representatives in Canada, a Minister who was not a Member of either House.” So I dispute that point from the member.

This is the job of the Official Opposition: to raise questions with the government and to call them to account. That is what this member has tried to do in bringing forward a situation in which the government appears to have contravened its own policy, and the member was questioning why. So I would argue that none of the citations brought forward by the House leader have in fact been contravened.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Additional participation?

Well, there may be some members in the House who actually are young enough not to know the origin of the word “payola,” so just for edification I will advise them that there was a time in North America when disc jockeys were playing music and record companies wanted to promote music and the artists on the records. Somehow it seems that payments were made under the table to the disc jockeys to play the records. So it was a bribe, and it was exposed. As I recall, the American Congress, in fact, had massive hearings at one time, and a lot of very reputable people who had started careers in the record business quickly found their careers brought to an end.

In this case the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar raised the first question: “Why is the Premier allowing the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate to be fully funded by the gas companies and the Balancing Pool?” Okay. A straightforward question.

In the second question the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar then goes further: “How can this government call the Utilities Consumer Advocate independent when his paycheque and his office expenses are being signed by the utility companies?” So there was a progression down the line.

Then in the third question the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar basically agrees with the position he wants to take by saying:

Given that this is a clear case of payola, who in the government decision-making process made the decision, who in cabinet made the decision that the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate should be fully funded by industry?

There’s a progression in the three questions that almost leads to the conclusion that there was bribery taking place. That is, in the chair’s view, totally, totally odious, and I’m not so sure that the language in the past is such that – everything has to do with the context of the question.

The word “payola” was used once in the Canadian House of Commons, and it was used in a speech given by the Member for Calgary West on September 28, 1998, but it was used in this context: “We have to end the whole practice of some would say payola, patronage, kickbacks or backroom dealing. Anyway we want to phrase it, it is wrong and we should end these types of things.” There was no intervention and there was no interjection in the Canadian House of Commons at the time.

Today it seems, though, that there’s an innuendo with respect to this. No one has been named with respect to this, and I say that no one has been named, so that means it’s a technical determination that there was not an allegation made against a particular member. But there’s absolutely no doubt in the chair’s mind that it wasn’t required. The phrase was not required in the question. It added nothing to the question.

The chair understands that there is a dynamic in the question period, but the chair also knows that if all members of this House respected the rules that are found with respect to questions in the

book that we use, *Beauchesne*, and also the guidance provided by the chair prior to the beginning of each session, we would never have these kinds of interventions. We would never have these kinds of statements with respect to a question period.

The word in this case added absolutely nothing to the contents of the question. It provided an innuendo that perhaps will hurt someone outside of this House. Hopefully, that will not be the case. Words such as this are not necessary to any of the quality in this Assembly. One may be enthusiastic in the question, but the use of words which may cause harm to others adds nothing and adds nothing to the dignity of the person raising the question. The chair also has to note that the Premier did respond and said that he would use this term in speaking of the federal Liberals.

I think we're just on the edge here today of whether or not this is a point of order. There's nothing that added to the quality of the context. There is nothing that added to the importance or the impact of the question. It was a rightful interjection for the Government House Leader to raise the point of order. It was a rightful opportunity to have a review of this. I just wish people would ask questions according to the rules of the House, and maybe the answers would come back, too, according to the rules of the House. This is not a good example to give to anyone who visits this Assembly. I feel sad about that.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, you had a point of order?

Point of Order Addressing the Chair

Mr. Mason: I did indeed, Mr. Speaker, and if I may cite from *Beauchesne's* 168 and from *Erskine May*, chapter 18, on page 371: "A Member must address the Speaker and not direct his speech to the House or to any party on either side of the House." I don't have the Blues in front of me, but today during question period in response to the question from my colleague the leader of the New Democrat opposition . . . [interjections] If I can make my point without interruption. The Premier leaned over and in a very belligerent and aggressive fashion, pointing his finger at my colleague, repeatedly addressed him directly and not through the Speaker, calling him "you." He repeated that several times. I would just like to bring to the House's attention that as per your ruling it is, in fact, a requirement that even in response to questions it's important to go through the chair and not personally address any members of this Assembly.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I think it's always a matter of the rules of the House that one addresses the Assembly through the chair. It is difficult when you're asked a question and you're responding to a question raised by a member. You tend to look at the member and you tend to address the answer to the member because that's what's considered polite in normal society, but we recognize that in this House we address matters through the chair. I will make sure that all members of Executive Council are aware that that is the practice, procedure, and process in the future.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'm going to bring this one quickly to a head. There was absolutely no doubt at all in the chair's mind that the hon. the Premier did turn his back to the chair and did focus his attention in the direction of the members of the New Democrat caucus, who should not have been interjecting when the Premier was speaking.

Now, there is a basic protection the chair can give to all members. There is a reason why members speak through the chair, and there is a reason why members are asked to direct their comments to the chair. It's not because the chair has an ego that needs to be, you

know, enhanced. That's not the reason. It's done so that the chair can be in a position to protect the member and the members. If the member is not facing the chair and if something 'slurrious', spurious may be used by way of language, I guess, with words being omitted or body movements or something like this, if the chair doesn't see it, the chair cannot intervene to protect anyone. That's the reason, and it's a basic reason.

3:00

In this case there's absolutely no doubt at all that the Premier did turn around, and he did look and I think as he was saying – I'm not sure that it was belligerent, though, when you read the words: "Now, you may think differently, but I'll tell you, your friend in Saskatchewan, Mr. Calvert, your friend in Manitoba, Mr. Doer, agrees – agrees with me – on this point." There's a lot of friendship talk in here. If it's belligerent, I'm sorry about that, but I could not see that.

So, Government House Leader, if you would convey to all your colleagues, again, the reason for this. Please use all the words used by the chair in conveying the message. It would be kind of important.

The hon. Government House Leader on a point of order.

Point of Order Improper Inferences

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will use all the words and assure him that it wasn't with respect to vanity that you require to be addressed.

But, in all seriousness, there has been a series of questions raised in this House in the last few days and, in particular, one raised today by the Member for Edmonton-Glenarry which offend the practices of the House. Particularly, I would point you to *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* page 438 under Written Questions where it says:

While oral questions are posed without notice on matters deemed to be of an urgent nature, written questions are placed after notice on the Order Paper with the intent of seeking from the Ministry detailed, lengthy or technical information relating to "public affairs."

I would submit, Mr. Speaker, as well, *Beauchesne's* 409(7) on page 121: "A question must adhere to the proprieties of the House, in terms of inferences, imputing motives or casting aspersions upon persons within the House or out of it." And 23(h) and (l) as well, as I've referred to earlier.

Essentially, my point, Mr. Speaker, is that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry has on at least two occasions raised specific questions in the House with respect to a specific date some years prior to this with respect to a specific manifest and who might be on it. It would be both courteous and parliamentary of that member to either put that type of a question in the form of a written question or provide notice to the minister that he's raising the question with the intent of the question if, in fact, he intends to do something other than cast aspersions on the minister.

It is the Minister of Infrastructure who's responsible for who flies on government planes at what time. It's the Minister of Infrastructure who has the obligation to ensure that the government planes are used in an appropriate manner. By raising questions in the House – and again I don't for a moment want to deny the opposition or anyone else in this House the right to ask about the appropriate use of government planes or the appropriate use of government money and the people's money or any of that. It's not about not being held accountable. It's about how you're held accountable in the manner which is not simply a drive-by smearing but is an appropriate question for accountability.

When you ask a question of a detailed nature on a manifest on a

specific date at a specific time as to who was on the plane, knowing full well that no one – the Minister of Infrastructure, despite his brilliance, cannot possibly know who was on what plane on what day for what purpose, so by asking the question in that manner in the House, the motive of the member asking the question is obviously to create an innuendo of some improper purpose. If it was for any other reason that he asked the question, he would have either given notice to the minister so that the minister could be in a position to know who was on the plane at that time and be prepared to be accountable for it, or he would have put it in Written Questions, where matters of a technical nature are properly determined.

It is totally inappropriate and offends the propriety of this House to use this House to smear the character of other members and to bring the character of all members into disrepute by suggesting that there's a process of using government planes or government money, the people's money, inappropriately. Government must be held accountable. Government must be open and honest. We relish the opportunity to be open and honest, to be the most open government in terms of providing accountability for public funds anywhere. But raising questions in that manner has only one purpose, Mr. Speaker, and that's to smear, to drag down the reputation of the member who's responsible for determining who rides on government planes at what time and for what purpose. There could be no other reason for asking the question in that manner, and the member should rise in his place and apologize.

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the issues brought forward by the hon. House leader. As I stated before, it's the job of the Official Opposition to ask questions of the government and hold them to account, and in fact, Mr. Speaker, that's exactly what happened today.

The Government House Leader very quickly named a number of citations. I missed the first two – I'm sorry – but I did catch 23(h) and (l) regarding casting aspersions, and I would like to come back to that. He spent a great deal of time also talking about how the level of detail that was asked for was more appropriate for a written question, and then somehow tried to hook that to the fact that it was a smear in that it had been asked as a question in question period rather than as a written question. The logic of that is escaping me.

I will address the actual questions that were asked. What's interesting in this is that the ministers were very well prepared today because there was a question that was asked yesterday. The Member for Edmonton-Glengarry very carefully laid out in the preamble the misunderstanding or possible misunderstanding that had happened in the exchange yesterday and offered an opportunity for the government to clarify, because in fact on the face of it there was a discrepancy in what the minister questioned yesterday had answered.

The questions were very straightforward to the Premier: would he help his minister out by confirming that the government does transport people to partisan political events? So the opportunity for the government to answer the question. There were no names mentioned there. I don't know how anyone could be smeared by it. There were no names mentioned.

In the second question, the Premier is asked again about a specific date. Now, according to the information that we were able to obtain, there were some seven flights on the day in question, and in fact the Minister of Infrastructure was very well prepared because he had the aircraft request from Alberta Infrastructure with him. So he was very prepared for this particular series of questions. When there was a question about transportation of a particular group of people – and the question asked was very straightforward; there was no innuendo.

It was just why on this particular date the government plane was used to transport a particular group of individuals who were not sitting government members. According to the information we have, that's a perfectly reasonable question.

The final question in the series: whether the persons that were transported – again, no names were mentioned there in the third question – reimbursed costs, and that in fact was answered.

There was no casting of aspersions upon any individuals, named or unnamed, here. There were straight-out questions to seek information from the government. A set of circumstances presented themselves, and the opposition questioned the government on that set of circumstances to allow the government to answer why that situation occurred.

The second issue raised by the Government House Leader is that somehow the government was unprepared for this, and it was not fair or was going against the practices of the House to be asking a question that required a level of detail the minister couldn't be expected to have. In fact, the Minister of Infrastructure was very prepared to answer that, and the original question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs was asked because on the passenger manifest that was the department under question. So the question was appropriately directed the first time, and in fact the minister responsible in this case was very aware of the situation and was prepared to answer the question, as was evidenced.

So we do not have aspersions cast here. We have no practices that offended the House. The opposition was seeking information and is perfectly entitled to do that. The question named names where appropriate and didn't where it wasn't appropriate. I don't see how there is a successful point of order in what the Government House Leader has presented.

I look forward to your response.

3:10

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure on this point of order.

Mr. Lund: Yes, on this point of order, Mr. Speaker. I'm having trouble even believing that someone would stand up and make some of the comments that we just heard. Clearly – clearly – yesterday the member said: "There were several municipal leaders." The fact is that coming from Calgary to Edmonton, the mayor of Edmonton and the mayor of Leduc were the two people from a municipality. "Family members of MLAs": there was no family member of any MLA. As a matter of fact, there was only one MLA. They had the manifest, and they had the names of all the individuals that were on that manifest. "Other persons": yes, there were other persons on it.

Also, to suggest and question: were these people going down to the Premier's dinner? Well, the fact is that the plane, when I look at the log, left Calgary at five minutes after 1 o'clock. The Premier's dinner did not start till the evening, and in fact all of the people – all of the people – that flew down to Calgary on the aircraft in the morning came back on the aircraft and left Calgary at . . . [interjection] But there's only one flight that was with Municipal Affairs, and you asked the question of Municipal Affairs, so there's no question, Mr. Speaker, about the intent of what they were up to.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, do you want to participate?

Mr. Bonner: No. That's fine.

The Speaker: The hon. government whip, please.

Ms Haley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to the point of order today, just on the specific narrow band of that, the issue on the point of order was actually on the October 2002 – the innuendo was that we were flying former Premier Getty and his family around for no specific purpose.

I wanted to just address from my perspective, sitting and listening to the questions since last week when we came back into this spring session, that many of the questions are designed on the basis of implying in some way, passing innuendo or casting aspersions or making people who take the time to listen to this or read a headline, that somehow members of my government – ministers, MLAs – are doing something wrong. Mr. Speaker, what I find totally and wholly unacceptable about what's happened since the session began is that whether anybody's been guilty of anything, the innuendo is out there.

In the world that we live in where so many people enter the world of politics with all the best of intentions, nothing but the right reasons for wanting to be here, it takes about four seconds before somebody's questioning whether you have any integrity. These types of things that we do to ourselves in here are just horrendous to me. There are many issues in an over \$20 billion budget in 24 different departments: in health, in education, on roads. There are great questions, and the opposition have every right to ask them. But when they drop down into these depths, they make everybody feel like, "My God, what are we doing? We must have done something wrong."

You're always putting into question our integrity in here. When you do that, hon. members, you do it to yourselves as well, and I think it's really sad. It's so out of character for what Alberta stands for. I just hope that one day this kind of thing can stop, that we can get back onto issues that matter. They have their philosophical point of view; we have ours. But when you tear us all down like this, you've hurt the whole, and there's no merit in it. There's no value to it. It is not what Albertans expect of us. Frankly, it just horrifies me, and I want it to stop.

The Speaker: Let me quote from *Alberta Hansard*, Tuesday afternoon, February 24, 2004, page 117. This is the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me be categorical. At no time will a government plane ever be used for political purposes, now, ever before, or ever into the future.

That's in *Hansard*. That was said here yesterday.

Okay. I respect any hon. member's right to stand in this House and say what they want to say, providing it's within the rules. So today the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry started off with a preamble saying that there was some confusion about whether or not the government uses its planes to fly persons not in government to partisan political events, and the last statement in the question was:

To the Premier: will the Premier help his minister out by confirming that the government does transport people to partisan political events such as the Premier's dinner?

Now, I just finished reading what I read in *Hansard* on page 117. Okay. It seems to me it was clarified, but the hon. member is right to raise a question. So the Premier responded.

The next question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry:

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: can the Premier explain why on October 1, 2002, the government plane transported to and from Edmonton and Calgary six members of the Getty family?

Now, as I'd indicated in a previous point of order today, there seems to be an extension from one question to the next. Clearly, our rules make comment about innuendo. If I were to read this: does the government "transport people to partisan political events such as the Premier's dinner?" there's an answer given. So the next one is: what

about "six members of the Getty family?" Well, I guess I'm just sitting here saying: whoa, does he mean that six members of the Getty family went to a partisan political event such as the Premier's dinner? That would be the connection I'd make. That's what I make. All I do for a living these days is listen – that's my sole reason for being – and I think there was an innuendo. Once again, I know the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry, and I know he's better than that.

So it's not a good day. We've had an explanation of this. You know, this is – what? – day 6. It was clarified to me that there's not a full moon out today, but I heard the plea from the government whip, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View, about pulling people down: everybody goes down. I think this is a place of honour. We've had this building here for 99 years in the province of Alberta, and I think we're supposed to be here to talk about policy and alternative policies, and we start talking about personalities and stuff like that. Maybe there's another place in the world for it, but it's never been a part of the tradition of Alberta that I'm aware of.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Transmittal of Estimates

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I have received a certain message from Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, which I now transmit to you.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order!

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Lieutenant Governor transmits supplementary estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2004, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

Please be seated.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, prior to moving a number of motions relevant to the supplementary estimates, I wish to advise that this morning I provided the government's 2003-2004 quarterly budget report for the third quarter to all MLAs. We have also made this report public as required by section 9 of the Government Accountability Act. I am now tabling this quarterly budget report as the amended consolidated fiscal plan. This revised plan is required by section 8 of the same act whenever a subsequent set of estimates is tabled during the fiscal year.

I am also tabling the third-quarter activity report for 2003-2004. This document describes the major achievements of our government during the recent period.

3:20

Mr. Speaker, I also now wish to table the 2003-2004 supplementary estimates, No. 2. These supplementary estimates will provide additional spending authority to nine departments of the government. When passed, these estimates will authorize an increase of \$114,322,000 in voted operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases and \$6,350,000 in voted capital investment.

Mr. Speaker, section 8 of the Government Accountability Act requires that the government table a new and amended consolidated fiscal plan when there is another set of estimates. Having just tabled the amended fiscal plan as the quarterly budget report for the third quarter, I have complied with that requirement.

head:

Government Motions

8. Mrs. Nelson moved:

Be it resolved that the message of Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, the 2003-04 supplementary estimates

for the general revenue fund, and all matters connected therewith be referred to Committee of Supply.

The Speaker: It's a debatable motion.

[Government Motion 8 carried]

9. Mrs. Nelson moved:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 58(9) the number of days that Committee of Supply will be called to consider the 2003-04 supplementary estimates for the general revenue fund shall be one day.

[Government Motion 9 carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 7

Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Mr. Jonson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure this afternoon to rise to speak to second reading of Bill 7, the Alberta Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004. The government of Alberta has long been committed to Senate reform. We have led the charge in pursuing meaningful change through a triple-E Senate, one that is equal, elected, and effective.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta was successful in having Stan Waters, the first Senate nominee elected under the Senatorial Selection Act, appointed to the Senate by then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney back in 1990. Since that time, the Premier has continued to seek the support of other Premiers and the Prime Minister to achieve meaningful Senate reform.

Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Senatorial Selection Act is due to expire on December 31, 2004. It was originally expected to be a transitional measure while the provinces and the federal government worked toward an agreement on a triple-E Senate or on overall Senate reform. Now with Bill 7 I am proposing that the act be extended out to December 31, 2010. It has already been extended twice before, once in 1994 and in 1998. I would like to extend the act so that a mechanism remains in place to elect Alberta's Senate nominees should we decide to do so. Extending the act does not commit Alberta to holding further elections for Alberta's Senate nominees. However, it does keep the election mechanism in place so that we would not have to start all over again from the ground up with new legislation allowing Albertans to vote for their Senate nominees.

Mr. Speaker, as we saw with the past Prime Minister, there seems to be little inclination on the part of the current Prime Minister to appoint either of Alberta's elected Senate nominees to the upper Chamber. With two Alberta Senators reaching mandatory retirement age this year, three of Alberta's six Senate seats could be empty.

Alberta will continue to press for Senate reform with other provinces and the federal government. We need to modernize Canada's democratic foundations and ensure that the voices of the provinces are adequately reflected in our parliamentary institutions. Therefore, I encourage all members to vote in favour of Bill 7, the Alberta Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise this afternoon and speak to Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004. Certainly, we understand the reasoning behind the extension of this act, but by way of history the concept of a triple-E Senate, which was elected, effective, equal, gained prominence during the 1980s as it was adopted as policy by the government of Alberta at that time. By way of history again, on March 10, 1987, the Alberta Liberals introduced Motion 210 calling for triple-E Senate reform.

During the Meech Lake constitutional discussions it was agreed that the Prime Minister would appoint Senators from a list provided by the provincial governments until real Senate reform occurred. After Meech Lake failed, Prime Minister Mulroney agreed to fill vacancies from provincial lists. In response Alberta passed the Senatorial Selection Act in 1989 because the government believed that the only fair way to choose a candidate for the list was through a province-wide election. The Alberta Liberals voted against the Senatorial Selection Act at that time. In 1989 an Alberta Senate seat became vacant, and an election was held, won by Reformer Stan Waters. The Prime Minister grudgingly appointed him to the Senate.

Amendments were introduced to the Senatorial Selection Act in 1998. Those amendments made it possible for a government to hold elections for a Senate nominee even when no vacancy currently exists. It also established that a person would remain a Senate nominee until they are appointed by the Prime Minister, resign as a nominee, or until their term as nominee expires. Lastly, the bill allowed the provincial cabinet by regulation to determine the duties and functions of Senate nominees, established mechanisms to assess their performance and accountability.

So this is some of the history. In October of 1998 Bert Brown and Ted Morton were elected, with, I might add, a very, very low voter turnout. I did want to provide some background as to where we as Liberals, the Official Opposition, stand on a triple-E Senate. I look forward to hearing comments from other members of the Assembly, and I do thank you for this opportunity to speak to Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak briefly to Bill 7, Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004. This bill seeks to extend the life of the existing legislation to the year 2010, as I understand it.

Mr. Speaker, the bill speaks to an issue that's broader than just fixing the problem with the Senate. I think Canadians in general would like us all – Canadian citizens, Canadian governments, Canadian political parties, and others – to certainly seek to modernize, bring up to date all our electoral systems, whether they pertain to the election of members to the House of Commons, a House such as ours, the Legislative Assembly of a province, or the manner in which a Senate at the federal level is constituted.

3:30

The general interest, which is reflected to a degree in the bill but, certainly, widely expressed by all kinds of organizations and some political parties including federal NDP and provincial New Democrats, with respect to the need to broadly update and modernize our electoral system I think is appropriate. So the general idea in the bill is something that I have no quarrel with, but to tinker with little pieces one piece at a time I don't think serves well the interests that Canadians in general and Albertans in particular have in the need to

modernize our electoral system and the manner in which we constitute our various decision-making bodies at the federal and provincial levels.

I think it's appropriate, perhaps, at this stage, Mr. Speaker, to raise the question of, in fact, increasing regional and provincial representation at all levels including the House of Commons and making that representation not only regionally more representative but also representative in terms of the strength of different political parties that take part in the body politic of Canada both provincially and federally.

Proportional representation has certainly been proposed as one important next step that needs to be taken. Fair Vote Canada, a nonpartisan organization, has been campaigning and working at bringing forward the proposition to move our electoral system from one that's the first past the post type in which the winner takes all model is operational. It doesn't provide representation based on the number of votes, the strength of support expressed electorally that different parties enjoy during our election processes. Western Canada, for example, would be much stronger in terms of representation in the House of Commons if the proportional representation model appropriate to Canadian conditions were adopted here.

So the way to strengthen the voice of provinces and regions at the federal level, in my view, would be much better served if we in this province and across this great country seriously engage Canadians and Albertans in debate with respect to how to improve upon and change our electoral system in order to make all our institutions, including federal institutions, more representative both of political support as expressed through elections and regional representation as indicated in the number of votes and the pattern of support that can be established through democratic, free, and open elections.

So while I understand the spirit behind this proposed legislation, to extend an existing legislation which narrowly focuses on the Senate and the Senate alone, I think it's a bill that's now behind the times. It reflects the debates of the '80s and the '90s. We are into the next new century. We'll be stepping into a new century for this province next year, and I think it's about time for this province to play a leading role in seeking a broad-based change and reform in the electoral system so that both we as Albertans and also we as part of western Canada can find our voices appropriately represented and reflected in federal bodies both at the House of Commons level and perhaps the Senate level.

One question that needs to be raised and debated, I think, is about the present sort of role of the Senate as a body that doesn't really reflect any democratic values or commitments in the way it gets appointed. It hasn't really served to broaden democratic participation or democratic sorts of commitments on the part of ordinary citizens to the electoral process because the Senate, in particular, denies the role to Canadians in having any ability to determine who sits in the Senate.

Merely for one province to continue to bring forward legislation which, in my view, is perhaps left behind by the changing times suggests that we need a more broad-based, more pan-Canadian effort to mobilize support for effective reform that will democratize the institutions that we take pride in and that provide us the democratic means to set the course of our nation, of our province, and of communities across this country.

So, Mr. Speaker, I have serious reservations about the utility of Bill 7 and what it proposes to do. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) kicks in.

Mr. McClelland: On debate?

The Speaker: No. We have the five-minute comment and question section. Any members wishing to participate?

There being none, then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is a particularly important opportunity to speak to the Senate of Canada. I speak to the Senate of Canada today because I think that vested with the Senate is the capacity to achieve balance in the country, which is sadly lacking, but if it were there, it would effectively remove many of the irritants which have over many decades, since at least 1914 or 1915, resulted in what is known as western alienation and in our case particularly alienation here.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Now, it's interesting that the Senate didn't happen overnight. The Senate was a reflection of the British parliamentary system in the House of Lords. As members would know, the House of Lords is an appointed body, and it was appointed without number, so in the Confederation debates that took place in 1864, the first question that came to be debated was the number. It was decided that there would be a limited number of Senators, and initially it was for Upper/Lower Canada or for the provinces that made up Confederation. But there would be a finite number, unlike with the British House of Lords, which could, in essence, be an infinite number.

The second consideration that took place even at that time in the 1860s was: would this body be elective or would it be appointed, and if appointed, how so? The concern was that if the upper House was to be a reflection of that which already existed, all that would happen is that it would end up being a mimic of the lower House. It was determined at the time that the lower House should have an effective check and balance that would not have members sitting based on the same volition as the lower House. Thereby, they would not have to be elected. Thereby, they would not have to appeal to voters for the same reasons. They could therefore potentially have a longer range vision, a longer view. What had happened, even in Upper and Lower Canada, was that the upper House ended up being a reflection of the lower House because the members were appointed by the politicians in the lower House.

3:40

So it was determined then that in Canada's first Senate the members of the upper House would be appointed by the Crown, and that's the essential difference in what has happened in the intervening years. The notion of the Senate being appointed by the Crown in 1867 meant that the allegiance of those in the upper House would be to the people of Canada with the longer range view and would, in fact, represent the provinces. The initial Senate was to represent the provinces in the upper House with a longer range vision.

Well, as members know, that is not what has evolved. That's not what's happened. That's not the case today. The upper House does not reflect the provinces. The upper House reflects people appointed from the provinces but whose allegiance is not to the province. It's to the federal government; it's to the central government. In Quebec Senators are elected representing various geographic regions, and they have a specific geographic region to represent. In the rest of Canada that's not the case.

The net result is that our upper House does not reflect the values that were envisioned for the upper House in 1867, nor does it reflect the values that are necessary today. Because it does not reflect the values, which is to be a representative of the regions or the provinces, we end up with legislation that is of interest to the heavily

weighted population centres as represented in the House of Commons but without the check and balance of the regions.

Let me give you an example. The famous gun registry is a piece of legislation that came as a direct result of an incident that took place in Montreal. It was the massacre at l'école Polytechnique, a disaster and a terrible thing. That raised the awareness of gun violence and, of course, gun violence and violence in general that we see on TV every day. A person by the name of Wendy Cukier in Toronto took up the cudgels, and she made it a political ambition, essentially, to have firearms removed from Canada as much as could possibly be achieved. The federal government of the day took this up as a very popular measure, and it was and is very popular in downtown Montreal, downtown Toronto, and in many urban centres across the country.

The difficulty is that Canada geographically is vast and diverse, and what may well be good for downtown Toronto and downtown Montreal is not necessarily appropriate in other regions of the country, either in Atlantic Canada or in the west or even in the north of Ontario.

So we need to have far more flexibility in our federation. We need to have a certain ambivalence within our Legislatures that provides for treating different geographic regions of the country and different interests differently because one size does not fit all in a country as broad and diverse as our country. That's why the Senate is so absolutely crucial to the future of our country. If we are not able to achieve balance in the country, we are not ever going to rid ourselves of the sense that there are those who are underrepresented or not represented, which results in a sense of not being part of the equation when matters of national importance are considered.

It's not going to be easy for us to continue to drive the agenda for a reformed Senate, and in fact it may not be a triple-E Senate that we eventually arrive at. Ted Morton, one of Alberta's Senators in waiting, has been circulating a paper which calls for a proportionally equal Senate, which, in his opinion, is better for Alberta and better for Canada and certainly would be a far easier sell to the other Premiers.

Now, through the Council of the Federation, in which our Premier will definitely and does have a leadership role, we do have now a unique opportunity to drive the agenda for Senate reform. In my opinion, Mr. Speaker, if we are to have a united Canada a hundred years from today as we are at the cusp of going into our hundredth anniversary of being a member of the Canadian family and Confederation, it will be because we have the courage to drive the agenda for Senate reform which will result in balance in the country even when no one else will listen, especially when no one else will listen. Because we have the opportunity, we also have the obligation to do so. If we do not, then I fear that a hundred years from today someone would be standing in this place, and we will not be addressing the Canada, the future that we could have if we do address it.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would encourage all members of this Legislature and indeed all Albertans to get behind this, to say that we will not rest until we have representation in the centre of governance, in the centre, that is equal to what we contribute to this country generally, faithfully as proud Canadians, but there is definitely a limit to our patience as being taken for granted.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29? Hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, you are rising to ask a question?

Mr. Bonner: Yes. Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford certainly has had a distinguished career not

only at the provincial level but also at the federal level. Under the current rules for gaining entrance into the Senate, hon. members in this country are approached by the Prime Minister and asked if they would certainly consider taking a seat in the Senate, and they have the option of then saying: yes or no. My question to the hon. member would be: if under the current rules he was approached by the Prime Minister of this country, would he accept an appointment to the Senate?

Mr. McClelland: Well, that's a fair question. I would love to be appointed to the Senate by the province of Alberta. I would love to be elected by the people of Alberta to represent the people of Alberta in the Senate of Canada. I can think of no greater honour. If that were to come, I would feel as honoured as every other person in this room. But given my background, given what I have said here today, given the aspirations of Alberta, given how important having Senators representing the province and not the political party or the Prime Minister of the day is, I think my duty to Canada supercedes that. I would with great regret have to say no.

If I ran and were elected by the people of Alberta and were put on a list and the Premier of the province of Alberta submitted that list to the Prime Minister, when in fact that list should be given to the Governor General and the Governor General should make the appointment, not the Prime Minister, then I would be most honoured to serve our country and our province in the Senate. That is the only condition.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

3:50

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate this afternoon on Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004. I think that if there were an election and for some reason or other the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford were in that election, I would probably vote for him. I don't know if that's an endorsement he'd like to go too far with, but I would because I think he would represent this province and its people with distinction.

Now, certainly, we are in changing times in this country, and this whole issue of an elected Senate is an important issue. I find it ironic that at the same time as we're beating the drum here in this province for an elected Senate, we can't have elected regional health authorities. But we have talked about that in this Assembly before, and I won't say anything more in regard to that matter. [interjection] Now, some hon. member across the way has said, "Good," and I think it is odd that we can talk about democratic renewal in Alberta, but we can exclude this whole idea of having democratically elected regional health authorities.

There certainly are many issues to be discussed around citizen empowerment, legislative reform at the province level, electoral reform, election financing reform, and transparency in government that, in my view, go along with reform of the federal Senate. They all fit together in the same debate.

We heard a very good speech from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford on exactly the role of the Senate in the country. One of the things that I don't think has been discussed at length is the change that's occurred in this country as a result of the late Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and his government bringing the Constitution home, so to speak. But there have been significant changes in the last 20, 25 years in this country. The Senate has not changed with those times. That's a fact. Are there regional disparities? There certainly are. There certainly are whenever you look at the west, Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes.

Are there reasons for western alienation because of the lack of senatorial appointments from Alberta? There certainly are.

When one considers what the original role of the Senate was, to be this chamber of sober second thought on legislation, well, it is my view that with the constitutional changes that were implemented in the last generation, the judiciary has taken over a lot of that role of sober second thought on legislative proposals. Legislative assemblies, the federal House of Commons: it seems to be almost routine to have the judiciary look at legislation from time to time to see if it is compliant with the Charter. That is why I say that there's such a change, and there has been a change in how the Senate works because some of the job, I think, that the Fathers of Confederation thought that the Senate should do has now been taken over by the judiciary.

That is one fact that I think has not come forward in the debate. It is the view of this hon. member that there has been a significant change, and that has not been reflected in the Senate. How do we change the Senate? That's a good question. It needs to be changed. It certainly does, and I support that. But is this the answer? I'm not so sure.

I don't think it is proper to look at the appointed Senators and say that they are not doing a very good job. I used to have a sort of really suspicious attitude towards the Senate, but I had the pleasure and the honour of going to a south side banquet hotel, the south side of Edmonton, and participated in an evening where many people from across this province had come to Edmonton and gathered to toast their success. Many of them were adults who had learned to read. One of the promoters of adult literacy in this country, one of the greatest promoters, is Senator Joyce Fairbairn. Now, I don't know if I'm allowed to say the Senator's name in this Assembly or the Senator from Lethbridge, but I would apologize to the House and to the Senator if I have said something wrong.

This Senator has gone out of her way to help Albertans who have for one reason or another failed to learn to read, and that one evening convinced me that there is a role for the Senate in this country. That is one member doing many, many good deeds. Senator Doug Roche from the city of Edmonton here: he's an independent member of the Senate, and he has many, many good views to present not only to Canadians but to international audiences in regard to international peace and homelessness.

We can't dismiss these people. They do very, very good work on behalf of not only this province but the entire country. In this debate I would urge all hon. members: please do not forget that.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like to urge all members of this Assembly whenever we're discussing senatorial reform that we also should talk about democratic reform as well in this province and in this Legislative Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29 for questions?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I listened very carefully to the hon. member's comments, and while he described the situation somewhat, I want to make absolutely sure that people recognize that when we talk about senatorial reform, we are not saying for one moment that the people that are there are the problem. The problem is the structure, the way it's structured and the way that people get there. So that's the problem. I wanted to make sure that that was on the table.

Listening to the hon. member, I wasn't able to really understand and know whether he believes that allowing the judiciary to be the so-called sober second thought is acceptable and that's the way it should be and also whether, in fact, the structure of the Senate is the

way it should be. So I would like to know the answers to those two questions. Is the judiciary to have the appropriate authority to overrule the elected people? Is that what the hon. member wants? Secondly, does he really want the Senate not to be elected?

Mr. MacDonald: Certainly, Mr. Speaker, it's up to individual respective parliaments whether they want to seek advice and guidance from the judiciary. It's not the other way around. So if there's no reason or if legislative assemblies or the House of Commons is not interested in seeking advice from the judicial branch of government, well, then, that's fine. They don't have to do it. It's not any case of judicial activism. It's just how we have over the last number of years had to have clarifications on the Charter. That's it.

As far as an elected Senate, a triple-E Senate, certainly I could live with a triple-E Senate. This side of the House has always been strong believers in a triple-E Senate and Senate reform, but we do not believe that this Senatorial Selection Act is the way forward. This is grandstanding. This is political posturing.

Thank you.

4:00

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. Asking a question?

Mr. McClelland: Thank you. I, too, echo the comments of the Minister of Infrastructure. It's not about the people that are in the Senate, many of whom are remarkable individuals and deserve to be there and do a wonderful job. It's the checks and balances.

The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar brought in the notion of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court, as members know, is essentially appointed by the Prime Minister. We have the phenomenon that the Prime Minister of the country could in fact be directly elected by the membership of a political party. So the leader of the party, who could become the Prime Minister, would not have a connection to the party or the militants but would have direct power outside of the Parliament. As it stands now, the Prime Minister appoints the Senate. So we have the judiciary. We have the Senate. There are no checks and balances in the Canadian system, which further concentrates power in the office of the Prime Minister, which may in fact lead to some of the problems we see today nationally.

I wonder if the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar could answer that and say whether we would not be better as a country if the federation had provinces capable of offsetting the power vested in the centre.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, that's a very good question, Mr. Speaker, and the simple answer to that is that not only at the federal level do we have an extreme concentration of power by leaders. That also happens at the provincial levels as well. Perhaps in all this debate — and I don't see that anywhere — we should look at having term limits. If the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford were, for instance, to be Prime Minister of this country or to be a Premier of this province, perhaps eight years is enough. Maybe we should look at term limits for leaders of this country and the provinces so that there is not this concentration of power in one or more offices.

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member is still dancing around the question that we're asking and trying to get him to commit to, but I want to also suggest to the member that under our current Premier if anybody thinks that all the power is invested in the office of the Premier, then certainly they don't know the inner way that our government works because all members have the opportunity . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. minister, regrettably the five minutes that's allocated for this portion has run out.

Anybody else who wishes to participate in the debate may do so now.

The hon. Minister for International and Intergovernmental Relations to close debate.

Mr. Jonson: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I'd like to commend those people that have engaged in the debate because it is, in the view of the government of Alberta, a very, very important topic, particularly in these times when the whole position or place of the province is undergoing a review under the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford's capable chairmanship.

It's also a time in which across the country, both at the provincial and federal levels, there's interest in parliamentary reform and in government reform. The bill, of course, as members of this Assembly have already rightly pointed out, is a very basic, mundane bill, I suppose you could say, but an important one, extending the timelines for legislation we've had in place for a number of years, and was something that was established to provide a framework for moving ahead on Senate reform.

We acknowledge the various suggestions, recommendations, and comments that have been made in favour of Senate reform and there being, of course, a great deal more to bring about true Senate reform which would be operational in this country, but right now, Mr. Speaker, we are simply extending this legislation to keep in place the mechanism that would allow us to become involved in the selection of Senate representatives for Alberta. This is not the end of the government's interest in Senate reform by any means. It is merely keeping in place one measure which we think is necessary for the overall work on Senate reform and improving the overall governance of our country federally on into the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a second time]

Bill 8

Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This afternoon it is my pleasure to move for second reading Bill 8, the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

The proposed changes contained in this bill are based on the final report of a committee that I chaired in 2002 which reviewed Alberta Blue Cross, and it had a name, the Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee. It was a report to the minister, and I think it has now been distributed but not by the minister. It was a report internal to government. It had one external consultant working with the committee, and departments which were represented on the committee were Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta Finance, and Alberta Revenue, and I was the sole MLA participating in the review.

Prior to describing the amendments proposed by this bill, I would like to just briefly give a backdrop to this review. Mr. Speaker, one of the reasons the review was called for was concerns which had been expressed that the private health insurance plans of Alberta Blue Cross might be subsidized by surpluses that had been generated through the operation of Alberta Blue Cross's Alberta government plans, and it was argued that this subsidization, if it existed, provided an unfair advantage to Alberta Blue Cross which other insurance companies operating in the province which were selling products similar to Alberta Blue Cross in the realm of private health insurance plans only did not enjoy.

The basis for these concerns was basically twofold; firstly, that

Alberta Blue Cross is exempt from the payment of the 2 per cent premium tax under the Alberta Corporate Tax Act, which is the case. All other insurance companies in the province must pay this tax on their accident and sickness insurance premiums that they receive during the tax year. Mr. Speaker, the products where private insurers and Alberta Blue Cross would be competing are those programs which are called subscription rate programs, which provide supplementary health benefits for small employer groups, for individual plans, and also for travel insurance plans. So it was the recommendation of the committee that this advantage be removed because it was found to in fact be an advantage operating to the benefit of Alberta Blue Cross not enjoyed by private insurance companies.

The second basis for concern was that as Alberta Blue Cross is a not-for-profit entity, it is exempt from the payment of federal and provincial income taxes, and this means that Alberta Blue Cross can reinvest its entire surplus in any given year as it sees fit, whereas a taxable company in the same business can only work with its surplus net of tax to reinvest.

4:10

Now, it was the committee's recommendation that, in fact, Alberta Blue Cross retain its tax-exempt status for other reasons, those other reasons being that as Alberta Blue Cross is a legislated entity, it does have legislated mandates, one of which is to participate in programs – to initiate them, own them – that benefit the health of Albertans, and in fact Blue Cross does participate in programs such as the tobacco reduction program and others of that nature, which do represent a cost to it which private insurers don't have to be concerned about. However, it was the decision of this government to go with the option of removing that tax-exempt status and requiring Alberta Blue Cross to in effect pay tax through the payment in lieu of tax program.

That, Mr. Speaker, is the backdrop to this bill, and what the amendments in this bill do is level the playing field between Alberta Blue Cross and other private providers only on private insurance programs, which represent roughly 15 per cent of Alberta Blue Cross's customers.

Just to summarize then, the main amendments of the bill have the effect of removing the tax-exempt status of Alberta Blue Cross and establishing the payment in lieu of tax program for it in recognition of federal and provincial income taxes and, secondly, requiring Alberta Blue Cross to commence paying a premium tax of 2 per cent, but I reiterate that this is just on its private insurance programs. It is hoped that the concerns that have been raised about the corporation enjoying a competitive advantage will now be adequately addressed.

At the same time, this bill also provides amendments which protect the government-sponsored Alberta Blue Cross programs for the benefit of Albertans, and it does this by clarifying the definition of the scope of the Alberta Blue Cross plan so that in the future the Alberta Blue Cross Benefits Corporation, which operates the Blue Cross plan, is not in any position to expand its operations or its products into types of insurance which would expose the corporation to significant risk, and it does this by defining the plan basically as it stands now. So the status quo is maintained, and new insurance products cannot be readily added to its inventory that might put its subscribers at risk.

Mr. Speaker, there are also amendments contained in this bill which address corporate governance standards. The act establishing the ABC Benefits Corporation was basically silent on the duties of care for directors and officers and the duties of the board. This has been addressed in the bill by establishing such duties, which are consistent with those found in our own Alberta Business Corpora-

tions Act, and these amendments should give assurance to Albertans that the corporate governance is up to date and in accordance with our current standards.

Before taking my seat, Mr. Speaker, I would like to recommend the report to anyone who wants to learn more about Alberta Blue Cross. It is certainly an impressive organization which does its job in administering government-sponsored programs very well. It also provides other good services to Albertans by engaging in activities which support the Alberta government regarding health care issues and policy issues, and I would like to reiterate yet again that this bill and its amendments, which relate to the payment of income tax and premium tax, relate to a narrow portion of the business of Alberta Blue Cross, as I mentioned, 15 per cent of its customers.

The other 85 per cent of Alberta Blue Cross business is administrative services only business with respect to prepaid supplementary health plans and services. This, Mr. Speaker, consists in the main of the Alberta Health and Wellness sponsored supplemental health care coverage for seniors, widows, and nongroup members and also the Alberta Human Resources and Employment sponsored programs, being the child health benefit and income support programs. These are administered by Alberta Blue Cross on a cash flow basis for the government of Alberta, which pays an administrative fee by agreement for that service provided by Blue Cross.

These are my comments on second reading, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to any debate that may be forthcoming.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can assure the hon. member that there will be debate forthcoming.

This is a bill that the opposition will strongly oppose. We've already had a number of calls on this. In fact, I had an urgent call yesterday from a representative of a major group who was quite unhappy with this whole trend represented through this bill.

I listened to the comments from the previous speaker, and I appreciate her candour, and I'm sure we'll go back and forth on this one. There are a number of concerns that we would raise with this bill, and maybe through the course of debate the concerns will be allayed, but I'm not expecting that to happen. I'll keep my mind open.

One of the principles that is at work through this bill is the notion of levelling the playing field so that all providers of health insurance are on an equal footing. The problem I have with the way this process is going is that the playing field is being levelled in the direction of getting more expensive rather than less expensive. In other words, we're taking the lowest cost provider, and we're adding to its expenses to level the playing field. We're doing that through forcing Alberta Blue Cross to make a payment in lieu of taxes and also to pay the premium tax.

I guess I just cannot understand why we would do that. Why would we artificially add to the cost of an insurance company rather than celebrate it? Why not be delighted that we have a lower cost, homegrown, Alberta-based insurance provider serving not only seniors and all kinds of other people but serving many small businesses. We should be celebrating and strengthening that low cost service rather than artificially adding to its costs.

One of the things that I realize is going on here is that we're taking, as I say, a homegrown, Alberta-based major organization that's very successful, and we're giving it a disadvantage so that its main competitors, which are big international insurance corporations, will have a benefit. Where's the Alberta advantage in this? It's certainly not to Albertans. It's not to Blue Cross. It's not to

their subscribers. It's to the big multinational insurance industry, which seems to have enormous sway over this government.

4:20

Indeed, it has such sway that I can't help thinking of another issue that's brought to the surface by this, which is the need for a lobbyist registry. It has become evident – and I will stand to be corrected, but I have not heard any of that correction so far – that the chair of this committee overruled the committee members and, in fact, required these changes to be made, changed the committee members' consensus recommendations that Blue Cross not be penalized, and brought in the recommendation that Blue Cross be penalized because she was lobbied by the insurance industry.

If that's the case – and I've not seen anything to contradict that; in fact, that's been reported and published and repeated, and as far as I know, there are no denials – it's just shocking. It's just shocking that we are prepared to not only go against a homegrown Alberta organization like Blue Cross, not only add to the cost of the small businesses that rely on Blue Cross for the services, but in fact overrule the members of a committee advising the government just to please the multinational insurance companies. What's happened to this government? Who are they in touch with any more? It's remarkable. So this is yet another example, I think, very much of the need for some kind of lobbyist registry. We need to know who's talking to MLAs and who's influencing them because clearly they're wielding a lot of influence despite due process.

This bill also illustrates yet again the failure of for-profit health care delivery corporations to be competitive. I mean, if the myth had some truth in it, that for-profit health care corporations were the most efficient, effective organizations around, they wouldn't need this bill. They'd be able to beat that clumsy, old, nonprofit Blue Cross hands down. Why would they need this benefit?

Well, the fact is that the idea that the private, for-profit industry is always more efficient is, in fact, nonsense. Sometimes they are. Many times they are. Many times market forces work but not always and especially not in health care. This bill simply confirms that premise, and I'm afraid we're going to see this same premise played out over and over and over again as we see more and more private providers brought into the health care system or, indeed, into other P3 systems. We will either see public standards lowered, whether it's in the provision of insurance or the building of highways or the construction of public buildings, where we're seeing trends toward lower standards, or else we will see costs escalated, which we're seeing played out here.

So this is a bill with nothing – nothing – in it of benefit to Albertans. What's the benefit in this to Albertans? Let me ask you that. Let me put it to you that way. Who's going to benefit? Is it the so-called Martha and Henry people of this province who this government's so happy to refer to? No. It's the big shareholders of the multinational insurance companies who will benefit at the expense of Albertans. This is a shameful piece of legislation as far as I can see.

It goes from there to other problems. The legislation, as I understand it, will limit the product lines that Blue Cross will be able to offer. Why would it do that? Well, the previous speaker said it's to limit the risk that Blue Cross will take. I suspect that it's to limit competition in the marketplace.

Again, what we're doing by this is sidelining one of the most effective, credible, trusted providers of health care insurance in this province to open up the market from here on through eternity to big multinational insurance companies. If they're so darn effective and if Blue Cross is going to be saddled with a payment in lieu of taxes in the premium payment, why not let them go head-to-head? Why

are we so frightened of competition on this basis that we have to keep Blue Cross leashed? It's a sad commentary on the state of mind of this government.

So, Mr. Speaker, you can tell that I'm going to be opposing this piece of legislation, and I think we all will be. I might as well warn government members now that we'll be calling for a standing vote on this because we'll want all small businesses in this province who are going to be facing higher costs to know who stands on what side of this issue. [interjections]

So, Mr. Speaker, I'm getting lots of heckling. We'll obviously stir up debate. I look forward to engaging in that debate. I will take my seat.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Standing Order 29(2)?

Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the hon. Member for . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, the question period begins with the third speaker and thereafter, so it doesn't apply to the second speaker.

Rev. Abbott: I'm sorry.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to speak on the bill?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed to close debate.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I expected that there would be more debate forthcoming.

I would just like to say this in response to the comments made by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview when he asked us why we would be doing what we are doing to level the playing field by requiring Alberta Blue Cross to pay the premium tax and to pay income tax on its private insurance. Basically, why we are doing that is that, well, firstly, our government does not believe that we should be in the business of competing with private business wherever possible. But Alberta Blue Cross has evolved over many years and has gotten into the provision of private insurance programs.

So rather than saying, "you're out of that" and "you can't provide that," we're basically freezing the situation with the status quo. But we are saying that where you compete with private business, you will be on the same level and you will not, government-linked agency, have special benefits that will give you a leg up on companies operating in this province. That's our philosophy. I think it's the correct one. That in a nutshell is why we are doing what we are doing.

In the other remark that was made by the member, he gives me credit for single-handedly changing the recommendations of this committee report. I think he forgets that this was a report to the minister, that this is a government bill, and that, certainly, anything that we do is a decision by caucus and it's certainly not the decision of one backbencher from Calgary-Lougheed. So I think you give me much more power than I had. I could see the arguments on either side of the issue, and there were certain people on the committee that felt that there were good reasons for retaining this tax exemption status. I happen to be one who believes that this is the proper way to go, and I think obviously the majority of our caucus does as well. That's why we're doing what we're doing.

With that, then, I'd call for the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 8 read a second time]

4:30

Bill 9

Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I'm also pleased this afternoon to move second reading of Bill 9, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004.

Prior to talking about the principles of this bill, I'd also like to talk a bit about its background. Members will no doubt remember that in 2002 this government launched a strategy to reduce tobacco use by all Albertans. A major focus of the strategy was to prevent young people from starting to use tobacco in the first place.

In that context, Mr. Speaker, in April 2003 the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act was proclaimed, which has as its aim to protect young people from the health risks of tobacco. This act was the result of the work of the Member from Wetaskiwin-Camrose, who introduced this as a private member's bill and who has been through his work as former chair of AADAC a very dedicated proponent of antismoking strategies in this province.

In any event, Mr. Speaker, this law made it illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to use or possess tobacco in a public place, and under the act police officers have the authority to issue violation tickets to offenders with a fine of \$100 or to seize tobacco products from any minor found using or in possession of tobacco products. But since the act was proclaimed last spring, it has become evident that greater clarity is required in this law to ensure that the act is not applied where and when it wasn't intended and to also make it easier to enforce in court.

So the amendments in Bill 9 and the purpose of Bill 9 are to accomplish three main things: to allow for regulations to be developed to define necessary exemptions for youth to possess or use tobacco in very limited circumstances and for limited purposes, a second purpose is to provide a broader definition of a public place where the act can be enforced, and the third purpose is to establish evidentiary rules for use in prosecuting infractions in court, including the use of certain inferences and the use of certificates of analysis.

Mr. Speaker, the need for exemptions for use or possession of tobacco by minors are these. Aboriginal youth who participate in the ceremonial use of tobacco will be permitted to do so. This affects a very limited number of youth and for very sacred and culturally sensitive purposes for which it has been deemed suitable to exempt this particular use. As well, exemptions will allow young sales clerks to sell tobacco in the workplace without defying the law. If they are under the age of 18 and working in the local Mac's store, they will be able to in fact sell these products without being in contravention of the law. As well, these changes will allow minors to participate in routine sting operations used by Health Canada to test retailer compliance with federal law that makes it illegal to sell tobacco products to minors. So for these very limited purposes these exemptions are seen as being useful and necessary.

As well, Bill 9 will expand the definition of a public place to include a vehicle which is in a place or building deemed to be a public place and also to include other places or buildings which are so designated in regulation.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 9 is needed to help strengthen a law that has been designed to help protect our young people from the health risks of tobacco, and it will also advance our progress in our tobacco reduction strategy by supporting reduced use of tobacco by youth. I do hope all members see their way clear to support these amendments.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [interjection] I'm glad everyone's so excited to hear from me again.

Actually, this bill is in many ways commendable in its spirit, and I have many times encouraged the government and congratulated the government for some of their work on tobacco reduction. I'm sure we all realize the dangers of tobacco use. It's an unusual product in that there's no way to use it safely. Even when you use it according to directions, it's bad for your health. That sets it apart from all kinds of other products that are dangerous when they're overused but are quite safe when they're used in moderation. Of course, the health hazards of tobacco from cancer, which we all know about, heart disease, many, many other problems are well known. So any effort that this government makes to reduce tobacco use is to be commended, and we commend the thrust of this legislation.

That being said, it may be time to actually carry this somewhat further. Alberta, if I'm correct, is unusual in not having comprehensive tobacco control legislation. Most other provinces, I believe, do. In fact, it may be the case that all other provinces do. What we're seeing here in Alberta, while some of it's commendable like the very substantial increases in tobacco taxes last year, is a piecemeal approach. That's what we're seeing Alberta, a piecemeal approach to this problem and then piecemeal corrections and piecemeal shifts.

In the fall there was actually a bill that I spoke strongly against which gave the cigar industry in Alberta a tax break. Well, that's completely the wrong direction to go. That's a significant step backwards. I wouldn't have thought that the cigar industry in Alberta was large enough to mount an effective campaign to get its tax reduced, but I guess it is or that certainly they were able to push the right buttons. So that was a step backwards in the fall.

We had a big step forward a year ago in the spring, and this is something of a step forward too, I think, but as I say, it's all piecemeal, and what we could really benefit from in this province would be comprehensive tobacco control legislation. In fact, there's a kind of irony here in that tobacco is not an Alberta-based industry at all. I'm not aware – maybe the minister of agriculture can correct me – that there's any tobacco grown in this province. We have an out-of-province industry and in many ways an out-of-country industry that we're allowing to come in and claim thousands of lives a year, so I would certainly encourage a stronger stance on this.

The idea in this bill of broadening the definition of a public place for the purposes of enforcement is, I think, a good idea. That's the way to go, and we'll continue to go in that way. Some of the exemptions that are being brought in to the bans on who can possess tobacco and at what age I don't see as a step forward at all. I think we need to stay tough on those kinds of issues. Providing exemptions for people under the age of 18 to possess tobacco because they might work in a convenience store where it's sold doesn't sustain our pressure on containing tobacco use, and I think we need to sustain and increase that pressure.

4:40

There's also, of course, the problem with every law, and that is: how is it going to be enforced? This bill will only be as good as the enforcement behind it. We already know, of course, that our police forces, which struggle so much for funding, are overworked, and they're not going to be seeing this as a top priority. We may see some other kinds of enforcement that, in fact, may be facilitated by this bill. Having underage people pose and go in and try to buy tobacco and if they succeed, they'll be able to blow the whistle on the retailer: that's been used in the past, and that sort of thing is effective. But are we going to see the resources for that continued

and expanded? If there was one thing we could do genuinely to help the sustainability of our health care system, it would be to reduce tobacco use.

There are many other comments we'll be making on this bill. A lot of it will come once the legislation is in committee. I would, however, make one final point here, which is the value of education in reducing tobacco use as opposed to the value of punishment. I'm certainly not afraid of there being punishment when people break the law or do things they shouldn't be doing, but in this particular case I think we need to remember that education is the best way to go about reducing this problem and catching children and young adults before they get hooked on tobacco. Strong public awareness programs, strong prevention programs, strong education programs are crucial, and the more we have to punish, the more it's a sign that our prevention programs have failed. So while punishment will need to be there and we don't want to lose that, we also want to encourage AADAC or the department of health or whoever else is prepared to do it to spend effort on education and prevention.

Again, if we had comprehensive tobacco control legislation, we could address all of those things at once. We could address issues of pricing and issues of supply, issues of education, issues of punishment, issues of control, and so on all in a single, comprehensive tobacco control bill. We're not going to see that, and that's disappointing, but maybe we can bring in some amendments and improve this bill. Maybe we'll try that.

So I appreciate the rapt attention of the other MLAs on this particular discussion and look forward to other debates. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to briefly speak to Bill 9, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004, and also to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed for bringing forth this bill, which is an amendment to the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act.

Keeping our kids tobacco-free is at the heart of the government's tobacco reduction strategy, which we've been developing over the last probably two or three years. The key to a healthy future generation lies in educating our young people about making good choices in life and taking responsibility for their health.

Mr. Speaker, it would be ideal if no one used tobacco. Every year 3,400 Albertans die from tobacco-related illnesses. Tobacco use is also estimated to cost this province almost \$1 billion in lost productivity each year. Our tobacco reduction strategy, which I guess we all know is managed by AADAC, aims to reduce the smoking rate by as much as a third over the next 10 years. Getting that message to teens and adolescents is critical in how successful we will be.

Aside from raising awareness about the health dangers of tobacco, stronger action is required to prevent children from starting to use tobacco. Mr. Speaker, proclaiming the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act in April of 2003 was part of our work to do just that. This law is central to Alberta's tobacco reduction strategy and deliberately targets young people. It sets a clear expectation for children and youth in regard to tobacco use. Statistics show that if young people do not start smoking before they are 20, they are unlikely or, certainly, less likely to start at all. By making smoking illegal for young people, the act is helping to make tobacco less normal and less acceptable as a choice for young people.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 9 provides the amendments required to make the law a stronger tool in reaching a tobacco-free generation. Our focus is getting people to not use tobacco, and the best place to start is with our children. I believe this amendment strengthens our legislation. Once again, I would like to thank the Member for Calgary-Lougheed

for bringing forward Bill 9 before the House today. I would certainly suggest and ask that this House support Bill 9 to ensure that this law can be effectively enforced.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do welcome the opportunity to speak to Bill 9, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004. I would like to commend the Member for Calgary-Lougheed for bringing this forward. I think that we don't have to go any further than to look at recent settlements in the United States, billion-dollar settlements against tobacco companies, to realize the huge impact that they do have on the health of our society.

I also agree with all other members that have spoken who indicated that what we do need is comprehensive tobacco control legislation in this province. Certainly, one of the areas that I look at in making that statement is that if we compare the smoking rates in Alberta according to the Canadian tobacco use monitoring survey, we see that the rates from 2002 to 2003 overall have dropped 2 per cent, from 23 per cent to 21 per cent. In the age group of 15 to 19, which would be most affected by this particular piece of legislation, we had a reduction of 4 per cent, from 20 to 16 per cent. However, in the age group which would not be affected by this legislation, that rate has increased from 27 per cent in 2002 to 36 per cent in 2003. So I see that while, certainly, a very good place to start is with minors, we also have to make a concerted effort in the age groups 20 to 24 and 25 to 44, where we are getting increases in the rates of smoking among people in our society.

Now, the other thing that always struck me as odd was driving by the high schools in my constituency. High schools and junior highs and whatever have a no-smoking policy in their schools now so that anybody wishing to smoke, teacher or student or janitorial staff or any of the staff, cannot smoke inside the facility. So it was quite odd to see teachers out on the sidewalk smoking with the students. I think that this is a great piece of legislation that is aimed at a particular group and at that group that would be in those high schools, but again it doesn't say anything for the example that we are setting amongst adults with these youth.

4:50

I think we can even take this one step further. If, in fact, we are truly looking at enforcing a reduction in tobacco use in this province and we want to lead by example, then certainly one of the places we can start is right here in this building, where members are allowed to smoke. I would certainly like to see the Legislature Building of Alberta a smoke-free facility. When we look at the money that was spent in our cafeteria alone, downstairs, to separate smokers from nonsmokers, then certainly a good place for us to start is right here.

Mr. Speaker, if we are bringing in legislation of this nature, then certainly for it to be effective, there must be some type of strong enforcement; otherwise, the act itself is meaningless. I also agree with other members who have spoken here who said that this tends to be a punitive piece of legislation which is aimed at the youth of our province and certainly that an aggressive prevention and education policy would be far more effective.

We had a visitor in this Assembly a year and a half ago, I believe. I forget the exact date. Barb Tarbox had certainly made a plea to all the youth in Canada and done such a magnificent job in promoting nonsmoking and in promoting the effects of smoking and how it can

not only impact your own life but impact those loved ones around you.

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, this is a bill that I agree with. I think it's got us moving in the right direction. I think there are so many more things that we could also do. I would urge all members of the Assembly to vote for this bill.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to speak to community support for Bill 9, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004. We have already heard that Bill 9 will help to provide new efficiencies in how we can prevent tobacco use by children. These amendments will allow for new regulations to provide reasonable exclusions to tobacco use and possession by youth and better define public places where the law can be enforced.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to remind this House that Alberta was the first province in Canada to introduce legislation that makes it illegal for youth to use or possess tobacco. The Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act was introduced in response to society's growing concern about the increasing rate of children smoking in Alberta. In Alberta 85 per cent of smokers began smoking before they reached their 16th birthday.

I know that when I've talked to my colleagues around the House, I tend to be the exception in that I'm one of the few people who have never had to quit smoking. I never started smoking, so I've never had to quit smoking, but I have watched my friends and colleagues go through the horrible withdrawal symptoms of actually having to quit. So anything that we can do to cut it off early in terms of people not having to go through that horrible process of having to quit.

By making smoking illegal for young people, the act is helping to decrease the chances that children will try tobacco, become addicted, and become lifelong smokers.

Mr. Speaker, these amendments have wide support. Members of the Aboriginal Tobacco Use Steering Committee were consulted and suggested changes that will help to reduce recreational tobacco use in the aboriginal community. Bill 9 also reflects discussions with Alberta Justice, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, and the Alberta police chiefs.

Mr. Speaker, there is support for Bill 9. I now ask this House to support Bill 9 to prevent tobacco use by children and reduce the smoking rate in Alberta.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions? Anybody else wishing to participate in the debate?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed to close debate.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have no further comments at this time and would ask you to call the question, please.

[Motion carried; Bill 9 read a second time]

Bill 6

Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate February 24: Mr. Lukaszuk]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's a pleasure to speak to this bill. The bill was moved yesterday in this Chamber, and it is bringing an overdue amendment which will definitely make the work of this government much easier and much more effective when enforcing child maintenance orders which are presently on the books and which very often are quite difficult to enforce.

Mr. Speaker, I don't believe that there is one member in this Assembly who in his or her constituency work has not received a number of phone calls from custodial parents indicating that somewhere out there, hopefully in the province of Alberta, is the noncustodial parent against whom a maintenance order has been granted by one level of court or another; however, the custodial parent is having great difficulty enforcing that particular order and collecting on the order for the benefit of the children simply because individuals are either difficult to locate or perhaps their employment activities are not known to the custodial parent.

The child maintenance enforcement program in this province, I would argue, is very effective, and it's doing all that it can to assist those parents, particularly through the assistance of the Human Resources and Employment department with their low-income programs. A great degree of assistance is offered to a custodial parent in their ability to collect on maintenance orders. However, the system is not perfect, but it is aiming at improving itself. Bill 6, indeed, is one large step in that direction.

Mr. Speaker, what Bill 6 will allow the department to do in their effort to assist custodial parents is to be able to avail itself with information on noncustodial parents and their whereabouts and their employment activities by way of either contacting friends, family members, or those who happen to know the noncustodial parent or by way of collecting information by simply receiving reports about the noncustodial parent and not having to release information to the noncustodial parent of who it was that informed the department of his or her whereabouts. This is a magnificent tool because, as you can appreciate, in the real world outside of this building, even though many Albertans may believe that it is not only a legal responsibility but a moral responsibility for every noncustodial parent to pay maintenance for his or her children, when it comes to actually reporting that individual to a government department or to the custodial parent, there is some hesitation, because if that information is then released to the noncustodial parent, relationships may suffer and personal repercussions between individuals may take place. Well, this bill addresses amending that and will ensure the security of information for those who are courageous enough to come forward or who co-operate in an investigation effort.

5:00

The benefits, Mr. Speaker, are immeasurable. Number one, there are many low-income families in Alberta, as you know, who simply

need those dollars, who need the assistance for raising their children. Obviously, the court orders have been ordered by judges, are deemed to be just, yet the enforcement of them very often is so difficult, and the dollars are so badly needed in those families. So, Mr. Speaker, anything that we can do in assisting those single parents in collecting those dollars for the children is, I imagine, much appreciated by the single parents.

Perhaps equally importantly is that many of those single parents who are not now in position to obtain the dollars that they so badly need are unfortunately forced to rely on taxpayers' assistance through our variety of low-income benefits. Indeed, it is our responsibility as government to take care of those who can't take care of themselves, and very often we do. As you know, a very large portion of our previously known SFI – supports for independence, now Alberta Works – recipients are single parents, primarily, unfortunately, single moms who do need those dollars. Now, by being able to collect the duly ordered child maintenance, the cost of supporting those individuals who are now receiving government benefits will be offset by the amount of dollars that are being collected. So not only is there a benefit to the parents, there is also a benefit to all of Alberta's taxpayers because simply they will be burdened by a lesser cost of providing low-income benefits.

Lastly and, I would argue, perhaps most importantly, the benefit is not only financial, but it's a benefit of justice. There is an inherent responsibility on any adult who is a parent to support his or her children, whether they are in a marriage or outside of a marriage, and I don't think anyone is absolved of that responsibility simply by the dissolution of a marriage. Therefore, this bill will allow our government and the Department of Human Resources and Employment to enforce that responsibility and to remind those out there who don't believe that they are required to pay child maintenance payment of that responsibility that has been placed upon them by the courts.

So I would urge all members of this Assembly to support this bill and to assist those who are right now awaiting receipt of those dollars, to support this government and all the single parents out there who are seeking that particular support.

Thank you.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I'd move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. Minister of Learning, are you rising?

Dr. Oberg: I am, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we adjourn until 8 o'clock this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:05 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, February 25, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/25

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the committee to order.

Before we begin, just a reminder to all members that this is less formal, and for those that may be observing, this is less formal. It does allow for members to talk quietly between themselves and only one member standing and speaking at a time.

Tonight it's Committee of Supply in which we will be going over financial estimates, and there's allowance in this particular session to go back and forth between ministers and people who are questioning. Before we begin our debate and discussion on supplementary estimates for the year, I wonder if we might have the committee's approval for a brief Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has been standing for a long time. Are you wishing to introduce guests?

Ms Carlson: Yes, sir.

The Chair: Well, then, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview I would like to introduce the 24 Parkallen Cub group that is joining us here this evening. They are accompanied by group leaders Steve Pentyliuk, Doug Jacula, Brent Irving, Tania Kajner, and parents Irene Henderson, Charles Davison, Devon Pinchal, Suzanne Olenik, Rick Poole, Rick Mogg, and Andy Brooks. So I would ask if all of the members of the 24 Parkallen Cub group would please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Colleagues, I'm not sure if the guest that I am introducing is here as yet, but if I may, I'll introduce her for the record. Her name is Anita Sherman, and she represents Education Watch, which is a group of concerned parents. In this case, Anita Sherman has two children attending McKernan elementary junior high school, but she is from one of many citizen groups including the Whitemud Coalition, the west end coalition that are citizens very actively engaged in education issues. We'd ask Anita to stand if she is here and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's an honour and a privilege today to introduce a guest who is a friend of mine and a constituent of Lesser Slave Lake. It's too bad that the Minister of Seniors isn't here. [interjection] I'll tell you why; I'll tell you why. His name is Ron McCue. Ron had a tire shop, Ron's tire and mobile repair, and when seniors would come in, he would sell tires at cost and install them and balance them for free. We need more

citizens like that in the world. I would ask Ron to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Tonight I'd like to introduce some guests who are watching the Legislature very carefully because of their concern over education and classroom sizes and related issues. One of them is Luisa Su. She's a parent of three children in grades 1, 2, and 6 at McKernan elementary junior high school. Cathy Wrightson is a parent with a child in grade 2 at McKernan. They are here as part of the parent watch group, who, as I say, are watching carefully the proceedings here as they relate to education. I'd ask them to rise and receive our warm welcome.

head: **Supplementary Estimates 2003-04
General Revenue Fund, No. 2**

Human Resources and Employment

The Chair: We'll start off with the Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to direct everyone's attention if I can to page 23 of the 2003-04 Supplementary Estimates (No. 2), General Revenue Fund. You will notice there that we are asking for an additional budget of \$28,680,000.

Now, this is split up into two main areas. First, we're asking for \$14.68 million to help families with their basic needs through what has been called the supports for independence program, which, as many of you will already know and understand, we're moving to a program called Alberta Works. In any event, this is to help low-income Albertans that are faced with increasing drug costs and with some utility disconnections, and we help to reconnect the utilities.

Then, there's an additional \$14 million that has been provided for hands-on career assistance, for enrollment costs for academic upgrading and for short-term skills training. This is of paramount importance to us because, of course, we still have ongoing demand here in the province for not only skilled workers but also demand generally. While there are some excellent opportunities now within Alberta for some of our aboriginal folks and also many of the disabled that are amongst us, we still know that more and more people if they are to find themselves in the workforce are going to need some help to get there.

Now, at one time in the history of family and social services and the welfare reforms that took place throughout the '90s, in many cases as the number of people on welfare diminished, it actually provided us with the kinds of dollars that we needed to move into skills training. In other words, for many, many years we were able to finance ourselves within that particular area. As a matter of fact, it wasn't uncommon to see family and social services, as it was called prior to 1999 and then Human Resources and Employment subsequent to 1999, actually lapse dollars. We believe that throughout these years ministers have been fiscally responsible, and of course we maintain that we are continuing along the fiscal conservative basis.

8:10

But times have changed. What we're finding is that we have a situation where the welfare rolls are growing in actual number although they're staying steady when we look at a ratio of percentage of a working population. We've been able to reduce that ratio to approximately 2.1 per cent of Albertans that are on our caseloads.

It's 2.1 per cent of the total of the working population. Now, there's no other jurisdiction in Canada that even comes close to that, and of course we have such a hot demand for additional workers here in this province that we've been able to maintain that at a steady level. But, of course, hidden in that percentage, as the working population has actually increased, even though our percentage remains stable, the actual numbers have in fact increased. Now, I can't tell you all of the reasons for that, but some intuitively would be that as workers move to this province, they are in fact bringing family members with them, and some of these family members, of course, need our assistance and will be entitled to it.

As many people are aware, the social services ministers, so-called, right across the country made an agreement some time ago, two, three, four years ago. I don't remember the exact date when we signed the documents, but we wanted to have mobility for people in Canada, and of course that meant that we wanted to allow people that were in need but also might even be disabled to be able to move across this country and not have gaps in assistance where they needed it.

So we still continue to encourage people to come to Alberta because we need them. Our population just simply is not large enough at the current time to supply the labour demand that we have in this province, and I believe that things are going to change. I don't whether it's for the better or for the worse. As recently as two weeks ago at a seminar in Calgary when we were discussing labour demand, the skills deficit, the federal government representative – I forget now the gentleman's name, but he was an assistant deputy minister in the new Human Resources and Skills Development department of the federal government – put an astonishing overhead up for us to have a look at, and it indicated that in the federal government's planning, after the year 2011 100 per cent of the new jobs created in Canada will have to be filled by immigrants.

Now, they're not even playing around any more with large percentages, you know, like, maybe it's 73. Or is it 87? Or, wow, it's going to be 92. They're talking about 100 per cent. So we have a situation now in Alberta where if all of that additional demand is to be filled by immigrants, they would be extrapolating from what we currently see in terms of: well, here is a generally accepted level of people to be on assistance; here is a generally accepted level of people that won't be able to work.

My message here tonight is that that's simply not acceptable. How do we possibly expect to fill all of these jobs through immigration? Now, the Minister of Learning and myself will continue to work with the federal government, under the Minister of Learning's direction, trying to find more flexibility as it comes to changes within the immigration system as it's dealt with in Canada but specifically to Alberta. It raises other concerns.

Right now we have a labour mobility concept here in this country that Premiers like to talk about, that ministers like to talk about, but it's not happening in the seamless way in which it should. As a matter of fact, as recently as July of 2001 there was an obligation on the part of all of the ministers in Canada from each province and, of course, the federal minister responsible. We were to report to our Premiers and to our Prime Minister by July 1 of 2001 that we had accomplished the goal of labour mobility within our borders in Canada, that we would all have been able to have sat down, looked at the labour mobility agreement, and would have said to our bosses that we had accomplished that goal. Well, ladies and gentlemen, we failed. On July 1 of 2001 the ministers responsible in Canada were not able to make that statement to their bosses, that we had in fact accomplished that. We still have not accomplished that.

The good news is that from an Alberta perspective if we're not at a hundred per cent, we're fairly close. We in Alberta for years have

led the charge in this particular area of trying to provide mobility into this province. The government has faced some criticism in previous years because there was always the concern: well, somebody coming from somewhere else in Canada is going to get this job while my son or daughter won't be able to fill that position. That simply did not prove to be true because, again, the demand stayed so strong. Well, we need to keep moving in that direction, removing whatever barrier there might be in order that a worker, not just a skilled worker, will be able to come to this province and be able to fit into our system.

It raises a concern about productivity. If, in fact, a hundred per cent is going to have to be filled from immigration, why aren't we getting into a debate about current productivity? We're starting to hear about it from the oil sands – that's where it started – where there is a concern that's been expressed about projects to be developed and designed, where there's a concern about cost overrun and there's a concern about timeliness of that project. Now, we know from statistics that are provided to us that Alberta has the highest productivity rate of any jurisdiction in Canada, but, ladies and gentlemen of this Legislature, it's simply not good enough. The productivity rate in Canada itself is too low a standard, and the fact that Alberta might be leading in low standards is simply not good enough.

Now, I'm here to say tonight that the next big thing that we're going to be concerned about as issues in this vaunted room, that we've all earned our way to be here and to talk about these issues, is workers' productivity in this province. We've been dealing with the health care issue. It's a big thing, but we have been dealing with it and will continue to deal with it. We all hear the Premier as he tries to move that agenda along, and he needs to be successful in that.

8:20

The next big thing to health care, of course, was education, and again through the leadership of the current minister and the information that we now have from the Learning Commission in terms of the next big thing, education is being dealt with. So we're now at the next big thing, and I believe that it's going to be in the area of productivity, and it's certainly going to be the area in terms of skills deficit and, of course, then, in just the inability for employers to find the people that they need when they need them. That is why it is so critical to see an additional \$14 million go into our budget on the skills training side.

We are faced with resistance of being able to self-finance any more by being able to do something dramatic to our welfare roles. Now, we haven't given up on it, and we'll continue to work on that, and I'll come back in the time that's allowed me to spend a few minutes on that. But, basically, we're in a situation now of where we have to take people from where they are if they're unemployed, and you know what folks? I don't know if there's a reason for any Albertan to be unemployed, but if they are underemployed, then we have to look at what we are going to do with that person, and we've got to move them into the kind of skill sets that they can then move into the workplace.

So we're going to see within Human Resources and Employment a transition on how we look at skills because we're really not going to be training for training's sake any more, just so we get them off of the welfare roles, you know, put them in training so our numbers look better on the welfare side. Can't do that any more. Won't do that any more. What we're going to have to do is we're going to have to see the standards set higher for who qualifies for training and the kinds of training that they will actually be seeking. We're going to have to move from pre-employment training into a more inte-

grated training system so that people can then start moving directly into the workforce.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're going to have to have an attitude change about getting people ready for the workforce. Thus far we've been content to train, train, train and then provide the employer with that perfect little person that can then go in and start becoming productive within a very short period of time. I'm here to say tonight that we can no longer afford the luxury of paying for all of that particular time. I'm here tonight to say that we have to start moving people into the workforce before they are ready for the workforce, because the only way you get work ready is at work, and that is the kind of situation that we're going to be looking for. Now, that will ease the pressure on budgets as we move forward, but we're not there yet, and we're in this transition time of getting there. That's where we need the support tonight, of course, for \$14 million, but we need your support in the future because we have to reform the system. Once again we have a situation in Alberta where we're doing good, but it's just simply not good enough.

Now, getting back to the situation that we have in requiring \$14.68 million to help people that need assistance, this is a situation where if a person is unable to work, this government has made a commitment and we will continue with that commitment to provide them with the support that they need.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're all familiar with the AISH program, and the AISH program will remain. The AISH program has a mandatory review coming up, but it will remain.

But on the other side of things, in the supports for independence system, which is the old term – the Alberta Works system is the new term – we're going to have to carefully analyze everyone that we have in that situation. When I say everyone, I mean that, and I'm talking about 28,000 people as we stand here tonight. We're going to have to examine every one of those people and make the assessment about expected to work or not expected to work because we cannot afford to carry people on our files that otherwise would be expected to work. The workforce, the work market out there needs these people, and we need to be able to supply them. In order to do that, we need the money for skills, and I hope you will support our initiative here tonight.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Before I call on the Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, I wonder: just so that we agree where we're going, we'll have a minister speak and then some questions and answers, and then we'll go to the next minister. Is that the way you want to do it, or do you want to go through all of the ministers and then ask questions? Back and forth. Okay.

The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I listened with interest to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. He made a couple of comments early on that I would really appreciate some further explanation. One, he indicated that there's money in this request for utility reconnections. My question I guess is really sort of very low level but an operational one in terms of how that works.

Our constituency office – and I'm sure we're not alone – has been inundated with requests from people for relief from utility disconnections, and we've been drawing upon funds like the CFRN Good Neighbour fund and other resources to try to help those people over the hump, so I was interested that there would be this money in the budget. How does it differ from the sort of one-time relief that's available for social assistance recipients if they find themselves in difficulty? I know that we've been able to appeal to the department and get relief for some people, but can the minister explain how this

fits into the program? Is it something we should be alerting our staffs at the constituency level to be aware of? I really would appreciate some comment from the minister.

Mr. Dunford: Yes, I'd be glad to. Again, we're in a bit of a transition on this one as well, but let's talk about what's in place tonight. If a person in Alberta has received a disconnect notice, then they are invited to contact our office. What we will do is an assessment, so whether we assist or not is really based on need. If they're a low-income Albertan or otherwise could even qualify for assistance but for whatever reason have chosen not to but they would have ordinarily fit into that category, then we will reconnect their utility. We'll pick up the cost.

Now, what has happened to us over time is that our costs have gone from \$1.5 million to – \$5.3 million is the number that I have in mind. When we saw that increase, I became concerned that maybe something was going on with the utility companies, so I have had the three utility companies in my office or I've been in their office, and we've discussed it. We now have members of our staff that work with a committee inside the utility company to keep our eye on the situation to make sure that we and taxpayers' money are not being taken advantage of. There's information that we might have based on not individual clients necessarily but perhaps some kind of experience that we have that might forewarn the utility company so they can start to take maybe remedial action earlier so that it doesn't get to the disconnect notice. Then thanks to members like the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne and others, we are looking at, of course, load limiters for a way in which there would always be enough heat for a stove, for a furnace, and for a fridge.

The Chair: The hon. interim leader.

8:30

Dr. Massey: Thank you very much. I think that's useful and welcome information, Mr. Chairman, because even though it's a small number of Albertans that are involved, given the kind of temperatures we've had this winter, it's been a source of concern.

The other question – and the minister talked about a mandatory review of the AISH program coming up – is the whole issue of rates for people who are receiving assistance and what might happen to those rates. I guess I would like some comment in terms of what those recipients can expect, and I say it within the context of having been contacted recently by a group of AISH recipients who were really concerned about the financial plight that they find themselves in and asking if I thought there was any use in them making representation to the government. I promised at that time that I would ask when the opportunity arose in terms of those rates how the government sees them being adjusted if they see them being adjusted.

Mr. Dunford: This is one of the areas of some controversy or difficulty that we have currently, and I suppose it's not surprising that with the broad mandate Human Resources and Employment has, we might find at least one issue amongst all that we do.

I don't want to deal with the actual question about rates at this point, but I want to talk a little bit about what a person can do if they're on AISH and they find themselves simply unable to meet their obligations. We have tried as best we can to be as compassionate and caring on this issue as that allows us within the sort of mandates that we operate with. Quite often what happens, even though it might be temporary, is that we'll actually move an AISH person off AISH for a temporary period onto our support programs. The thing about AISH is that it's a generous program in the sense of

how people can qualify to become eligible for AISH, but once you're in the AISH program, it's very rigid about what it is, you know, that you can avail yourself of. So I think we've used a very open approach and have moved people back and forth based on their actual situation in order to help.

A review of the act has to start taking place in 2004, so later this summer or early fall we'll get started on that. Of course, issues that will have to be dealt with at that time are, obviously, the monthly rate but also whether or not we can still sustain the kind of asset availability that we currently provide. Well, again, I know that we don't always compare ourselves with other jurisdictions—I guess we do when it helps us—but in the case of AISH we are so far ahead of the rest of the country on this that you sometimes have to worry if, you know, maybe we haven't gone too far. But that's just going to upset a lot of people. I don't want to suggest for a moment that any of that asset limit is going to change, but that has to be looked at. This House will have to decide whether or not to carry on with it.

The Chair: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was listening to the minister with a great deal of attention, and maybe I can start with the comments that he made just a moment ago on the AISH program. I just want to share with the minister my constituency office experience. We get lots of calls from AISH recipients. There are two kinds of issues that come to my attention. One is, of course, the interest that recipients have in seeing the review that the minister just suggested may not start until perhaps September, October. Is that right? [interjection] Yeah. So that, I think, would be a matter of concern to my constituents.

I have a fairly large number of people who are on the AISH program who are my constituents. I do meet with them at least once or twice a year at their request, and they are concerned about the financial difficulty that they have with the current amount of money that they get. So the news to them that the review will look at the rates is obviously welcome to them, but the delay in when the review is going to start would be a matter of concern. I wonder if the minister can expedite that review, move it forward. At least that will give them some idea that the government is receiving their concerns through us, through people like me, and is willing to expedite the review. So that's one question.

The second question. As the minister said, his ministry tries to be very compassionate and responsive to special cases where there may be financial difficulties and tries to move people back and forth between the two programs, supports for independence and AISH. In the last meeting that I had with a fairly large number of AISH recipients in my constituency—I wish I could remember the details—my attention was drawn to the fact that once they move to the supports for independence program, it's very difficult for them to move back to AISH, which seems to be their preference. I don't know what's the basis of it. Are you aware of some of these difficulties? If you would shed some light on it and how they can be addressed.

So those are my first two questions.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you. On the timing of the review I'm trying to be realistic. If we were to start it, you know, in the late spring or in the summer months, I'm just not sure how convenient that will be for people, so in my own head I have a September date.

I might point out, though, that I think the review should look at a long-term situation as to how the rates would be dealt with. Again,

the actual \$855 a month is more a matter of budget than it is of that particular review. Well, let me say it this way. While they're not mutually exclusive—you know, one doesn't have to wait for another one—that doesn't mean that anything is going to happen to the rates either. The \$855 is a budgetary issue, whereas the overall aspect of AISH and all of its parameters is what really would be reviewed, and I hope that what would be reviewed in the overall parameters is some kind of way in which there might be adjustments to the rates.

8:40

On the moving back and forth, I'm actually unaware that there would be any difficulty, because the way the thing is supposed to work is that the AISH person goes onto SFI until their temporary situation is completed, and then they go back onto AISH. We've actually provided a situation where you could be off AISH for as much as two years and not have to go through all the rigamarole of re-enrolment, which is one good thing. But the other thing, why they prefer to be on AISH instead of SFI, comes down to the simple fact that when you're on SFI, you're on a program of last resort, so you get examined on a constant, constant basis by our caseworkers. When you're on AISH, we leave you alone for a year, and I think that's the difference.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you have a further question, or are we ready to go to the next minister?

Dr. Pannu: A question for the minister.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Chairman, the minister's explanation was very helpful. He did make a reference when talking about the review of the AISH rates to considering some sort of adjustment to it. Is there any consideration likely to be given to linking at least the AISH amounts, \$855, as you mentioned, Minister, to this cost of living allowance? That's one thing, the minimum that the recipients, my constituents, certainly are asking for. To be realistic, you know, if costs go up, some consideration has to be given to adjusting the rates in order for these Albertans to be able to live within the means provided to them. If \$855 is a reasonable amount and there has been no change in it over the last five years—I think it was five years ago that the last changes were made.

Mr. Dunford: In '99.

Dr. Pannu: In '99. They certainly are complaining to me that just in the interest of reasonableness, of fairness some inflationary adjustment needs to be made so that it reflects changes in the cost of living.

If I may add another question to it as we go on. I notice in the supplementary estimates \$14.68 million for supports for independence "to address caseload and cost-per-case increases." If you would please explain something about this. I have difficulty understanding what these things refer to and why these increases both in per case cost and the number of cases. Is it in part because the switch from AISH to SFI is more frequent now than it was before, or are there some other reasons for it?

Mr. Dunford: On the cost per case, prescription drugs are eating our lunch. It's just that simple.

**Chair's Ruling
Decorum**

The Chair: Hon. members, I'm sorry to interrupt your lively

conversations. It's just beginning to increase to a level now that we can no longer hear the members who are supposed to be debating. I wonder if we could just bring it down a few notches, and let's hear the hon. minister answer the questions from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Debate Continued

Mr. Dunford: Well, just in case nobody could hear that, the increased cost of prescription drugs is eating our lunch. We have been unable in the last while to meet our targets, and that's one of the reasons why we're here again tonight seeking a supplementary estimate.

We now spend something in the order of \$170 million a year on the medical card that we provide to our clients, and the overwhelming majority of that is in prescription drugs. So this is something that we need help with, yet we know and understand that in many cases the prescription drug has allowed the person to continue to be able to look after themselves to some extent and perhaps even in other cases allowed them to stay in the training that we have them in and perhaps then even get into the workforce. But there shouldn't be anybody – there shouldn't be anybody – in this House tonight and, as a matter of fact, there shouldn't be anybody in Alberta that is not serious about health reform because this is getting out of hand.

In terms of adjusting the rates—now, I can't say never. I can't say that I've never used cost of living as a way to increase this area because as a matter of fact I have in the sense that when we went back and reinstituted increases to the MLA pension plan, that you and I don't have but our predecessors had, we did use 60 per cent of the cost of living, which would be consistent with pension plans. But if this House chose to tie AISH rates to cost of living, I'd actually be disappointed. I don't like it as a measure. It doesn't measure anybody. It is some nonexistent Canadian out there that experiences these costs.

I think there are other indexes that, if we were to tie it to something, would be better. I think market-basket measurement is going to be something that we can look at in the future because it will calculate costs, then, as they relate to our communities. MLA salaries are tied to an average weekly wage index, and to me that might make more sense. One of the questions that would need to be asked is: if there's to be some sort of orderly change to the rate, how is it done? We would need to do that.

Now, the reason that the rates haven't changed in five years is – I talked about prescription drugs eating our lunch; the other thing that's been eating our lunch is the increase in the AISH caseload. We now spend \$360 million, I think it is, within that AISH file, and we've been experiencing 7 per cent increases up until the last year of 6 per cent. We simply haven't been able to find the funds to provide the increase because we've been trying to keep up with the caseload. It doesn't make any sense to me. I don't understand why when we have population increases of 1 and a half per cent we have 7 per cent increases in AISH. It doesn't make sense. Something's going on. We need to find that out.

The Chair: Hon. members, I wonder if we might have unanimous consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Chair. It's my pleasure to rise tonight and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly the mayor of Thorhild. I noticed that Vivian Prodaniuk is in the members' gallery to observe the session tonight. I'd ask her to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

8:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Yes, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to also introduce a guest in the members' gallery tonight, and that is the mayor of Breton, His Worship Darren Aldous. I'd ask Darren to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Supplementary Estimates 2003-04**
General Revenue Fund, No. 2
(*continued*)

The Chair: Okay. Are we ready to go to another minister? The next minister on my list appears to be the minister that we've been talking a little bit about, the Minister of Health and Wellness.

Health and Wellness

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and speak to the supplementary estimates for Health and Wellness for the 2003-2004 fiscal year. These estimates add up to a total of just \$12.5 million split roughly equally between operating expenses and equipment and inventory purchases.

The third-quarter forecast shows that my department is \$28 million over budget. This is true, but my department has managed its budget extremely well. We're managing to pay for all of the additional \$22 million allocated to health regions to offset higher operations and maintenance costs. We also found all but \$2 million out of \$14 million in higher than expected prescription drug costs.

In all, Mr. Chairman, the supplementary estimates represent less than two-tenths of 1 per cent of my overall budget. We will get about half of this money, \$6.35 million, back from Canada Health Infoway in the near future. This does not represent an additional cost to the province. These funds will enhance and implement the pharmaceutical information network, which is linked to the electronic health record. Access to a patient's prescription history helps doctors and pharmacists avoid ineffective drugs and prevent adverse reactions. This has great potential to improve the effectiveness and quality of care and will reduce wasted prescriptions.

My department is allocating \$453 million this fiscal year to Blue Cross to cover prescriptions and other extended health services for Albertans not covered under an employer group plan. Most nongroup benefits, 97 per cent, or \$440 million, are for prescriptions, and most of those are for seniors. Drug costs under Alberta Blue Cross are going up an average of 17 per cent a year. This fiscal year my department needed about \$14 million extra to meet this growing drug cost. We can cover all but \$2.2 million of the increase from funds that have already been allocated to us.

These supplementary estimates, Mr. Chairman, show \$4 million to reduce the human risk of West Nile virus. The first and best protection continues to be personal steps that people can take to eliminate their properties as mosquito breeding sites and protect themselves against being bitten. This year we will also assist municipalities in targeting the larvae of the one mosquito species most capable of transmitting the virus to humans. Provincial public health officers will provide details when we announce the full plan next week.

In the meantime, Mr. Chairman, I ask members of the House to

vote and approve this and all expenditures in these supplementary estimates.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a handful of questions on this. I consistently hear reports of very, very substantial deficits from the RHAs, something in the range of – I can't remember the exact number – \$60 million for each of Capital and Calgary health regions and smaller amounts for the other health regions. How is the minister expecting to cover those since they're not covered in this estimate?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, sir. We have examined the plans of all the regional health authorities, and we are satisfied that they will make it through this fiscal year with this additional amount of money that will be allocated to them plus money that we have reallocated from other elements of the Department of Health and Wellness budget. Furthermore, Mr. Chairman, there are some regional health authorities that have accumulated surpluses that will be applied towards their current operating expenditures.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. I hear ongoing concerns about the very long delays in the approvals of the RHA budgets and business plans, depending on how you're looking at them. Indeed, my information is that even as recently – perhaps it may be still the case today – as a few weeks ago the RHA budgets for this current year had not actually been, as it were, signed off by the minister. That's of very close relevance to this debate because we're debating supplementing those, so perhaps the minister can enlighten the Assembly on the process through which the RHA budgets are signed off on a year-to-year basis.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, we are working hard at trying to develop multiyear contracts with the regional health authorities. Part of that challenge, of course, is the ability for us to get information out as soon as possible on how much a regional health authority might be looking at getting in the upcoming year. So because we're making the transition to multiyear contracts as opposed to year by year, that is the reason why the current fiscal year's budgets haven't been signed off yet.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, are you ready? Okay.

Dr. Taft: No, no. I've got plenty of questions.

That makes it more difficult, really, to support these supplementary estimates because it feels like we're adding on to an as yet undefined amount, but be that as it may.

The minister did mention West Nile protection, promotion, and prevention programs. There's a substantial amount allocated here for that.

Another concern similar to West Nile, in fact potentially a much more serious concern, is around SARS. I do believe that some of the RHAs have undertaken extensive preparations and training of their staff and even preparation of facilities in case there is even a single case of SARS reported in, say, Edmonton or in Calgary. Was that preparation entirely financed out of previously approved revenue, or

is it in here somewhere? Does the minister have any idea how much that has cost? Is it more or less, for example, than what's been spent on West Nile preparation?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, we have taken significant steps to deal with issues of infectious disease particularly as we know that there will be at some point a pandemic influenza, so our planning for infectious diseases like SARS has been part of really an overall picture of dealing with infectious diseases like pandemic influenza. We do allocate money for public health. It is out of that allocation of money that we have been working on the development of plans by regional health authorities and by the province. The plans for West Nile virus are quite a bit different because it's not an infectious disease like SARS or like the flu but really is something that is transmitted by in this case mosquitoes.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, are you wishing to ask a question? Go ahead.

Dr. Pannu: Yes. Mr. Chairman, thank you. A question to the minister – I think the Member for Edmonton-Riverview raised that question – with respect to the alleged deficits in two major RHAs, Capital and Calgary, to the tune of \$60 million each. The minister said that those monies are likely to be found within the budgets of each of the RHAs or within the overall budget of the department. I wasn't quite able to understand where those monies are to be found, if those budget figures are, indeed, more or less right in the judgment of the minister. There's the first question.

9:00

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. What is happening is that throughout the province there are regional health authorities, some of which do not have accumulated surpluses that they can apply to their current deficits. Some of those regional health authorities will find sources of money from our supplementary estimate. Others will be able to do it by accessing accumulated surpluses. So the solution for each regional health authority to making sure that it is able to deal with its deficit by the end of this fiscal year will differ from region to region.

The Chair: The hon. third party leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My next question to the minister has to do with the \$2.167 million being requested as part of the supplementary estimates for the nongroup health benefits program. What does this term refer to and if you would, please, give some information?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, as I indicated to the committee, most nongroup benefits, some 97 per cent of it, or \$440 million, are for prescriptions. What we found is that drug costs under the Alberta Blue Cross plan were going up an average of 17 per cent a year, so this fiscal year we needed 14 million extra dollars to meet the growing drug costs. We have found monies from other elements of our budget to cover for all but \$2.2 million. So the \$2.2 million that is being asked for are monies that will apply to the drug program under Blue Cross, and as I indicated, most of that is for the benefit of seniors.

Dr. Pannu: Two questions on this 17 per cent increase to the Alberta Blue Cross drug costs. Is this consistent with the overall

increase of the cost of health care, and if not, what is driving this particular high level of increase in drug costs?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, that is a good question but one which is a very complicated one to answer, but I'll do my best. The 17 per cent increase in drugs is driven by two things predominantly. It is a function of the growing volume of people requiring drugs but also a function of the growing cost of new drugs that are coming onto the market. The overall costs of health care are not increasing at 17 per cent. It would be more in the range of 8 to 10 per cent across Canada.

Other elements that are higher cost are things like new technologies that are becoming available, and that's very analogous to the growing costs of drugs. Also, there is an issue with respect to our aging population. Even if our population were to stay static in its number, generally speaking as people age they use, consume, more health care dollars and resources, and that is also one of the areas that's driving your overall cost of health care, but 17 per cent increases for drugs are not indicative of all the costs going up in the health care system.

Learning

The Chair: I'll call on the hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I rise today to discuss the supplementary estimates for Learning. The supplementary estimate is \$14,600,000, which will fund the following things that I will list. There is also some statutory funding to the tune of around \$4.6 million.

I'll start with the statutory funding first, as I believe it is excellent news. On the statutory side \$1.1 million are for the Alberta heritage scholarships, which is due quite simply to a higher than anticipated number of students becoming eligible for these awards. This is nothing but good news in that our students are achieving more and are eligible for more of the awards.

There's also 3 and a half million dollars for the provision of the future cost of student loans due to a higher than anticipated number of students becoming eligible for financial assistance. Again, Mr. Chairman, it's an extra 3 and a half million dollars that goes into the postsecondary system through student loans.

We have \$500,000 in the nonstatutory voting amount for equipment and inventory for the development of a new apprenticeship, trade, and occupation management system. This will enable us to be much more effective on the apprenticeship side. Already we're the number one system in the world, and this will continue it to be even that much better.

There's also, Mr. Chairman, \$5 million for private schools supports; \$600,000 of this is from the increasing number of grade 12s returning to high school for upgrading, and \$4.4 million of this is for early childhood services. This goes to the private kindergarten providers for an increased number of children with severe disabilities and potentially higher costs per child.

The last, \$10.2 million for public and separate schools support; \$5.6 million dollars results from an increasing number of grade 12s that are returning to high school for upgrading. What we are seeing is a considerable number of these students coming back to high school for either upgrading their marks, upgrading courses, all in all returning to school. This is more than we had anticipated. We have \$1.3 million for providing learning programs to students in provincial institutions. What happens with this is there were some new institutions opened, and quite simply under the law we are forced to provide education to them, and that is costing us an extra \$1.3

million. Mr. Chairman, \$3.3 million for early childhood services PUF funding, which represents an increase in the number of children with severe disabilities as well as higher costs per child.

This is good news for the Department of Learning in that there's a little over \$20 million that is being put into Learning with these estimates, Mr. Chairman, and it's all going to the children and the learners in this province.

I'd be more than happy to take any questions.

The Chair: The hon. Interim Leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I noticed in the estimates that there is a line that refers to "higher costs per child," and I wonder how that is determined. I guess to give it some context, if you look at what happened to the public schools with their reduction of a thousand teachers, it seems to me that they could have claimed that the arbitrated teachers' settlement resulted in much higher costs per child. There wasn't relief for them, yet there seems to be relief here on the basis of costs per-child increases. I wonder if we could find why the difference.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The higher costs per child are in kindergarten where we have expanded the mild and moderate. We have expanded the ESL as well in kindergarten, and again this is very good news for those kids that do have learning disabilities in kindergarten and are identified early.

Dr. Massey: Well, I guess I'm still having difficulty with it, Mr. Chairman. What triggers a request from one area that results in additional monies being handed to the operators? What would have happened that these higher costs would be covered in these estimates?

Dr. Oberg: Quite simply, Mr. Chairman, there are more children that are identified. There are more services that are being provided to these children and subsequently the higher cost per child as well as the increased number. I do not have the breakdown between the actual increase in the number of severe disabilities versus the cost per child, but again it's from bringing more children into being funded at the kindergarten level compared to what it used to be.

9:10

The Acting Chair: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A question to the minister. In the supplementary estimates there are \$3.3 million for early childhood services program unit funding in the public system, and parallel to that is \$4.4 million for early childhood services program unit funding for private schools and private operators. The size of the private segment of the education system relative to the public segment is much, much smaller, yet the amount being requested is nearly 25 to 30 per cent more for that much smaller sector. Would the minister try to explain this?

Dr. Oberg: One thing we have to remember is that the comparison between private schools and public schools is not the same ratio in kindergarten. In kindergarten we have a high number of private providers, private schools who just give kindergarten, and there's a much higher ratio of the private to the public in that rate.

The other issue that has occurred is that we have seen more children with severe disabilities. More of the PUF funding in that

particular sector is going to private kindergartens, and subsequently that realizes why there is the \$4.4 million for them. When we typically think of private schools, we're running at about 5 to 6 per cent of the students who are in grades 1 to 12. For kindergarten we're up around 40 per cent of the number of students actually in private kindergarten.

Dr. Pannu: A sort of supplementary to my question to the minister: would the minister have an estimate in terms of the number of ECS students in the private sector and the number in the public sector that's under reference here?

Dr. Oberg: I believe it's about 40 per cent in the private and around 60 per cent in the public, but I certainly will undertake to get that exact number for the hon. member.

The Acting Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Pannu: Then if the ECS segment in the public schools is 60 per cent and in the private sector it's 40 per cent why a 25 per cent more increase sought for the private sector?

The Acting Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Because we are seeing an inordinately increased number of kids with severe disabilities in the private sector. This is all done on a per-student basis, and what we're seeing is a rise there as opposed to the public system.

The Acting Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There is virtually nothing in here for postsecondary learning apart from the \$500,000 in equipment and inventory purchases for apprenticeship and trade programs, at least if I'm reading this correctly.

Dr. Oberg: It's \$4.6 million on the statutory side.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Can you elaborate a bit on the \$4.6 million?

The Acting Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. What we see is on the statutory programs, which are monies that have to be put out purely by the number of students. We have a \$1.1 million increase in the Alberta heritage scholarships. This is due purely to the fact that there are more students qualifying. We also have 3 and a half million dollars for the provision of future costs of student loans issued – this is what the people are telling us – because there are more people becoming eligible for financial assistance. So, again, this 3 and a half million dollars is put into the student loan program in anticipation of the costs according to our actuaries.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. I appreciate that clarification. I was actually questioning about funds going directly to postsecondary institutions as opposed to the students, and my question would be to the minister. In preparing these supplementary estimates, did any of the postsecondary institutions, or universities or colleges or technical schools, request extra funding of the minister?

The Acting Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. The postsecondaries always ask for extra funding. What I will say is that in the last supplementary estimates they received an extra \$30 million purely for postsecondary on the operations and maintenance side, and they also received I believe it was \$45 million from the access funding side. So in the previous two supplementary estimates that have come forward, they've actually received about an extra \$70 million to \$75 million. Therefore, this time when supplementary estimates come forward, it has been kept to the K to 12 system.

The Acting Chair: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My next question to the minister is with respect to the acquisition of an investment risk management system. There's \$875,000 requested to provide funding for the acquisition – that would be on page 48. I believe it's from your department; it may not be. My pages might have got mixed up. Sorry, Mr. Chairman.

The Acting Chair: Hon. minister, do you have a response?

Dr. Oberg: No, Mr. Chairman. That's actually the Department of Revenue.

The Acting Chair: Thank you.

The Interim Leader of the Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Just a couple of questions, Mr. Chairman. At budget time I asked a detailed set of questions and still haven't received responses to a number of those – this was the last budget – and I wondered what had happened to those. I still would appreciate having that information as we prepare for the next budget.

The other question I have is with respect to determining public school funding and private school funding. What is the basis – and I guess this goes back to some of those questions that I asked – for determining a per-pupil allocation?

The Acting Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. The present funding formula is determined with a base amount per student with additive amounts afterwards. There are additive amounts, for example, in special needs. There are additive amounts in ESL. There are additive amounts also in sparsity and distance, which is not directly tied to a student, but it is tied to the funding of the student. There are additive amounts on transportation. So, in essence, what happens in the funding formula as it exists today, keeping in mind that the funding formula will be changed come September 1, there's a base amount per student with plus and plus and plus added on top for each different one of the variables that the student qualifies for.

Dr. Massey: Well, I guess, then, that begs the question: how is that basic amount determined? How do you decide this is what it's going to cost a school or a school district to educate a youngster?

Dr. Oberg: There are two ways, Mr. Chairman. First of all, we determine the amount that is needed, and secondly, it is based on historical amounts. So what happens is the increases are built onto the base funding. What then happens is the additive amounts, the variables that are added in, tend to be more based on the need, so the actual base amount has the built-in increase. The other variables

tend to have a variable amount of increase. For example, what you've seen is that the amounts for severely disabled children go up significantly higher than the actual base amount per child. That's gone up around 9 or 10 per cent. We've seen huge increases in that.

To put it bluntly, it's based on historical amount. The historical amount was done with the needs of the child in place. The variable amount is much more responsive to the individual child and the individual school jurisdiction.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I have one question for this minister. I heard his comments to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview about postsecondary funding with some interest. We repeatedly hear the president of the U of A talking about how funding from the province to postsecondary institutes has dropped, how in 1982 for every dollar a student put in in tuition fees, the province put in \$10, and how now in 2002 that has dropped from students putting in \$1 to the province putting in \$2.3. So that seems to be significant. We don't see that addressed here in this supplementary supply. Can you give us any good news about what's happening in the upcoming budget, and why didn't you consider funding it here?

9:20

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Chair, as you well know, I cannot talk about what is in the upcoming budget. What I will say, though, is there was an agreement made from this government about eight or nine years ago, at which time a number was put forward about the percentage of what would be reasonable for a student to pay for their own education. At that time that number was stated to be 30 per cent. For the University of Alberta, which the hon. member asked me about, the present cost is about 24 per cent. So for every dollar that a student puts into his own education, there is another \$3 that is put in place by other sources, and I fully recognize when I say that that the other sources do include more than just the government funding. There are research funds, accumulation on their deposits, interest on their deposits, things like that.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My question to the minister is, I guess, prompted by the question asked by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview earlier with respect to there being no supplementary funds being requested for postsecondary institutions. I was reading some document from the University of Alberta a few weeks ago, I think, in which reference was made to utility costs alone going up during this year beyond the estimated amount by about \$27 million. Now, that's a huge cost, and I'm surprised that there's no indication here that either the request was made from the university – I've given one example; there are other institutions, I suppose, that are similarly affected – or that in terms of asking for more funds there's no response to that request from the university.

Dr. Oberg: The universities and colleges put forward a request back in about May, as the hon. member said. There was \$30 million that was delivered to them in estimates in the last sitting that we had. They received \$30 million extra in O and M at about the end of July, so that covered them off. In actual fact they may have had some increases since that time, but they have not been vocal about any other increases. So they did receive an extra \$30 million on top of what they had.

The Acting Chair: No further questions of the Minister of Learning?

Then we'll call upon the Government House Leader.

Seniors

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm prepared to put forward the estimates on behalf of the Minister of Seniors with respect to supplementary supply for the Department of Seniors.

As is disclosed in the supplementary estimates that were tabled, those supplementary estimates fall into three areas: the sum of \$4.5 million, which was provided to assist an increased number of low-income seniors with the costs of long-term care accommodation fees; the sum of \$900,000 to support additional year-round and seasonal beds in homeless shelters; and \$5.5 million for increased provincial funding under the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement.

The seniors' benefits addition will come as no surprise to members in the House. The seniors' benefits program is an income-based program that provides cash benefits to low-income seniors. In general, single seniors with an annual income of \$18,850 or less and senior couples with a combined annual income of \$28,740 or less are eligible for a cash benefit. The yearly maximums for seniors who qualify are generally \$2,820 for single seniors and \$4,200 for senior couples.

When long-term care rates were increased in August 2003, of course that also impacted low-income seniors who were in long-term care. At that time the government of Alberta determined that low-income seniors on Alberta seniors' benefits who were residing in long-term care facilities should receive more assistance, obviously, to offset the impact of the rate increase. So to do this, the Ministry of Seniors implemented a supplementary accommodation benefit which allows qualifying low-income seniors to receive assistance over and above the yearly maximums that I've just mentioned to pay for the long-term care costs. The maximum amount per senior is \$4,455 per benefit year.

A supplementary estimate, the members will recall, was approved in the second quarter for \$17.3 million to pay the costs of the supplementary accommodation benefit, but since then some changes have occurred. Additional seniors have qualified to receive assistance with the higher fees. There's been a change in the makeup of long-term care facilities so that there's a larger proportion of seniors in long-term care facilities who now qualify for benefits. In the summer of 2003 48 per cent of seniors living in long-term care were eligible for supplementary benefits. That percentage is now almost 57 per cent. So the \$4.5 million supplementary estimate that's being requested of the Legislature today is to pay for that additional supplementary accommodation benefit for seniors in long-term care facilities.

The homeless shelters' \$0.9 million was needed to fund an additional 100 year-round beds and 200 seasonal shelter beds in Calgary. To meet the level of demand in Calgary, the Ministry of Seniors has been operating Sunalta Shelter, which provides for an additional 100 year-round beds. The Mustard Seed church had operated the Sunalta Shelter as a temporary winter emergency shelter in Calgary over the past two years.

The supplementary funding will also help to pay costs incurred by the Calgary Drop-in Centre for 200 additional beds over the winter months. In addition to those projects receiving the funding, the Ministry of Seniors has funded the Westgate Hotel project and the Knight Inn project in Calgary as well to provide additional temporary beds.

The remainder of the supplementary estimates, \$5.5 million, which again is in the area of housing services, is to complete the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement. Members will recall that the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement provides access to up to \$67.12 million in federal contributions to be matched by the province to help increase the supply of low-cost housing in high-growth communities.

Under the agreement the federal government is prepared to provide up to \$20.5 million to Alberta in 2003-2004. The 2003-2004 budget originally provided only \$15 million, which is \$5.5 million below the amount necessary to fully match the federal contribution. With this supplementary estimate the Ministry of Seniors will be able to fully match the federal contribution for 2003-2004, which will result in an additional \$11 million being provided to communities to meet the need for affordable housing. Since signing the agreement, more than \$40.2 million has been allocated to 21 projects for the construction of 1,005 affordable housing units.

So, Mr. Chairman, that's the rationale for the \$10.9 million which is being requested by the Ministry of Seniors.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, Minister. Are you prepared to respond to questions on the Minister of Seniors' behalf?

Mr. Hancock: I'll respond to the questions, Mr. Chairman, that I can respond to and undertake to get answers to the rest.

The Acting Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks. I appreciate that gesture from this minister.

The first questions I have are around the allocation for homeless shelters. We are all aware of the number of homeless people on the streets of not just Edmonton and Calgary but of the smaller cities in Alberta as well. Many of these people are there as a result of mental health problems. Many of them are there because they can't have supported housing where they could live and get a minimum bit of support so that they don't end up in crisis and in hospital and on the streets. So my question – and perhaps this minister may well be able to answer because of his role in Justice – would be: are we seeing anything in here that's going to address some of the long-term causes of homelessness, or are we simply seeing treatment of the symptoms?

9:30

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, of course with respect to the Ministry of Seniors specifically, obviously this budget would address the symptoms. It deals with making provision for low-cost housing and provision for homeless shelters.

The issue with respect to why people are homeless would be provided for mainly within the context of other government departments. In many cases, as the member well knows, there are issues with respect to mental health. There are other issues that impact people which I won't go into in detail here, not being an expert in it.

Clearly, what we're talking about here is providing shelters for the people who are homeless, and the leading-edge agreement with the federal government with respect to providing funds to support affordable housing is, again, to deal with those people who are in that situation, not to deal with the other side of the equation, which is also very important, and that is to ensure that people don't get into that position.

Dr. Taft: The point of my question was that we might not end up needing these supplementary estimates if we could get at the underlying cause of homelessness, so that's how it relates to this.

Mr. Hancock: Well, the hon. member may well be right. We wouldn't need these estimates if we didn't have the problem. As he well knows, however, those problems are not solvable overnight, so you have to deal with the acute care side of the equation now while

you're dealing with trying to solve the problem on the other side of the table. You can't abandon these people who are in need on a cold winter night because you want to cure the problem. That's one of the key struggles the government always has: to put resources into the preventative side and into the program side, which would resolve some of these issues. Obviously, we need to deal with the acute care side, and that's what's being asked for here.

Dr. Taft: Certainly I wouldn't want the minister to interpret my comments as suggesting that we cut out these kinds of responses to the immediate needs, but it seems to me that this occurs year after year after year. Frankly, we've known for a long time that many people who are homeless are homeless because of mental health problems, and we haven't addressed their care, so let's get on with addressing that.

My next questions are around the 4 and a half million dollars "to assist an increased number of low-income senior citizens with the costs of long-term care accommodation fees," which went up very significantly I think it was the 1st of August. At the same time that those fees went up, we're hearing increasing reports and seeing increasing evidence of decline in standards of care in nursing homes so that we have seniors who feel like they're paying more and getting less.

So let me frame it this way. This 4 and a half million dollars that's going in to offset the costs of the increased fees for low-income seniors will flow through the bank accounts of those seniors to the nursing homes. Does this minister have any thoughts or knowledge of what impact we might see on improving standards of care as a result of increases in revenues going to the nursing homes such as this 4 and a half million dollar increase?

The Acting Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, as the member will know, having read carefully the Broda report, the issue of making sure that there are sufficient beds in long-term care is certainly one which the Ministry of Seniors, responsible for housing, is acutely aware of and has been working hard on. One of the reasons for the increase in the long-term care rates was to have that payment for the housing portion of the care so that the operators would have sufficient funds to keep the standard of care and the level of care in the facilities strong and as well, of course, to make sure that other facilities would be available so that more beds would be available so that many other good things could happen. First of all, those seniors who are in need of long-term care and needed that type of accommodation would have it available, and people who should be in long-term care as opposed to acute care beds would have the opportunity to move there and thus free up acute care beds for the acute care system in health.

So there were many benefits which were intended by increasing the fees which were payable by people in long-term care for their housing. That's a good theory, but obviously there are people in long-term care who are low-income and who are being subsidized, so the Seniors budget had to be increased to cover off that portion of those people's fees. That's what we're looking for here, to keep those people whole and make sure that that increase did not impact unduly on people who couldn't afford to pay.

But, yes, of course the whole concept of making the long-term care charges match the costs of providing the housing portion is so that it doesn't eat into the cost of providing the care. The operators can make sure that that care is provided for. If the money isn't there, they can't provide the care, so you have to make sure that it's there, and these dollars will go directly to doing that.

The Acting Chair: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On the \$900,000 for the homeless, the additional funds that are being asked for here, would the minister have – you may not have because you're not directly responsible for that portfolio – a breakdown in terms of which communities received what amounts from this? As the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview drew to the attention of the House, the problem of homelessness is not just the problem of Calgary or Edmonton, but Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, and so on and so forth all have that problem now.

I'm particularly interested in this question because in my constituency there has been some neighbourhood dispute about whether or not a particular church should provide temporary shelter to the homeless. I'm interested in knowing what portion of the funds from this \$900,000 has come to Edmonton and perhaps some of that money to the area that I represent to provide for the facilities that are badly needed by the homeless in the area.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, to the best of my knowledge and subject to correction the information that I have available here is that the \$900,000 went entirely to Calgary from this supplementary estimate. That's not to say that there weren't other dollars in the budget that went to other homeless projects around the province. But this particular supplementary estimate was dedicated, as I indicated, to running the Sunalta Shelter in Calgary, which the ministry was operating, and the supplementary estimate was needed to pay some costs incurred by the Calgary Drop-in Centre for 200 additional beds there. I think the other projects that I listed, the Westgate Hotel project and the Knight Inn, were not part because the information that I have is that those were in addition to these. So the \$900,000 as I understand it – and I will certainly get correct information if I'm wrong – went specifically to the Sunalta project and the CDIC project in Calgary.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

Now, I'm well aware of the Inn from the Cold project in Strathcona. My church as well as other churches have been participating in that project. It's a very good indication of how the community can come together and provide support for those in need. It's unfortunate that there was a problem in getting that project up and running on a timely basis, partially due, as the member indicated, to the concerns that were expressed in the community. I have nothing but respect for the people from all the churches involved who were dedicated to getting that particular society together and up and running and providing that type of accommodation, primarily directed to young people in the Old Strathcona area but I don't think restricted to them.

I have had occasion to speak to the minister with respect to that project and with respect to the problems they were having getting up and running, but I have to indicate that this supplemental estimate deals specifically with those two projects that I mentioned in Calgary.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

9:40

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now I turn to the \$4.5 million "to assist an increased number of low-income senior citizens with the costs of long-term care accommodation fees." Clearly, this request is related to the increase in the rate that resulted from changes in the government's own policy with respect to that. From

the seniors' advocates we hear day in and day out, increasingly, their growing concerns about the quality of care at the same time as the Minister of Seniors is coming back to this House to ask for more money to pay for those facilities that provide that care. So that's a concern I want to register.

I don't know if any of this money – it doesn't look like it – is being used to monitor the quality of care in conjunction with the increase in fees, which in part were justified in order to guarantee and perhaps improve upon the quality of care received by seniors in long-term care facilities.

Now, the questions that I have about it. I know that there are three types of providers, I guess. There are private, nonprofit providers of long-term care; there are public facilities that provide that care, run by RHAs I would suppose; and there are private, for-profit. So there are three categories that I know of. Would the minister have any idea about what portion of this \$4.5 million is going to each of the three categories of providers, and what are the numbers of seniors receiving this assistance for each of these three types of residences run by three different categories of providers?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, the first portion of the member's comments were clearly a comment which I'm sure the Minister of Seniors will be pleased to read and get that input from.

With respect to the specifics about the three types of housing and how many seniors are in each type and what percentage of them in each type get the benefit of this supplemental assistance and more particularly this supplementary estimate, obviously I don't have those numbers at hand. To the extent that they are available, I'll see that the member gets them.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. While we are talking about numbers, perhaps I should also put in a request, then, and the Minister of Seniors will perhaps respond to it later on. What has been the increase both in terms of absolute numbers and the percentage increase of seniors requiring this assistance since the increase anywhere from 38 to 50 per cent on a monthly basis in the rates that the seniors have to pay for long-term care? Two numbers: absolute numbers of seniors who now require special assistance to pay for their facilities and, secondly, what percentage increase has taken place as a result of changing this policy.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, I don't have the absolute numbers of seniors available, but as I indicated earlier, during the summer of 2003 48 per cent of seniors living in long-term care facilities were eligible for supplementary benefits. There has been a shift in the demographics. There have been higher income seniors who have chosen to avail themselves of other accommodation. Once the prices, I guess, were comparable, they chose a different form of housing. So there have been higher income seniors leaving long-term care facilities and normally replaced by others who are lower income level.

So there has been a shift in the demographics. My understanding is that right now about 57 per cent of seniors in long-term care are receiving supplementary assistance benefits, and that's expected to increase to about 60 per cent by the year-end. There has been a shift, there has been a change, but my information suggests that that change has not been so much that the people who weren't before are now on supplementary assistance benefits, but rather there's been a change in the demographics. In fact, spaces have been made available for more lower income seniors, who then require the supplementary assistance benefit, and the higher income seniors are moving out to other types of accommodation.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I, also, have some questions on seniors. I wasn't completely satisfied with the answers I just heard from the hon. minister on how they intend to help seniors, particularly with long-term care fees and the problems they're having with increased power bills and insurance costs. I don't feel that seniors are more satisfied than they were at this time last year, and I want to know how come that isn't addressed in these supplementary estimates. I also want to know what the government's long-term plans are, because I don't see them addressed here, in terms of providing affordable housing for seniors.

We're seeing more and more that seniors are falling through the cracks, that many of them cannot sustain their own homes or rental homes with the costs that are accruing out there when you see the substantial increases in living costs, whether it's their power bills, their rents going up, being able to own and operate a car, which in this province it is virtually impossible to function without. The public transportation system is so poor and the cities are so spread out. So they see all these mounting costs; they see additional fees having to be paid for prescription drugs.

All of this adds up on a monthly bill that's unaffordable for them, and the only place they can cut back on is their housing. So if there is no affordable housing available for them, which we are finding increasingly is the case, then where are they supposed to go? How come the government isn't picking up their own phones and listening to these problems? We're hearing them in our constituency offices day in and day out, not seniors who are upset or mad but seniors who are desperate and who have no place to go. So I wonder why that hasn't been addressed anywhere in these supplementary estimates.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, the hon. member is debating beyond the provisions of the supplementary estimates and trying to tie it back to supplementary estimates by saying: why isn't it in here? The hon. member well knows that a budget might be expected sometime within the next month or so. She heard the Speech from the Throne in which there was a clear commitment to the seniors of this province, an indication that the government does understand that seniors who are living on the margin, seniors who've retired on a fixed income and are facing increasing costs, as everybody is – increasing costs with respect to utilities, with respect to groceries, with respect to all the costs of living do make it difficult for seniors who've retired on fixed incomes.

My own parents are living in their own home and have the same issues as other seniors around the province, and that is that it's increasingly more and more difficult to meet the rising costs that happen in society, the ongoing costs that increase on a year-to-year basis.

This government is not turning a blind eye to that. In fact this government has put in place the Alberta seniors' benefits in an attempt to make sure that there was a program in place so that seniors on a low income could have a place to go for extra funding when they needed it. When the government allowed the rates for long-term care to go up so that more long-term care spaces could be available, they also recognized that there would need to be some money in the budget to cover those that require assistance from the government to assist with that increased cost. That's why there was an additional \$17.3 million in the last supplementary estimates, and we're now looking at \$4.5 million in these estimates.

The Minister of Seniors is a strong advocate for seniors in this province, and the government will continue to ensure that those seniors who are living on the margin, who are having a hard time making ends meet in houses that perhaps might need repairs, in

houses that are increasingly difficult to heat through rising utility costs, seniors who have to meet their medical bills – the Minister of Seniors is working very hard to make sure that the programs are there and that they go to the people who need them.

So the issue is: at what level of income do seniors need assistance, and how can we have programs that are designed to be delivered so that those seniors get assistance? It's very much a part of this government's agenda, as was spoken to in the Speech from the Throne, but that's a subject for discussion when the main estimates are before the House.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the comments here. Seeing that we're getting towards the end of the discussion, I just need to put my concern on record that we've only had about eight hours since we were provided with the information in these supplementary estimates, and it does make it very difficult for us to carry on an informed debate. We don't have an opportunity to check with any of the stakeholders on the appropriateness of this legislation. It's over \$100 million in this case. So I would just like it to be on the record that this is a very, very serious constraint on our ability to debate this bill.

Thank you.

9:50

Innovation and Science

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. It's my pleasure tonight to represent the Minister of Alberta Innovation and Science. Mr. Chairman, hon. members, tonight on behalf of the minister I'm bringing forward the supplementary estimates for the ministry's budget regarding Imagis. For those of you who may not already know, Imagis is the acronym for the Alberta Government Integrated Management Information System. It is the corporate system that supports the government of Alberta's financial, purchasing, human resources, and payroll businesses. A project to implement Imagis was initiated in 1995-96 to replace multiple old systems that could not meet the changing business imperatives.

Now, what does Imagis do? Imagis provides the ability to meet the Alberta government's financial obligations to vendors, customers, and employees. It enables all ministries within the government of Alberta to comply with the requirements of generally accepted accounting principles. Last year Imagis processed approximately 1.9 million invoices. Can you imagine? One point nine million invoices. It sounds like something that my wife and I have to deal with when we go out shopping – 1.9 million invoices through accounts payable, 500,000 payroll cheques, 250,000 time sheets. How many time sheets? Two hundred and fifty thousand and 42,000 T4s and T4As. Through an automated employee self-service component approximately 20,000 employees receive the confirmation of their pay, eliminating the need of duplication to print and mail 200,000 pay advices. This, I believe, is a very important initiative. Seventy-five thousand expense claims were processed. The automated electronic payment system eliminates the manual handling of 1.2 million paper vendor invoices. So, Mr. Chairman, that is quite important.

Upgrades to the Imagis system are required approximately every three years to keep the system current and take advantage of the enhancements and new features. The upgrade undertaken in '03-04 involved changing the system to fully web-enabled technology and

significant changes to some of the financial and human resource functions.

Finally, as a result of the complications involved, increased costs were incurred. I think we can all relate to that in our own homes in terms of an estimate we get versus what it really actually costs. In addition, Imagis experienced increased operational costs for such things as hardware requirements and software licensing fees, another common phenomenon across Canada. To cover the increased operating and upgrading expenses, a supplementary estimate of \$1.55 million is required.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to present tonight. Should there be any questions, it would be my pleasure to ask the Minister of Innovation and Science and his staff to respond to them directly.

Thank you.

Dr. Massey: I wanted to ask a question. Has the government examined and responded to the Auditor General's criticisms in his last report where he indicated that the government hasn't formalized or implemented "an effective accountability framework for IMAGIS"? One would assume that before more money was put into the program, that accountability program would be in place, and I think there was a further recommendation from the Auditor General that the work be done within the individual ministries to make sure that the money was being well spent. I guess it's that concern, that the Auditor General's caveats be addressed before we put more money into it.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I can't say. This morning I appeared in front of Public Accounts, and some of the hon. members across the way and on this side were at Public Accounts. The Auditor General was there, and he talked about the importance of accountability. I was very proud to say that the accountability within the ministries that are presenting to Public Accounts – I'm not aware at this point if, in fact, Innovation and Science is presenting to the Public Accounts, where a similar type of question, I would assume, would be asked as well. But I will say this. I understand the minister's perspective. Actually, not the Auditor General's criticisms but the Auditor General's recommendations I know are clearly taken very seriously by this government and are acted on, as I indicated to the Public Accounts Committee this morning.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In light of what the Auditor General has recommended, the question of accountability I think is something that we need to take seriously. So in that spirit, looking at the request for a little more than \$1.5 million related to a budget of \$12.1 million that was approved by this Assembly earlier, it's a rather large increase being asked, more than 13 per cent.

The information technology is not something new. It has been around for many years, extensively used by this government and its offices as well as businesses and other institutions all over the place. Why is it that the budgeted amount is so far out of line with what was in fact being spent and because of which now a certain per cent increase is being requested by way of this particular request for supplementary estimates?

Mr. Boutilier: I appreciate the hon. member's comments. I think we can all appreciate either in our lives, in our homes, or in institu-

tions that, clearly, software licences and fees are something from an accountability perspective that we have no control over because it's an external market that we're dealing with. But I can assure you from an accountability perspective that every single cent that is being invested in this new technology – Alberta is viewed as a leader, and we want to ensure that we get the best value in terms of what we're providing relative to this.

Again, I will take the hon. member's comments that he has mentioned and share them with my hon. colleague the Minister of Innovation and Science, and I thank him for his comments.

Infrastructure

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm here this evening before the committee requesting and showing that we need an additional \$35 million to fulfill the Natural Gas Price Protection Act. The original budget was for \$180,600,000. Of course, it covers five months: November, December, January, February, and March. What happened? In November and December there was no payment, but we were figuring on a first of the year payment, and it turned out that in January there was a \$2.50 payment, then in February \$1.50, and we know there's another \$1.50 coming in March. Our calculations tell us that we will need about \$215 million for this whole program, which requires the addition of the \$35 million.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I just can't resist asking the minister what the justification is for such a poorly funded kind of system, where people have to get rebates and we just can't provide fair and reasonable pricing when it comes to natural gas.

10:00

Mr. Lund: Well, I'm so pleased that the hon. member would find time to ask me a question. I remember having to stand in the House almost daily and answer questions from the hon. member, but with her aspirations to leave this place and go to bigger and better things, I really appreciate that she give me one more opportunity to answer one of her questions.

Mr. Chairman, the fact is that gas is priced on the market, and I think it would be a huge mistake if, in fact, we said that we were going to interfere – I don't know what the number would be, where the level would be – on a monthly basis with that level. I think the gas price protection act certainly offers the level of protection to the consumer that is necessary for those heavy-use months. When we don't know exactly what the price is going to be, we don't know how many gigajoules are going to be used, we make the best estimate that we possibly can, and I really, really believe that we've now come to the point where we know that we're going to need about \$215.6 million in order to fulfill the requirements under the act.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My question to the minister, of course, is whether or not the same rebate program will be kept in place for next winter, if he knows anything about it, or whether, in fact, since the election might be called by the time we are into this month next year, he thinks that the rebate might even be made more generous and the program might be made sweeter for Albertans by then?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Chairman, under the act this present formula is in place for three years, and the level of funding, of course, is gradu-

ated. Depending on the price of gas, it can go all the way from \$1.50 to \$3.25. It can even go higher than that if the price of gas to the consumer goes over \$12 a gigajoule. That's the protection we have, that the consumer will never pay above a certain level. As a matter of fact, it's really interesting because for March we know that the price is going to be considerably below anything that the consumer has paid through November, December, January, or February – in March. So that's the benefit of this great program that the government put in place, and it's there for three years.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I don't have any more questions for this minister, but I just wanted to put my one question on the record for the Minister of Revenue, and that's in terms of the investment risk management system that they're spending the \$875,000 on. Could you tell us why you think you need one, and do you expect to have any anticipated expenses?

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much to the hon. member for the question. The reason for this request of \$875,000 is to provide funding for an investment risk management system. The total cost of the system is \$1.26 million, half of which will be recovered through charge-backs to external investment clients as the asset is amortized naturally over the next five years.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to point out that Alberta Revenue will be lapsing a similar amount of operating dollars that we're now requesting be added to the Revenue capital budget. Now, these operating savings cannot be directly transferred to capital because they have associated recovered revenue. But as a capital expense the revenue will be recovered from investment clients over a five-year period as the asset is amortized rather than in the year of the expense for operating funds. Now, this is why a supplementary estimate is required tonight.

I would also like to conclude by saying, just as a reminder to the hon. members in this Assembly, that Alberta Revenue manages approximately \$38 billion in investments on behalf of Albertans. Now, that's \$38 billion. I'm going to say that slower. Do you know how many zeroes are in 38 billion? It is quite substantial. So this includes the heritage trust fund as well as the endowment funds like the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Science and Engineering Research, and the Alberta heritage scholarship fund as well as various other public-sector pension plans.

Now, the request will provide an investment risk management system giving the Department of Revenue a highly sophisticated tool which will evaluate investment opportunities and risks.

I thank the hon. member for the question.

The Chair: The chair hesitates to interrupt the hon. minister, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(4) and Government Motion 9 agreed to earlier this afternoon, I must now put the following questions with respect to the 2003-04 supplementary estimates, No. 2, for the general revenue fund for the year ending March 31.

head: **Vote on Supplementary Estimates
General Revenue Fund**

Agreed to:

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development	
Operating Expense	\$1,750,000
Health and Wellness	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$6,167,000

Capital Investment	\$6,350,000
Human Resources and Employment	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$28,680,000
Infrastructure	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$35,000,000
Innovation and Science	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$1,550,000
Learning	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$14,600,000
Revenue	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$875,000
Seniors	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$10,900,000
Sustainable Resource Development	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$14,800,000

10:10

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll move that we rise and report, but I just wanted to put on the record as I do that – the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview indicated for the record that the opposition only had eight hours to look at these estimates before Committee of Supply. Just for the record I'm not aware of any request from the hon. members to schedule the Committee of Supply at a different time than was proposed. Always open to working with members of the House with respect to scheduling and when things might come forward and always had a good working relationship with the retiring House leader on the other side. Always open to requests for scheduling at more appropriate times if it's possible.

Having said that for the record, I would move that the committee rise and report the estimates that have been voted in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions and reports as follows. All resolutions relating to the 2003-2004 supplementary estimates, No. 2, have been approved.

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development: operating expense, \$1,750,000.

Health and Wellness: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$6,167,000; capital investment, \$6,350,000.

Human Resources and Employment: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$28,680,000.

Infrastructure: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$35,000,000.

Innovation and Science: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,550,000.

Learning: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$14,600,000.

Revenue: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$875,000.

Seniors: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$10,900,000.

Sustainable Resource Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$14,800,000.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to table a list of those resolutions voted upon by the Committee of Supply pursuant to Standing Orders.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? Carried.

Mr. Hancock: Seeing the enthusiasm of my colleagues, Mr. Speaker, I would move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:15 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, February 26, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/02/26

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon, and welcome.

Let us pray. As we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our energies with thanks so that we may continue our work with the people in the constituencies we represent. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased and honoured to introduce a group of 17 grade 6 students from Seba Beach school. They are here on the normal visits to the Legislature. They are accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Dave Hardman. I'd ask them all to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have today in the members' gallery members of our ministry, all from the Human Resources and Employment department. As I announce their names, I would ask them to stand, and then I would hope that you would join me in providing a warm welcome to all of them. First is Shannon Marchand, Darren Campbell, Cathy Clement, Percy Cummins, Cynthia Bourque, John Vellacott, Alice Leung, and Tina Dragon. They're here investigating what it is that we do over here in this building. So let's give them a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Along with my colleague it's a pleasure of mine to introduce 11 guests from Alberta Revenue who are visiting with us here today to also observe the proceedings of the Legislature and come to know better this part of the policy-making within our administration. All are members of the investment administration division, and I'd like them to stand as their names are read. Donna Kowal, Ivan Kupchenko, James DuBarry, Bev Campbell, Mercinth Campbell, Doreen Chandra, Rene Schmied, Juliana Nash, Frank Marr, Yueyang Qiu, and Louise Shepherd. If we could all give them a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure for me to be able to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group of individuals from my constituency. You know, I don't often have visitors from my constituency, so it's really neat to have them here. The Airdrie Koinonia Christian school where we are in session so that they can observe the Legislature and do a tour. This year it's a group of grade 10 students, and they are accompanied by Mr. Dean Hughes. It's just a small group; there are 14 students and Mr. Hughes with them. They managed to survive on

the icy roads this morning, and I hope that they'll all be safe going back home. Would you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With a great deal of pleasure I want to introduce two ladies that are visiting our Legislature today. Actually, one is a temporary resident of the constituency of our Economic Development minister, and the other one is visiting all the way from Poland. Their names are Teresa Chipiuk and Ms Monika Grzybowska. I would ask them to rise and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you 16 adult students from the Yellowhead Tribal College located in the Edmonton-Calder constituency. They're from the adult upgrading program and the university/college transfer program along with their instructor, Linda Anderson. We met previous to the proceedings today, and they had good questions regarding health care and regarding student financing, so I'm sure that they will find their visit here today instructive and very valuable. They are in the public gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you unto this Assembly four constituents. This is a mother and her three daughters. The mother was here earlier in the week with a school class and indicated that she would like to come back and bring her daughters to watch the proceedings of the House, so they are here today. Kim Militsala and her daughters Aleia, Tara, and Tennille are here, seated in the public gallery. I would like them to stand at this time and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm just delighted today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two constituents and a special guest of theirs. Seated in the public gallery we have John and Bettie Zyp, who are constituents, and with them today is Jonas Coyes, and that's their grandson. He's in grade 4, and he's very interested in the political process. So I would ask them to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Through you to members of the Assembly it's my pleasure to introduce Mr. Michael Ivey. Michael is a grade 11 student at Harry Ainlay high school, and he is here spending the day at the Legislature on a job shadow. I happen to have the privilege of having Michael shadow me today. I would ask him to rise and accept the warm welcome of the members of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it's my honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly three people that are near and dear to me. I'd like to ask them to stand as I call out their names. The first one is my lovely wife, Trish; my fine eldest son, William; and for the time being my youngest son, Samuel. I know you're sitting there wondering where my daughter is. Currently, her French class is in Quebec on a student exchange program.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has blown \$8 billion on trying to make electricity deregulation work. Now the Premier admits that he doesn't know, quote, if prices will ever go down. This is no comfort to consumers in this province. To the Premier: why has this Premier blown \$8 billion on an electricity deregulation scheme that will never, never work to benefit consumers?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, only the Liberals say it will never, never work. The Liberal critics say that the deregulation has caused higher power bills and that the increased generation brought about since deregulation would have happened anyway. That is nonsense. The fact is that Alberta has gained over 3,000 megawatts of new power generation, a 30 per cent increase to Alberta's energy supply, and those who say that new generation would have come about anyway are wrong.

Mr. Speaker, relative to rate increases, certainly on the retail side, the consumer side, a lot of work has been done to protect the consumer from sloppy billing, from gouging, improper pricing of electricity. Relative to the price of electricity or natural gas or oil or any commodity, there is the general increase in the rate of inflation. The price of gas, the price of electricity, the price of oil, the price of everything in other provinces is going up, as is the price of health care, by the way. Everything is going up. Their salaries go up. Our salaries go up. The salaries of the public service employees go up. Everything goes up.

1:40

Mr. Speaker, we try to achieve stabilization as much as we possibly can, but we have no control over prices going up related to the normal rate of inflation. I would remind the hon. member that if a power company wishes to have a rate increase, they have to go through the process, the process of the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board. If they're concerned about prices going up, they can intervene, which they never do.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: when did the Premier realize that electricity prices will never go down as a result of electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know, but I do know that in tracking the rate of inflation, things go up. Commodity prices go down from time to time, but incrementally and over the years they go up. The price of wheat, the price of barley, the price of oil, the price of gas, the price of electricity: they go up. It's called the normal rate of inflation. From time to time they do come down, but incremental-

ly they go up. God, I can remember when the price of oil went down to – what? – about \$8 a barrel. Now it's up to in excess of \$30 a barrel. So things do come down, but incrementally and over the course of history . . . Instead of spending millions of taxpayers' dollars FOIPing to find out whether we spent \$2.70, he should maybe do some research in the incremental increases in power prices, gas prices, oil prices, wheat prices, barley prices.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. There's a lot of inflation in this House.

Is Dr. West's first job with this government to correct bad public policy and to once and for all unplug electricity deregulation? Is that his first job?

Mr. Klein: No. Dr. West's first job is to make sure that the policies of the government are fulfilled. Dr. West is not involved in policy development. I can understand their concern about Dr. West being the chief of staff.

Mrs. Nelson: Snap you like a twig.

Mr. Klein: Oh, absolutely. So when they launch these frivolous requests, spending millions of taxpayers' dollars to determine whether we spent \$2.70 on a glass of orange juice, Steve West will make sure that, indeed, any requests for information are legitimate, and he will keep their feet to the fire. Mr. Speaker, I suspect we will see their rear ends pucker.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier has turned the Public Affairs Bureau into the marketing wing of the electricity industry. Despite the fact that electricity deregulation is an \$8 billion waste of money, the Public Affairs Bureau still plans to spend \$3 million trying to sell this to Alberta consumers. To the Premier: why has the Premier turned his Public Affairs Bureau into the marketing arm of the electricity industry?

Mr. Klein: I don't think that that is true, Mr. Speaker. Well, I don't think – it is not true. It's not the marketing arm. As a matter of fact, I've listened to many commercials by many power-generating companies and power-distributing companies advertising rates and advertising the ability of people to contract with their particular company and advertising the wonderful service that they're prepared to offer. The Public Affairs Bureau had nothing to do with that.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: why is the Premier committing \$3 million to trying to sell a defective product, electricity deregulation, when even he doesn't have any confidence that it works?

Mr. Klein: Oh, Mr. Speaker, that is not true. That is a big fib. I have lots of confidence in energy deregulation. I have lots of confidence in a program that brought about 3,000 additional megawatts of power to this province and prevented brownouts and blackouts. I have great confidence in the Bolger committee report, of which two representatives were from this government caucus, to deal with the retail and the consumer side. So I don't believe that energy deregulation has failed at all. I think it has been a monumental success and, indeed, is a model for those that want to deregulate – is a model – in North America.

Mr. Speaker, would this hon. member like us to go to a state-owned system where they have accumulated millions, billions of dollars worth of public debt? Is that what they want? I think that's what they want, because that is quite consistent with Liberal thinking.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I want the Premier to visit liberalopposition.com and see what a real electricity policy looks like.

This is to the Premier. Who in the government ordered ATCO Gas to hand over close to half a million dollars to the government of Alberta to pay for this propaganda campaign?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea if that statement is true. You know, we have learned in this Legislature that any statement coming from the Liberal opposition is embellished, is exaggerated, and when it's investigated, it turns out to be so far from the truth as to be absolutely ridiculous.

Mr. Bonner: What are you doing?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, this hon. member, I think the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry if I recognize his chirping, is a good example, a very, very good example. He brings out this information relative to the use of government aircraft. He is totally and absolutely off base, but he creates through innuendo, vicious innuendo, an implication that something wrong has taken place when, indeed, nothing wrong or improper took place. And he refused to apologize.

Southeast Calgary Hospital

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, this week alone I've received two shocking letters about appalling conditions at the Foothills hospital. While this Premier talks about providing wine and room service at health care's version of Hotel Ritz, ordinary Albertans are being made to wait eight hours in emergency with stroke symptoms and are even resorting to lying on the floor in emergency rooms. To the Premier: how does the Premier explain his government's failure to construct a new hospital in Calgary despite the fact that he personally identified this as a priority five years ago?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, this allegation, again, is wrong – wrong. His nose is growing. To stand up and say that is wrong. Indeed, the Calgary regional health authority is now proceeding with conceptual plans for a hospital in the south. Money has been committed for revamping of the trauma centre and emergency room at Foothills hospital. A children's hospital is well under construction right now, as we speak. The centre for expertise for bone and joint surgery is well underway. The Alberta foundation for medical research is well funded and is generating good research projects. So what the hon. member says, that we are not committed, is wrong, absolutely wrong. Yes, there may be problems. There are always going to be problems. That's why we are addressing as Premiers the whole issue of achieving sustainability in the health care system.

1:50

When the hon. member talks about wine in hospitals, Mr. Speaker, put it in context. I alluded to a person who visited Birmingham, England, where he has operatives, by the way, in England or the U.K. anyway, a person who related to me a story about going there to have the Birmingham hip installed and taking advantage of some rooms attached to the hospital that were luxury rooms that generated

money, that generated money for the national health system, for the public system, generated big dollars. At least half the people occupying those luxury rooms were from Alberta, believe it or not. You know, you have to ask yourself why. This fellow said that, yes, he could order wine. Well, big deal. Now, if the *Edmonton Journal* wants to make a big deal out of it and if this hon. member wants to make a big deal out of it, so let it be, but the average Albertan understands what I'm talking about. It's talking about thinking differently and doing things differently.

Dr. Taft: Will the Premier confirm that this five-year delay has facilitated his government's discussions with private developers interested in constructing, operating, and maintaining this new southeast Calgary hospital, including a hotel facility?

Mr. Klein: That very well may be, and if indeed the Calgary regional health authority is talking to private developers to enter into a P3 and if indeed there could be a hotel component with that hospital, great. Get at it.

Dr. Taft: So his agenda is revealed.

Is the Premier bringing back Steve West, his former quarterback of privatization, to privatize the health care system in this province?

Mr. Klein: No. But, you know, I can say that one of the reasons Steve West is coming back is to pound some common sense into the Liberals.

The Speaker: Third party opposition question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Electricity Deregulation (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Back when he was the Minister of Energy, Steve West gave a speech to the Calgary Chamber of Commerce about electricity deregulation. He said, and I quote: you can't give people power too cheaply. He said that he was very confident that we can lower the cost to the consumer. Yesterday the Premier admitted that there was nothing his government could do about the fact that power bills have gone through the roof. My question is to the Premier. If deregulation can't deliver cheaper power, then why keep it?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, he does not tell the truth again. I never said – never ever, ever said – and he should stand up and apologize because I never said that there is nothing this government can do to stop prices from going through the roof. I never, ever said that, and he knows it. Stand up and apologize and state what I said for the record. I said that there is nothing that this government can do to stop normal price increases.

As I said in this House, things go up. The price of wheat goes up. The price of barley goes up. The price of oil goes up. The price of gas goes up, the price of houses, the price of cars, everything. This member attended university for many, many years. All he needs to do is go back, look at a simple chart and see that the price of virtually everything has gone up. Will he do that? If not, I'll provide him with the information on any commodity.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that electricity prices in Alberta have doubled since deregulation and are now considerably higher than in other provinces in this country, will the Premier stand up and apologize for misleading this House?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is not true, and I won't apologize. That is not true. Stand up and tell the truth. They are not higher than in any other province. I had a document that was given to me yesterday showing that power prices are very comparable to those paid in other provinces.

Mr. Speaker, you know, I would like to produce my own power bill. I think it was something like \$29. I mean, that is not an outrageous power bill.

I don't know what your power bill is. What is your power bill for your house? You know, I would challenge the hon. member to table his power bill in the House. I would challenge him to table his power bill from, say, 10 years ago, and I would like him to track the general rate of inflation. Will you do that? Will the hon. member stand up and commit to doing that? Mr. Speaker, there's a challenge. You will see that his bill, except for some spikes during the difficult times in deregulation, has gone up, but generally it has tracked the rate of inflation.

At least now he has the security of supply. Would the hon. member like to stand up and say to this House, "I would rather risk brownouts or blackouts than pay a little bit more on my electricity bill"? Is that what he's saying?

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that I've already tabled power bills that are much higher than they used to be from dozens and dozens of Albertans, will the Premier admit that he has not been able to produce one power bill that shows that power prices have come down since deregulation was brought in?

Mr. Klein: I would like to table for the perusal of the members four copies of this document. It shows residential bill comparisons, consumption based on 600 kilowatts. It's based on ATCO energy rates, based on December 29 to January 27 flow-through rates. It talks about the rates in Edmonton, Whitecourt, Calgary, and Grande Prairie, Mr. Speaker, and nothing on this chart indicates to me that anything – anything at all – is unreasonable.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Identity Theft

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Identity theft has become one of the fastest growing crimes in North America with at least 50 million Americans victimized. The problem is as serious in Canada, happening without our realizing it through the use of credit cards, by submitting personal information over e-mail, at ATM machines, and by hacking into databases. My question is to the Minister of Government Services. Does your department have information on the magnitude of this crime in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, identity theft or anyone attempting to assume somebody else's identity is a crime not only in Alberta but in North America. These crimes are committed by unscrupulous people who have absolutely no conscience. They have devious minds, and they will do anything to lie and cheat and misrepresent themselves to secure your credit card, your debit card, your driver's licence, your passport, your social insurance number. They will use those documents to assume your identity so that they can break into your bank account and do anything to secure your property. This is a North American problem, but in Alberta in the last three years the number has risen

from 640 instances to over 1,000 instances, and the total loss has risen from just under half a million dollars to \$1.2 million in this province alone.

I've created in my department a new investigation team, and that's done in co-operation with the police and court investigation units to look at the instances here in Alberta. Presently we have 100 files on identity theft that we're going over at this particular time.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you. Is your department developing a plan – and I guess you've partially answered – or a program to inform Albertans about the risks of identity theft and about what actions can be taken to minimize those risks?

Mr. Coutts: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. In addition to the investigative team that we have in place to look at what's presently happening, we are embarking on an education program for Albertans. We have an identity theft tipsheet that is available, and it can be found on our web site in Government Services.

We also have helped other consumer protection divisions in various governments across Canada set up a national identity theft kit. This theft kit will help anyone who's been a victim of identity theft clear their name with one standard form that they can go down and have a checklist on how to correct their credit rating across Canada. We also use this form to notify banks and retailers and credit card users about how their identity has been misrepresented.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, we have just recently come up with a brand new driver's licence, which is more secure and tamper proof, and that is a big deterrent to identity theft in Alberta. But, most importantly, consumers should keep their documents safe. They should shred all documents that have any account numbers on them, and they should make sure that their credit cards and debit cards are kept safe as well as their passports and social insurance numbers. That's the biggest deterrent to identity theft.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Edmonton Remand Centre

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Built for less than 300, the Edmonton Remand Centre now houses over 700 people. Medieval living conditions are resulting in judges ordering 3 for 1 credit for time served at the remand centre when sentencing convicted criminals. This government's policies increasingly result in criminals spending less time in jail. My questions are to the Solicitor General. Why is this government allowing conditions to deteriorate so badly at the Edmonton Remand Centre that criminals gain by not having to serve their full time behind bars?

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd first like to mention that the hon. member has mentioned a case in regard to somebody that was given some time off due to serving time in our remand centre. That was an exception in that particular case. Unfortunately, I can't go into the details on that.

Mr. Speaker, in regard to our remand centre I have to tell you that we don't have any control over the people who comes into our remand centres. We can't hang a no vacancy sign on a remand centre when people are sentenced to the remand centre. We treat all

our prisoners with dignity and grace, and we provide them what they need while they're serving time in our jails.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. The minister is responsible, however.

Given that the Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre has one and often two units sitting empty, why is the minister not housing low-risk detainees there to reduce overcrowding at the remand and not just the weekend people.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, people who are usually sentenced to remand aren't people that can go into a low-risk area.

Ms Blakeman: You've got empty units there.

Again to the same minister: given that smoking is not allowed in most workplaces or in public institutions, why is the Solicitor General continuing to allow inmates to smoke throughout the remand centre, affecting the health of other inmates and especially the staff?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has a good point. Smoking is allowed in our remand centres in certain areas, and we are well aware of some of the things that are happening within our remand centres in regard to smoking. We have been monitoring what was happening in Nova Scotia when they made their facilities a nonsmoking environment, and I would ask the member to stay tuned because it's going to be happening in our area also.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Agricultural Small Business Assistance

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. BSE has not only had a devastating impact on Alberta producers, but it's also put many agricultural manufacturing businesses at risk. At the same time, Alberta Treasury Branch is calling in loans on some of these businesses. These same businesses are being courted by American jurisdictions to relocate to various locations in the U.S.A., complete with the offer of venture capital to get them established. If we lose these businesses, they won't be back, and that's unacceptable. To the Minister of Finance: given that Alberta Treasury Branch was originally born to address these very kinds of issues back in 1938, can the minister tell me if there are any advantages for small business to still deal with the ATB over other financial institutions?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills is correct. The ATB has a long history of providing sound financial services to its clients. In fact, this year the Canadian Federation of Independent Business ranked ATB Financial number one across the country for service to small business in 2003.

All that being said, I can say that ATB has been servicing the financial needs, of course, for 65 years within the province, and today almost two out of four farm families do their banking with ATB Financial. Let's be very clear; ATB understands agriculture and small businesses within Alberta and continues to grow strong local business while helping customers with their success. One thing

that is very, very obvious in this province is that ATB is located in the vast majority of small communities within the province and has been there with those communities from day one and services them very, very well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the minister tell me what other financing options are available for these small businesses that are at risk to get them past this BSE crisis?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, we've had this tremendous tragedy and disaster hit this province. I understand that the financial institutions within the province have tried very, very hard to deal with the disaster that has hit our agriculture community once again.

Insofar as ATB Financial is concerned, they have been very proactive in working with their customers throughout the province and, in fact, have been trying to mitigate some of the impact on their customers on a one-to-one basis by seeing what best suits them. I can say that ATB has clearly recognized, even in their most recent annual report, their focus on the BSE issue as it pertains to Alberta customers this year, and they are trying to work on situations where they could help them through the crisis and stay with these communities. In fact, I can tell you from the annual report I just went through that it's very obvious that ATB is there for Alberta rural communities without question.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, and I'd like to thank the Minister of Finance for that answer.

My next question is to the Minister of Economic Development and tourism. What's your department doing to prevent what could soon become an exodus of Alberta businesses?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I also want to thank the hon. member for taking time to share his constituency with me the other day and some of the problems that are being faced. There are a number of programs that are ongoing right now that are of great importance to, certainly, rural Alberta and all of Alberta, especially faced with the BSE crisis. One of them, of course, is our value-added strategy that looks at turning commodities into more profitable high-end products within the very constituencies they're taken from. The other is our rural development strategy, which the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and the hon. Member for Wainwright co-chaired, and I'm working on that with the hon. minister of agriculture.

I would like to say to the hon. member that it's because of efforts like his that those problems have been brought to light to the Ministry of Economic Development and other ministries, and we do recognize the importance of them. It's been very tough in rural Alberta to deal with these, but hopefully these strategies we're working on will help combat this in the future.

2:10

To his original question about the exodus of businesses, we take that very, very seriously, and we do not want to see one business leave the province of Alberta. In fact, we believe that the more businesses come, the greater the tax base pie, the better for all of Alberta. The evidence is that in most industries the growth rate is very significant. With this particular industry we're monitoring it

very closely, and we'll be bringing forward programs, as I said, through the rural development strategy and the value-added strategy to help combat the commodity price, which is really at the heart of this crisis.

Again, I want to thank the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills and all rural members who have brought that to our attention. Thank you.

Water Management

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, communities around the province are watching the Red Deer River diversion hearing with grave concern. This hearing sets a precedent for how fresh water will be used in this province, and so far it looks like this government supports promoting development at the expense of sustainability. My first question to the Minister of Environment. Mr. Minister, you waffled all week on this answer. Will you just say no to using fresh water for oil field injections?

Dr. Taylor: I don't even like waffles, Mr. Speaker. We haven't waffled. I've said very clearly what process is happening. We've got a semijudicial process that's happening. It's in the public. It's the Environmental Appeal Board, which has its own legislation. It's a public body conducting a public hearing. They will make a recommendation to me within about 30 days of the conclusion of the hearing as to what their recommendation is in regard to the Capstone Energy application for a water licence.

Once again I repeat: as far as I know, we're the only province that has a public hearing process like this, where if a member of the public does not agree with a decision that one of my environmental directors makes, they can appeal that through the Environmental Appeal Board in a public process. Mr. Speaker, not even the NDP provinces in this country offer that.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: why would this government allow companies to even apply to use freshwater injection when the government-appointed committee is in the process of making recommendations on water use in this province?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have legislation which allows a certain procedure to follow for a water licence. Capstone Energy has followed a procedure. An irrigation district or an irrigation farmer or a golf course will follow a process to apply for a water licence, and that's exactly what has happened in this case. We have under legislation a process to apply, and that's open to the member if she'd like to apply for a water licence as well.

Ms Carlson: This minister has the authority to freeze that process. Will he confirm that the real reason they are allowing these applications to go forward is because development is more important to this province, this government than sustainability?

Dr. Taylor: Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, people of Alberta appreciate the strong and healthy economy we've got, but they also appreciate the strong and healthy environment we have, and we will continue to protect the environment as a government, and we do have a wonderful environment in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

[The sound system emitted a prolonged, high-pitched squeal]

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for clearing my sinuses.

The Speaker: Hon. member, there are switching problems in this building. It's caused the lights to flicker now and then and perhaps the sound system, and it's simply due to the age of the infrastructure. So please be patient and proceed.

Correctional Services

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's hard to compete with that squeak.

There have been many questions and speculations about correctional services in Alberta, including suggestions that the remand centre may be overcrowded, coming from those who are very sympathetic towards prisoners, but also that correctional officers may be in danger and that offenders serving their sentences in the community are not adequately monitored. The minister received a report a year ago dealing with such issues. My question today is to the Solicitor General. When is the correctional review report being released?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I would like to thank the hon. member for bringing up that question. I'd also like to thank the members who have served on that committee.

Mr. Speaker, the member is correct. I have had that report in my office for the last year, and I will not apologize for that. What I will say is that that report contained many, many, many very, very good recommendations, some of them very controversial. Some of them we have monitored over the last year to make sure that we are making the right decision. I'd be pleased to tell the hon. member that with this report there were budget implications, and that report will be released after the budget, because we'll have some good news then.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental: what is the minister's response to allegations that the Edmonton Remand Centre is overcrowded, not in relationship to the comfort of prisoners but the safety of employees there?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, any time you have people held within a remand centre or a correctional facility, you always have to worry about the correctional officers who serve this province. All of the correctional officers in this province do a good job. They're well trained. It would be insane for me not to have to worry about them in regard to their health and their safety, but they're well trained. They deal with the conditions that they have to deal with. Like I indicated to the member across the way, I can't put a "no vacancy" sign on my remand centre. We deal with the prisoners the way they should be dealt with, with dignity, and I always worry about the safety of our corrections officers. But, again, they're very well trained.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last supplemental: considering that more and more offenders are now serving conditional sentences in the community, what is the department doing to ascertain that members of our community are safe and those prisoners are adequately supervised?

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, another good question, one that is dear

to my heart and dear to the Justice minister. For the last three and a half years the Justice minister and I have been going to federal/provincial/territorial meetings and advocating how we feel about conditional sentencing in this province. I think Albertans would be appalled if they knew the number of conditional sentences that we're dealing with in this province.

I want to especially express my thanks to the probation officers in this province that deal with conditional sentencing. We closely monitor our offenders that are in the community serving conditional sentences. Mr. Speaker, one of the things I'm looking at and that I hope to announce after the budget, again, is some surveillance monitoring. I know that's something that the hon. member would like us to proceed with, and we will.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the leader of the third party.

School Closures

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Twenty-five years ago planners for the Calgary board of education recommended closing 31 schools. The plan, of course, wasn't acted upon, but former MLA Tom Sindlinger attributed the chaos of closures to the lack of a long-term plan to address the disposition of schools with declining enrolments. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. What direction is given to the Department of Infrastructure with respect to closing out programs or closing schools?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There is a very definitive process that has to occur any time a school or a school program is closed. If a junior high is closed, there has to be a consultation and subsequent decision made, all within the school year. If a high school is closed, the same thing. In elementary if three consecutive grades are closed, there has to be the process that takes place. There's a very strict consultation process that has to occur with the community. It has to be done within the school year and within certain time frames.

Mr. Speaker, there have been some criticisms of this process, and realistically I think it's valid criticism. I think that what it does is it does not necessarily allow some of the school boards to plan long term. One of the things that we're looking at very seriously is to enable the school boards to be able to put out long-term plans about what they are going to do with specific schools and specific locations as it applies to new schools and the closing down of older schools.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: why are we still saddled with a policy that links new school construction with school closures and results in neighbourhoods being pitted against neighbourhoods?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, there is nothing in the school closure policy that relates to new schools. What is in the new school policy, so to speak, is an occupancy clause, which states that there has to be so much occupancy, and I would invite the Minister of Infrastructure to comment on that. But there is no direct link.

Keeping that in mind, though, Mr. Speaker, I still feel and I'm a strong proponent that the whole idea of school closures and, subsequently, new schools should be done on a longer term plan so

that it does not pit community against community, school against school for closure and/or new schools. I think that that will be a step in the right direction, and we are moving in that direction.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

2:20

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I think it's important to recognize that we do have to have some way of dealing with the excess space today within the province of Alberta. If you added up all of the excess space, there are probably somewhere around a hundred schools, if you could put it all in one location, that are excess to the system. So to talk about building new schools when you've got all the excess space makes it very, very difficult, and quite frankly to operate all of that space would not be a wise use of taxpayers' dollars.

With the process that the hon. Minister of Learning described, with being allowed to do planning over the longer term, that is exactly what we are very anxious to get into so that we don't pit communities. After all, this is more about students than it is communities.

The Speaker: The hon. leader?

The hon. leader of the third party.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Premier seems to be taking a page out of the Pentagon playbook and engaging in his own shock-and-awe campaign against public health care. By threatening to pull out of the Canada Health Act and openly advocating health care user fees, the Premier is launching a shock-and-awe campaign against the wallets of Albertans. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why is it that the government's concept of sustainability boils down to nothing more than imposing deductibles and user fees, thereby shifting the burden of funding health care onto the patients and their families?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I don't think that this hon. member has heard a single thing that I've said since we commenced this session and we've been answering questions in question period. The core issue is this, and I've said it a number of times in this Assembly. The core issue of sustainability is that our health care system is growing at roughly twice the rate of the rate of growth of government revenues. That's not just in Alberta; that is across Canada. It's not just the province of Alberta that is talking about the issue of sustainability and its solutions. It is also the NDP Premiers of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. So if he would caucus with those Premiers, perhaps that would help him out in understanding what this problem is all about.

Mr. Speaker, we as a government are striving to protect the basic principles of the Canada Health Act. What we do is seek to ensure that Albertans will have the service when they need it, not only now but also in the future. In order to do so, we're prepared to look at all the options. We are not ideologues, as the hon. member appears to be. We are open minded to different options throughout the country, throughout the world, in an effort to ensure that when Albertans are sick, they'll get the service that they need when they need it, in a timely way, in the most effective and efficient way possible. We'll stop at no length to make sure that we find every possible solution to make our health care system work. Full stop.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can this very open-minded minister please explain how shifting costs of health care onto patients, their families, and employers does anything to make the health care system less costly or more sustainable?

Mr. Mar: We again want to focus on the core issue, and we'll look at all of the solutions. We're not proposing anything yet as a government – we're not proposing anything yet as a government, Mr. Speaker – but we are saying that we'll look at: how does the Swedish health care system work, how does the French system work, and how does the system work in New Zealand? What we'll find is that there are mixed delivery systems involving the private and public sectors. Some of them are successful; some of them are not. We need to evaluate each one. As I've said before, if we're prepared to recruit physicians from other parts of the world, we should be prepared to recruit the solutions that help achieve sustainability in our health care system.

Mr. Speaker, it's absolutely critical that we deal with this, because again the hon. member would be well advised to listen to the words of NDP Premiers and NDP governments. My colleagues Minister Nilson in Saskatchewan and Minister Chomiak in Manitoba recognize the core problem in health care, and they are also prepared to say that the system as we understand it today will not survive the decade, and if we don't do something, the principles of the Canada Health Act by the end of the decade will certainly be in jeopardy because we didn't do something. His solution is to just keep it the same. By default we'll end up with a two-tiered system under his proposal.

Dr. Pannu: My final supplementary to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: if his government is so concerned about curbing rising health care costs, will he reverse the proposed changes to Alberta Blue Cross, changes which he himself admits will drive up medical and dental benefit costs for hundreds of thousands of Albertans, and if not, why not? Keep an open mind on this.

The Speaker: Hon. minister, if that's part of the debate that we have on the Blue Cross bill before the Assembly, it has to be noted that it is only the Assembly that can deal with a bill. Now, I'm not sure, so I'll be guided by the minister's response in this question.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, it would be within the ambit of the bill, but I can assure you that the purpose of that bill being put forward is to ensure that there's a level playing field for private-sector insurance.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, Albertans and Canadians understand the importance of our health care system. Lately there's been a lot of talk about delisting services and opting out of the Canada Health Act. This has many Albertans concerned. My question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: is Alberta opting out of the Canada Health Act?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the Premier has made his point very clear on this. What we need is more flexibility from the federal government on how the Canada Health Act is interpreted. Opting out is a very last resort. But this Premier, the Premier of Alberta, and all of the Premiers across Canada have agreed that the Canadian health care system is in urgent need of reform. In some provinces health care costs are approaching and, in fact, exceeding 50 per cent of their overall budgets, leaving less and less money for other important public priorities. Imagine what it would be like to spend more on one portfolio, in health care, than on everything else that this

government does put together. That is not the direction that we want to go.

With respect to the principles of the Canada Health Act, Mr. Speaker, this government supports those principles under the Canada Health Act in spirit and, in fact, in law. This is the only province in Canada, that I'm aware of, that has enshrined the principles of the Canada Health Act in its own provincial legislation, the Health Care Protection Act.

Mr. Ouellette: My next question to the same minister: can the minister tell us if the government will be delisting services as a way to reform our health care system?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just want to reiterate that we are absolutely committed as a government to the spirit and intent of medicare, that no one will face personal hardship because of a health crisis that they might have. Basic health care is basic to public health care.

Mr. Speaker, over the last 40 years the province of Alberta has continually added to services that go well beyond that which is required under the Canada Health Act. As an example, Alberta is recognized as a leader in a number of these different areas, but keep in mind that roughly \$2.3 billion that we spend out of our \$7.3 billion budget is for non Canada Health Act services.

So, Mr. Speaker, we are working hard at improving the sustainability of our health care system to protect the principles of the Canada Health Act, but again our future public health care system must continue to provide services but do so in a way that is sustainable to the pocketbooks of Alberta taxpayers.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

Mr. Ouellette: Okay.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds I'll call upon the first of several members to participate, but in the interim might we revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:30 **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly representatives of various Alberta paramedic services, the Alberta Fire Fighters Association, and the Alberta Federation of Police Associations. These representatives are here because Alberta's front-line police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and other emergency personnel are routinely at risk of exposure to the blood and bodily fluids of people they come into contact with as first responders to emergency incidents. They are here today to observe the introduction and first reading of Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act, by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Among these dedicated professionals I'd like to acknowledge three persons who have experienced the trauma of blood exposure during the course of their duties. They are Constable Ray McKenzie of the Calgary Police Service and constables Mark Bloxham and Andrew Hoglund of the Edmonton Police Service. I'd ask them and all the other emergency service representatives to please rise and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Members' Statements

Silver Skate Festival

Mr. Vandermeer: Mr. Speaker, this weekend the Dutch Canadian Club once again combined its efforts with the Children's Ability Fund to host the 12th annual Silver Skate Festival at Hawrelak park in Edmonton. This popular event began as an idea of its originator, Mr. Rikke Dootjes, honorary consul for the Netherlands in Edmonton, who wanted to organize a recreational skating party on Alberta's Family Day weekend. It has grown into a wonderful weekend of recreational skating, friendly speed skating competitions, snowshoeing, little-sledge hockey, snow sculptures, a display of theatre on ice, and a showcase for young figure skaters in our province.

At the same time, the Silver Skate Festival raises money for the Children's Ability Fund, a nonprofit organization that provides power chairs, power walkers, lifts, ramps, voice synthesizers, hearing devices, and adaptive computer equipment for disabled individuals. This festival also showcases the importance of ice-skating to people of Dutch ancestry as portrayed in the famous storybook *Hans Brinker or the Silver Skates*.

On behalf of myself and the Minister of Community Development, who attended and launched this year's Silver Skate Festival, I extend congratulations and thanks to our Dutch community; to Carol Russ and the Children's Ability Fund; to all the event sponsors; to founding sponsor Sid Braaksma, owner of Northgate Industries; to the National Ice Theatre of Canada; and to all the participants and volunteers for a job very well done.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Peter Elzinga

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the tremendous contribution to Alberta made by Peter Elzinga, who today announced his impending retirement from his current post as chief of staff in the office of the Premier.

All members of our caucus have benefited from Peter's wisdom, good advice, and sound counsel. He has provided valuable insights for how we as MLAs can serve our constituents and this Legislature. By word and by deed he has been an example for us on how to conduct oneself in public life. The benefits of his contributions have been felt by all of our caucus, whether we have served for three years or for 30, Mr. Speaker.

I know that the hon. Premier would be the first to agree that Peter has also made tremendous contributions to the work of the Premier's office and to helping the Premier manage his demanding schedule and responsibilities. Above all, for the Premier, for all the members of our caucus, and for all who had the opportunity to work with Peter, he has been a true, true friend. He has been there to help many of us through personal matters, times of doubt, and on occasions when a warm thought, a firm handshake, and a kind word were needed.

For all those reasons Peter will be missed by everyone who came in contact with him during his six productive years with the Premier's office. Of course, those six years as chief of staff were just one chapter in Peter's distinguished career. In three decades of public service, whether serving in Edmonton or in Ottawa, Peter has built a lifetime of contributions to his community and his province. I am certain, Mr. Speaker, that there are many more chapters to be written as Peter moves on to new horizons.

First, though, as many know, Peter plans to undergo a medical procedure to donate a kidney to a dear friend in need. That is a true

friend. While that is a remarkable and telling example of the type of compassionate and giving person that Peter is, it is only one example. People who know Peter also know that it has been a lifetime of compassion and giving.

On behalf of my caucus colleagues and certainly on behalf of our Premier I extend many thanks to Peter Elzinga and best wishes to Pat, to him, and his family for good health and continued happiness. Thank you, my friend, and God bless.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Edmonton Public School Board

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today to recognize the many accolades that Edmonton public schools is receiving from across Canada and the United States for its innovative education model. The *Globe and Mail* called Edmonton schools "a textbook case of success."

Edmonton public responded to a desire by communities to have local control over school resources in order to meet local needs by introducing school-based budgeting, which allows principals and parents to decide how resources would best be used in their own schools. As a result, its principals control 92 per cent of their budgets, which is far more than the average North American principal.

The success of Edmonton public school based budgeting is also recognized in a book called *Making Schools Work*, in which the author, UCLA management professor William G. Ouchi, argues that successful school districts give principals the freedom to control their own budgets.

In addition to school-based budgeting, Edmonton public has proven itself as responsive to a changing educational climate in other ways. Competition from private schools in the late 1970s encouraged the school division to decide that it wanted to offer school programs that were just as good as private institutions. This plan entailed allowing students to attend any school in a district and offering dynamic arts and athletic programs. The division also invited independent schools to join the school board.

Edmonton public schools is recognized across the continent as a leader in education, and school systems in Seattle, New York City, and British Columbia are now adopting the Edmonton model.

C.D. Howe Institute president and CEO Jack M. Mintz wrote in the *Globe and Mail* on February 6, "Canadians and their governments should be debating how best to spread Edmonton's success to other schools."

We have a wonderful example of innovation and success in education right here in Alberta. Educators across North America have recognized Edmonton public's efforts and are trying their best to emulate its success with high student achievement scores for kids from all socioeconomic backgrounds. I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate Edmonton public schools on its commitment to excellence.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Public Health Care System

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While pretending to float suggestions about much-needed health care reform, the Premier has been laying the groundwork for a serious and ideologically based attack on public health care. While the per capita spending on health care has not increased significantly, all we hear from the Premier are

doomsday scenarios. This doomsday rhetoric would be a little more believable if it weren't based on distorted statistics and if the government hadn't just presented a bill that will increase health care costs by forcing the Blue Cross to make payments in lieu of corporate taxes. This legislation, which contradicts any efforts at cost-cutting, can only be understood as a gift to their friends in the private insurance industry, a gift that will be paid for by the hundreds of thousands of Albertans who depend on Blue Cross for supplementary health care coverage at affordable cost.

2:40

There is no doubt the reform to the public health care system is necessary. Our Premier, however, has fallen out of step with the rest of the Premiers of this country, who are calling for the implementation of the Romanow report. Instead of taking seriously recommendations of the Romanow commission, the Premier has chosen to pursue wine sales and expensive hotel rooms. These suggestions would be laughable if they weren't so clearly part of a well-planned and ongoing attack on medicare. Rather than listen to the advice of groups such as the Friends of Medicare and the Romanow commission, the Premier has surrounded himself with health care hatchet-men and yes-men who will support his flights of fancy about health innovation. Clearly, Mr. Speaker, this government represents a clear and present threat to the future of public health care in Canada.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Statements by the Speaker

Ladies & Gents of the Legislature 2004 Swimsuit Calendar

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we move on to the next item in the Routine, let me just advise that the Legislative Assembly Office has been nominated for a 2003 United Way Spirit award for its Ladies & Gents of the Legislature 2004 Swimsuit Calendar. The awards of distinction will take place tonight.

Several members of this Assembly were models in this particular project, and as all the members will know, the calendar featured volunteers dressed in period bathing costumes dating from around the time the Legislature Building was opened. The Legislative Assembly by way of its United Way campaign this year raised \$15,166.

Special thanks to Carole Knowles and Michelle Grove, who did all the work with respect to this project.

Calendar of Special Events

The Speaker: As this is the last day in February that we'll be sitting, I think it's also important that we recognize certain events as we leave February. As an example, the year 2004 is the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and Its Abolition, and it's also the International Year for Rice.

Now, February was Black History Month, as already commented on by a particular member. It's also Heart Month, Potato Month, and Junior Achievement Month.

February 1 to 7 was International Development Week. February 1 to 7 was White Cane Week; that has been commemorated. February 1 to 7 was Eating Disorder Awareness Week and also Burn Awareness Week. February 6 to 8 was Ski for Heart. February 9 to 16 was Take it to Heart Week. February 13 to 21 was Cops for Cancer Stationary Bike Ride and also the Heart Fund Campaign during that week. February 15 was National Flag of Canada Day. February 15 to 22 was Scout-Guide Week.

February 16 was Family Day in the province of Alberta and

Heritage Day in other parts of Canada. February 16 to 22 was Heritage Week. February 16 to 22 was also Brotherhood/Sisterhood Week, and it also was Random Acts of Kindness Week. February 21 was International Mother Language Day. February 21 was Cops for Cancer Auction and Dance celebrations. February 22 was Thinking Day for Scouts Canada. February 22 to 28 was Freedom to Read Week, and it was also Antibiotic Awareness Week. All members will want to know that February 28 is the SPCA's International Spay Day, and February 28 to March 7 will be National Engineering Week. And the hon. Minister for Human Resources and Employment is having a birthday this month.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one petition to present to the Legislative Assembly, and this petition urges the Legislative Assembly to have natural gas rebates.

Thank you.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

I'm also giving notice, actually, at the same time that on Monday I'll move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper also stand and retain their places.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Bill 14

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 14, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

[Motion carried; Bill 14 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed on behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Bill 203

Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Calgary-West I am requesting leave to introduce a bill this afternoon, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this bill amends the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act to provide that a written agreement between spouses or common-law partners not to divide their unadjusted pensionable earnings under the Canada Pension Plan Act will be enforceable.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

**Bill 204
Blood Samples Act**

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act.

The goal of Bill 204, Mr. Speaker, is to protect police officers, firefighters, correctional officers, front-line emergency workers, good Samaritans, and health care workers who in the course of their work exchange bodily fluids with someone who may have a communicable disease.

Mr. Speaker, this bill would create a process to allow a qualified medical practitioner to take a mandatory blood sample from someone who refuses to comply voluntarily. The blood sample may only be used for the purpose of the act and cannot be used in a criminal proceeding. The bill will also include provisions protecting the privacy of the test subject.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 204 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I would like to table five copies of an Alberta Finance document which shows that health care spending has actually dropped as a percentage of Alberta GDP since the early '90s.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to table Motion for Return 14, the financial audit of the Alberta Career Computer Center Inc. Last spring Alberta Human Resources and Employment was requested to submit a copy of the financial audit of the Alberta Career Computer Center Inc., and today I'm pleased to table eight copies of those portions of the report which was prepared in early 2003 by Doug Courts, chartered accountant, Jervis Afanasiff & Redinger, for HRE as deemed subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. First is the appropriate number of copies of a letter I referred to in question period from Kathy Briant, whose 80-year-old mother waited eight hours in the emergency room in the Foothills without seeing a doctor and had to leave.

The second is the appropriate number of copies of an e-mail from Moneca Blackwell, who was also at the emergency room at the Foothills and who was with a friend acutely ill who ended up lying on the floor because there were no gurneys or beds available.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling this afternoon. It's a letter that I received from the hon. Minister of Energy on July 21, 2003, and it's in regard to the Alberta royalty tax credit.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today, both on the Learning Commission. The first is from Dan Friedt, who comments that he's concerned about recommendation 78 of the Alberta Learning Commission to establish a new council of education executives. He believes that removing administrators from active membership will cause great problems and does not approve of supporting it.

2:50

The second letter is from a constituent, Delia McCrae, who also is reacting to recommendation 78 from the Learning Commission, believing it disadvantages everyone; also concerned about recommendation 75, that eliminating the board of reference puts "teachers in a . . . vulnerable position"; and recommendation 81, noting that "working conditions are of paramount importance" and teachers should be involved in discussions on that.

Thank you very much.

**Speaker's Ruling
Tablings**

The Speaker: Hon. members, let me just make a comment with respect to the tabling of e-mails again. How does an hon. member know that what might be in an e-mail or even a letter to them is true? How does one know that? When an hon. member stands up in this House and quotes either something from a letter that they have received or has provided an editorial comment with respect to it, how does that hon. member know that what he or she is saying is the truth? There's a code in this House that is extremely important. When an hon. member says something in this House, this hon. member must know for sure. I provide that as a caution.

I made comments last year about the tablings and the reports and how this is dealt with in all other jurisdictions, virtually, in the Commonwealth, that the only documents that are tabled are official reports required by statutes essentially to do it. We've allowed a great latitude in this Assembly. I want to provide again caution, because there will be a point in time when an hon. member will be challenged under a point of privilege by another hon. member, and that will have very serious repercussions.

Mr. Mason: May I ask a question as a point of clarification?

The Speaker: Absolutely. Under Standing Orders that's permitted.

Mr. Mason: Yes. I wonder about tabling documents which are referred to in the asking of questions. Is that something that's appropriate?

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, we've talked about that before, and then the three House leaders have had discussions with respect to this matter in the past. At one point in time there was a section in the Routine that provided for tablings of returns and reports prior to the question period. Then, as a result of the consultation among the three House leaders, the determination was that the Routine should be changed and that Tabling Returns and Reports should come after that. So there's always a subjective point during, particularly, the question period when an hon. member refers to a document. At times in the past I've said: "Look; well, hon. member, okay. If it's really important at that point in time, table it. Go ahead and do it." But the preferred approach is to wait until this section in the Routine called Tabling Returns and Reports comes about.

There's a dilemma, though, with that. If an hon. member refers to

a document that hasn't been tabled, there could be almost an hour from the time, one hour ago in the question period, when a document has been referred to, and it may be of particular impact or importance to another member or minister, and it won't be one hour until that particular document is circulated to all members. So, in essence, you've got a kind of a vacuum of knowledge. If a particular hon. member would then say, "Well, okay; this is such an important issue that I want to deal with it," but we prohibit that document from being provided to that hon. member, I think there is perhaps a disservice to the performance of the House.

The preferred mechanism, of course, would be that if an hon. member were to know that he or she is going to refer to a document in the question period, as a courtesy provide a copy of that to the person that they may be directing the question to prior to the question period. Today we had a different situation. We had one where an hon. member referring to a question would not have known what the question would be but had in his possession a certain document and during the response said that he would table the document.

I've given you all the whole expanse of the options. The preferred one: if an hon. member is to raise a question, out of courtesy provide a copy of that particular document to the person that he chooses to raise a question. If a person responding to a question has a document they want to table during the question period, the preferred mechanism is to await Tabling Returns and Reports, although there would be some exceptions to that.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Cardinal, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: the Surface Rights Board and Land Compensation Board annual report, 2003.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Subject to Standing Order 7(5) I would ask the Government House Leader to please share projected government business for the week of March 1 to 4, 2004. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, subject to progress today I would expect that on Monday, March 1, at 9 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders for second reading bills 6 and 13 and in committee bills 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9. Bill 6 is the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 13, Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004; and in committee Bill 2, Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act; Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act; Bill 3, Architects Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 4, Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 7, Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 8, Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 9, Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004; and as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday afternoon, March 2, under Government Bills and Orders for second reading Bill 12, the Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 13, the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 14, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004. In committee bills 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 and in third reading bills 2, 5, and 11 and as per the Order Paper. At 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders the same list in committee: bills 1, 2,

3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9, and third reading of bills 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 and as per the Order Paper.

It's anticipated that a notice should go on the Order Paper this afternoon or Monday that there will be three additional bills at least available to the House: the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004; the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; and the Residential Tenancies Amendment Act, 2004. In the event that they are placed on notice and introduced for first reading on Monday or Tuesday, then we might anticipate second reading of those bills on Wednesday in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders together with committee on bills 12, 13, and 14 and third readings on bills 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11 and as per the Order Paper. In the evening at 8 under Government Bills and Orders the same bills and as per the Order Paper.

Thursday afternoon as per the Order Paper.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 6

Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate February 25: Mr. Hancock]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to bring forward comments on Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004. I just had a couple of questions on this act. There's not a lot in it here, and I wanted to go back and read the remarks from the mover of the bill. He's now spoken in two parts: when he first introduced the bill and then I think again yesterday. I haven't read his comments from yesterday, so I'm sorry if I repeat questions that you have already answered.

The bill is saying that it will assist parents to obtain child support agreements or court orders. My question is: would the parents or one of the parents have to be on an assistance program through the government like AISH or supports for independence in order to be eligible to have the government assist them to seek and obtain child support agreements or court orders? What's happened in the past is that the maintenance enforcement staff were available to go to court to pursue only subrogated amounts – in other words, amounts that had accrued or were accruing while the individual that had the order was in fact receiving government benefits – because the government viewed that as money that they were eligible to recover. If they were providing supports to a single parent and that single parent was eligible to receive maintenance payments, then the government felt that those maintenance payments should in fact be coming directly to the government to pay them back for having doled out money through the assistance program. That's not clear from what I'm reading in the news release and what I heard the member say when he introduced the bill. As I say, I don't know if he followed up again with it yesterday. So that was one of the questions that I had around this bill.

3:00

The first section of it is really around a whole section, changing it from the minister's direction to "the Director, which appears to be just a straight housekeeping change, which is fine, changes a few comments around "eligibility or continuing eligibility for, or the amount or value of." It's just a minor wording change there.

The larger piece is around getting information from people who may know where a creditor parent, the noncustodial parent, could be,

where their location is, one presumes so that papers could then be served to seek the money from them. So this is to protect individuals who may be able to give that information like a landlord or a neighbour or a friend or an employer and, further, that the information about who gave them the information would not then be released to anyone else. That makes a certain amount of sense. They're protecting their source, in other words.

Now, I did hear the sponsoring Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs talk about the Alberta Works program that was mentioned in the throne speech when he first commenced his comments on second reading of this bill, and I'm not sure why he was looking to do that because I don't particularly see any reference to that in this bill. So is he foreshadowing something to come, or is he pulling out something in this bill that I have not seen?

The whole issue of pursuing noncustodial parents for maintenance agreements or support agreements is a difficult one, and we've all commented in this House about how difficult it is for our constituency office staff and, indeed, for all of the elected members to deal with this issue. For me it always comes back to: this is money that's ordered by the court for the children. So all other arguments that go on between the custodial and noncustodial parents really should not come into play here. If we're talking about court-ordered payments for children, then that's the focus that we have to keep on this. The money is for the maintenance of those kids so that they have a reasonable place to live, their electricity bill, however high, is paid, they have clothing, and, further, they can participate fully in their society, their school fees can be paid, they can participate in school activities and extracurricular activities like the rest of the kids that are around them. They shouldn't be in a worse position.

We have court orders set up to facilitate this, so when we have someone who decides not to pay for their children, we should pursue them with great vigour. We should be fair, and that's not to say that we should be taking money that isn't due, but if there's a court order that says X amount of money is to be paid for the maintenance of this child, I look to the government to pursue this with as much vigour as they can.

So this act appears to be facilitating that in that they are seeking funds on behalf of the children. My concern here is: are we just looking for money that would be in fact coming back to the government, or are they willing to pursue this on behalf of court orders where the monies would not necessarily be subrogated or in fact on behalf of parents who are not involved in a benefit program that's flowing from the government at all?

At this point I can't see any other reason for objecting in principle in second reading to this act, but I've learned to be very cautious in giving my support to bills put forward by the government until I get all the answers to my questions and I'm reassured that there's nothing unanticipated here. So I look forward to the sponsoring member being able to answer my questions either here in the House or, certainly, by note if he wishes to do that.

Thank you for the opportunity to raise the issues in second reading.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) kicks in for five minutes should hon. members wish to participate in questions or comments.

There being none, the chair would recognize the next speaker who would like to participate, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would also like to make a few comments on this bill. Any time we do anything with maintenance enforcement, it's of particular concern to my constituency and a number of the people who regularly have to access our constitu-

ency services in order to deal with issues around the maintenance enforcement program.

At first glance it looks like this is an additional improvement to this particular piece of legislation. The problem of noncustodial parents skipping out on their payments and then taking a variety of evasive actions to be able to not pay what they've been demanded to pay by the courts is a real common problem. They leave the country; they leave the province; they change their names; they work for cash; they put all of their assets into a new partner's name. They do all kinds of things. They have all of their assets in their company and pay themselves out a bare minimum wage so that they can have their payments reduced over time. They go in arrears for years and years or months and months and then go back to court and get those arrears reduced in amount. So we've seen every conceivable kind of evasive action taken by noncustodial parents in the past on support payments.

So this looks like it's a step in the right direction in terms of giving anonymity to people who are disclosing information about the whereabouts of a person who can't be found. That's a good start, but it's just a tip of the iceberg on where we need to go on this issue, Mr. Speaker. Everyone in this country needs to value children, and we need to ensure that the support is in place for them to be able to be taken care of to the best ability of both parents, whether they're custodial or not, whether they're married or not. So I strongly encourage this government to take action on an ongoing basis to try to solve this outstanding problem that has been a tremendous problem over the course of my career in this Legislature.

So I will be supporting this bill, but I'm looking forward to seeing much more aggressive action than just this. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The chair is prepared to recognize additional speakers.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a second time]

3:10

Bill 13

Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to move second reading of Bill 13, the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, the last major review of this legislation occurred back in 1980. We are amending the legislation by updating the language and streamlining the legislation to meet the changes that have occurred out in the field – for instance, there'll be some wording changes to be consistent with the Public Lands Act – and also reducing overlap in the legislation by deleting parts of the act that are already covered under other legislation.

We have proposed adjustments that reflect organizational and operational changes that have occurred in the department since the last review. This bill also proposes to transfer the authority to develop regulations governing livestock grazing and other related activities from the Lieutenant Governor in Council to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. This adjustment will allow the department to update the legislation in a more timely manner. As you are aware, noxious weeds and restricted weeds are a problem that can have a significant impact on the environment and other land users. Changes to this legislation will enable the department to address the need for control and destruction of restricted and noxious weeds through regulations.

Mr. Speaker, other changes to this act deal with the amount that can be assessed for offences and adds new provisions for administra-

tive penalties. One change is an increase in the maximum amount that can be assessed for offences under the act. The fee being charged to do with an offence under this act has been set at \$5,000 per day. This is consistent with assessments for offences under other acts such as the Public Lands Act. The change will also allow for better enforcement of the act and provide for a better deterrent.

Within that change we're also proposing that the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development have the authority to assess administrative penalties for minor violations of the act and regulations. A maximum of \$5,000 per day will be set for this purpose under the act. This change is being proposed to ensure compliance and speed up processing of minor violations. These changes will also ensure uniformity when dealing with contraventions and a deterrent, ensuring consistency with other legislation such as the Public Lands Act.

So as you can see, Mr. Speaker, these amendments will update the legislation, making it more relevant to what's happening out in the field in Alberta today, and I hope everyone supports these proposed changes.

With that, I would move adjournment of debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good afternoon. I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 2

Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act

The Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise on this occasion to make some additional comments during the committee stage of debate on Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. I guess that in particular I would begin my comments by responding to some of the comments that were made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie during the debate on February 24 on page 131. She made some very good points, and there were a couple that I thought perhaps needed correction and/or clarification, from my point of view.

I'll begin with the statement she made that references the management plan for the Whaleback area in general. I'm sure she probably meant to say "draft management plan" when she was quoting, but she didn't, so people looking at this are calling me and saying: "There is already a management plan put in place? Is that what you've already done?" I've said to them: "No. We haven't in fact put the management plan in place yet. What we have done is arrived at a draft management plan that has gone out for public input." People had until I think January 31 of this year to in fact put forward their comments. So I'm taking it, hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, that that's what you had intended to say, because it just got left out inadvertently here.

The second point I wanted to make is with respect to the comment she made regarding access points in other possible locations. Mr. Chairman, the Whaleback area is not only unique, as you yourself know very, very well, but it is also quite mountainous in many parts. In other parts, of course, it's got that beautiful, lush vegetation and grassland and wild-land appearance. But in terms of access points into the Bob Creek wild-land, which in this case is the western portion of the Whaleback ridge, there really were no other feasible

alternative access points that could easily be used to get into the Bob Creek wild-land.

The reason that is important to know is because the Bob Creek wild-land is an area where we do allow on already designated trails certain types of activities to occur. For example, off-highway vehicles would be allowed in that classification of a wild-land, but with no available or designated access points to get into the Bob Creek wild-land, we occasionally see people trying to get into the wild-land through all kinds of other self-made roads, if you like.

In this particular case what we have are two existing trails that have been in that area for many, many decades used primarily by the farmers and ranchers. Many of those that live there have grazing permits or grazing leases in either the Bob Creek wild-land or in the Black Creek heritage rangeland. So as a result of having those two existing trails there already, what this bill will do is restrict the public's access into the Bob Creek wild-land to those two pre-existing trails only. That, Mr. Chairman, is a good thing because it will take away a lot of the random driving that is occurring right now in other places surrounding Bob Creek wild-land, and that will help protect the area even more.

I want to emphasize again that we're talking about a trail here that emanates from Bob Creek staging area, which already exists, and another one which goes up through to the Camp Creek staging area, which we are creating. Now, a staging area is simply a place where people can gather and get ready to go out and do whatever their business is, hunting or fishing or a limited amount of backcountry camping, that kind of thing. That's what a staging area more or less is all about.

3:20

Those two trails together comprise 3.5 kilometres, and in fact I think one of them is approximately eight feet wide, and the other one is probably about 10 feet wide. They're more like ruts in the road that have been there for many, many years, so we're not fancying things up here and allowing total random access into the heritage rangeland. In fact, we are restricting it to the general public through those two trails only. So that's very important to note.

Now, to come back to the point that I started with here, which is the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's second point, "They virtually eliminated any other possible access points." Well, we didn't eliminate any access points, hon. member. As you probably know, there is a small access point off White Creek, which is way up on the west and toward the north end. Unfortunately, that is a difficult one to get to if you are a farmer or a rancher living down in the southeast corner. Then there is another small access point possible up in the north-northeast quadrant, but that one is little known and little used and extremely difficult to get to because you'd have to go down the riverbed or something close to that to in fact access it. So it isn't that we eliminated any access points; it's that we didn't create any others. But we did eliminate the possibility of using other ones or designating other ones, and that's an important point to remember.

Now, the other point here that came up during the discussion was the hon. member saying: "They need to find a different solution to this problem. This is not the right way to go about this." In fact, I need to inform the House, Mr. Chairman, that this is the best way to go about it under the circumstances. I've indicated before that we have very, very unique circumstances in this case, and I just want to refresh members' memories on this.

The uniqueness of it is a couple of things. First of all, in order for us to have been able to accomplish the protected area designation back in 1999, we needed to work with the local stakeholders and, in particular, with the ranchers and farmers whose livelihood depends on access into both the Black Creek heritage rangeland and into what

is now called the Bob Creed wild-land. Their livelihood depends on it, and they agreed with the designation of a special place in both these cases provided that the government of Alberta didn't shut off their access to either of the two areas, because, as I mentioned before, they rely on it for access to their grazing and permit leaseholds, whichever might be the case. They also rely on it for hunting and for fishing purposes, which is a food source that is very important to them and to others.

So that is one uniqueness of why we have to go about doing this very carefully and cautiously, and it took quite some time to get to this compromise arrangement, if you like. In fact, it is the only way that we could see going about the business that we needed to go about while also respecting the rights of access, particularly for the farmers and ranchers living in that area.

Of course, there are many recreationalists who like to hunt and fish as well, so we wanted to ensure that we also allowed them some access into the Bob Creek wild-land, where those two activities are allowed, but we didn't want to just open it up randomly. So we designated two special existing trails for that very purpose, and I can assure you that with additional attention and with good signage and with proper monitoring, which we fully intend to do, we're hoping to not only preserve that very pristine, natural area the way it is, but we will also further enhance it.

Just a couple of other quick points here, Mr. Chair. There is a comment here: "Protective legislation is originally brought into place as more than a convenience." The quote goes on: "It's brought in for specific reasons, which the government clearly outlined at the time, and they shouldn't be overruled whenever it's the most convenient way to allow access." I would hope that the hon. member would reconsider that comment. We are providing an exception – that is correct; that is exactly what this bill does – but it will be restricted to the two trails indicated, and it will be restricted to this particular heritage rangeland, the Black Creek heritage rangeland, which, as members of the House know, is the first officially designated heritage rangeland in this new class that came into being formally last year.

So it's not so much a question of overruling it as it is a question of trying to do what's right and to do what common sense would dictate we should do to take into consideration the important points raised by the local area persons, who have proven over decades themselves and through their families over many generations that they, in fact, are among the best stewards you could ever possibly hope to have. Our farmers and our ranchers depend on the land. They know how to care for it and how to look after it.

This has been arrived at after some meetings and phone calls and letters and more meetings and so on, in particular with the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, who is the MLA for the area, myself, the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, the Member for Athabasca-Wabasca, the hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, and many local area ranchers. We had a meeting right in Cowley, in their library as it were, and arrived at what needed to be done.

I think I have a minute or two left. I'll just let someone else take the floor in a minute.

On the comment here about significant policing needing to be put in place, well, it's impossible, as everyone knows, to put police people in place on a 24-hour basis, but I can assure you, Mr. Chairman, that with the signage and the postings that I indicated earlier and with the provisions for penalties that will be adopted through the regulations that will flow out from this particular act once it comes into law, we will do everything we can to ensure that that area is not only protected but that it is better protected than is currently the case under the circumstances before us. Again, we will be relying a lot, also, on the local area people to help us with some

of that monitoring. So I want to give that assurance to the member and to the House.

I'll come back, perhaps, and comment a little further. I believe that probably someone from across the way has a few comments to make. If there are any questions, I'd be happy to address them.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I was listening with great interest to the hon. Minister of Community Development in regard to Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. I have a few questions at this time, and perhaps in committee the hon. minister would be kind enough to respond to my questions.

Certainly, we know that less than 9 per cent of provincial Crown land is set aside for nonmotorized access, and we see that we are opening this up in a fashion with off-highway vehicles. Now, my first question – and I believe I already know the answer to this, but I'm going to get it on the record. Snowmobiles are certainly included in that definition of off-highway vehicles. Correct?

Mr. Zwozdesky: The definitions are in the Traffic Safety Act.

Mr. MacDonald: The definitions are in the Traffic Safety Act? Perhaps when I cede the floor to the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, I'll have a look at that act.

How much random driving is going on there now? How has that been monitored, or how has that been calculated? The minister referenced that in his comments, and I would just like to know if there's going to be an increase in the access from these random rides, if you could call them that.

3:30

My next question, Mr. Chairman, is: how many hectares of land are open for grazing leases in this Black Creek heritage rangeland? Is it all for grazing? What percentage of this land is set aside for grazing leases?

If this bill were to become law, could commercial enterprises or tourist enterprises organize rides in this area? Could they use this? Is there a licensing system in place, or could anyone just set up a commercial operation similar to what we do with horses on trail rides? Could there be quad rides, or could there be possibly in winter snowmobile rides through these areas? If this is true, how would the adjacent landowners feel about that?

Those are my questions at this time, Mr. Chairman, and I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to ask them. Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. minister, I wondered if you wanted to take a few questions from different people and then answer two or three people at one time. I have I think four on my list right now. So the next speaker is the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by Edmonton-Highlands, followed by Airdrie-Rocky View.

Mr. Marz: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and speak on this particular bill. As the minister responsible knows, the development of trails is a very sensitive issue in many areas of the province, especially with adjacent landowners, and my constituency has been, I guess, a bit of a flashpoint for some of these. I've received correspondence from concerned adjacent landowners

throughout the province, and I continue to do that. I continue to bring those issues forward, and perhaps that's why I continue to get them.

But I didn't get any correspondence yet at all on this particular bill, and in listening to the comments of hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, who's the MLA for the area, I assumed that there was not a lot of opposition, if any, to this particular thing and that there was an adequate amount of consultation done. Looking at the background of the news releases that were sent out, it would indicate that there was quite a bit of consultation done with stakeholders and particularly the municipal district of Ranchland. I think it's probably the right approach to try to protect a greater area by restricting this type of use to a confined area and making sure that that use is done in a proper and responsible way.

One of the concerns I have – looking at the map that was put out in the news release, there is an area that goes on nonpublic land through the municipal district of Ranchland, and I know that the minister has repeatedly stated that no trails would be developed in the province without approval of the municipalities that they're located in. It was my understanding that that approval would be in the form of a development permit that would be applied for through the municipality, and then they would approve it through that process, and that would be the final say, yes or no, whether or not that trail developed.

So my question to the minister is: has that process taken place through a development permit process for that area that goes through the municipal district of Ranchland? If it hasn't, perhaps he could explain what the difference would be in this particular trail as opposed to other trails that may develop in the province under Alberta Trailnet or Trans Canada Trail.

So those are basically my concerns and questions, and I'd be happy to hear the answers to those. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to take this opportunity to express my tremendous appreciation of these natural areas that have been preserved. I had the opportunity last summer to visit the Whaleback area. It is absolutely one of the most beautiful and wonderful parts of this province, and we should spare no effort to ensure that it is not despoiled through development or overuse or any other means. So I have a lot of concern about the direction here. I listened very carefully to the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod when he spoke about this when the bill was introduced at second reading.

I guess that my questions to the minister are similar to my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar's. Having allowed these two trails to accommodate vehicles, how will the government keep those vehicles on the trails? We certainly have heard from wildlife officers from the provincial government, and they can't even afford the gas, in some cases, Mr. Chairman, to do their job, so deeply has the government cut this area. So the real question is: in practicality, how do you keep the vehicles on the trail? If we accept for the moment the minister's assertion and the member's assertion that it's okay as long as the vehicles stick to the trails, then how do we keep them there?

The second question is: how do we ensure that there's not a significant increase of people using the trails for recreational purposes to go four-wheeling as opposed to engaging in traditional economic activities that take place on these lands? How will the government monitor that? How will the government make sure that the use doesn't increase beyond what it is now or beyond a reasonable limit on its use?

So, Mr. Chairman, those are the primary questions. The real thing as far as I'm concerned is not what the government says it intends. I'm sure that the government, you know, is sincere in its desire to do this, but if they don't place the resources in place, if they don't plan, if they don't monitor, and if they don't have the will to take action if damage to this area occurs because of increased use, then it's all for naught. I would really like some clear and concrete answers about how the government plans to enforce the intentions that they have set out in bringing this act forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View, and then maybe we'll hear from the minister and get others that may wish to speak.

Ms Haley: I'll be very brief. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to ask a couple of small questions and perhaps just make a comment on this bill.

First off, I want to say right up front that I truly appreciate the fact that the ministers that were involved in this – and I know that there were at least four of you that went down to my colleague's constituency. These same people were calling me asking for assistance on this issue, and the fact that we were able to sit down with them and negotiate to come up with an arrangement that is not just suitable to the province of Alberta as a whole under the heritage rangeland act but also to deal with people who actually have to live there, earn a living there, and make this work – I wanted to thank you and congratulate you on that, Minister, but I also wanted to ask if maybe when you do get up to answer questions you might explain what the impact on other rangelands in our province might be?

3:40

I also wanted to just mention that unlike some of the hon. members in this Chamber I'm one of those people that is a little bit concerned about how much land we are truly designating. I believe we're up to 12 per cent of our province now, and I hope that we're being very careful about what we are designating because people in Alberta also want to use and see and visit some of these areas as well. I just want to caution the minister on this side. On the protection side I totally concur with the concept of preserving, just as long as people can still access.

Thank you, Minister, for all the work you've done on this, and I look forward to your response.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. Just in response to some of the questions asked – and if I don't get to all the answers because I couldn't write fast enough, then we'll provide them later in writing to the members.

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was asking about snowmobiles, and are they allowed or not allowed and so on. I'm talking now for recreational purposes. Snowmobiles are not allowed in a heritage rangeland, but under certain circumstances they might be allowed in a wild-land park area.

The definition that he's looking for is in the Traffic Safety Act, and I just don't have a copy of it right here. As I recall from when I did read through that definition, it's quite lengthy, and it includes, typically, four-wheel drive vehicles, trikes, mountain bikes, some all-terrain vehicles, and I think there was a reference to snow vehicle,

but I'm not sure if in that particular instance it applies to a snowmobile because there are other types of snow vehicles. It could be that that snow vehicle does include a snowmobile in this case, but you would have to look at the Traffic Safety Act. If I had a copy of it here right now, I'd be able to answer that question more accurately.

The other question he asked was with respect to random traffic through the area and will it be increased or not. I believe the Member for Edmonton-Highlands asked the same question. No, I'm hoping that we won't see an increase. Perhaps, on the other hand, we will see an increase, but it will be restricted to those two areas, the two trails that are already in existence. So we'll be controlling the traffic better. If maybe that's the comfort he's looking for, then that's what he might take away from this answer.

As for the number of hectares that are open for grazing in the Bob Creek wild-land and/or in the Black Creek heritage rangeland, I'm sorry; I do not have that specific number of hectares or acres handy here, but we'll provide it to him in writing later.

Then he asked a question to do with tourism operations being set up, and that certainly is not the intention of the act. It's not something that we're looking at allowing to happen. But I have to say that where the Black Creek heritage rangeland boundary meets the Bob Creek wild-land boundary, where those two boundaries come together, there will be two staging areas, which are typically small but nonetheless larger areas than the trail, where groups can gather for purposes of getting organized about their particular activity. But it is not our intention to turn that into a commercial venture.

I do need to comment, however, that if there are existing commercial ventures, which is where you might say these grazing permits come into being, then those are being allowed to continue in the heritage rangeland and also in the Bob Creek wild-land. Other commercial endeavours at this stage are not contemplated. In fact, no one has even asked about the possibility of them occurring. So if there's more on that, I'm sure the member will let me know.

The Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills asked about trails in relation to the Recreation Corridors Legislative Review, which the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul along with the Member for West Yellowhead and the Member for Calgary-Currie have undertaken over the last while. They created a report, sent it in to me, and I sent it back out to the public for review. In that RCLR report it is very clear that insofar as trails that are or wish to be connected or hooked in with the Alberta Trailnet system or with the Trans Canada Trail system, those kinds of trails would need specific support first from whichever municipality they are in, provided that the municipality, of course, has jurisdiction over the land in question. Nonetheless, I have said very clearly that the issue of municipalities having the first right of approval is the first step with regard to the recreation corridors report that I've just referenced.

The trails that we are talking about here today under Bill 2 are a different set of trails or a different type of trail if you like. These are already-existing trails that have been there for a very long time. We're simply saying that the usage of those trails will be allowed to continue, but traffic on them is being curtailed somewhat, limited if you like, so as to not deviate off the trails, and they're only being used to access other trails in the Bob Creek wild-land. So we're really talking about two separate issues.

In specific response to his question about Ranchland county, in fact, I put it into the news release that I issued on February 18, because we are very grateful to the municipal district of Ranchland for all the help, assistance, advice, and suggestions that they gave. I've met with them a couple of times at least, as well as with local stakeholders, to finalize the requirements that we're needing for our long-term management planning process. So the local municipality or county has in fact been involved.

The Member for Edmonton-Highlands was asking about how the government will keep off-highway vehicles off the trails or words to that effect. I think I answered that when I first spoke at the beginning of the afternoon on this bill. We will do everything we can with very visible signage. We'll do everything we can by reinforcing the bill and what the signs stand for, by ensuring that there are adequate penalties in place for lawbreakers. We will definitely be monitoring and patrolling that area, albeit we won't be able to do it 24 hours a day, but we will be stepping up our monitoring. We'll also be working with the local stakeholders, the farmers and ranchers in that area, as I indicated. I think he asked some additional questions, and I'll have to review *Hansard* to see what they were.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View had asked about the impact of this legislation on other heritage rangelands. It's a very good question because the Black Creek heritage rangeland is our first heritage rangeland. I anticipate that there will be at least six others across the province, one of them, in fact, just east of Edmonton here near Beaverhill or close to there, another one east of Chauvin, another one in the Drumheller area, another one closer to the Saskatchewan border on the east side, and I think there's another one just toward the Coutts/Montana border in the deep south.

But this particular bill today is specific to the Black Creek heritage rangeland only. There are two existing trails, and we're saying: let's limit the usage to those two trails only so that people will have the access that they require into the Bob Creek wild-land. So this particular legislation will not impact the other heritage rangelands, Mr. Chairman.

3:50

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. Well, this has been a very interesting discussion. I've tried to read the previous comments in *Hansard*. I've listened to the minister's responses today, and I think what I might do is just speak a little bit more generically around the issues being raised here.

If we take a step back, there was the special places project, which was to identify and designate certain special kinds of environment and landscape in Alberta and protect it so that it continued to exist for future generations. At the time there was a great deal of, in some places, amusement that ranged to flat-out derision, I think, from some sectors because there seemed to be all kinds of exceptions that were built into this. You know, we would protect this area, but in some places I think there was even oil and gas exploration that was allowed to go on in it, so there was some question about how serious people actually were about the protection of this.

Nonetheless, the project went through, we got the designated spaces, and in some cases I think they're quite vigorously protected. I know that my colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie was actually reading out a quote about what was and was not allowed to happen in a certain area, a management plan that said "heritage appreciation and outdoor recreational goals may be met . . . but only to the extent that their attainment does not conflict with or impinge on the preservation goal." So that was a very strong statement.

Okay; we've got these special places. They're not supposed to have things go on in them that is going to affect or ruin the reasons for them being a special place, so in a lot of cases off-highway vehicles are restricted from going in there. Now we have a situation where in order to get access to one particular recreational area, one of these protected areas is going to have to be used as the right-of-way, in effect, to get through there.

I'm a snowmobiler, and my concern when I hear the issues being raised here is: well, if we actually had some good trails that were,

you know, easily accessible, that had good staging areas, that had the kind of time and thought and resources put into them that we see in places like British Columbia, for example, or Montana and Wyoming—Yellowstone park is another one I'm thinking of—where they really put a lot of effort into making the trails well marked and groomed and they're maintained, people want to go there, and they're happy to spend their money.

I've said before that snowmobiling is not a poor person's activity. I mean, for these machines I think the low end now starts at about \$7,500, and you go up from there. So it's not cheap to get into this business. By the time you get the suit and the boots and the helmet and the electric face shield which warms up and doesn't frost over, you've laid down a lot of cash. Then you're going to stay in a hotel; you're going to buy gas; you're going to buy food. You know, there's money to be had here. This is a tourism growth industry; let's put it that way.

So I think people in Alberta, those that are snowmobilers, are of course always looking for a place to ride, and they would prefer, frankly, to ride in a place that had a staging area, that had marked trails, that had groomed trails. It's a much more pleasant experience than trying to crash your way through the bush getting hung up on, you know, dead logs and stuff and ripping your track to shreds. That's not fun, and frankly it's expensive. Tracks are very expensive to repair. So we would rather be in a place that accommodated us and was inviting to our activities.

The problem is this province has not really invested in that. There are a couple of areas just outside of Calgary, and they never really developed far enough to be a full-day's activity. You know, there are—I'm casting back in my memory here—Sibbald Creek and a couple of other ones. They were, like, five k loops or something, and, I mean, sorry, but you can do that in 20 minutes. So it wasn't exactly a full-day's activity. I know that Whitecourt has worked hard to develop their trail system. They've got some warm-up shacks. They do have marked trails. I don't know if there's an attempt to groom them. I haven't been out there in a long time. Although they're now talking about putting up the world's largest snowmobile as a monument somehow, so they must feel that it's a worthwhile endeavour in that area.

So what I'm trying to say here is that snowmobilers want to go to a place where they're welcome. They don't particularly want to be in areas that they're not wanted in. If we were provided with other places to go, then we wouldn't need to be going into ecologically sensitive areas like this.

There are consequences to choices that you make. Had the government decided to make the kind of investment in off-highway vehicle recreation in the past years, we perhaps would not be facing what we're facing now. I realize that even inside of the off-highway vehicle definition, there's greater and lesser impact upon the environment by the various vehicles that are captured there. I know that some are frankly more damaging to the environment than others, and there may need to be restrictions even inside of that subclass to deal with that.

Those places I have been that went through ecologically sensitive areas—and I'm thinking of Yellowstone park—where the trails pass through an area where they did not want the machines getting off of the path were literally policed. I'm thinking of one area just as you were coming into the little town, and there was a police officer that used to sit out there on a machine at the peak times of day. It was made very clear: you were not to go off the trail. There was signage, there were fences, and there was a police officer there. That's what they did to underline, to make sure that everybody understood, that you were not to go off the trail there.

So when my colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie talks about the

need for policing and the minister is saying, "You know, that's not really possible," I think we have to understand what we're talking about here. If you really mean that, you've got to put the resources into saying: okay; yeah, we mean that we do not want people going off of this trail. You're going to have to put the resources into that to make sure that that's what happens.

Most people are law abiding. They will do what they are asked to do, but you need clear signage, and you've got to have a backup system to that signage. If the signage comes down for some reason, legally or illegally, you've got to have a backup there. Because how much damage can be done in a weekend or a week or a month before that signage gets fixed? If you really mean it, put the fence up. Well, now you're running a fence through an ecological area.

You know, you've created a series of difficulties here that I don't know if you've anticipated. I haven't heard that discussion be fleshed out in the Chamber. I, frankly, just find it a little odd that we have these protected places and then we allow activities in them that we know are not what was originally anticipated as an activity in a protected area.

You know, as a snowmobiler if I had a choice of going to a place where I was treading on ecologically sensitive ground, to create a euphemism there, versus one where I was welcomed with open arms, where there were, as I said, the trails, the grooming, the warm-up sheds, all of those things, I would probably choose to go to the place where there was more accommodation for me. I mean, I'm aware of all of this. I'm out in the woods. I know what happens when these trails get that kind of wear and tear. I've been there. I pack my garbage out. I'm careful about what I leave behind. I've been there. I know what can happen to these areas, and there are just some areas where it is not suitable to have those kinds of machines. I would say—and somebody, I'm sure, will argue against me here—that because the snowmobiles are operating on the snow, there's less damage done. From what I've seen, there's more damage done by some other kinds of off-highway vehicles.

4:00

I think that if you're at the point about arguing that minutia, then we probably shouldn't be in the area at all, and that's part of my concern here. I understand that the minister is saying: well, there are certain landowners that agreed, and now they feel their deal has not been upheld, and therefore this has to be done to accommodate them. I don't fault the landowners there at all. You know, if that's what they thought was going to happen and they gave an okay to a certain plan or scheme and said, "Okay; it can happen as long as I've still got access," well, who on earth was saying that this was going to happen, that it was possible? Who designed this scheme knowing that it's unimplementable and that we were going to come to this point in time where we now have to have access through a protected area to get to a recreation site? Somebody wasn't thinking far enough ahead on this one.

Even though I'm one of those recreational off-highway vehicle users who probably could get access to this site now and given my 35-year long harangue that the Alberta government has not given snowmobilers enough places to go—we've been cut off the eastern slopes; we've been cut off other kinds of places—I find it a little odd that I'm now standing here saying: okay; cut me off from another area. But I have a larger responsibility here both as an MLA and also as an Albertan when we look ahead to how much of our province is going to be left pristine for other generations, and I think there are serious questions about what the government is proposing through this bill.

I think that this was not well thought out in the first place. We're now having to have a patch put through in the form of this bill to

deal with mistakes that were made with earlier agreements. I am not at this point in favour of what's being suggested in the bill. I wish that I didn't have to say that, but I just think that there have been a lot of mistakes here, and two wrongs are not going to make a right.

So thanks for the opportunity to address the issues that I've raised here. I haven't really given the minister any particular questions to answer; rather, I've made some observations, but I think this whole thing is problematic.

Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to make a few comments and ask a couple of questions. First of all, the Whaleback area is one of the oldest agricultural disposition lands in Alberta. Some of the early ranches in the late 1870s and the early 1880s were formed in that area. It's been continuously grazed by cattle primarily but also by horses ever since the buffalo disappeared in the late 1870s. As one wilderness association said when they discovered the Whaleback – it's been there all along and used as cow-grazing land – it's pristine, and to me that really just speaks loudly for the stewardship of those many generations of ranching families that have made sure that it stayed that way.

I concur with my colleague from Edmonton-Centre, who said that this area probably isn't suited to snowmobiles. I would suggest that she's absolutely right. The area, if you think of it, as ranchland meant that because of the wonderful grasses that grow there, and we could go on a long time about those. The snow, when it comes, gets taken away quite quickly by the Chinooks, so the animals were able to graze naturally and still do, which means there isn't very much snow. If you're a snowmobiler and no snow, well, then, there's no snowmobiling.

I have a little bit of a concern about the trails. Access for the ranchers and maybe some hunters, if they're light footprints, is really not a big issue. I have a set of photographs – and I'm cognizant of the rules of the House that I can't bring them in here and show you – that will show you in an area just a little farther north what unrestrained four-wheel drives, quads, and motorbikes can do to a grazing area, destroying the grass in the area. A wonderful one where there's a trail all marked out – it's got a little bit of gravel, but the four-wheelers don't want to do that. They go on either side of it, so there are multi-trails. So anybody that wants to see those, just check with me and I'll show them to you. I have a whole set of them in my office.

A couple of questions then. First of all, does the MD, as in the MD of Ranchland, have the right to refuse a development permit for either a trail or for some commercial development that might be put on Crown land because they have the municipal responsibility?

Secondly, these access trails that let you get from one area that you

can travel on to another area that you can travel on – we all know that if there's a fire danger, the whole area will be interdicted. But if there does happen to be snowmobiles and there's a lack of snow, would we eliminate them? Again, with the lack of snow there's a great danger for grass fires. One of the biggest grass fires I've ever seen in my life, other than the Granum fire, was one that was set in December by a cigarette out a window. Of course, these catalytic converters on your exhaust system are famous for starting grass fires. So the question is: can these trails be shut down and access denied to all except those who need to be there?

Mr. Chairman, at this time I'd like to adjourn debate. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Chair, I would move that the committee now rise and report progress.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports progress on Bill 2.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? The motion is carried.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, you know, we were having such an excellent debate on heritage rangeland and Mother Nature, so I thought I would just pop outside and take a look at how Mother Nature was doing. We have had a lot of intense fog in the last two days in this area, and I notice that it is snowing and blowing and raining all at the same time, and there are still foggy conditions. In the Edmonton area alone yesterday we had two deaths that occurred as a result of a vehicle accident, unfortunately, and that's a tragic circumstance. I wouldn't want to see that happen today, and I know that all members of the House are very busy with commitments they have to be at and homes they have to reach. So that having been said, I would move that the House now stand adjourned until Monday at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; at 4:10 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 1, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/01

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome back. At the conclusion of the prayer we'll have the singing of our national anthem, so please remain standing.

Let us pray. As we begin our deliberations in the Legislature today, we ask to be surrounded with the insight we need to do our best for the benefit of our province and its people and for the benefit of our country. Today we also pray for those who have been taken and those who have suffered as innocent victims of violence. Amen.

Now, hon. members, our national anthem today will be led by Mr. Paul Lorieau, and if you'd participate in the language of your choice, that would be most acceptable.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a very accomplished young lady, Miss Danielle Schnurer, who is with us today in your gallery. Danielle is the 2003 4-H Premier's award recipient. This is the highest honour that the Alberta 4-H program bestows upon a member, and it recognizes young Albertans that demonstrate strong project management, leadership, and communication skills plus dedication to their community. Award winners are selected based on their 4-H and community involvement and performance at Alberta 4-H selections. Most importantly, they are selected by their peers as well as representatives from Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, the 4-H branch, our industry sponsors, the 4-H Council, and the 4-H Foundation.

Mr. Speaker, during Danielle's year as the 4-H Premier's award recipient she serves as a travelling 4-H ambassador, promoting the 4-H program and rural youth through the province. Danielle truly demonstrates the 4-H motto of Learn to Do by Doing, and she is the best commercial we will ever get for the 4-H program. I have had the honour of being present at a number of occasions where Danielle spoke, and she truly has benefited from the 4-H program and the public speaking opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, I think we're all strong supporters of the 4-H program. It's simply part and parcel of community life. But behind every young 4-H member there is a family who contributes time to their success, and today Danielle has a number of her family with her. I would like Danielle's family to rise as I introduce them: her parents, Brian and Daphne Schnurer, her sisters Jamie and Chelsea,

her brother Bryant. Also, we have two of our 4-H reps with us, Vanessa and Mark. I would ask that all members give these very special guests a very warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a member of the Alberta government's International Governance Advisory Committee I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a delegation from our sister province in South Africa, Mpumalanga. They are in your gallery, and I'd ask them to rise as I call their names: Mr. Thulani Mdakane, Mr. Richard Mkhathshwa, Ms Shirley Sikosana, Mr. Andrew Dlamini, Mr. Tenane Charles Makola, and Ms Thandiswa Nyati. They are accompanied today by Aimee Charest and Aniko Parnell, director of the international governance office. Would you please give them the welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 23 grade 6 students from Meadowlark elementary school. These students are in the Mandarin Chinese program at Meadowlark school, one of my favourite schools. I can tell you that these are some of the brightest lights I've seen in a while. Would you please give them the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a close personal friend of mine and a strong supporter of yours, Mr. Ernie Sillito, who is sitting in the members' gallery. I'd like Ernie to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am rising today to welcome Carol Carbol. Carol is a licensed practical nurse who is here because she is very concerned about the future of public health care in Alberta. She's particularly concerned about the use of P3s to build hospitals and about the impact on patient safety of moving nurses from site to site. She will be watching our proceedings closely. I ask everyone to give her a warm welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to other members of the Assembly Mike Gladstone. Mike is a proud product of the University of Calgary, having graduated in political science with a focus on international relations and foreign policy. He's here visiting the Legislature today because he has a very keen interest in politics. Starting in high school and going to university, Mike has participated in all levels of politics – federal, provincial – and among other things has been the youth president of the Alberta PC Association executive. Mike, I would ask that you stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Government Expense Claims

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, today the Alberta Liberal opposition sent Premier Klein a letter calling for a detailed explanation of Executive Council expenses and also demanding that Alberta pass rules on expense claims that equal or surpass those of Ontario. My first question is to the Premier. How long before we get answers to these questions, Mr. Premier?

1:40

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I received the letter about 15 minutes ago, which is typical of Liberal tactics: first, hold a news conference, release the letter to the media, and then say, "Oh, we'll give the letter to the Premier as well."

The letter contains 23 questions. Here are the questions.

- What are the rules and guidelines governing the approval of expenses for members and staff of Executive Council? Can we have a copy of those rules?
- Who is responsible for approving expenses for the Office of the Premier, including staff expenses and credit card statements?
- What role, if any, does the Premier play in controlling expenses in the Office of the Premier?
- Who is responsible for the Premier's travel plans and for publicly circulating those travel plans?
- What are the rules and guidelines for publicly circulating the Premier's travel plans?
- What are the rules and guidelines for publicly circulating the travel plans of members of cabinet and government MLAs?

We're up to about \$5,000 or \$6,000 right now in staff time to examine this, and we're only at item 6.

The Speaker: Perhaps, hon. Premier, the letter could be tabled. We do have other sections called Written Questions, Motions for Returns on the Order Paper as well.

The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I'm happy to table it later.

Again to the Premier: could the Premier narrow that timeline a little bit and perhaps answer whether he could give us answers by the end of the week?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would ask the opposition party to do as you have suggested, and that is to put it on the Order Paper as motions for returns or written questions. They are more appropriately put there than they are in this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that Alberta seeks to be better than every other province . . . [some applause] I'm glad you're up to the challenge. Given that Alberta seeks to be better than every other province, why aren't our rules on expenses as stringent as those passed by your Conservative cousins in Ontario way back in July 2003?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the rules are in Ontario.

Ms Blakeman: We gave them to you.

Mr. Klein: I still have no idea. Mr. Speaker, I'm going to make this quite clear: I don't pay much attention to what the Liberals give us, because, you know, it is so convoluted sometimes and so misinterpreted as to not be believable.

Relative to this province leading, I would remind the hon. member that we are number one in economic growth, we are number one in employment rates, we are number one in low taxes, we are number one in debt reduction, we are number one in business competitiveness, we are number one in salary growth, we are number one in student achievement, and we're the only province in Canada right now not running a deficit.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Auditor General's Powers

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. The Premier says that the Auditor General is okay with his expenses, but the Auditor General doesn't even have the authority to review and make public any investigation into Executive Council's spending. My question is to the Premier. Will the government introduce legislation to give Alberta's Auditor General the same powers as the federal Auditor General?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I think that the Auditor General has tremendous latitude to examine and investigate anything he wants. In addition, there is the Ethics Commissioner, and I've indicated to the Ethics Commissioner to come in and examine our procedures. If he finds anything wrong with those procedures, we'll move to strengthen and to correct any deficiencies in the procedures we may have.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why won't this government bring in legislation authorizing Alberta's Auditor General to investigate any potential abuse of taxpayers' money?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as far as I know, the Auditor General has every latitude to investigate abuse of taxpayers' dollars including, you know, abuse by any member of government, all government officials, members of the opposition, anyone who handles a taxpayer's dollar.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. He needs to read the legislation.

Again to the Premier: will this government bring in legislation authorizing the Auditor General to publish separate reports on his investigations? Right now he can only do one report. Let's have it all.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it's my understanding that if the Auditor General is requested to examine a particular issue, he can report on that issue. That, I believe, has been done before, where we have asked the Auditor General – I'm trying to recall the case. It was when Mr. Valentine was the Auditor General, and he was asked specifically to investigate a particular issue and issue a report on that matter. I believe it was an issue involving myself, an issue related to Multi-Corp. He conducted an examination and issued a report on that . . .

Ms Blakeman: That was the Ethics Commissioner, not the Auditor General.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, will you tell her to quit chirping and listen to the answer?

Mr. Speaker, if I recall, the Auditor General did a report, a very thorough report, issued his report in this Legislature. So I see no reason to raise the issue of the Auditor General being able to investigate certain and specific matters, because it has been done in the past, and I don't see why it can't be done in the future.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Dr. West, the former Minister of Energy, produced and directed a scheme which certainly could be made into a horror film, the disaster of electricity deregulation. Last week the Premier announced that the Eight Billion Dollar Man is back in town. My first question is to the Premier. Given that electricity deregulation has failed and Albertans are tired of this government's false promises of savings, when will the government admit that \$8 billion spent on electricity deregulation is enough and you're simply going to do the right thing, and that's unplug deregulation of electricity?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm glad that the hon. Minister of Energy is here because he can supplement my answer.

It is wrong, false, untrue, inaccurate, a misrepresentation to say that deregulation has failed. His assertion that this is an \$8 billion boondoggle – I don't know where he gets that figure, but it's not a boondoggle at all. It has been a success.

Mr. Speaker, as an example of the misinformation and misrepresentation of the facts, I allude to a situation in Calgary on Thursday where there were brownouts or blackouts imposed by the electric system. The Liberals were immediate to say that this was caused by deregulation and had to withdraw their press release when they found out from the power company that it had nothing to do with deregulation whatsoever. This is a small example of the steps they will go to to misrepresent and not tell the truth about deregulation.

Mr. MacDonald: Talk about misrepresentation: the power blackout was on Friday, not Thursday.

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Practices

The Speaker: I'm going to read this again. *Beauchesne* 409 with respect to oral questions: "It must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate." So let's proceed with the question.

1:50

Deregulation (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: is it now government policy to deregulate public health care with, again, the false promise of savings to Alberta now that the Eight Million Dollar Man is back in town?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I apologize. If he says that it was Friday, it was Friday, but we still didn't issue a press release saying that it was due to deregulation, like they did. That was real misrepresentation.

He also said that Dr. Steve West is now the Eight Million Dollar Man. He has been devalued from \$8 billion to \$8 million.

Mr. Speaker, the answer to the question, quite simply, is no. This

is a serious issue, much more serious than many, if not most, if not all of the issues the Liberals raise, and that is the issue of health care sustainability and what we need to do as Canadians – because all provinces are faced with this difficulty – to bring health care costs in line and to get them under control and to bring about sustainability. That's what it's all about. It's not about following the model of electricity; it's about Alberta taking the lead. When other provinces talk about it and say, "Simply throw more money at the situation," we are saying, "Let's find new and different and more imaginative and innovative ways of doing things." Nothing wrong with that.

I can see the Liberals thinking there is something wrong with it because it involves thinking outside the box. It involves something more than being narrow-minded or myopic. It involves really imaginative thinking, something that is so strange and so foreign to them that all they can do is get up and criticize.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: is it now government policy to deregulate the Alberta civil service with the false promise of savings to Albertans now that the Eight Billion Dollar Man is back in town?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, he went from Eight Billion Dollar to Eight Million Dollar. Now, he's back to Eight Billion Dollar.

Mr. Speaker, it's the government's policy to deregulate where it makes sense to deregulate. If he's talking about deregulation of the public service, in some areas it has happened already. It has happened relative to liquor stores. Certainly, they were taken out of government control and management and privatized. Does he want us to go back to a government-run system?

It was done relative to the franchising of registries, Mr. Speaker: much cheaper, much more efficient. Instead of going to the motor vehicles branch, taking an afternoon off work, and lining up only to be told that they have the wrong documentation, to come back tomorrow, they can actually walk down the block, go to their local registry office, be called by their first name, be served a cup of coffee, get their driver's licence, get their licence plates. Nothing wrong with that.

The Liberals think it's wrong, of course, because it doesn't involve huge bureaucracy. So if we have an opportunity to break down bureaucracy and to privatize and to deregulate and if it makes a lot of sense, we will do it, Mr. Speaker, if it makes sense. That's something they don't understand.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Meat Packing Industry

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Approximately \$800 million of Canadian and Alberta taxpayers' dollars have been spent so far on programs to address the BSE crisis. According to a beef industry report that I will be tabling today, while cattle producers are going under, meat packers are making a killing by lowering the price they pay for cattle about the amount of the government subsidy and increasing their margin by selling beef at pre-BSE prices to supermarkets. My questions are to the minister of agriculture and rural development. Will the government hold an independent inquiry into the waste of \$800 million which seems to have ended up in the pockets of U.S. meat packers rather than cattle producers, and if not, why not?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I think I have addressed this issue in the House before, but I will again. One thing that this minister will do rather than flinging around wild accusations is be sure of the facts before I do make statements like this. I think that would be responsible. If the hon. member would be more current with the issue, he would know that about two weeks ago I did ask for a carcass evaluation and asked my staff to prepare that because I really don't appreciate in a time of distress in this industry that we have these types of accusations being flung around.

Some months ago it was the big fat feedlots that were being accused of taking all of the profit. Then in the fall it was that cow-calf were getting very high prices for their calves. Now it's the packer issue. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that the beef industry, the cattle industry in this province and across Canada is under great duress. What we need are solutions to move us through this, and that's what this government is doing with the industry at the table.

Mr. Speaker, this minister will not make those types of accusations without facts. When I receive those facts, I will be very happy to share them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, sweeping it under the carpet is not going to do it, and that's exactly what the minister is doing by refusing to call an inquiry. Why is the government sweeping under the carpet the findings of a beef industry report which concluded that meat packing companies have "simply discounted the price they were prepared to pay for the cattle by the amount of the government support payment"? Why won't she have an inquiry?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I could discount that very quickly, and so could the hon. member if he chose to go back and look at what beef prices were prior to any intervention in the industry. I can assure him that prices for the industry improved greatly. If he understood the packing industry at all, he would understand that they suffered great losses the first weeks of the BSE issue, after May 20, operating at about 27 or 28 per cent efficiency.

Now, I don't expect him to have that broad understanding of the industry, but I do think that at a time when this industry is under siege, is suffering great duress, we all have a responsibility to have the facts in front of us and not to be divisive in this industry. The only way that we will work our way through this very serious issue is if we all work together. Mr. Speaker, that is what this minister is going to do.

I can assure the hon. member that at all of the many, many meetings we've had, every part of this industry from the trucking industry, to packers large and small, to cow-calf producers, to feedlot operators, to the grocery retailers, the Canadian grocers' institute, has been at the same table in the same room and addressed all of these issues, not picked them apart one shot here, one shot there. That is totally irresponsible.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, could the minister please tell the House why, if this program has spent \$400 million of Alberta taxpayers' money and an equal amount of federal dollars, packers' margins have increased by 200 per cent over the same period?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I wish the federal government had contributed equally to this program; the cost to Alberta would have been considerably less. I'm still hopeful in my discussions with the federal minister that they will come to the table and help this industry through. This industry contributes a very great deal to the

economy of this province and, in fact, provinces across Canada.

If the hon. member is suggesting that the investment that this government made of \$400 million has not assisted the industry, then I suggest that he get out of his desk in this office and go out and visit with the industry and find out how it really is working. I would have suggested that he attend that meeting, Mr. Speaker, where this paper was discussed. I was invited to that. I spoke at the meeting. I answered questions. I spent all day with them. I'm not sure whether the hon. member was invited and couldn't come, but you cannot take a piece of paper and solve the complex issues around this.

Again, Mr. Speaker, this is too important an issue to try and pick sides, pit one part of the industry against the other. The only way we will solve this issue is if this industry works together, and that's what we're going to do: work with them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

2:00

Community Programs

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the government encourages effective community programs and community groups have responded with their grassroots initiatives and reflecting the requests from my senior constituents – as an example, I want to focus on a particular program in my constituency called mow/snow, that has been effective in its purpose to keep seniors aging in place, in their home, and providing a hand-up work experience for Albertans in social need – my question today is to the hon. Minister of Seniors. What is the government doing to preserve community programs such as the mow and snow program to help seniors who are in need?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to point out that the Ministry of Seniors does not have a grant program that would be specific to mow and snow as a program. However, our responsibility towards seniors is to ensure that the folks who do need help receive help, and we, in fact, do that. The special-needs assistance program will support seniors who are eligible and who have a requirement for some yard maintenance, as it is in clearing sidewalks or whatever. Also, for other people who have mobility problems, we have things such as the home adaptation program.

I would like to say that I'd like to commend the people, the volunteers in the member's constituency, for such a program and would hopefully like to see it continue. Like I say, we do our level best to look after the seniors who are eligible for our support.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Given that the ACE program provided some seed funding for just such a community program for grass cutting and snow removal for seniors in need, I want to ask you a question. What are you doing to preserve such a cost-effective program?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, the program that was referred to was developed in 1993, and as we know, there has been substantial change in the Alberta situation since that time. In 1993, to use round numbers, I guess, there were something like 90,000 people that were on our welfare rolls. Ninety thousand. What we've been able to do in the intervening time is cut that by two-thirds. We're under

30,000, but we're not going to, you know, get into the exact numbers.

In any case, I think that, clearly, one could see that the type of skill training that's required in today's terms would be significantly different than what we were required to do 10 years ago. Really, what we've done with our skills investment program is we've removed, actually, the ACE program as one of our key components in our skills training situation. We've informed all of the community organizations that we've worked with in the past that at the end of this March that program will cease to exist.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Given that the mow and snow program for the seniors in my community had 90 clients in the summer of 2003, now that the ACE program has been cancelled, when is the new program to come into place to continue that effective community program to help people?

Mr. Dunford: Well, as I've indicated, of course, all of the programs that were in existence have come under review, and many have been revised. In this particular case, ACE, we've eliminated that program.

Now, we still have training-on-the-job programs that are available. So we have department officials that will work with community organizations, I'm sure some of which are in the hon. member's constituency, to work on aspects, then, of a mow and snow kind of program to see what we're able to do with that, because we don't want to eliminate the opportunity for people who are on our rolls but who are looking for self-reliance and independence to move into the workforce.

We're willing to work with these groups and will continue to do so. In many cases some of the tasks that would be involved in a mow and snow program might just fit the kind of framework in which a person might start out in trying to become self-reliant. So we'll look at it.

Ophthalmology Services in Calgary

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, in 2002 the Minister of Health and Wellness designated the Calgary health region as an area with an emergency need for ophthalmology services. This allowed for two ophthalmologists from South America to be brought to Calgary under section 5 of the special register of the College of Physicians and Surgeons. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: what is the minister's justification for approving this designation under section 5?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there were two physicians involved in the particular situation that the hon. member is referring to. Dr. Maria Castro is a pediatric ophthalmologist. Her husband, Dr. Alberto Castro, is also an ophthalmologist. If a health region is trying to recruit such a physician to their region and they are unable to find such an individual within Canada, then a part 5 designation is signed off by the minister of health, which will allow them to recruit from elsewhere.

Now, pediatric ophthalmology is quite a high-demand specialty, Mr. Speaker, and Dr. Maria Castro indicated that she would be prepared to come from Colombia if we could also find a position for her husband to practise in Calgary. Dr. Alberto Castro practises in the area of vitreo-retinal surgery.

Mr. Speaker, Dr. Maria Castro does practise in the area of pediatric ophthalmology. She's employed by both the University of Calgary and the Calgary health region. Dr. Alberto Castro, her

husband, provides in-patient service at the Rockyview hospital and also outpatient services at the Holy Cross facility.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Can the minister, then, confirm that the request to import these two specialists originated with the chief of ophthalmology for the Calgary health region?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I don't have a specific recollection. I don't have the files of these individuals before me, but the request does come through the health region. Who may have signed off the request for that is not within my recollection. If the hon. member would like to send me a letter outlining his question for further specificity, I would be happy to respond to him accordingly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question: what action is this minister prepared to take if it's proven that there were specialists already available when he approved the emergency need in Calgary? Will he reverse his decision?

2:10

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there are, as I indicated, reasons why we recruit physicians from other jurisdictions. We look to continue to support the good kinds of services that Albertans have come to expect. I can say that quite a number of part 5 designations have been approved since 1995. On average about 50 such requests a year are made by health regions that I have signed off on during my time as minister of health. Fifty requests a year. I take it at face value that if the regional health authority feels that it needs such physicians to be recruited from elsewhere, they in fact know what their needs are. At a time when Albertans are talking about the importance of access to the health care system, I should think that it would be most appropriate that we continue to recruit specialists that we require in this province from wherever they might be.

I should note, Mr. Speaker, that the College of Physicians and Surgeons is also involved in this process, that they do have an important role in acknowledging the credentials of such physicians to indicate that they, in fact, have the appropriate training to practise within Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Health Care Services for Out-of-province Patients

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the minister of health. Health care delivery and the quality of service available in Alberta are the envy of all provinces despite the financial challenges all provinces face. I understand that this has resulted in out-of-province Canadians accessing health care in Alberta, as Albertans may also access health care in other provinces. My question: what is the service and fiscal effect on our Alberta health care system of out-of-province users?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, one of the principles under the Canada Health Act is portability. Alberta is a recognized leader in health care delivery in Canada, and accordingly Alberta hospitals provided 130,000 services to other Canadians. This makes Alberta the largest provider of services to out-of-province Canadians.

People come here from the provinces of Saskatchewan, British Columbia, the territories, and Manitoba as well for services that

sometimes are available in those provinces but sometimes are specialized here in Alberta. For example, our organ and tissue transplantation programs, our cancer programs, our adult and pediatric cardiac care, bum treatment, diabetes treatments are only a few of the areas where Alberta provides services to non-Alberta residents.

Mr. Speaker, the rates at which we bill back to those other provinces are set through an interprovincial committee. Previous to last July there was a much wider gap between what it actually costs us to provide those services and what we actually billed back. That gap has closed somewhat, but we still subsidize approximately \$20 million a year in services to non-Alberta residents. That's the best estimate that we can come up with. Still, we billed approximately \$90 million worth of services to the health care insurance plans of other provinces. We will continue to provide those services to other Canadians in need of those services because we do support the principle of portability within the Canada Health Act, sir.

Mr. McClelland: The minister's response has generated another question. To the minister of health: would it be possible, then, to pick up the \$20 million difference from the federal government to keep our health authorities whole?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, not to discount the importance of \$20 million, let us say this. It is a significant amount of money, to be certain, but to put it into context, \$20 million is what we pay to run our health care system for a single day in this province. So in the whole scheme of things, the total value of budgets of regional health authorities would be something in the magnitude of about \$4.2 billion. To argue with the federal government over an additional \$20 million – it's not really a material amount. I'd rather be fighting over \$20 billion.

Mr. McClelland: My final question, Mr. Speaker, is to the Minister of Seniors. Alberta is also benefiting from the in-migration of seniors. Could the minister tell the House what the impact of net in-migration of seniors to Alberta is?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, I don't have dollar figures on that, but the member is correct. We receive more seniors coming in than leaving the province. A couple of things. For seniors to sign on to a program, say the seniors' benefits program, they must be resident in Alberta for at least three months, and we haven't had any indication that there are very many of those people. With respect to other seniors they are very welcome here because when they come, they bring with them their assets. They invest in housing. They invest in a lot of things. Also, equally as important is that in Alberta and in Canada, indeed, the greatest proportion of any population that volunteers is the seniors population. So to measure the actual benefit to the province would be very difficult, but certainly these people are more than welcome here.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Little Bow.

Utilities Consumer Advocate

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Wednesday the Minister of Government Services admitted that the electricity industry through the Balancing Pool is paying for the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate under section 148 of the Electric Utilities Act. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. How can the Utilities Consumer Advocate be independent, working on

behalf of consumers before regulatory hearings, when the electricity industry is cutting his paycheck?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again the member has got it wrong, so we are more than pleased to correct the information for him. The structure of the utilities advocate is such that that individual is paid from the Balancing Pool. That is an arm's-length organization from industry, and it reflects the interests of the folks in the rate base. So for him to intimate that it's actually going to be influenced by the utility providers is nothing more than his usual brand of hogwash.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Energy: when did the minister make a ministerial order dictating that the gas companies would also fund the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, that sounds like an interesting question for a written return, but he has also been one that has used the word "utilities" interchangeably with the word "electricity." So, in fact, with the creation of the Utilities Consumer Advocate, the individual who will watch on behalf of all Albertans' consumer interests, that will also include natural gas.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Energy: how much money precisely is being paid by the Balancing Pool to fund the consumer advocate?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the member who asked the question knows full well that the consumer advocate budgeting falls under the Minister of Government Services. I believe he asked that question last week in the House, and I'm sure that if the minister wants to supplement today, he will.

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, just to make it very, very clear, yes, as we said in this House last week, the Balancing Pool does look after this. The consumer advocate is set up to help consumers in this province have a one-window approach when they have problems with their electricity bills or when they want to get information about electricity and the restructuring of electricity. As well, if they have inquiries about natural gas, they are also calling in to our advocate's office, and we're providing them with the proper information. We inform consumers to help them empower themselves.

One other thing the consumer advocate is looking at doing is making representations in front of the EUB on behalf of all small businesses, residential and farm customers. As a matter of fact, if at the end of this year we don't expend all the dollars that are needed for that, that have come forward, flowing through to us, those dollars will go back to the Balancing Pool, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

2:20 Agricultural Income Stabilization Program

Mr. McFarland: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. As you're aware, Madam Minister, many changes have been made to the systems that are in place for the agriculture industry over the first year, and while the Canadian agricultural stabilization program is supposed to be the answer to ad hoc programs, have you got any

assurances that the program is going to be responsive and timely in responding to our producers who are in desperate need?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member would know, Alberta has been a full participant in the ag policy framework document, and of course the Canada agricultural income stabilization program is one part of the safety net chapter of that program. When that program was designed, it was designed to look after any small and large changes in income. However, while it was designed to cover small and large losses, it was not designed to cover equity losses such as we have experienced through this current BSE issue.

Because we work so closely with our industry, we realized that there would have to be some changes made to that program, and it isn't just in this program with the extreme low prices in the hog industry, again an issue, and, in fact, in the grain industry, Mr. Speaker. If you were to experience four or five repetitive years of drought, for example, it would not deal with that, so it became very apparent that we had to deal with negative margins. That was done. This program covers 60 per cent of negative margins.

Also, we would have to deal with the caps. The caps were set at \$975,000. It sounded like a reasonable amount for average losses for any production, but when you get into losses such as we've experienced in an industry as large as the beef industry and, in fact, the pork industry – and in fact it could be the grain industry – those caps had to change. So they were renegotiated nation-wide to \$3 million. Three million dollar caps do not answer the needs in Alberta, so in Alberta, in fact, we'll go to \$5 million caps in this program.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While people are anticipating these changes taking effect, what is the actual holdup that prevents these changes being made in the program and put into effect?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, to get an amendment to the original agreement – in December we finally got the signatures to the ag policy framework, but the agreement has to be amended. An agreement to be amended requires the same formula as it does to get a national program; that is, 50 per cent of the production and seven provinces. We have three provinces that have signed on to the program: Prince Edward Island, Ontario, and Alberta. Quebec has taken this through their cabinet, and we understand that they will be adjusting their program. But we still need three provinces to sign the agreement. Our understanding is that they're dealing with it with their cabinets, but for some provinces it is very difficult given their budgets, and they are requesting that the federal government assist them.

Mr. McFarland: A final question to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: although these changes may take effect immediately, how can we let the producers know in a timely fashion so they can access any of these changes that the provinces and the federal government, hopefully, sign on to?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, one thing, Mr. Speaker, that we did negotiate successfully was an opportunity with a bilateral agreement with the federal government that we could do some advance payments under what would be called an interim case program. That process is occurring.

We had 30 to 40 formal producer regional meetings to describe the case program. We are having more meetings now to discuss the

enhancements, and any member of the Legislature that is getting these types of questions that wants to have a meeting should let us know, because these programs are very complex, and our staff would be happy to go out and sit down with producers and go through the program.

We've tried to keep them informed through media, through newsletters and that type of information, but probably the best communicators are in this building. I would encourage all of our members that serve that population to get the answers because, Mr. Speaker, this is the program that is anticipated to remove the need for ad hoc programs out of agriculture. It's what this government wants, and it is definitely what the industry wants.

Private/Public Partnerships

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the government web site lists highway 407 in Ontario as an example of a successful P3 project. Meanwhile, back in Ontario the private operators of the now controversial highway 407 are gouging commuters with toll rate hikes that have exceeded 200 per cent over the last five years. The government of Ontario is now involved in a dispute with the consortium that owns highway 407 over high toll rates and poor customer service. To the Minister of Infrastructure: given that highway 407 is listed as a success story on this government's web site, is this the standard that this government sets for its P3 projects?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the Minister of Transportation may know more about the highway that the member is referring to. I don't know the details of that particular project. But I will say that from all the indications that we have of any of the P3s that have been here in Alberta, including what looks like it's going to be a very successful one with the Calgary courthouse, we're very, very hopeful and are sure that we will be able to show that it is a great deal for Albertans.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that this government is looking to a P3 to extend the southeast leg of Anthony Henday Drive, what guarantee can the minister give commuters that the private operators will not implement tolls?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, I thought I explained it to the member once before when he started asking me questions that are not on this department. If he cares, I can do it more slowly. The infrastructure that is horizontal – that means that it's out this way – is in Transportation. The infrastructure that is built vertically is in Infrastructure. So perhaps he could address the highways to the Minister of Transportation because that's where it's properly housed.

Mr. Bonner: Well, Mr. Speaker, we will try the Minister of Transportation. Will the minister provide the documentation outlining how it calculated the estimated cost of \$300,000,000 as a public project for Anthony Henday Drive versus the \$220,000,000 it would cost a 30-year P3 project?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'm not quite sure what numbers the hon. member is using, but what we've essentially done is gone to the request for qualifications. This is trying to find those companies world-wide that are willing to bring business to Alberta and qualify in terms of the background and the necessary expertise to proceed with this project. As I mentioned in the House last week, there were six companies, marriages of various companies that put together six proposals. We are going to boil those down to three, and then the next step is the request for proposal. What will happen then is those

three companies will bring forward their proposals on how they want to build this leg of southeast Anthony Henday Drive and also how they will finance it and manage and maintain it for the next 30 years.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven hon. members to participate in Recognitions.

head: 2:30

Recognitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Raylee Edwards

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to recognize the accomplishments of an outstanding Alberta cowgirl, Ms Raylee Edwards. Raylee attended her first Canadian Finals Rodeo when she was nine years old, and in this, her first attempt in rodeo, she unfortunately missed winning the Canadian ladies' barrel racing championship when she knocked down her third barrel in the final go-round.

Coming from a winning rodeo family, Raylee could not help but follow the riding trails of her mother, Mary Lynn, the 1980 ladies' barrel racing champion, and her father, Oscar, the 1981 Canadian calf roping champion. Ride after ride, competition after competition she continued to hone her skills to perfection, becoming the best in her sport.

While holding the record for the youngest competitor at the CFR, 16 years after Raylee's first big trip to the Canadian Finals she finally scored the big ride. Raylee Edwards became the 2003 Canadian ladies' barrel racing champion, continuing a winning family tradition, a title of which she and her family can forever and truly be proud.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Sarah and Jessica Gregg

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure this afternoon to rise and recognize the accomplishments of two very exceptional young athletes from the city of champions. Last month Sarah and Jessica Gregg competed in the North American long-track speed skating championships in Minnesota and brought home a combined total of eight medals from the event. Jessica won two gold, two silver, while her younger sister, Sarah, won the overall championship for her age group and equalled her older sister's medal count.

Winning medals and championships seems to run in the Gregg family, Mr. Speaker. Their father, Dr. Randy Gregg, is a former Oiler defenceman who played with two Canadian Olympic hockey teams while their mother, Kathy Gregg, is a former medal winner in Olympic speed skating. She also coaches her daughters in speed skating. Their daughters' wonderful achievement is not only a testament to hard work and dedication to their sport but to the quality of the Edmonton Speed Skating Association program.

On behalf of this Assembly I would like to congratulate Sarah and Jessica on their superb accomplishment and wish them all the best in their future competitions.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Arctic Winter Games

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today as

a northern Albertan to recognize the city of Fort McMurray and the entire regional municipality of Wood Buffalo, who are hosting over 1,500 young athletes from all across the world's circumpolar region for the 2004 Arctic Winter Games. Athletes from northern Alberta, the Northwest Territories, Yukon, Nunavut, Quebec, Alaska, Greenland, Russia, and Scandinavia are competing in the events to celebrate our northern cultures and promote active lifestyles through sport.

About 5,000 local volunteers have combined their time to make these games a success and to help their communities benefit from hosting these prestigious events. Volunteers are part of a province-wide network of people who are absolutely vital to the formula that makes our province the best place to live, work, and visit.

On behalf of our Premier, who officially opened the Arctic Winter Games this past weekend along with several MLA colleagues, I invite all members of this Assembly to join me in congratulating the people of Wood Buffalo for their dedication in hosting these games.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre

Edmonton Opera Week

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to recognize a first today, or, rather, 40 years of firsts; that is, first-rate opera in Edmonton. The city of Edmonton has declared this week, March 1 to 7, Edmonton Opera Week to recognize and celebrate 40 years of production from Edmonton Opera.

March 2 will see the mayor of Edmonton make the official proclamation at noon at city hall before an audience of current and original cast members of *Madama Butterfly*. *Madama Butterfly* was the first-ever production, opening in October 1963 at the Jubilee Auditorium, playing to a sold-out audience. The anniversary version opens this weekend.

My congratulations to the board; the volunteers; artistic director, Brian Deedrick; general manager, Mary Phillips-Rickey; staff; technicians; and production staff; and, of course, the artists who bring us such joy.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Elbow Park Elementary School

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased in this Assembly to extend hearty congratulations to Elbow Park elementary school. You have accomplished the very rare, a public school taking top spot in this year's provincial school review by the Fraser Institute.

As a grandma I frequently visit this small, inner-city Calgary school and truly enjoy its special environment, one that exemplifies what I call LCC behaviours – leadership, commitment, and caring – by administration and teachers and parents. The students truly benefit, working hard in this caring, supportive, and challenging environment to become the best they can be as individuals and as learners.

Elbow Park, with your approach you have led the way for others. Success is not just about class size or socioeconomics. Students, administration, teachers, and parents, I encourage you to be truly proud of this achievement and the recognition you so well deserve. Congratulations.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

David Gillies

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to recognize a special person. For years this person sat long hours in this Chamber, perhaps more attentive than some of us, at the same time studying at university. In the Chamber this person took the only seat that has control on the speaking of all members. It's not the Speaker's seat. It's not the Premier's seat. It's higher than those. Just look up and see. All of us can see up there.

After university study this person decided to join the Clerk's office. Later this person decided to join the government's team to assist the Government House Leader. This person is Mr. David Gillies.

David was born to Mr. Fred Gillies and Mrs. Jean Stock. David has two brothers, Darcy Gillies and Jordy Gillies, and one sister, Lisa Mackowetzky. David is married to Lorraine Chay, and their family includes Dr. Reid Wiest, living in Calgary with his wife, Beth, and their young son, Thane, and John Wiest, living in High River with his wife, Andrea, and their young son, Hunter David.

David Gillies is a hard-working person very dedicated to the democratic system. Through his work this legislative agenda sails smoothly through the parliamentary process.

May I ask all members to join me to recognize and thank David for his dedication and his work to keep our parliamentary democratic system strong to serve the interests of Albertans.

U of A Pandas Hockey Team

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, across Canada and around much of the world interest in women's ice hockey is surging, and the University of Alberta Pandas are helping lead the way. On February 28, 2004, the Pandas once again claimed the Canada West championship.

The accomplishments of the Pandas' ice hockey team are amazing. This weekend was their sixth Canada West championship in the last seven years. They won every one of the 20 games they played in the regular season. Including playoffs, they have now won 32 consecutive games.

In six seasons the Pandas have won three CIS national championships. Not surprisingly, head coach, Howie Draper, has won several coach of the year awards. The Pandas will head to the national championships, hosted by McGill from March 12 to 14, as the number one seed.

I invite all MLAs to join me in wishing the Pandas success at the national championships and congratulating the achievements of this wonderful team.

Calendar of Special Events

The Speaker: Hon. members, since this is the first day of March, let me just draw to the attention of all hon. members that March is the following: Help Fight Liver Disease Month, National Kidney Health Month, National Nutrition Month, National Epilepsy Month, Learning Disabilities Month, Red Cross Month, Kidney Foundation Door-to-door Campaign Month, Canadian Liver Foundation Spring for Daisies Campaign.

February 28 to March 7 is National Engineering Week. March and April together are Hop for Muscular Dystrophy Association of Canada months. March 1 to April 30 is Easter Seal Mail Campaign.

March 1 to March 5 is the National Social Work Week. March 1 to March 7 is Pharmacists Awareness Week. March 1 to March 17 is Give a Buck for Luck Shamrock Campaign for the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Canada. March 3 to March 6 is Canadian Music Week. March 5 is the World Day of Prayer. March 5 to 21 is Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. March 7 to 13 is Interna-

tional Women's Week. March 7 to 13 is also National Dental Assistants Recognition Week. March 8 is International Women's Day. March 8 is also the United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace. March 8 is also Commonwealth Day. March 12 to March 19 is Canadian Agricultural Safety Week. March 12 to 29 is also Asthma and Allergies Door-to-Door Campaign. March 14 to March 20 is National Farm Safety Week; March 17, St. Patrick's Day; March 19, St. Joseph's Day; March 20, Journée internationale de la francophonie; March 21, International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. March 21 is World Poetry Day. March 21 to March 28 is the Week of Solidarity with the Peoples Struggling against Racism and Racial Discrimination. March 21 to March 28 is also Social Work Week. March 22 is the World Day for Water. March 22 to March 27 is Daffodil Days for the Canadian Cancer Society. March 23 is World Meteorological Day. March 24 is World Tuberculosis Day. March 27 is World Theatre Day.

I thought all hon. members would like to be brought up.

head: 2:40

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Bill 206

Alberta Wheat and Barley Test Market Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce Bill 206, the Alberta Wheat and Barley Test Market Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill will provide for the automatic establishment of a 10-year Alberta test market for wheat and barley if the governments of Alberta and Canada do not reach an agreement for the establishment of a 10-year test market by a date set by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. This bill will provide all free-enterprising and hard-working Alberta farmers the opportunity to sell their wheat and barley outside the control of the Canada Wheat Board. It will provide them with a ray of economic hope and a level playing field with farmers in Ontario, who already have a choice. Mr. Speaker, it will allow the added-value economy due to wheat and barley to be re-established and encouraged to grow in Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 206 read a first time]

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and table on behalf of my hon. colleague for Edmonton-Highlands one document titled Consolidated Beef Industry Action Plan: Actions for Industry if Borders Remain Closed. This report claims that Alberta packers have seen . . .

The Speaker: It's okay, hon. member; we just table it these days.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. The first is a letter from the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition to the Premier, and this is recommending the implementation of a stricter new policy on expenses.

The second tabling is on the rules that were implemented by Premier Ernie Eves in Ontario.

Thank you.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, February 26, it is my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In a similar manner it's my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 202
Environmental Protection and Enhancement
(Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004**

[Adjourned debate February 23: Dr. Taylor]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you and good afternoon, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to be able to join the debate on Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. As we have heard previously during this debate, Bill 202 would, if passed and proclaimed, require gas stations, fuel trucks, and petrochemical terminals to be equipped with stage 1 vapour recovery systems by 2014. This would be done in order to reduce emissions of volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, which are a factor in low-level ozone, as well as carcinogenic hydrocarbons, which are known to cause cancer and other serious illnesses in addition to fouling up the air we breathe.

I have given this issue a good deal of thought, and before I tell you what my conclusion is, I'd like to take a few moments to explain the reasons why I arrived at the conclusion that I did. One of the most pressing issues of our time, Mr. Speaker, is the quality of our environment. In recent years this Legislature has grappled with a variety of measures to enhance Alberta's environment, ranging from how to safeguard our clean water supply to how to handle chemical spills and how to preserve and improve air quality. We do this not just because Albertans want us to protect the environment but because it is the right thing to do.

Doing the right thing when it comes to the environment, however, is certainly not always as straightforward and simple as it might seem. There are always many competing and also beneficial interests to consider out there along with various players, who each have their own set of issues and concerns. Sometimes you may even get a short-term gain in one area but only if accompanied by the expense of a long-term pain somewhere else. In other situations a little short-term pain in one area might actually be a good thing because it may result in a larger overall gain further down the road. So all decisions involve trade-offs, and when making such decisions,

we always have to be mindful of our province's economic growth and health.

We are very fortunate in this regard, Mr. Speaker, because in the course of the last 10 or 12 years the Alberta economy has not only recovered from being burdened by significant debts and budget deficits, but also the province has gained both a national and an international reputation as one of Canada's economic powerhouses. We can be very proud of the fact that in spite of many upheavals to the world economy Alberta has weathered a number of economic storms, and the state of our economy remains strong. We are in a position that is the envy of every other Canadian jurisdiction.

Being in such a position clearly puts us in a better position to be able to do a lot more in other areas, such as protecting our environment, from what would otherwise have been the case. In other words, a strong oil and gas industry and thriving overall economy actually puts us in a much better financial position to work on things like improving our environment compared to what our position would have been with a weak industry and a weak economy.

It has taken much time and effort, however, to get to our current position of strength, and it also took a great deal of sacrifice on the part of Albertans to get here. It is thanks to Albertans' willingness to sacrifice and Albertans' hard work that we are able to enjoy such a high standard of living today. For this reason, Mr. Speaker, it is vital that the policies we set and follow are those which will not harm or in any way reverse the economic progress we have made since the early 1990s.

Of course, on the other hand, we must always take the necessary steps and precautions to ensure that we do as little damage to the environment as possible when creating this economic growth and that if any damage does have to occur, we use the economic gains that have been created to later mitigate or restore what was damaged back to its original or perhaps even an improved state.

Throughout the world society has come a long way and has made significant progress in recognizing the impact of our actions and policies on the environment over the years. There was a time here, and not too long ago at that, and still is, in fact, in many places in the world when the environment was given little, if any, thought, and much needless damage was being done. Factories were able to spew toxic emissions into the air or water, mining operations were carried out without regard for what would happen once operations ceased, and in general we human beings did not pay much attention to the well-being of the thousands of other species occupying the planet.

By the middle of the 20th century, however, a collective consciousness concerning the environment was well underway across the world. We have come to realize the importance of preserving rain forests and water systems. We know also that finding alternative sources of fuel makes for both good policy and for a healthier environment. Win/win situations between economic development and the environment are possible more often than many people may realize.

There is no doubt that environmental awareness is growing and is becoming one of our most important political issues. Both here at home and elsewhere in our country and around the world laws and regulations have been enacted to preserve and safeguard the environment. We are, in other words, trying to find ways to improve our standard of living, and we now recognize that this standard includes improving the quality of our environment.

2:50

Some may still ask why. Why do we need to preserve the environment, and why should we care? Well, as simple as it is to ask these questions, they're not so simple to answer. Of course, there are some responses that are obvious and straightforward. We need to

preserve the environment because others will come after us: our children. Also, it is a well-known fact that a good environment is healthy for us in many ways. Green hospitals, where you go to reduce stress, is how some people refer to our natural park systems and the great special places that we have created through Alberta, a program that I personally have been excited to have played a small role in as chair of Alberta parks and special places. The bottom line is that we should care about the environment simply because it is the right thing to do.

Perhaps the right question to ask is not why we should care about the environment, because I am sure that we all care about the environment, but rather: how should we go about caring for it? Developing policies willy-nilly out of the air based on bad facts is not good government. Sometimes, Mr. Speaker, it's not even a matter of bad facts but, rather, a lack of facts, and therefore jumping to conclusions, that has the danger of inspiring draconian laws and legislation that simply may not do quite what they were intended to do and may even be counterintuitively counterproductive. So we must be careful to ensure that we do not pass any bad or unnecessary legislation that may have large, negative, unintended consequences.

So we must ask questions of the proposed bill before us. Are the volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, that the stage 1 vapour recovery systems aim to harness a problem? It would seem that, yes, they do pose several problems for us. It has been established that they contribute to the formation of smog and, as a result, affect the quality of the air that we breathe.

As well, fuel vapours contain hydrocarbons, which are known carcinogens. Benzene and other hydrocarbons can cause among other things several different forms of leukemia and other blood disorders and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the kind of cancer that hockey great Mario Lemieux battled and successfully overcame in 1993.

Quite clearly, Mr. Speaker, the VOCs and hydrocarbons do present a problem. There can be no question about that. So what should or could be done about this, and at what costs and trade-offs to other important considerations should we examine?

Well, for starters it is clear that a lot is already being done to deal with this problem, so no one should feel that it is being ignored by any means. In our own province, for instance, most new gas stations built by Petro-Canada since 1997 were built using stage 1 vapour recovery plumbing. Moreover, all major automobile manufacturers furnish the cars they build with a vapour absorption system in order to reduce the amount of vapours that escapes during a refuelling.

These are but two examples that show that efforts are already well underway to curtail the VOC and hydrocarbon emissions. What is perhaps even more important is that they show examples of how responsible businesses have already taken it upon themselves to address this issue, which is perceived by many people to be a very real problem.

This government has always believed that business performance will be optimized when the government takes a hands-off approach and leaves the private sector alone. As a government we are often hesitant to step in and tell businesses what they can or cannot do, and in my view this is as it should be except perhaps in special circumstances.

In spite of the lack of legislation in this area we are already seeing the private sector taking steps to address this issue, which has become a cause for concern. Unfortunately, not all businesses always behave so responsibly. Not at all. We all know that with some frequency government reluctantly must step in to regulate or enforce legislation in order that particular business conduct not be allowed to adversely affect Albertans and our environment. We often agree that an irresponsible business should not be able to profit

at the expense of other businesses or the environment when the other companies are showing more responsibility. So sometimes we are called upon to level the playing field.

The facts are that petrochemical refineries in Alberta must be approved, regulated, and certified under the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act. However, stage 1 vapour recovery has never been legislated in Alberta. Perhaps one reason why is that smog has never really been an issue in Alberta. During 2000-2003 the air quality index showed Alberta as having 97 per cent good days, and the rest, 11 days, were all fair. So we don't yet have a big problem in this area, and much has already been done about what problem we do have. However, I worry about that level playing field I spoke of, and I worry about responsible companies not being rewarded for having already acted and less responsible companies being rewarded for not acting.

Thus, Mr. Speaker, I will support the bill before us on that basis. I'd like to congratulate my colleague from Edmonton-Norwood for both his intent and his initiative in bringing this bill forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak to Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. I should say at the very outset that I will support this bill in principle.

The bill is a good attempt in the right direction to seek and put in place measures to help control vapours which pollute the environment and also have negative health effects. So not only is the issue controlling emissions that will help us control the amount of smog in and around our communities, but also if the vapour control equipment is put in place, then that helps in a preventive way with respect to the relative health of Albertans. So the bill has this intent, and it deserves the support of this House.

I have a concern, Mr. Speaker, about the length of time that the bill allows for enforcement of the measures proposed in this bill for the installation of vapour control equipment. The bill allows 10 years, starting January 2005 to the end of the year 2014, for operators, companies, businesses to comply with the requirements of this bill. That to me is an unacceptably long period of time. The enforcement and compliance with the provisions of the bill can be and should be required to be in place to be completed in the next three to five years. I think that would be a long enough time.

To allow for 10 years for this compliance to happen, for the enforcement of the provisions of this bill, is to ignore the concerns of communities, neighbourhoods which are directly affected and affected on a daily basis by the release of these gasoline vapours and is not acceptable. These households, these neighbourhoods are daily affected by the negative consequences and by the threat that the release of these vapours into the atmosphere poses to their health and safety. So 10 years is much too long a period, but as I said, having expressed the reservation, the concern about the provision of the bill with respect to the 10-year period in which equipment is to be installed, I am happy to support Bill 202 and congratulate the Member for Edmonton-Norwood for having brought it forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to get up and address Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004.

I appreciate the sincerity with which the hon. member has brought forward this bill, but with the most honest and sincere intentions on my own part I'm unfortunately going to have to vote against this bill.

No one in this Assembly wants to harm the environment, and despite what the hon. opposition on that side of the House believes to be the exclusive domain of an opposition member, to defend the environment, my hon. colleagues and myself on this side of the aisle believe that in Alberta we need to balance the interests of Albertans with those of our surrounding environment, which means that you have to have a sustainable environment and economically viable as well. We all live here, we all must share our province, and we all care about it in ways such that none of us would ever do anything that would in any way hurt our province. Period. End of statement.

But the protection of the environment requires more consideration than interest groups and overly redundant bills. It requires, as our Minister of Environment has shown on countless occasions, a thoughtful and considerate approach. Bill 202 simply does not meet those requirements.

3:00

Mr. Bonner: That's not much support.

Ms Haley: Well, one is better than none, hon. member.

I could not agree more with the Member for Edmonton-Norwood that "leaving environmental issues until the problems stare us in the face can often lead to irreparable damage." In light of that, Mr. Speaker, I am glad that the Department of Environment, in conjunction with other partners, has taken key steps to address the issue of volatile organic compound emissions.

I would like to note that the following measures have been taken to help reduce the specific source of VOC emissions. Since 1998 all new vehicles are required to install on-board refuelling vapour recovery equipment that is aimed at reducing VOC emissions. The fuel dispensing rate during vehicle refuelling has been limited to help limit fuel spills and fuel spit back. During summer months fuel vapour pressure is reduced to help lower losses of gasoline vapours. Bottom loading of gasoline products at all terminals in Alberta is utilized, which helps to reduce VOCs during filling operations. Benzene concentrations in gasoline have been reduced to less than 1 per cent by volume since 1999.

In addition to that, Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment is working to establish a national framework to provide a plan and a strategy to set facility emission caps. It is expected that substantial reductions in air pollutant emissions will be achieved at Canada's refineries, including the three in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, it's quite a substantial list of initiatives to address a situation that accounts for less than 0.5 per cent of all VOC emissions in the province. While it should be strongly noted that the majority of emissions are from natural sources such as forest fires and vegetation, I think that the government should be congratulated for addressing the situation in such a thorough way.

Furthermore, while I readily admit that I am not an expert in chemistry, it is my understanding that atmospheric reactions that produce ozone are more sensitive to nitrogen oxide than VOCs. In other words, VOC reductions have only a small effect on ozone formation. Because the gasoline distribution sector contributes less than 0.5 per cent of the VOCs, the implementation of stage 1 controls will make little difference to ozone levels in Alberta.

So with the government already taking action on this matter and it appearing that there is no substantive benefit to the environment because of this bill, perhaps there must be another reason that we should be considering Bill 202. I note from some of the comments

of other hon. members that there could be some health issues involved with this bill. The central premise of these concerns seems to be centred on the dangerous nature of the chemicals involved in gasoline and the effects that VOCs might have in their interaction with other gases.

One of those chemicals is benzene, and though there can be no doubt that benzene is a dangerous chemical causing a host of symptoms and problems for those individuals exposed to large quantities of that substance, I wish to note once again that benzene concentrations in gasoline account for less than 1 per cent by volume. Furthermore, fuel distribution in Alberta now accounts for less than 0.1 per cent of total provincial benzene emissions.

I think it goes without saying, Mr. Speaker, that individual Albertans use common sense when filling their cars and are not subjecting themselves to these chemicals en masse. It also goes without saying that part of the reason that gas stations are so open in their construction is to allow fresh air to dilute and remove any vapours that may occur during this process. It's like a car garage; it is simply common sense that you do not leave the car running with the door closed.

I wish to note how strongly I object to any allusions to how by not passing this bill, people may develop cancer or that by not supporting this bill, somehow members would be supporting endangering people's lives. What utter rubbish. I strongly disapprove of suggestions like that, and to use inflammatory comments like that in this Chamber is just ludicrous.

Albertans need not stay up nights worrying that they are going to be exposed to the serious consequences of massive exposure to benzene simply by filling up their vehicles. I hardly think that those who should be protected, like children, are being routinely exposed to situations where high quantities of gasoline are being transferred, like refilling of a gas station by a refuelling truck. Suggesting otherwise suggests a serious lack of thoughtfulness and consideration of reality.

Concerns have also been raised in this debate that the emissions of VOCs contribute to low-level ozone problems and photochemical smog. There can be no doubt, Mr. Speaker, that when a massive forest fire happens, chemicals are released into the air that can have far-ranging effects. There are times throughout the year where health alerts are issued because the smoke and chemicals in the air are troublesome for those people with respiratory problems. Others during this time face common problems such as headaches, eye irritations, coughs, and other discomforts. To my knowledge no health alert has ever been issued for these sorts of situations occurring because of a transfer of gasoline.

Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, with there being no major health benefits or environmental merit to this bill, I fail to see any reason why members of this House should be supportive of implementing this proposed law, especially in light of the fact that industry is already moving on this issue without the assistance of government, implementing controls and standards that are further reducing these compounds.

I received a letter, as I'm sure most members of this Chamber did, from the Canadian Petroleum Products Institute. While they cover some of the areas that I've also mentioned, one of the comments that they did make was that when we estimate what it would cost in order to do this, a number of \$25 million is sort of bounced around as being possible for vapour recovery or vapour barriers. They also point out that the proclamation date on this bill is next January. You might want to keep that in mind because once you proclaim a bill, it actually becomes the law and that \$25 million needs to be spent now, in the next year or two. There are a lot of very small businesses out there, and this would cripple them.

Mr. Speaker, I can't emphasize strongly enough: I really sincerely hope that we defeat this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today to speak in favour of Bill 202, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood. I think that this bill has a lot of good intentions, and I think it's one that we should all carefully consider.

Our environment is our most precious resource, and I think we should work a little harder to protect it. That is one of the reasons why I respect this idea of Bill 202. The entire purpose of this bill is to reduce harmful gas vapour emissions that escape into our atmosphere, which can cause health concerns.

Mr. Speaker, reducing harmful emissions from escaping gas vapours may seem like a trivial thing to do, but it is something that can cause a lot of different problems. First of all, it is widely known that escaping vapours can contribute to smog problems.

Now, I don't know if any of the members have risen in the morning here in Edmonton and seen the smog that has settled over the city. I live on the 20th floor of a high-rise on the river edge overlooking the north part of the city. Every day there's a heavy layer of yellow-brown smog hanging over the city. [interjections] Well, it is that that has me worried, including that one across the way.

Smog can contribute to many different health problems. It can affect the way people live because they have to figure out how they can best breathe. I think that says a lot about our society, when we have to worry about whether it is safe to breathe outside or not.

Now, I'm not saying that pollution in Alberta has come to that. In fact, it's not even close. That smog I mentioned earlier is usually burned off and gone before lunch. But in other cities you can really see how pollution has affected the people of the city. I am a frequent traveller to Asia, particularly China, and people routinely walk around with masks over their faces. Of course, some are trying to avoid diseases, but for the most part they are trying to live through the thick pollution that has become part of their daily lives. In fact, I'm usually quite amused by western visitors there who are out jogging in the morning in that very thick smog.

This is why I think we should support Bill 202, not because our air is thick with pollutants that will harm our lungs but because it will prevent that from occurring. I think that the members present today should look at this bill as a proactive measure. I look at this bill as our government tackling a problem before it becomes a more serious problem for Albertans. Look at it as a first step in eliminating some of the contributing factors to smog in this province.

Stage 1 vapour control devices are not uncommon. Many different companies have voluntarily put this recovery system on their equipment to do their part for their environment. As well, there are a few other jurisdictions throughout North America that have legislated something similar to what Bill 202 is asking for today. One of these jurisdictions is the U.S. I would like to point out to members that nearly every single major metropolitan area in the U.S. has stage 1 vapour recovery legislation or regulations due to the increase in smog problems in American cities. However, if you look at this in the same light as something I said earlier, they were legislated as a reaction to the smog and health problems, not to prevent them.

3:10

As well, if one should look at some of the other provinces in Canada, one would see that B.C. and Ontario have some sort of

legislation to deal with smog. In British Columbia the government legislated it so that every service station, bulk plant, cargo truck, and terminal in lower mainland B.C. was equipped with stage 1 vapour recovery systems. This action was taken in 1995. The same sort of thing happened in Ontario in 1996. The Ontario government passed legislation requiring that all service stations, bulk plants, cargo trucks, and terminals be equipped with stage 1 vapour recovery systems in the southern Ontario corridor.

But, again, the problem with B.C. and Ontario is that they legislated this action because of the large pollution problem that was being experienced in both areas. In B.C. they were having all sorts of problems with pollution in the lower Fraser Valley area, so as a reaction they equipped everything they could with recovery systems that helped reduce the pollution. In Ontario it was the same thing. The Windsor/Quebec corridor had horrible pollution problems, so as a reaction to the problems, the government had to legislate systems that would be a solution to an increasing problem.

Mr. Speaker, there's nothing wrong with a government being a reactionary machine. However, when it comes to the environment, sometimes being reactionary is doing something when it's too late. It is up to us to take a step forward and begin tackling future problems head-on because I have no doubt in my mind that this province is going to grow like it has in the past five years and pollution is going to become a significant problem. I like the fact that the Member for Edmonton-Norwood has decided to be proactive and address this problem. This is our opportunity to do something now and be a leader while doing it.

I mentioned Ontario and B.C., but what I failed to mention is that the legislation they have passed only deals with certain areas within the province; it does not encompass the entire land. That is what is different about Bill 202: it encompasses the entire province. It makes sure that all entities that need this type of recovery system get it. Bill 202 makes us a leader in this country.

So it is with this, Mr. Speaker, that I will close my remarks. Bill 202 is a proactive solution to a problem that is growing. I urge all hon. members to join me in support of Bill 202. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate surrounding Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. I commend the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood for bringing this bill forward on behalf of his constituents.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is blessed with an abundance of natural beauty and pristine wild-land habitats. Albertans enjoy this beauty on a daily basis and understand that sound environmental practices are essential to preserve this landscape. As representatives of Albertans, it is our right and our duty to ensure that proper legislation is in place to protect the awesome natural spaces in our province.

The government has not taken this responsibility lightly. Indeed, good environmental stewardship has been a cornerstone of our government for the past decade. Our government has equipped our park wardens, police officers, transportation constables, and other agencies with the tools that they need to ensure the preservation of our environment. These acts and regulations govern practices concerning everything from the handling and disposal of pesticides to the requirements that must be met for an oil pipeline to be built.

Mr. Speaker, I can well remember my days in the oil patch jeeping pipes and taping them to ensure a permanent seal. Being from oil country, we know and apply environmental regulations on a daily basis. Government strategies outlined in the throne speech show our

government's continued dedication to good environmental practices and to planning for the future. The creation of a water council and expanded research into alternative energy sources speak louder than words that the Alberta government takes its commitment to the environment seriously.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood is sponsoring legislation that would add to these measures that are currently in place to protect the health of our environment. As we have heard from other members, Bill 202 aims to tackle the problem of gasoline vapours that escape from tanker trucks and storage tanks during the refuelling process. These vapours do contain harmful hydrocarbons such as benzene and other contaminants such as volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. As I have previously mentioned, preserving the health of the environment has been of the utmost importance to our government.

Another issue that is of the highest priority is preserving the health of Albertans. This year alone our province will spend in excess of \$7 billion providing health care to Albertans. No one can doubt how important health is to the government or to Albertans. This is why it is so important to recognize the essence of Bill 202. Benzene, one of the chemicals found in fuel vapours, is a known carcinogen, and VOCs cause the formation of ground level ozone. Both of these chemicals are detrimental to Albertans' health. By limiting the amount of these chemicals being released into the air, the health risks that Albertans are exposed to would be reduced. We're not talking about harmless vapours here; this is serious stuff.

Mr. Speaker, other jurisdictions have taken steps to pass legislation similar to Bill 202. The Windsor to Quebec City corridor in eastern Canada and the Fraser Valley in British Columbia have both enacted legislation concerning the use of stage 1 vapour recovery systems. Now, anyone that has visited these areas is aware of the level of pollution present and the regularity with which smog will form.

I know we don't have those same pollution levels here, but Bill 202 attempts to deal with the issue of airborne pollutants in Alberta before they reach a level that is insurmountable. The ambient air quality in Alberta is good the majority of the time. The Environmental Protection and Enhancement Amendment Act will help our air quality remain at the high level that it is today.

As with most problems, the longer you ignore it, the more difficult it becomes to deal with. The other jurisdictions that have passed this legislation have realized that the hard way. The problems that they experienced with smog and air pollutants have fully matured, and they are now fighting a much larger problem. Bill 202 could deal with the problem of airborne contaminants from fuel vapour entering the atmosphere while it is still in its infant stage. We can learn from the delays of other areas so that we are not caught in the same situation.

Mr. Speaker, there have been concerns raised about the financial burden that this bill will bring to certain Albertans, and I am concerned too. I understand that the total cost of implementing the measures suggested by Bill 202 has been estimated at \$25 million. To put this into perspective, it costs just over \$20 million to keep our health care system running for one day. Now, this being a leap year, it was a particularly expensive year for health care. A one-time expense of \$25 million in that light does not seem too high to help protect the health of the environment and ourselves, and there's a possibility that we could find some innovative ways to phase this in or to possibly call on the federal government to help.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this matter, and I'm anxious to hear other comments as this debate continues. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to speak to Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. First, I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood for bringing forward this bill. It is an attempt to improve the long-term health of our environment and, of course, of our citizens.

I agree with the goal of the bill, which is to reduce emissions of volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, as well as carcinogenic hydrocarbons – and if you can't pronounce it, it just can't be good – which occur in part when we fill the tanks of our vehicles. There is little doubt in my mind that government needs to be cognizant of the environmental damage and serious health concerns that are associated with such pollutants. Benzene is the most potent carcinogen found in fuel vapour and is a danger to human health. It is released into the air during the refuelling process of the underground or above-ground storage tanks at gas stations.

At many locations in the United States and the lower mainland of British Columbia and even southern Ontario legislation has been created to require all service stations to be equipped with stage 1 vapour recovery systems to combat smog and air quality problems. Obviously, this approach has been part of a solution in other jurisdictions as well.

3:20

The member's attempt to take a proactive approach towards this issue is admirable, rather than implementing such a regulation, like these other jurisdictions did, after the problem occurred. However, Mr. Speaker, I cannot lend my support to this bill.

Requiring all gasoline service stations, fuel cargo trucks, and terminals to install stage 1 vapour recovery systems by 2014 comes with a huge economic price tag. I do not believe that the costs that would be associated with this mandatory switch reflect appropriately the amount of environmental improvement we would see in the province of Alberta. There are other ways of dealing with this problem, avenues that the Alberta government has already undertaken. We would be better served by placing our resources and efforts behind more proven methods of reducing emissions into the air.

I also cannot support Bill 202 because legislation is not warranted in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, the United States, Ontario, and even British Columbia were forced into implementing this measure for reasons of geographic location. They have been deemed, in quotations, ozone nonattainment areas and have a history of producing incidences of smog formation during the summer months. According to the Department of Environment's annual report for 2002-2003, the air quality index report in Alberta was good 97 per cent of the time. This is partly because Alberta's physical location and characteristics do not substantially contribute to the problem of smog formation.

Also, Mr. Speaker, I believe that most gas stations will undergo these changes without legislation as they replace their tanks in the future. In Alberta since 1997 most new gas stations have been constructed with a vapour recovery system. This makes up 27 per cent of the total number of tanks already. In this time frame we saw a significant improvement in the percentage of gas tanks that include stage 1 vapour recovery components.

The industry has already recognized its responsibility to improve the equipment it uses for its respective businesses. Petro-Canada, for example, uses tank equipment with vapour recovery technology when replacing all old tanks. This trend suggests that future improvements in this area will be made without government intervention.

It is also important to note, Mr. Speaker, that only a very small percentage of VOC emissions result from the gasoline distribution sector. In fact, this portion of the industry is only responsible for half a per cent of the estimated VOC emissions in the province. The majority of the emissions are produced by naturally occurring phenomena such as forest fires and vegetation. The fact that the transfer of fuel is such a minuscule portion of VOC emissions coupled with the fact that the changes contained in Bill 202 are destined to occur regardless leads me to believe that Bill 202 is simply unnecessary legislation.

To illustrate this point further, according to Environment Canada, 753 tonnes of VOC emissions are produced in Alberta each year from dry cleaning. This is nearly 8 per cent of the amount produced by fuel marketing, as it is estimated at 9,678 tonnes. Is it necessary to take action on something as innocuous as the dry cleaning industry? I suggest not. Proscribed burns in the province account for 5,808 tonnes of Alberta's VOC emissions, or over one-half of the amount produced by fuel marketing. Do we need to change these procedures? To put this in perspective even further, forest fires dwarf all other categories when it comes to VOC emissions, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to take this opportunity today to talk about some of the initiatives currently being undertaken by the provincial and federal governments surrounding this issue. I believe that these initiatives better address the problem of VOC emissions as well as carcinogenic hydrocarbons. The Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment is attempting to provide a methodology and framework to reduce VOC emissions that occur in Canada's refineries. The National Framework for Petroleum Refinery Emission Reductions will expand on Alberta's success in making our air cleaner.

It is also a good example of directing efforts where the most good can be done. For example, in 1995, Mr. Speaker, the total industrial and mobile industrial emission of benzene and ambient benzene in the province was 11,962 tonnes. Following the initiatives outlined in the ratified Canada-wide standards created by the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, the Alberta government focused on reducing emissions in three different sectors: natural gas hydrators, petroleum refineries, and chemical manufacturing plants. Overall emissions from industry and mobile sources in Alberta have been reduced by 50 per cent during this time period as well.

Closer to the gas station question emissions are being reduced in many different ways. The rate at which fuel is dispensed through a gas pump has limited fuel spills and fuel spit back. During the hotter months fuel vapour pressure is reduced to lower the loss of gasoline vapours. The number of above-ground storage tanks in Alberta has been reduced. Bottom loading of gasoline at all terminals in Alberta reduces fuel vapours during filling operations, and the reduction of benzene concentration in gasoline to less than 1 per cent means that fuel distribution in Alberta now accounts for less than 0.1 per cent of total provincial benzene emissions. It is important to add, Mr. Speaker, that vehicles built after 1998 require on-board stage 2 vapour recovery.

Much effort has gone towards resolving the problem of releasing VOC emissions and carcinogenic hydrocarbons at fuelling stations. In addition to the fact that VOC reductions have only a small effect on ozone formation and that the gasoline distribution sector contributes less than 0.4 per cent of VOCs, making stage 1 vapour recovery mandatory seems like overkill.

Mr. Speaker, I have already outlined that the industry is slowly moving towards a stage 1 vapour recovery system on its own. As new gas stations are built, this technology is being implemented anyhow. As old tanks are being replaced, this technology is being

implemented as well. To put a timeline on some small business owners to make these upgrades is simply unfair. Independent gas stations may be seriously put back when they receive a \$10,000 to \$30,000 bill for having their service station retrofitted.

Implementation of stage 1 vapour recovery controls in Alberta would cost in excess of \$25 million. That cost would be initially placed on businesses but would eventually be placed onto consumers as well. Industry is already moving in this direction, and legislation would only hurt Albertans.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

In the end, Mr. Speaker, Bill 202 would have little impact on the environment, especially when it comes to the air we breathe as Albertans. The burden that business owners within the gasoline distribution industry would have to bear far outweighs the positive effect of Bill 202 and the effect that it could produce. Therefore, I cannot give my support to this particular initiative.

I would like to conclude by saying that the intentions of this bill are honourable, and I believe that when it comes to our environment, it is important to have these discussions, especially at the government level, but at this point I would urge all members of this Assembly to not support this particular bill.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. Ouellette: Good afternoon, and thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and join the debate on Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood. As co vice-chair of Climate Change Central I find it important that I rise this afternoon and discuss Bill 202 and its relation to the strategic plans and goals outlined through Climate Change Central.

What is being proposed through Bill 202 is part of what Climate Change Central is already working towards at a sustainable pace for all parties involved. The government of Alberta recognized back in 1998 that global climate change is a serious problem and responded by forming Canada's first committee concerned specifically with taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

3:30

Climate Change Central is a unique public/private partnership that promotes the development of innovative responses to global climate change and its impacts. Climate Change Central builds links and relationships between businesses, governments, and other stakeholders in Alberta interested in pursuing greenhouse gas reduction initiatives.

Climate change is one of the key environmental and economic challenges for Canada and the world in the new millennium, and Albertans have proven themselves leaders in developing creative solutions to climate change. Climate Change Central is born of this leadership. Through accomplishing the goals and following our established strategic plans, we will ensure that innovative solutions continue to accelerate Alberta's environmental economic opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta as an acknowledged world leader has achieved zero net greenhouse gas emissions while enhancing the province's economic performance, quality of life, and ability to adapt to climate change effects. As we have heard throughout the debate concerning Bill 202, volatile organic compounds are emitted from a number of sources, and the proposed legislation would only target 0.5 per cent of those emissions.

Climate Change Central is taking a much broader, vaster look at Alberta's environment, and we are attacking the threats to Albertans and the safety of their environment on a much larger scale than is proposed in this legislation. I commend the hon. member for bringing this issue to the attention of the Assembly and all Albertans, but I believe that provincial policies that are already in place are far more effective at accomplishing these goals than the regulation proposed in Bill 202. One of the main reasons for this is because Climate Change Central is a private/public partnership, which means it is a co-ordinated, collaborative partnership amongst Albertans and with world-wide stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is also important to acknowledge that much of Alberta's industry is dependent on the province's natural resources, and we have to keep this in mind as we tackle these issues. It is necessary that a balance remains and that all parties affected are consulted, resulting in a consensus on how to effect the most positive change while maintaining a strong economy.

The strategic plan provided by Climate Change Central is a road map for transforming our mandate into reality. I encourage all members not to support Bill 202, not because we aren't concerned with the environment but because the proposed targets are already part of a larger plan through Climate Change Central, one that takes into account the well-being of all Albertans, the environment, as well as the province's economic performance.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and good afternoon. I welcome the opportunity to join debate on Bill 202, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement (Vapour Control Equipment) Amendment Act, 2004. As we've heard previously, Bill 202 would, if passed and proclaimed, require gas stations, fuel trucks, and petrochemical terminals to be equipped with stage 1 vapour recovery systems by 2014.

There's no question that one of the most pressing issues of our time is the environment, and in recent years this Legislature has grappled with a variety of measures to enhance Alberta's environment ranging from safeguards surrounding our clean water supply to how to handle all chemicals and how to preserve and improve air quality. We do this not just because Albertans want us to protect the environment but because it's the right thing to do. However, doing the right thing is not as simple as it seems sometimes. The key is to balance the benefits against all of the associated costs of the environmental initiative.

On one hand, we have to be mindful of our province's economic growth and health. It's a well-known fact, Mr. Speaker, that in the course of the last 10 or 12 years the Alberta economy has not only recovered from being burdened by significant debt and deficits, but also the province has gained both a national and international reputation as Canada's economic powerhouse, all the while developing and ensuring that Alberta's industries and businesses work and grow under some of the most stringent and responsible environmental legislation in the world. For this reason it is vital that the policies we set and follow are those which will not harm or even reverse the progress we have made since the early 1990s: solid growth and sound environmental policy.

On the other hand, we must always take the necessary steps and precautions to make sure that we do as little damage to the environment as possible and that if that damage occurs, we can restore it to its original state. I will, Mr. Speaker, admit that sometimes the restoration appears to do more damage than the problem.

We have come quite a way and made significant progress in recognizing the impact our actions and policies have on the environment. There was a time not too long ago when very little thought was given to the environment, and as a result of this, tremendous damage has been done to many facets of our environment. At the time I think we thought that humans were the only important species on the planet. By the middle of the 20th century, however, a collective consciousness concerning the environment was well underway. We learned about DDT, lead, sulphur dioxide and other airborne particles, and the ozone. We realized the importance of preserving the rain forest, and we know that finding alternative sources of fuel makes for good policy and a healthier environment.

Thus, much like the proverbial stone that doesn't gather any moss, there was little stopping the environmental awareness that was gaining ground. Both here at home and elsewhere in our country and around the world laws and regulations have been enacted to preserve and safeguard the environment. We are, in other words, trying to find ways to maintain our standard of living and improve the quality of our environment. We owe it to future generations to leave the Earth in at least as good a shape as we found it, particularly because we don't own the environment; we're merely its stewards for the time that we are here.

So, Mr. Speaker, perhaps the right question to ask is not why we should care about the environment but how. Developing policies and passing laws that may or may not have the desired impact is tantamount to bad governance and a breach of public trust. Bad facts make bad laws. No matter how well intended the initiative might otherwise be, sometimes it's not even a matter of bad facts making bad laws but the lack of facts that result in laws that may not quite do what they were intended to do, and so it is, in my opinion, with Bill 202. I have no concerns at all about the hon. member's intentions. To the contrary, I know that the spirit in which he introduced the bill is commendable.

Quite clearly, Mr. Speaker, the VOCs and hydrocarbons may present a problem, but that is not the question. There can, however, be a question about whether Bill 202 would contribute significantly towards reducing the presence of these emissions. Based on the available research, I do not believe that Bill 202 would yield outcomes where a net reduction of these pollutants would be achieved at a responsible price. It's simply a question of balance.

This government has always believed that business performance will be optimized when the government takes a collective and constructive approach, when there is a legal and regulatory framework established over the years by successive governments on the federal, the provincial, and the civic levels. We should continue to work carefully and responsibly with all stakeholders when developing legislation. Aside from the fact that petrochemical refineries in Alberta must be approved, regulated, and certified under the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, stage 1 vapour recovery has never been legislated in Alberta.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, while I very much appreciate the hon. member's intentions and applaud him for drawing attention to the issue of the VOCs by introducing Bill 202, I fail to see that the bill would provide additional remedies to an already recognized problem. I believe that the cost to Alberta citizens that would be associated with the bill would far surpass any benefit, the amount of which could most definitely be put to better use. For these reasons I cannot support Bill 202.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: If there are no further speakers, I would call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood to close debate.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, holy smoke, I've sure got a lot of whining to do to convince a lot of people that this is the right thing to do. I should start by saying that anybody who is not supporting it is not breaking the law, because the Canadian Constitution says that we have the right to be wrong. So to those who don't wish to support the bill, you're all right within your scope of competence.

I might have to remind hon. members of the difference between CO₂ and benzene. Benzene is C₆H₆, which is one carbon atom for one hydrogen atom, so it's like a snake chasing its tail. It goes around and around. Mr. Speaker, at the same time, when Climate Change Central was mentioned by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, it does not reflect the poisons here on ground level. Climate change has no relationship whatsoever with benzene. Benzene is a poison that poisons the very fabric of our society.

3:40

Even the Ministry of Children's Services has amended the name from fetal alcohol syndrome to fetal alcohol spectrum, and I could see another amendment by talking to that department that it should be fetal volatile organic compounds spectrum because children are being affected, they're finding out, by these compounds that are in gasoline.

Yeah, maybe we should throw a cape over industry and weigh that against health, but at the same time when we're called to be stewards of the environment and stewards of the taxpayer and do a cross-ministry analysis when we bring a bill forward, then when these are all weighed out – and I've just proclaimed myself as an expert in this field, so when an expert brings forward evidence saying that this is what needs to be done, that should be weighed out. Well, Mr. Speaker, by being an expert in this field and over members who are not experts, I have to enlighten them that passing Bill 202 is the right thing.

Mr. Speaker, I have to really commend all the members who spoke in favour of it and also the ones that spoke against it, because we're getting value out of our debates, and it puts the pressure back on me to reiterate to the ones that spoke against it to try and educate them. I don't have a chalkboard or a chunk of chalk on me to go through what's needed, and maybe I erred in this area, thinking that wisdom would prevail, but the emphasis is on me, ultimately, to get this bill passed.

I have it in my hand. It says "bill" because it's not passed yet, but it's pretty skinny, and I'm not asking for too much. At the same time it's cheap. It's only \$20 million. It's expensive on one side, Mr. Speaker, because it's going to save lives. It's going to change the quality of lives, and it means that we're going to move into the next century. When fossil fuels become obsolete or at one point where you can't give them away, then how are we going to introduce nuclear energy? At some point in the centuries to come we're going to have to face nuclear energy. So if you can't face and correct things as you're using a product today, how in the world are you going to go into the future?

Mr. Speaker, on that note I'd like to ask all hon. members on all sides to support this bill and at the same time not to mix up, from the minister, who's shaking his head at me, the difference between CO₂ and benzene. We're not trying to change the climate temperatures. We're trying to make the ground-level ozone down here on Earth – as a matter of fact, on A-Channel on Wednesday it was ground-level ozone, the smog in the air, that contributed to the fog, which was actually smog, and it rhymes. That's what it was.

So as the population is growing, at that rate in 2014 it's not going to be the same amount of people here today. We're not going to have the same amount of gas stations. The reason I took the liberty

to extend it to 2014 is out of the kindness of my heart. When people are going to replace the gas stations, it's going to be, coincidentally, the same time that the bill is going to engage. Now, it doesn't get any better than that.

An Hon. Member: It doesn't really?

Mr. Masyk: No, not really.

These tanks have a shelf life, so after starting the shelf life – that's why the timing is essential.

So, Mr. Speaker, I look around at all my colleagues that are elected to do the right thing and be good stewards and vote in favour of this bill. Thank you very much.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:45 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Bonner	MacDonald	Masyk
Carlson	Maskell	Pannu
Lord		

Against the motion:

Ady	Herard	Norris
Broda	Horner	O'Neill
Cenaiko	Hutton	Ouellette
Coutts	Jonson	Renner
DeLong	Kryczka	Snelgrove
Doerksen	Lougheed	Stelmach
Evans	Lukaszuk	Stevens
Forsyth	Magnus	Strang
Friedel	Marz	Tannas
Griffiths	McClelland	Taylor
Haley	McFarland	VanderBurg
Hancock	Melchin	Vandermeer

Totals:	For – 7	Against – 36
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[Motion for second reading of Bill 202 lost]

Bill 203

Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise in the Assembly today to sponsor and begin the discussion and debate for Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. At this time I would like to thank the Member for Calgary-Lougheed for introducing Bill 203 on my behalf last Thursday, February 26, 2004. I would also like to thank Andrea Hennig, researcher, for her diligence and interest in the development of Bill 203 and to all individual researchers involved in developing speaking notes for second reading today.

The intent of Bill 203 is to give Albertans the informed and mutually agreed choice whether to split their Canada pension plan

benefits following relationship breakdown of marital or common-law spouses. Bill 203 amends both the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act in order to allow for spousal agreements, agreements made between married or common-law partners upon divorce or separation, which would waive the right to or interest in any future division of a pension entitlement under the Canada pension plan.

Mr. Speaker, in introducing and discussing Bill 203, it is very important to provide some background information on Canadian pension plan credit splitting. The CPP began some 38 years ago, in 1966, as a compulsory contributory program that would provide benefits in the event of retirement, disability, or death of a contributor. The CPP records your contributions over the years as pension credits. When you apply for a benefit, the CPP uses these credits to determine your entitlement. Generally, the more credits you have built up, the higher your benefits or the larger your CPP cheque each month.

CPP benefits can be divided between spouses when a marriage or relationship dissolves. Any pension credits that were accumulated during the relationship will be equally divided if an application is filed to the CPP by an ex-spouse. This division pertains regardless if one or both parties pay into the CPP and does not account for differences in contributions paid into the pension plan. The credits are added together and then equally split between parties. It is this division that is referred to as credit splitting. Mr. Speaker, I would like to stress that the credit split only pertains to those credits built up during the time span that the couple was together.

According to CPP legislation amendments made in 1987, the credit splitting provision became mandatory. However, automatic splitting of CPP benefits is not occurring, and the correct documentation still needs to be received by the federal minister responsible for the CPP Act in order for ex-spouses or separated couples to split their credits. To date there have been no mechanisms employed to trigger this automatic split. Furthermore, the CPP does not disclose a projected time frame or limit or an implementation process for when the automatic split will occur.

4:00

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 is based on the premise that divorcing spouses and separating partners are in the best position to make decisions about the division of their assets, investments, and pensions, including CPP credits. Traditionally most aspects of the division of family property between spouses on marriage breakdown are subject to an agreement. The resulting spousal agreements or contracts are a practical and preferred way of giving choice and allowing divorcing parties to resolve their differences. Bill 203 offers a similar approach with regard to CPP benefits rather than the current state of uncertainty and possible future surprises to an ex-spouse.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

In reality, the decision to split CPP credits does not have to be mutual. It can be dependent on the choice or decision of one party and does not have to consider the other's wishes. Only one of the ex-spouses needs to apply for the split. The consent of the other individual is not mandatory. The division will occur regardless if the other party objects. He or she has no mechanism in which to stop or negotiate this process. In many cases the application is filed by one party with the other individual completely unaware of the filing. It is first brought to his or her attention when he or she receives a notice in the mail explaining that his or her next CPP cheque will be divided and a portion of the benefits will be given to the ex-spouse.

Mr. Speaker, it should also be noted that there is no time limit to restrict former spouses or partners from applying for the benefit. The divorce or separation may have been settled 15 years or more previously, but if the application is filed, it will be granted. Bill 203 acknowledges that in marital or common-law relationships both spouses share in building assets and entitlements, including CPP credits. The bill recognizes the financial protection mechanism of the CPP credit-splitting program, but it also values the importance of flexibility for spouses to choose which assets or investments are most beneficial to each party when settling divorce or separation proceedings.

It is important to stress that Bill 203 is not about favouring one party over another. It does not devalue the importance of the spouse, male or female, who works inside the home to contribute to the family. Rather, this legislation simply allows couples to mutually agree on whether to split or not to split their CPP benefit during divorce negotiations and finalizing of the agreement, depending on which is in their own best interest.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out that spousal agreements revolving around or that include splitting CPP benefits already take place in the province, and as a general practice separation and divorce agreements include a general waiver signed by both parties against any future claims, but a major problem lies in the validity of these waivers. Since Alberta does not have provincial opt-out legislation in place, the waiver and the agreement become void. Therefore, if an ex-spouse discovers that he or she can apply to receive a CPP benefit regardless of the terms of an existing spousal agreement or waiver, it will be granted.

In some cases spouses will even intentionally enter into spousal agreements knowing that they can later apply for credit splitting. They will have initially negotiated to give up CPP benefits in exchange for other equity or assets, but once the divorce agreement is finalized, they will then at any time in the future submit the application to receive half of the combined total of the CPP entitlement.

Mr. Speaker, another problem exists with mutually agreed divorce agreements or contracts. If the Canada pension plan should take steps to ensure the mandatory splitting of CPP credits as currently legislated, the CPP will override the actual intentions of the signing parties. All waivers could be void regardless of the parties' original wishes as stated in the agreement. Bill 203 remedies the problem of void waivers in spousal agreements. This bill provides the legislation necessary for these agreements to remain legitimate. In other words, if an automatic mechanism were to be implemented by the CPP, the agreements made by divorced or separated couples would continue to be honoured.

Mr. Speaker, I understand that some members may feel that the CPP is under federal jurisdiction and that, therefore, we shouldn't get involved. However, section 55.2 of the CPP legislation allows for provinces to opt out of the credit-splitting program if certain criteria are met. One of the provisions of section 55.2 states that spousal agreements must be allowed by provincial law. Bill 203 would provide the necessary provincial legislation to opt out and give permanent legitimacy to spousal agreements.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I would like to stress that Bill 203 is about giving Albertans clear and informed choice. It allows couples to come to a mutually agreed decision on how to best divide all of their assets rather than the federal government choosing for them at some future date. With Bill 203 in place Albertans can choose in the spousal agreement to opt out of the program or decide to split their CPP benefit, whichever they determine is in their best interests. Either way, this legislation would deal with CPP benefits up front through mutual agreement and at the time of divorce settlement.

I look forward to the discussion by my hon. colleagues on this matter. I encourage all members of this House to support Bill 203, Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, and therefore I move second reading of this bill.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak to Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. I will support this bill, and I encourage each of my colleagues to do so as well.

My reasons for supporting this partly stem from the fact that I consider myself a conservative thinker. This bill places decision-making in the hands of the two individuals who choose to make a contract and, thus, takes the government out of the nuts and bolts of decision-making and places it in its proper context as a facilitator and enforcer of just contracts.

Before I get into that in a little more detail, I'd like to talk a little bit about the idea of divorce as well as the idea of placing something that is considered a social benefit inside the parameters of a divorce settlement. Divorces are not pretty. They aren't planned, and it is always a tragedy when a relationship breaks down, especially when families are involved, Mr. Speaker. But whatever the reasons for divorce they are rarely our business as a government.

So while I would agree that this government ought to make legislation that makes things easier on families, I cannot agree with those people who would suggest that we should not pass this bill because it makes divorce easier or legitimates divorce. Divorce is legitimate, and in many cases it ought to be made easy. An individual or couple has that choice, and when that choice is made, the government ought to be there to maintain a consistent system and set of rules within which the divorce proceedings take place. That is one definite benefit of Bill 203.

Furthermore, some will suggest that we shouldn't pass this bill because it takes a social benefit intended to be shared by a couple, a Canada pension plan security, and separates it within the negotiations that are part and parcel of divorce proceedings. A part of that argument is sound, and it is clear that the sponsor of the bill believes so as well. After all, the bill has as a sort of default position that Canada pension plan benefits earned during the years of marriage shall be split evenly, but importantly, Mr. Speaker, unless both sides agree to a different arrangement.

That's a good starting point because it does two things. It first affirms the value of a social program like the Canada pension plan, and second, it places agreement as the centrepiece of any change in the status quo. So if there is no agreed-upon separation of Canada pension plan benefits, the status quo remains.

However, there is a part of this argument against this bill that is somewhat suspect, especially here in Alberta. If it is argued that Canada pension plan benefits should not be split because they are part of an overall social program, then is it also the case that we ought to let overall state considerations trump an agreement between individuals even in cases when no other people or persons than the two of them making the agreement are affected?

Nobody other than the two divorcees are affected if Canada pension plan benefits are split. Nobody else's benefits are taken away from them with this bill. In fact, more people are harmed by the poor management of the Canada plan than by this bill. Because of that poor management, more and more working Canadians are being forced to pay higher and higher premiums to keep the bankrupt plan alive. If we are forcing Canadians to pay more, shouldn't we do what we can to let them do what they like with their benefits?

4:10

I would also argue, Mr. Speaker, that reopening old wounds is not beneficial to a newly separated individual trying to make the past go behind them. It is difficult enough to go through these procedures of divorce and the tragedy of a separation, then reopen that wound as a surprise, as my hon. colleague mentioned, down the road.

The Canada pension plan is not a state freebie. Somebody pays for it. In fact, every working Canadian pays for it, not only for the purpose of helping out the less fortunate but also for the purpose of saving for their own retirement and for the retirement of their spouse. I'm not the sort of person who says that working Canadians shouldn't be contributing towards the well-being of seniors, but I am the sort that believes each Canadian should have the opportunity to do with their own benefits as they see fit, and each family or divorced family should have the opportunity to do with their benefits as they have agreed. After all, at some point after paying in for years and years, shouldn't the average Canadian have the right to say, "That benefit is mine"? Shouldn't the average family be able to say that that benefit is theirs?

Those who argue that this bill might put grandmothers on the street do so to confuse the issue. There is a social component to the Canada pension plan, but there is also an individual component, and we would do well to remember that. In our province we value the goal of individual self-reliance. Part of being self-reliant is being trusted by the government to make legal decisions and agreements with the heavy hand of the state becoming involved only when the agreements that are based upon law are separated or if one person dupes another person into an agreement that holds no legal standing.

In fact, Bill 203 is tackling such an inequity. Right now many lawyers believe that couples can split Canada pension plan benefits in whichever manner they choose. Many of these same lawyers only learn afterwards that such agreements are not backed up by law and so are not entirely legitimate. It's in cases like this that the government ought to become involved and change the rules so that they are consistent and can be applied consistently.

We have, as the sponsor has noted, two choices available to us. We could outlaw any splitting of Canada pension plan benefits, or we could make legal and consistent rules governing the splitting of benefits, which Bill 203 asks us to do. By choosing an avenue under which the government makes legal and consistent rules regarding the splitting of Canada pension plan benefits in divorce proceedings, Bill 203 puts government in its rightful place as the facilitator of a consistent environment in which individuals make decisions and agreements.

Further, government is one more move away from being a tool of social engineers. That's actually the major reason I support this bill. It is in keeping with this government's ethic of promoting individual responsibility. Our government has promoted self-reliance as a key piece of our policy for quite some time now. It is the engine behind our touting the lowest taxes in Canada, it is something that we measure in relation to the standard of living, and it is the basis on which we promote a government that allows choice, entrepreneurship, and the ability to make a good life for oneself in whatever field is chosen. It should also be considered when we look at legislation like Bill 203.

What we are doing in Bill 203 is noting that within a divorce proceeding various different things are up for negotiation: investments, alimony, assets such as houses and cars not to mention cottages and boats, and the appropriate child support level as well as other bargaining items that are brought into play. It may seem cold to speak of bargaining items, but let's not lose sight of what is going on within a divorce proceeding. Each partner is attempting to secure a good outcome for themselves from the proceedings, and it is true

that not every divorce proceeding goes off without a hitch. While it may not be the best arrangement – it would be better, I suppose, if we were proceeding with amicable relationships – it is ultimately up to the two parties involved to choose the assets that will be divided. As pension benefits are considered assets, then they should be well within the scope of assets to be divided and agreed upon.

In that light, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of the House to join me in supporting Bill 203.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and speak to Bill 203. This is a bill that I feel is necessary and one that should be supported mostly for the common-sense principles that it is based upon. This is a very simple piece of legislation. It is one which does not bring much confusion to an issue that on the surface seems to need a solution.

Currently in Alberta when a divorce occurs, spouses sit down and divide everything. It is not a fun time, I am sure. It is something that must happen and it is necessary for fairness on all sides. However, during divorce proceedings sometimes things get overlooked, and that is where this bill tries to bring some simplicity to the situation.

Right now it is conceivable for partners to agree to something during a divorce proceeding, and then one of the parties involved can renege on that agreement. This is seen in the splitting of Canada pension plan benefits. In Alberta it is mandatory for CPP to be split upon divorce, either by an agreement by two parties or by application of one of the ex-partners. That being said, it may be mandatory, but the automatic splitting of CPP credits is not occurring.

What is interesting to note is that it can happen to those involved in a divorce who may decide not to split up the pension credits that were accrued during a marriage. Here is an example. Let's say Mr. and Mrs. Smith, for whatever reason, after 10 years of marriage decide to get a divorce. In the proceedings it is decided between the two parties that Mrs. Smith would keep her full CPP benefits and that they will not split them because Mr. Smith gets the boat, the car, and the dog. It is agreed that Mrs. Smith gets to keep the full pension because she was the primary breadwinner, made the contributions to the plan, and Mr. Smith doesn't want the CPP benefits anyway.

Well, then, 20 years later Mr. Smith decides, upon discovering that he should right any wrong that may or may not have occurred to him, that he should have gotten half of the CPP benefits. So Mr. Smith makes an application 20 years after the fact to obtain half of Mrs. Smith's CPP credits. Mr. Speaker, he will get half of the CPP benefit accumulated during the marriage because that is the way the law is set up in this province at this time. It is completely unfair because these two parties had already agreed not to split the CPP benefits, yet one party has an entire lifetime to change his or her mind. Granted, the party will only receive what has accrued during the marriage, but again one can come back and claim what had been settled previously.

A funny thing about this is that at the federal level there is a mechanism in the CPP legislation that allows the provinces to opt out of CPP credit splitting, and what is required for it to happen is for the province to pass the pertinent legislation, which is what we are looking to do here today.

Bill 203 is an excellent idea because it gives spouses or ex-spouses, as it were, the ability to make the agreements binding instead of just having to trust that one party won't decide to apply for the split. One of the main objectives of this bill, which I think is

very good, is that it requires CPP issues to be dealt with at the time of divorce, not 20 years later but at the time when the house, kids, dog, boat, and finances are all being divvied up.

This is all about flexibility, Mr. Speaker. It gives spouses the ability to agree between themselves what they want to do with all of their assets including their Canada pension plan benefits. You can see how this just makes common sense. With all the confusion that surrounds divorce, this bill sets down the rules for division so that every person involved – lawyers, spouses, representatives, and family members – all know and understand what is happening. Unfortunately, that is something that just doesn't occur today as the rules and laws are a bit confusing. At the very least this bill clears that part up.

Mr. Speaker, again, this is a simple piece of legislation. It doesn't really intrude into the lives of Albertans. We aren't sticking our fingers where they don't belong either. We have to remember that federal legislation allows this to happen as long as we pass our own law. Now is the time for us to pass that law. I can't really figure out what kept us from doing this for so long.

It is unfortunate as well to note that Alberta won't even be leading Canada in this regard as there are a few jurisdictions in this country that have legislated similar laws and have had very few, if any, problems with them. British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Quebec with the Quebec pension plan have all taken strides to ensure that couples going through a divorce have the option not to split their benefits. Manitoba is currently going through a trial process to see if such legislation is beneficial to their province. In all cases there have been very few problems with the decision that the policy-makers have made in this regard.

4:20

This bill is just a very simple procedure that should get full and unanimous support from all sides of this House. I think that giving the choice to people whether or not they wish to do something is better than forcing them to do it, which is the way it is currently legislated. The CPP has legislated the mandatory split, meaning you have to split it. Keep in mind that I am not an advocate for divorce, but I do realize that divorces have happened and will happen, and when it does happen, each ex-spouse must be treated equally and fairly.

Mr. Speaker, as I conclude today, I hope that all the hon. members will realize why this bill should be passed, and I hope that it gets unanimous support of this Assembly. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise today and join the debate on Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-West. What this bill brings to mind as I read through it is choice, the choice for Albertans to decide whether or not to split their Canada pension plan credits upon a divorce or separation.

Currently, as we have heard, those Albertans that contributed to CPP are allowed to split their accrued pensionable earnings or credits. Effective January 1, 1987, amendments were passed concerning credit-splitting provisions which made credit splitting mandatory for divorces or legal annulments occurring on or after the amendment date. Credit splitting was also expanded to include separations of legally married or common-law spouses.

Mr. Speaker, the word "mandatory" seems like a fairly strict and strong word. One would assume that this type of language would

imply that credit splitting is not an option and that it must be adhered to. This, however, is not necessarily the case. One of the problems with CPP credit splitting that needs to be discussed deals with documentation. Because credit splitting has become mandatory, neither spouse in a divorce situation should be required to submit an application. As I see it, that would take the mandatory out of the process.

However, it is necessary for the spouse requesting the division of pension credits to provide the required information and documentation to the federal minister responsible for the CPP. This is a main point of confusion for me, and it begs the question: what is the difference between submitting an application and submitting the required information and documentation? Isn't it feasible to assume that by submitting the required information and documentation, one would be applying for CPP credit splitting? As I see it, Mr. Speaker, should a couple not want to participate in the so-called mandatory credit splitting, then they would simply not submit the required information and documentation. In essence, they would not apply, although apparently submitting relevant information and documentation is completely different from the application process.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that the scenario sounds as convoluted to you as it does to me, but it does prove a good point, being that the CPP credit-splitting process as it is needs to be clarified and simplified. Bill 203 would do just that. It would put the credit-splitting process in the hands of the spouses involved, so they could decide their own financial future and not have to jump through the current maze of federal hoops.

To continue on with this scenario, a couple has come to a mutual agreement to not participate in the splitting of pension credits, and a number of years pass. One may think that after a while the window of opportunity to participate in credit splitting would be shut. This is not the case whatsoever. Should one of the spouses decide 15 or 20 years after the divorce or annulment has taken place that they would like a piece of the credit-splitting pie, they are more than welcome to it. All that is necessary is that they submit the proper information and documentation.

Mr. Speaker, if a couple signs an agreement on or after June 4, 1986, even if it says that they specifically gave up their right to split CPP pension credits, in most cases the CPP, as a third party to the agreement, is not bound to its provisions, and the Canada pension plan can still split the pension credits. The reason this can take place is because Alberta has not instituted provincial legislation. This is a serious predicament that can have substantial consequences for Albertans. The possible scenarios that could be hypothesized are endless, and few of them end with favourable results for both parties. What Bill 203 is suggesting is that we give Alberta's divorced and annulled couples the opportunity to make their own decisions on CPP credit splitting that are legal and can be upheld.

Mr. Speaker, what is being proposed, as I mentioned earlier, is a choice, one that appears to be present through the smoke and mirrors of federal legislation but, in reality, is only an illusion. There are exceptions to the federal CPP regulations. The federal legislation allows each province to enact its own legislation permitting the spouse to agree that the pension under the Canada pension plan will not be divided. Therefore, those critics that believe we may be stepping on federal toes by passing Bill 203 are incorrect. The federal legislation has opened a door for each province to accomplish what is proposed here today. I believe we should take full advantage of this opportunity.

Some provinces have already seized this opportunity and implemented legislation which allows couples specifically to agree not to split Canada pension plan credits. Currently this is the case in Saskatchewan, Quebec, and British Columbia. Therefore, if an

agreement is signed in one of those provinces, the Canada pension plan cannot circumvent the federal legislation and split the credits anyway, a fine idea, if I do so say myself.

British Columbia produced a working paper late in 1990 concerning the division of pensions on marriage breakdown. Many points were made that I would like to share with the Assembly today. A point that favours this type of legislation is that of rights, and it can be said that a person who has rights is usually entitled to choose between asserting them or declining to do so. Again, we are reminded of choice and how important it is that all Albertans are provided that right, as they should be. This choice can involve some type of compensation or flexibility. Depending on the case, one spouse may wish to use the pension credits as a bargaining chip in the divorce settlement. This, of course, would be a binding agreement between the couple and the decisions they made concerning CPP credits at the time of the settlement.

A case in British Columbia provides a perfect example of the federal smoke-and-mirrors show. One of the spouses in the marriage was not aware that a waiver of rights under the Canada pension plan was ineffective. The other spouse, however, fully aware of the loophole, agreed to forgo those rights in exchange for other property and then applied for the Canada pension plan benefits at a later date. It was held up in court that under the circumstances the spouse was prohibited from applying for a division of the pension benefits. Thankfully, the court upheld the mutual agreement within the credit-splitting waiver, but this may not always be the case. I find it extremely important that Albertans unaware of such situations need to be protected from the harm that could result.

Mr. Speaker, the argument can also be raised concerning the valuable court time that has been used to bring resolution to such disputes. Valuable time and resources would not be required if the waiver was legally solid and undeniably enforceable within the courts instead of leaving the decision to the discretion of the judge. Bill 203 would take away these uncertainties, and the end result would be confidence and legitimacy in the decisions made between spouses at the time of their divorce. These decisions would then be upheld and respected by both parties, if not on a moral level then legally.

Mr. Speaker, a point that I believe cannot be stressed enough is the necessity just to protect spouses. It is evident through the example that there is a possibility that one spouse may be financially victimized by the other. Spouses should be afforded the choice of how their rights are to be affected by marriage breakdown. Bill 203 would allow for that choice by permitting a waiver of the right to a division of credits under the Canada pension plan.

Mr. Speaker, not only would we be protecting Albertans who could one day fall victim to the loopholes in the federal legislation, but we would be allowing Albertans the opportunity to take control of their finances during a divorce settlement.

I encourage all members to vote in favour of Bill 203, and I look forward to further debate on this issue. Thank you.

4:30

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to share my thoughts on Bill 203. We have before us a piece of legislation that deals with a very complicated and delicate issue, the aftermath of a failed long-term relationship. When two people commit to one another for a significant period of time, not only do emotions become entangled, but so do finances. People will spend years living and working together: buying a home, furnishing that

home, investing their money for the future or in a business, and so on. When this relationship fails, there comes the unpleasant task of dividing the assets between the partners.

This division of assets can come in many ways, either through selling all of the mutually owned items and splitting the proceeds or by merely dividing possessions or by any combination of these strategies. In this process partners will decide what will best help them in their future lives. They are the ones deciding how to divide their possessions because no one knows better what these people need than themselves. They managed their finances while they were together, and when they separate, they will direct the course of their finances on their own.

Mr. Speaker, in Alberta there exists legislation to ensure that marital assets are divided, but this does not exactly say how these assets are to be divided. It does not say that every asset and possession is to be split down the middle because it values the importance of personal responsibility and choice. Indeed, dividing assets in this manner could be extremely inefficient due to a multitude of circumstances. This is why the exact way in which the assets will be separated is left up to those involved, because they are in the best position to decide what will be most beneficial to them.

Governments allow those involved to make these choices with respect to every other asset when dealing with a divorce except in the case of the Canada pension plan. In this instance the federal government tells couples that they cannot decide how to separate their CPP credits. The couple must split the credits, regardless of any decision the couple has reached on their own. I feel that this is not the best way to deal with the division of a marital asset and that the people involved in these situations should be afforded the power to choose how they manage their own financial situation.

Mr. Speaker, as I see it, there are three main reasons why we should support Bill 203. The first and most important reason I've already mentioned: Albertans should be given the power to determine their own financial goals and needs instead of having the federal government choose for them. Secondly, the social climate in which mandatory credit splitting was introduced has greatly changed, and we need to take into account the fact that many more families are choosing to have both parents work outside the home. Finally, we need to implement a system that leaves no room for ambiguity. Under the present system people are uncertain as to the power that a prenuptial or divorce agreement has in regard to a spouse's CPP credits.

Additionally, while credit splitting is theoretically mandatory, in practice one of the partners must apply for the credits to be split. If neither of the parties involved applies for the credits to be split, then nothing happens. Most often the credits are not split because of the public's lack of knowledge about the program. Many people simply don't know that credit splitting is possible. Due to this, quite often the credit splitting happens long after the divorce has been settled when one of the parties realizes that this is a possibility. By passing Bill 203, we can end that ambiguity for Albertans. This will allow people to deal with all matters at the time of divorce clearly and without the possibility of future changes.

Mandatory credit splitting came about in 1987 in an attempt to ensure that a spouse who had chosen to work in the home would be assured of some level of retirement income. While I appreciate the intent of mandatory credit splitting, I would say that the circumstances have changed considerably since mandatory splitting was legislated. In particular, the makeup of the workforce in Canada has changed, and there are a larger number of families where both spouses are part of the workforce.

According to Stats Canada dual-income families have been on the rise for the past four decades and are now as common as single-

income families were in the '60s. That is to say that over 60 per cent of the census population is part of a dual-income family. Therefore, both family members are earning a wage outside the home, and both are contributing to the Canada pension plan, thereby ensuring a retirement income for both partners in the event that the marriage fails. Additionally, there is almost equal workforce participation on the part of both men and women.

In the past there was a greater trend to have one parent, usually the mother, work in the home. In this situation that parent would not be contributing to the CPP and, therefore, would not be accruing credits for retirement. This is simply no longer the case. Even if this remained a concern, this legislation does not forbid CPP credit splitting. It merely affords partners a choice as to whether they would like to split the credits or not. If they choose to split the credits, there is no reason that they would not be able to do so.

Bill 203 will allow Albertans to choose for themselves how they would like to manage their marital assets instead of having their CPP contributions controlled solely by the federal government. As I have stated before, this piece of legislation is about allowing partners to decide how to split their assets in the event of their relationship falling apart. It may be far more beneficial for one partner to not split the CPP credits and, instead, take an asset that will provide immediate help for that person to become independent. On the other hand, there is nothing stopping the person from splitting the CPP credits if they see that benefit as being the most beneficial path for them to take.

Mr. Speaker, when the CPP Act was amended in 1987, the federal government provided a way for provincial governments to opt out of mandatory credit splitting if they chose to do so. Why would the federal government allow for that provision if they did not see that there might be a problem with mandatory credit splitting? The CPP Act allows for provinces to alter the program in order to deal with problems that could be caused by its inflexibility.

Another revision that was made in 1987 was the length of time during which you could apply for CPP credit splitting. Previously the time limit to split credits was 36 months. Currently there is no time limit. It is possible to apply for credit splitting 10 or 15 years after the divorce. This can leave those who are involved in the divorce uncertain about their finances for years to come. For example, if a couple were to mutually decide to not split their credits, they would agree to this in the divorce proceedings. However, as it stands, there's nothing stopping one of the parties from applying for the credit splitting the next day or the next year or 10 years down the road, even after agreeing to not split the credits.

These agreements cannot be enforced unless the provincial government has passed opting-out legislation. The federal government does not recognize contracts concerning CPP credit splitting until this happens. What both partners thought was a legally binding contract and entered into in good faith means nothing unless there is provincial legislation in place to support this. There are currently people in Alberta that are realizing this the hard way when they receive a letter from the Canada pension plan saying that their ex-spouse has applied for and been automatically granted a splitting of CPP credits regardless of how long ago the divorce was or whether there was a signed agreement or not.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that under the current legislation it is not possible for people to do as they choose with their own assets. They are entering into contracts in good faith that turn out to be completely invalid. This lack of clarity needs to be stopped, and we have before us the tool to end this ambiguity. Albertans deserve the right to decide how they will manage their finances. In no other area are there restrictions regarding how Albertans choose to divide marital assets, only when dealing with the Canada pension plan. This is a

pension like any other, and the two people involved should be allowed to choose how they want to divide all of their assets, not just most of them.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I ask for all of your support for Bill 203. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to offer some of my thoughts on Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by my colleague from Calgary-West. My overall impression of Bill 203 is very positive. I believe that despite some of the concerns that have been raised with regard to this piece of legislation, Bill 203 has much merit and will allow this Assembly to remedy some of the current problems and issues associated with splitting CPP pension credits.

The federal CPP legislation stipulates that when a marriage between two individuals ends, the CPP pension credits that the couple collected during their time together must be split up equally between the two. In other words, unlike a car, house, or investment assets, CPP credits are currently not treated as unitary items, and as a result one party cannot end up being the sole possessor of the benefits. Bill 203 aims to add more choice to this equation by permitting individuals the option to split their CPP pension credits or to opt out of the credit-splitting process altogether. In other words, the new amendment will allow former couples to treat their common CPP benefits in the same manner as other items like the house, car, or financial assets.

4:40

From the fiscal and practical point of view, Mr. Speaker, allowing couples such an option does not sound like an unreasonable idea. This begs the question as to why CPP pension credits are currently being treated differently than other financial assets such as mutual investment holdings or even provincial employment pension benefits. Undoubtedly, there are numerous arguments that attempt to justify the dissimilarity between CPP credits and other financial assets and benefits. However, while some of these arguments were valid a few decades ago, I believe that the present realities have rendered them invalid or obsolete.

One of the main viewpoints against allowing ex-spouses to opt out of credit splitting argues that the Canadian pension plan is a social program designed to ensure that both parties receive the same amount of retirement income regardless of which party was making the majority of CPP contributions. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, if one of the spouses was employed while the other was not, both would receive exactly the same amount of CPP credits if their marriage came to an end. The rationale behind having this measure in place follows the logic that both partners are equal contributors to the relationship regardless of their financial or employment status, and as a result, if they choose to go their separate ways, they should receive equal compensation.

While this argument may promote fairness, I am afraid that it does not stand up to the present fiscal or practical realities. First of all, Mr. Speaker, while CPP pension credits are a source of ensuring that individuals enjoy a steady retirement income, in most cases these benefits are usually never large enough to provide for a comfortable retirement. Consequently, the average Albertan cannot live on a CPP pension alone and, as a result, must make sure that he or she is procuring income from other sources. With this in mind it makes no sense why ex-spouses are currently being forced to split their pension credits if at the end of the day these credits don't amount to a whole lot of money.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, I cannot see the benefit of splitting a

relatively small quantity of funds into two lesser but equal sums. To put it into more practical language, if retired individuals cannot live on a CPP pension alone, how can they possibly be expected to live on half of that amount? Consequently, by allowing ex-spouses to opt out of the credit-splitting process and permitting them to decide for themselves how their CPP benefits should be affected by their divorce, Bill 203 brings more options and more clarity to the table. In the end the bill would make it possible that at least one of the individuals would enjoy the full benefit of CPP retirement income, even though it does not amount to much, while the other would be equally compensated by another asset of their choice.

Now, Mr. Speaker, some may argue that by allowing couples to opt out of CPP credit splitting, Bill 203 opens up the possibility that one of the ex-spouses could potentially end up with an unfair settlement. In other words, if one party were to trade their benefits for other, less valuable assets, there is a possibility that they may be giving away more than they realize. As an example, if one were to trade their portion of their CPP credits for another item like a vehicle, which may not hold its value over a long period of time, then this person may end up with an unfair deal due to the depreciation of the vehicle's value. Also, apart from having a shrinking asset value, this individual will have no CPP retirement income, thus making his or her financial situation even worse. The only way this individual will enjoy steady retirement income is if he or she thought in advance and made appropriate financial choices and decisions.

While this may be an extreme scenario, Mr. Speaker, I would argue that Bill 203 offers couples enough choices to avoid unfair settlements that could result from the bargaining process. Firstly, as I have mentioned before, Bill 203 does not force couples to opt out of CPP credit splitting but, rather, gives them the option of pursuing this course of action if they so wish. This process operates on the principle of mutual agreement between both the individuals involved. Therefore, if for whatever reason an ex-spouse decides that he or she does not wish to opt out of credit splitting, then this process cannot be forced upon them.

Secondly, if during the post-divorce procedures one of the spouses or their legal representative believes that they may be getting the short end of the deal in relation to who gets to keep the CPP pension benefits, they have every right to refuse to agree to the settlement. This is a common practice when it comes to decisions affecting other mutual assets and possessions, and in situations where couples decide not to split the credits, it would apply to CPP benefits as well.

As you see, Mr. Speaker, apart from offering ex-spouses more options in relation to what happens to their CPP benefits, Bill 203 ensures that no agreement can be signed until both sides are content with its arrangements. Furthermore, the bill also makes certain that these issues are dealt with in a timely manner soon after divorce or split-up has taken place. Therefore, I believe that it would be unfair to characterize the provisions outlined in Bill 203 as unchecked and unbalanced since they provide ex-couples with more options and more security than ever before.

While I'm on the subject of legal procedures, I would like to point out that this piece of legislation would also help us remedy some of the inconsistencies associated with the current divorce procedures and the issue of the common CPP benefits. By this I'm referring to the issue of matrimonial property waivers and whether they preclude ex-spouses from claiming a credit split even after they have waived their rights to collect CPP benefits. As you have previously heard, Mr. Speaker, this inconsistency has enabled individuals to receive their portion of CPP benefits even though they agreed to waive their right to these benefits while compensated for an asset of equal value.

It appears that these waivers hold no legal backbone as they do not seem to be binding on a signatory. This is due to the fact that the

federal CPP legislation states that in order for the credit splitting to take place, provinces must enact appropriate legislation.

As a result, a situation has developed where those who sign the waiver enjoy an unfair advantage as they can collect their CPP benefits and still keep all the assets gained from the divorce proceedings. Bill 203 would remedy this problem by offering ex-spouses a choice to split their CPP credits right away or to opt out of this process and deal with the credits as they would with other common assets. If they choose to opt out and in turn sign a mutual agreement to waive any future claims to each other's pension benefits, they would no longer be able to apply for a credit split.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I would urge all members of this Assembly to support this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to join in the debate on Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, brought forward by the Member for Calgary-West.

The hon. Member for Calgary-West has proposed a very interesting and important piece of legislation. As she stated, this bill creates the right for divorced couples to choose where their Canada pension plan credits go. Both the man and the woman play an important role in a marriage regardless of who earns the higher salary. In addition to working, couples raise their children, manage the finances, and take care of the home. As we all know, many of these tasks are shared. Therefore, both are entitled to CPP credits. This concept is consistent with the fundamental spirit behind the Canada pension plan.

The goal of Bill 203 is to give couples who face divorce a choice of sharing these credits or giving them all to one person. The credits earned while they were married or living common-law could be used in exchange for other equity gained during the time they were together.

4:50

I support the right to choose, as do most members here, I believe from comments heard. I'm sure that most of the members in this Assembly also agree that a divorced couple should be given the opportunity to share pension credits or give them solely to one person. I think this legislation makes a lot of sense.

Passing Bill 203 could clean up some of the confusion regarding CPP credits in Alberta. Clients sign a waiver that settles financial agreements and allocates property to each party. Currently pension credits are listed as property along with other forms of equity. As previous speakers have pointed out, in some cases this waiver directs CPP credits to one person. However, this isn't always the end of the story. The person who forfeited the credits can attempt to reclaim them at a later date. Needless to say, this causes financial problems for the people who lose part of their pension. I would agree that something should be done to eliminate this legal glitch from happening in the future.

Although I support Bill 203, I would like to take this opportunity to present a few concerns I have with the proposed legislation. The strongest argument against Bill 203 is the philosophy behind the Canada pension plan. These credits were not meant to be bargaining chips. They are part of a federal policy to provide coverage for retired or disabled Canadians. Bill 203 creates a legal mechanism to take part of a public pension away from one person, and that's not consistent, Mr. Speaker, with one of Canada's oldest social programs.

Some may argue that these credits are property that should be on the table. These people may point out that other provinces have passed similar legislation and that Alberta should do the same. The problem is that CPP credits are seen as both a financial asset and an important pillar of a national social program. It's true that other provincial governments have passed legislation similar to Bill 203, but not every province believes that this is the best way to go.

Mr. Speaker, there's a precedent set by other provinces that helps legitimize Bill 203. There are also precedents set by provinces that feel that CPP credits should be shared to ensure that people have access to their public pension. The Alberta Law Reform Institute studied this issue in 1990, and the institute agreed that actions needed to be taken to eliminate any uncertainty around the division of CPP credits. It was agreed that the social value of assuring the income security of noncontributing spouses outweighs enacting the opt-out legislation.

The Ontario government has also chosen not to adopt the opt-out legislation and continues splitting CPP credits. The Ontario Law Reform Commission looked at the pros and cons of legislation similar to Bill 203 in 1995. The commission believes that the definition of net family property should be amended to specifically exclude benefits payable to a spouse under the Canada pension plan.

I would like to know how this amendment is working in other provinces. Has anyone challenged the perceived contradiction? Are people who gave up their CPP credits reconsidering their decision?

Bill 203 is taking away part of a pension that every Canadian is entitled to if both spouses agree to do so. This bill could help everyone involved in a divorce because it clears the way for a choice to decide whether or not to split CPP credits. However, this bill could also take money away from people when they are most vulnerable.

The CPP has always been a social program. Taking elements of a social program away from one person and awarding them to another for financial gain is not consistent with the mandate of a publicly funded pension.

One thing this Assembly needs to remember is that pension credits do not equal money. Although every Albertan contributes to the pension plan from every paycheck, the credits are part of a formula. The more credits you have, the more money you are entitled to when you retire or become disabled. The amount of credits will determine the entitlement, and some may not want this right to be taken away.

The CPP is a taxpayer-funded social institution. In hindsight, I'm not sure every Albertan believes that a social program should be a bargaining chip during a divorce. In fact, this may be part of the reason why people try to reclaim their credits. They may see an opportunity to claim something that they now know they should not have given up so easily.

Some believe that the CPP is doomed and barely provides coverage in its current structure. It's believed that the entire plan needs to be reformed to make it sustainable for Canada's large aging demographic. I don't know where the CPP will be in 20 or 30 years, but I do know that the federal government can make quick and drastic decisions. Creating a gun registry to reduce crime and accepting the Kyoto protocol, that may or may not help the environment, are things that come to mind.

I understand that the Canada Pension Plan Act currently allows the provinces to opt out of the credit-splitting program. On the other hand, what would happen if the federal government decided that credit splitting as proposed in Bill 203 was not consistent with the social values of the plan? Mr. Speaker, let's just look ahead a few years. A large number of Canadians may be looking at retirement options and sizing up their financial situations. A number of people who went through a divorce see the connection between the CPP Act

and the social safety net and want their credits back. They could organize into one group and pressure the government to make changes to provide more protection.

Now, the federal government could see trouble in this with a sizable proportion of the voting electorate feeling this way and may decide to take some action. In haste perhaps the federal government could make sweeping changes to the CPP that would allow people to reclaim their lost CPP credits from their divorce settlement. I realize that this might be a highly unlikely scenario to some people, but some of us in this Assembly didn't think that the federal government would launch on to some of their programs like the Kyoto protocol either.

Deciding where CPP credits go is a provincial jurisdiction. This is clearly stated within the Canada Pension Plan Act, and my concern is with the predictability of the federal government because we're working with that federal legislation. Perhaps the sponsor of this bill can clarify this question in her closing comments.

Some may argue that the easiest solution may be to remove CPP credits from the waiver in divorce proceedings. This would ensure that the credits remain shared equally between the two parties. Keeping the credit split eliminates any chance of surprise well after the divorce is settled.

However, most people aren't aware of the additional paperwork to split CPP credits equally. As it stands now, the federal minister responsible for the Canada pension plan must receive the correct documentation before credit splitting can occur. Therefore, I don't believe that the current program is an effective way to provide retirement income for both spouses.

I support choice, so I do support Bill 203. I also believe that Bill 203 provides awareness and clarity to the CPP credit-splitting issue. As mentioned before, CPP credits aren't even divided equally in the first place without proper documentation in the hands of the federal minister responsible for the act.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be here this afternoon and to be able to join the debate on Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

As we have heard, Bill 203 would allow Albertans in the process of divorcing or separating to take control of their finances by giving them the choice with regard to how their assets are to be divided. Assuming for the sake of argument that pension plan credits represent assets that can and should be as divisible as, for instance, stocks and bonds, vehicles, and household furnishings, Bill 203 operates on the premise that spouses would be in the best position to make decisions about the division of their property. What to do with benefits earned under the Canada pension plan, then, would under Bill 203 be but one of several agreements into which the divorcing spouses will enter. Such spousal agreements are a sensible and a preferred way of allowing parties to resolve their differences, particularly so in what can often be a very emotional and tension-laden situation.

5:00

What Bill 203 proposes, then, is to amend the Matrimonial Property Act and the Adult Interdependent Relationships Act to allow spouses to opt out of the Canada pension plan's credit-splitting program. By amending both pieces of legislation, Bill 203 will apply to married and common-law spouses.

My initial reaction to Bill 203 was that it seems like a rather fair and a very sensible idea. What gave rise to that initial impression

was the fact that as things stand now, not being able to opt out of the credit-splitting program raises the possibility of a divorce or separation that's not quite finalized.

Contrary to the spirit of joint agreements on who gets the car or who gets the house or any other mutual agreement, when it comes to splitting the credits earned under the provisions of the Canada pension plan, only one of the ex-spouses or ex-partners needs to apply for the split. The consent of the other half of the now-collapsed relationship is neither mandatory nor necessary. What's more, the credits will be split even if the nonapplicant objects to the division of the benefits.

Whether one has experienced a divorce or not, we all know that they can be quite painful. Love, hope, and a shared future have been torn asunder and in their stead are now sadness, anger, and sometimes countless other emotions. Arriving at mutual decisions may be very difficult under such circumstances but obviously not impossible since many spouses do manage to do so. However, that only one spouse or, as it were, ex-spouse needs to apply for the split in order for it to take place seems unfair.

Under a set of circumstances so unsettling, it would seem obvious that every effort should be made to level the playing field, to use a popular expression, but here quite the opposite seems to be at work. The one saving grace of this predicament is that this inequality is not available exclusively to one spouse and not the other. Rather, it seems more a matter of who first takes advantage of this glaring omission and thus quite literally gets to cash in on it. Of course, it does depend on which spouse has been paying into the pension plan during the relationship. One would be remiss for not clarifying that. In any event, Mr. Speaker, this is a situation that ought to be rectified sooner rather than later.

Getting back to the outset of my remarks here today, this is what gave rise to such a favourable impression of what may be accomplished were Bill 203 to pass this House. It would seem to me that among all the things divorcing spouses seek to realize as part of the divorce, closure is at or near the top of the list. To be able to put an end once and for all to a very difficult time is what is desired.

Under current circumstances, however, it would seem that such closure may be somewhat elusive or at the very least subject to change. A person may be under the impression that a previous marriage had been relegated to the past when all of a sudden his or her ex-spouse files an application for pension credit splitting. Since there is no longer any restriction on the maximum length of time that can pass for such an application to be filed, this may force spouses to revisit what both of them thought was a closed chapter, indeed, to continue the literary metaphor, what they thought was a long since finished book.

However, the deciding factor for me is whether we can or for that matter should treat Canada pension plan credits like any other goods or piece of property. In short, are pension plan credits really ours to barter with as we see fit regardless of the situation? I suggest that they are not, and this is the conclusion I have come to after considering Bill 203 from a variety of perspectives. As much as it would be desirable to put an end to the one-sided and unequal nature of the credit splitting as it currently exists, Bill 203 is, from my point of view, simply not the proper mechanism to effect such a change.

This is one of those situations where the means do not justify the ends. Why do I say this? Simply put, it is everything to do with the very reasons why credit splitting is an option for divorcing spouses: ensuring that retirement income is available to noncontributing or lower contributing spouses, particularly women. This is not a gender issue. I'm not seeking to put this on a gender plane. However, when it comes to earned pension plan credits, many women are at a disadvantage compared to men. This is undisputable.

Why is this so? After all, hasn't the economic position of women, both in Alberta as well as throughout the country, improved over the years? Absolutely. Generally speaking, today's women are in a much stronger economic position than women were just a decade ago.

Having said that, however, women generally remain the primary caregivers of children, and women have a significantly greater tendency than men do to work inside the home. As a result, women are less likely to pay into a pension plan, and consequently women are less likely to have a secured retirement income. To mitigate against such an outcome, the Canada pension plan credit-splitting policy was created in order to ensure that both parties will have a retirement income.

Now, suppose that we were to opt out of the credit-splitting policy, much like Saskatchewan, Quebec, and British Columbia have done. What might be on the horizon if we were to do that? Well, Mr. Speaker, for instance, for those with low or even moderate incomes relinquishing credits earned under the Canada pension plan may in the future create a dependency on various retirement income support programs such as the guaranteed income supplement and the Alberta seniors' benefit.

No amount of planning can ever prepare us completely for what the future may bring. This is true under most every set of circumstances and is certainly true here. It is important to not lose sight of the fact that beyond a 30-day appeal period the decision to opt out of credit splitting would be final and binding. No matter how carefully one plans and seeks to factor in every foreseeable variable when making the decision to opt out, an individual's financial situation may change drastically at a later date. Assuming that the current conditions remain in place, the ex-spouse who chose to forgo his or her credits will have passed the point of no return.

On a final note, I find the notion of treating pension plan credits like any other piece of property somewhat unbalanced. Given the purpose for which the Canada pension plan was created, it would seem like a step in the wrong direction to take an entitlement program like this and turn it into a bargaining chip.

I am reminded of the coupons one sometimes gets in a store or in the mail offering 35 cents off here or a dollar there. If you read the fine print carefully, it often says that this coupon has no cash value. If that is a guiding principle for a coupon that entitles you to get a can of peas for a few nickels and dimes less, it ought to be a guiding principle for how to treat a program that may very well provide a significant portion of one's income at a time in an individual's life when his or her prime earning years are in the past.

For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I find it difficult to support Bill 203.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to have the opportunity to address the Assembly regarding Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. I'd like to commend the hon. Member for Calgary-West for her vision and attempt to give Albertans more flexibility and choice when it comes to managing their Canadian pension plan credits after a divorce.

While I believe government has an important role to play in the decision-making process for the province on behalf of Albertans, I also firmly believe that individual citizens need and deserve the freedom to make decisions that pertain to themselves. Freedom of choice in our society is fundamental in maintaining the democracy we enjoy as Albertans. Bill 203 is about choice. It's about instilling power in the individual. Albertans have the ability to make the decisions that are best for them, and they should be afforded the opportunity to make such decisions.

5:10

Like many other federal laws and institutions the CPP credit-splitting legislation as it currently stands isn't in the best interest of Albertans. Unlike other federal impositions like gun control, the Canadian Wheat Board, and the Kyoto protocol we are in a situation that allows us to opt out, as other provinces have, of this mandatory CPP credit-splitting process. Section 55.2 of the CPP Act allows provinces to opt out of the credit-splitting program. We would be so lucky if all flawed federal legislation that is imposed on Albertans granted us the option to pull ourselves out from Ottawa's intrusive thumb.

Mr. Speaker, I will base my comments on two key areas. First, Bill 203 will allow more options for those working out a divorce settlement, and second, this bill brings CPP benefits to the forefront of discussion during divorce proceedings. This will prevent situations where either a party is unaware that a credit split is taking place or situations where a CPP benefit split is applied for well after the two parties have come to a perceived agreement.

Mr. Speaker, on my first point, as it stands now, CPP credits are automatically split after a divorce in provinces that have not legislated a change in the federal government's policy. This is done whether one partner paid into the system or not. The decision to automatically split credits was made with good intentions in mind. Automatically splitting credits provides a safeguard for a spouse who may have not paid into the program through a profession but contributed to the household in other ways, like caring for young children.

While the rationale of split CPP credits after marriage was meant to provide an automatic equity between partners, benefits are not always split because an application form isn't always submitted immediately after separation. Credit splitting occurs in less than 15 per cent of divorces. Obviously credit-splitting legislation does not work the way it was intended to. Alberta should adopt a more effective approach by opting out of the current CPP credit-splitting process.

It's also important to note, Mr. Speaker, that Albertans are finding new ways to prepare for their future. For some Albertans their livelihood after retirement doesn't necessarily hinge on whether they are a part of the CPP plan or not. Many contribute to other plans through investment agents. Others have invested savings in a manner where the return is greater than what the CPP offers. Some Albertans also fear that the CPP program will not have the necessary funds to support them through their retirement. Many have backup plans. They contribute to RRSPs and savings bonds.

The point I am trying to make here, Mr. Speaker, is that there are other options available, and it is appropriate to treat CPP credits as a monetary value in reaching a settlement between parties. It is unnecessary to automatically split CPP benefits to reach an amiable solution between a recently divorced couple. Money or other assets can be exchanged in lieu of splitting CPP benefits to reach an equitable settlement. There may be those who have made other arrangements for themselves and are willing to forgo their share of a CPP plan in order to obtain an asset of equal value.

I believe it's important to point out that Bill 203 maintains credit splitting as an option. Many times it would be the ideal solution to resolve differing opinions when it comes to dividing an estate. Bill 203 allows both parties more flexibility in resolving a dispute associated with marital assets, and flexibility is an important asset that helps achieve an agreement between spouses.

The period of time following a divorce is often a trying emotional time period for all involved, even more so if there are children involved. Flexibility becomes key in allowing parties to reach an important agreement and move on with their lives. We can make it

easier for couples to come to an agreement by increasing the number of options available in the system. Other jurisdictions like Saskatchewan, Quebec, and British Columbia have already recognized what good legislation of this nature can have on these uncomfortable situations. I believe Alberta should follow suit.

On my second point, Mr. Speaker, by opting out of the mandatory credit-splitting clause in the CPP Act, Albertans would have a better chance of dealing with issues surrounding their CPP benefits at the time of the divorce. One of the problems with the CPP program as it stands now is that spouses are able to file for a portion of the benefits at a later date and there are no current time restrictions. This can draw out a divorce process that may have been considered completed months or even years before.

Even though opting-out legislation has not been passed, spouses sometimes include CPP benefits in the general waiver or divorce agreement. These waivers and decisions reached about CPP benefits are not recognized by the federal government, and some spouses enter into these agreements knowing that they can collect CPP benefits at a later date. This practice would be eliminated as such waivers would be recognized if Alberta opted out of the practice of mandatory credit splitting. These practices, while not necessarily commonplace, can be corrected through the passing of Bill 203. Opting-out legislation would make such waivers valid and would in effect eliminate the practice of going back on an agreement that has already been reached.

Also, under the federal program mutual consent is not required of both parties in order to split CPP credits. This means that one-half of a divorced couple can have his or her CPP credits split without input or even knowledge of the process taking place. Bill 203 would prevent an ex-spouse from starting the credit-splitting process without the other party's consent, especially in the case of a mutually signed agreement. I believe that it is important for both parties to at least be aware that an application is being put forward, especially when the results can have such a dramatic effect on the long-term financial situation of one of the people involved.

This legislation would do much to create a less hostile environment between ex-spouses. Trust is obviously key to successful discussions of this nature, and participants in this process should not have to fear a future claim when a settlement was thought to have been reached.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 203 does not eliminate the ability to split CPP credits after a divorce. I think we can agree that in some instances a credit split may be the right thing for a couple to do. This bill allows more flexibility between parties, and it will help divorcing couples arrive at a fair split of their overall assets. We should not look at this bill as taking away credits from a deserving party. By passing Bill 203, we would be adding a tool to help fix the financial problem that exists between a couple in the process of going separate ways.

Bill 203 also creates a more transparent method of dealing with the issue of CPP benefits, which puts more trust in the discussions revolving around the splitting of assets after a failed marriage. I believe that this allows all parties involved the ability to get on with their lives in a more expedient manner.

I urge all of my colleagues in the Legislative Assembly to pass Bill 203 and give Albertans more freedom over their finances. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise in the Assembly this afternoon and offer my remarks on Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004,

sponsored by the Member for Calgary-West. Mr. Speaker, as we have already heard this afternoon, this bill would allow Albertans the choice of entering into spousal agreements guiding the distribution of their CPP benefits. This option would be afforded to a relationship breakdown of both marital spouses and common-law couples in order to keep consistent with the current provisions outlined in the Canada pension plan credit-splitting program. The CPP program permits pension benefits to be split for common-law partners and marital spouses; therefore, this legislation has extended the opt-out to both types of relationships.

I would like to take a moment to clear up a misconception surrounding this piece of legislation. Bill 203 would not force ex-spouses or ex-partners to opt out of the CPP credit-splitting program. This legislation would give the province the authority to uphold spousal agreements entered into and agreed to by parties who decide to not split their credits. Therefore, Albertans could still choose to split their CPP credits if they do not enter into these agreements.

Mr. Speaker, quite simply, this bill offers Albertans choice. Parties can agree not to split the credits or decide that the division would be in their best interests. This bill does not force Albertans to opt out of the program. Instead, it puts forth flexibility and an option for Albertans to take control of their finances while making decisions that are relevant to their individual situations. This legislation provides ex-spouses or ex-partners flexibility in determining how their equity is divided upon the breakdown of a relationship, rather than letting the federal government dictate the outcome.

Mr. Speaker, I believe options in making these decisions are crucial. The dissolution of a marriage is difficult enough without not having the ability to make decisions based on personal circumstances. I question: does it not seem logical that spouses should be able to waive rights in a particular piece of equity, especially when the waiver is in exchange for something of more or less the same value? Are not these individuals in the best position to make decisions about their own financial futures, and if this isn't the case, who is in a better position: the federal government?

I believe that more problems can arise from inflexibility in these proceedings. The current federal legislation holds authority over how pension benefits are to be split. However, what if it is in the couple's mutual disadvantage to do so? Should they be forced to divide the pension? As the law stands, they would be required to split and would not have the option to choose for themselves as to how their rights are affected by a marriage breakdown. The lack of flexibility may interfere with sensible or practical resolutions of equity issues between the parties.

5:20

Mr. Speaker, I would like to offer an example to highlight this situation. Let's say that during a marriage one of the spouses worked outside the home and paid into the CPP plan while the other spouse stayed at home to raise the children. The couple is now seeking a divorce, unfortunately. The spouse that stayed at home does not wish to collect any of the CPP benefits. The children have since left home, and this individual is now working and paying into an employee pension plan. This person has also secured other means of providing retirement income through investments such as RRSPs. Therefore, it has become beneficial for that spouse to retain other equity such as the house. Perhaps the spouse that paid into the CPP has not paid into an employee pension plan and has no other means of securing retirement income. In this situation it would work against both parties' interests to have to split the CPP credits. It is beneficial for the spouse that paid into the CPP plan to keep all of his or her credits because he or she has no other source of retirement savings.

Mr. Speaker, another important point which should be brought forward is that Bill 203 would also work to raise awareness and provide information about the CPP's credit-splitting program. Income security in retirement is as important for noncontributing spouses as it is for contributors. Regardless of the decision that spouses make regarding CPP benefits, they should be aware of their options and the credit-splitting program. Credit splitting has not been an effective tool in providing retirement income to both spouses. Despite attempts to raise awareness by the CPP, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the Canada pension plan credit-splitting program.

Over the past few years various methods have been used to deliver credit-splitting information to divorced couples. Provincial courts currently include an information sheet with the provisions of the program in mailings of the divorce judgment documents. The information is also made available on the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada web site.

Despite these attempts many spouses or common-law partners are under the impression that if they did not pay into the CPP, they are not entitled to receive any benefits. This is simply not true. However, this perception is still prevalent among the general population. The CPP recognizes the importance of spouses who work inside the home to contribute to the well-being of the family. Even if both spouses paid into the plan, the CPP will take the pooled total and then divide and distribute the pension benefit.

It is important that both spouses are aware that they have a right to this benefit. Both spouses are entitled to share CPP pension credits. Bill 203 will help to raise this awareness. This bill would assist in dealing with pension credits in an upfront manner at the time of divorce or separation when other decisions are made about the division of property or equity.

Mr. Speaker, some individuals argue that the CPP is not an effective way of securing retirement income because it does not provide sufficient funds to cover the cost of living. Now, I would agree that Canadians should not rely solely on this program to provide their retirement income. However, it does provide important assistance to many Canadians.

The calculation of retirement pension varies with every circumstance and is dependent on how much and for how long an individual contributed to the plan. In 2001 the average pension that started at age 65 was over \$420 per month. The maximum for that year was \$775 per month. In 2002 the maximum retirement pension was \$788 per month. Therefore, half of the benefit is almost \$400 per month. It's not insignificant. I realize that for a lot of people this does not cover expenses. However, let us not forget about individuals who are on fixed incomes. Many seniors have tight budgets and cannot compensate for any deductions in their income. Therefore, any future entitlements could greatly affect the financial situation of some seniors.

Credit splitting needs to be dealt with in an upfront manner and through mutual understanding, whether the parties agree to split the benefits or not. Both parties need to understand the program and be provided with options to address their individual needs. Bill 203 would serve to raise the profile and create an understanding about credit splitting. It would allow individuals to make decisions about CPP benefits and plan appropriately for their future.

In closing, I would like to commend the Member for Calgary-West for raising this issue. Bill 203 gives Albertans an important option when making decisions about their pension. I encourage all members of the House to join with me in supporting Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

May I at this point adjourn debate on Bill 203.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 8 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:28 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 1, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/01

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Mr. Marz: Mr. Speaker, could we revert to introductions?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tonight members of the Alberta Special Constable Association made a presentation to the standing policy committee. Four of them are with us tonight. The other four – Paul Badger from Strathcona county, Darlene Roblin from the municipal district of Foothills, Terri Miller from Clearwater county, and Faith Wood from Airdrie – had more pressing things to do. The ones that were able to join us tonight are John Armstrong, special areas, Jayson Nelson from Mountain View county, Mike Woods from Lacombe county, Bruce Mackenzie from the county of Stettler. Would you please give these special constables the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have four introductions tonight, and they're in the members' gallery. I'll start off with Darlene Williams, who has one child in Belgravia elementary and a second who will be starting school soon; Beth Hendrickson, who has a child in Belgravia elementary as well; Erin Rowe, who has two kids, one in kindergarten and one in grade 2 at Parkallen; and the grandfather of these children, Howard Rowe. They are all parents and grandparents who are here because they're concerned about the funding for public education and are interested in watching the proceedings of the Legislature. I'd ask them to rise in the gallery, and we could all give them a warm welcome.

Thank you.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Education Funding

501. Mr. Griffiths moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to phase out the education portion of property taxes over a 10-year period, gradually supplementing the loss from alternative sources thereby freeing up financial resources for municipalities to adequately provide required services.

[Debate adjourned February 23]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this evening and join the debate on Motion 501, sponsored by the Member for Wainwright. Alberta continues to be in a very unique economic position compared to other provinces in Canada. As an example, earlier this month the Minister of Human Resources and Employment showed that his department had seen a net gain of 47,900 jobs in Alberta in 2003. This rate surpassed all other

provinces. Alberta's economic growth along with sustainable financing for program spending has earned accolades from financial institutions and envy from other governments.

To some people Motion 501 may threaten Alberta's success by eliminating a sizable portion of the tax revenue necessary for Alberta's education system. Mr. Speaker, this idea can be looked at from two different perspectives. On one hand, Motion 501 could drastically lower taxes for Alberta property owners. This motion could also lead to a reformed tax collection system and more accountable local governments. This shift in taxing policy could address many municipal issues by increasing available funding and helping them achieve long-term goals.

On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, some may wonder if this is a reasonable way to help municipalities. This motion isn't talking about a few million dollars. As it stands today, if we handed over the education portion of property taxes to municipalities, local governments could see a province-wide increase of approximately \$1.4 billion in a single year if they took it all.

Alberta's tax base is already low compared to other provinces. Some would say that the reason for this is because Alberta, unlike other provinces, has the luxury of collecting royalties from nonrenewable resource revenue. I won't deny that high oil and natural gas prices make up a great deal of the resources in the provincial coffers, but Alberta also collects a substantial amount through other taxes. Alberta's tax revenue for the 2003-04 fiscal year is projected to be just under \$10 billion. The school property tax accounts for approximately 12 per cent of the total amount, which is a very significant portion. Personal and corporate income tax accounts for over 70 per cent of Alberta's total tax revenue.

Eliminating the education portion of property tax would cost the Alberta government over \$1 billion each year. This shortfall would have to be made up in other areas. In the event that oil and natural gas prices fall, there would have to be another option for stable funding. One would assume that the Alberta government would look to the taxpayer. The taxpayer could play less of a role if we remain committed to sound fiscal policies. The concept of eliminating the education portion of property tax is feasible without causing great harm to our bottom line.

In the immediate future the government needs a diverse tax base to fund key programs and address immediate issues. In the future I don't think that the funding needed to address the issues of the day needs to come solely from the taxpayer. After Alberta's capital account is fully funded, less money will be needed for infrastructure. Once the stability fund is fully funded, Alberta will have a sizable amount of funding to survive inevitable dips in the energy market, and after Alberta's debt is paid off, the province will save millions each year in payments in debt-servicing costs.

I'd agree that it might be too soon to eliminate almost \$1.4 billion from Alberta's operating budget by eliminating the tax collected from property owners. I've no reason to believe that this process would be simple or quick. This motion isn't asking government to eliminate the education portion of property taxes over a single fiscal year. Doing so would no doubt cause financial pressure. This plan should be carefully thought out and phased in over time, say five to 10 years after the provincial debt is paid off. I think offsetting revenues would accommodate that change, and I don't think we should lock ourselves into, particularly, a 10-year program if budgets allow us to move quicker.

I also think it would be interesting to see what local governments would do under a new tax collection structure. Motion 501 urges the government to eliminate the education tax from property taxes and does not say what would happen to the existing tax system. If the amount collected from property owners is significantly decreased,

then it may be in the best interest of the Alberta government to create a more accountable tax collection system for local governments. Municipal governments are creatures of the provincial government . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, I'm sorry to interrupt, but under Standing Order 29 we've now reached a point where five minutes is reserved for the mover of the motion if he chooses to proceed to close debate.

The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this evening to close debate. I'd like to begin by thanking all those members who spoke for or opposed to the motion. I actually don't think there were very many people really opposed to the intent of this motion but, rather, to whether or not this was going to occur over a 10-year period or immediately.

This motion if it's passed will serve two main points; that is, to continue the move that was started in 1994 to reduce the government's dependency on property taxes to fund education. Mr. Speaker, that's the philosophy of this government, that everyone in this province receives the same and equitable education levels regardless of the resources available in that municipality.

It will also achieve the second main goal, Mr. Speaker, which is to allow municipalities tax room in order to expand their tax base so that they can provide services which they've found they experience now with the downloading of some services on them and also, and most importantly, new demands on growth, on new infrastructure – new roads, new sewers and water systems – because our economy is growing so fast.

Thank you very much. I hope everyone supports this motion.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 501 as amended carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

8:10 Health Care Premiums

502. Mr. Mason moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate seniors' health care premiums immediately and phase out premiums for all Albertans within three years.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. It's an honour for me, Mr. Speaker, to move Motion 502 on behalf of the New Democrat opposition and on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Albertans of all political persuasions who believe that the health care premiums are an expensive, inefficient, and regressive lump-sum tax.

While the elimination of health care premiums has been the position of the Alberta New Democrats for as long as health care premiums have existed, last month we decided to launch a new campaign urging Albertans to pressure the government to get rid of them once and for all. We're calling our campaign Scrap Health Care Premiums: It's Good Medicine. In our campaign we point out that health care premiums are an unfair tax that hurts seniors, middle-class families, and working Albertans. The New Democrat opposition proposes to scrap them because Albertans deserve a better deal.

In our campaign to scrap the health care premiums tax we put out that we are one of only two provinces with health care premiums. The other is British Columbia. Eight other provinces and three territories fund the health system using more progressive sources of government revenue.

In the past several months groups from across the political

spectrum have called for either a reduction or elimination of health care premiums. The Alberta taxpayers' federation is on record as favouring the elimination of health care premiums. The provincial Liberals have also recently adopted this position.

Dr. Taylor: They just copied you, Brian.

Mr. Mason: What else is new? Well, since the last election I guess they've had a different position.

Reducing health care premiums at least for seniors finds support even on the government benches. The Member for Edmonton-Manning suggested only a few weeks ago that seniors' health care premiums should at least be eliminated. He deserves credit for raising this issue shortly after his election, and I hope that he will continue to fight against this unfair tax, not limiting the elimination just to seniors.

That, Mr. Speaker, is why it's disappointing to hear the Minister of Health and Wellness say in the House this week that while there's no immediate plan to increase health care premiums, they will need to be increased in the future. The minister's statement is no doubt code for the fact that while health care premiums won't be increased before the election, they may well be increased after the election.

The New Democrats have been prepared to say how they'll make up the more than \$900 million in yearly revenues generated through the health care premiums tax. We're not prepared to shortchange our hospitals, schools, or other important services by scrapping health care premiums without replacing the lost revenue. As part of our campaign to scrap health care premiums as expressed in Motion 502, there's a plan for how to do it without jeopardizing funding for these important services.

The New Democrats would pay for the elimination of health care premiums by cancelling the multiyear corporate tax cut which will cost the Alberta Treasury \$1 billion once fully implemented. A phased elimination of health care premiums as called for in Motion 502 would cost about the same amount. Again I want to emphasize that it is only a reduction in the general rate for larger corporations that we would cancel. The New Democrats would retain all of the reductions for the small business tax rates as well as the increases in the small business exemption subject to the lower rate.

One economist that we consulted with told us that a \$1 cut in health care premiums would have bigger economic spinoffs than a comparable \$1 cut in corporate taxes. Much of the benefit of corporate tax cuts flows to shareholders outside Alberta, while a two-adult family which no longer has to pay the \$1,056 per year in health care premiums is going to save more of this money consuming goods and services at home, thereby stimulating greater economic activity and job creation. I'm sure that that approach is going to find favour with the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, who's worried about jobs.

Motion 502 calls for seniors' health care premiums to be eliminated immediately. Until 1994, Mr. Speaker, seniors were not required to pay health care premiums at all in recognition of the fact that they lived on fixed incomes and in almost all cases had no employer to make contributions on their behalf as many working Albertans do. At the same time that seniors were first required to pay health care premiums, they were promised that even if health care premiums rates were increased for other Albertans, they would not be increased for seniors. Two years ago, when health care premiums were hiked 30 per cent, the promise to not hike seniors' health care premiums was also broken. Seniors' health care premiums were also hiked, to \$1,056 for a senior couple.

Seniors have been hard hit by this government with the almost 50 per cent in long-term care accommodation rates. Copayments for

prescription drug coverage were increased from 25 to 30 per cent a few years ago. Universal eye care and dental benefits were also eliminated two years ago. So it's only fair that seniors' health care premiums be eliminated immediately. This would involve a \$90 million reduction in revenue, little more than half the \$161 million revenue reduction that would result from the further planned corporate tax reduction scheduled for April 1, 2004.

Health care premiums are a very economically inefficient tax, Mr. Speaker. When the massive administrative and compliance costs associated with this tax are considered, it becomes very clear that not only are health care premiums regressive; they are also very wasteful. Alberta Health and Wellness spends more money chasing down people who can't pay their premiums than it spends on administering the rest of the public health insurance plan itself. About \$15 million per year is spent administering this complicated premium tax. In the fiscal year 2002-03 \$50 million in premiums were written off because Albertans were simply unable to pay them. One in four individual health care premium accounts is in arrears. Money spent tracking down Albertans who have difficulty paying their premiums could be better spent on improving health care delivery.

Grassroots members of the Progressive Conservative Party have passed resolutions at past policy conventions calling for an end to health premiums. We were amazed, Mr. Speaker, when we read that, but there it is, and I would advise the government to listen to their grassroots because in this particular case I think they're onto something. In previous sessions of this Legislature members of the Conservative caucus have introduced legislation and proposals that would have ended the collection of health premiums. The Minister of Seniors has consistently promised seniors' groups that he believes that premiums should be eliminated, at least for seniors, as soon as possible.

It is unfortunate that the Premier and the minister are unwilling to listen to Albertans on this issue and are in fact considering further hikes in this regressive and unfair health tax. Burdening hard-working Albertans and middle-income seniors while proceeding with an extremely generous tax cut for already profitable corporations sends a clear signal to Albertans, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to listen only to what it wants to hear. It continues to tilt the so-called Alberta advantage to high-income earners and larger profitable corporations while asking average Alberta families to pay more.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of the House to support Motion 502. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise in the Assembly this evening and add my comments to the discussion and debate surrounding Motion 502. As we have previously heard tonight, Motion 502 proposes to wipe out health care premiums for all seniors and within three years for all individuals in an attempt to alleviate hardships endured by some Albertans.

As many of my colleagues are already aware, the care and well-being of seniors is of great concern to me. I feel we must always be mindful of the important contributions they have made and continue to make to our families and our communities, and we should provide for them the appropriate programs and necessary supports.

I also acknowledge that this province has an aging demographic and an increasing proportion of elderly individuals. The number of seniors moving into Alberta is also growing. As of April of last year, 2003, 10 per cent, or 1 in 10, of the province's total population were seniors, and it's projected that by 2025 we will have 20 per cent, or

1 in 5. The seniors population will grow to this number, and there will necessarily be an increasing demand on the province to provide adequate supports, health and other, for seniors in our province. So we should be thinking about the future when we go into this kind of discussion.

However, Mr. Speaker, I'd also like to point out that just over half of all seniors over the last year did not have to pay any health care premiums at all because they qualified for an exemption due to a lower level of income. So what you're asking for we are already providing to lower level seniors. Moreover, some additional seniors only paid half their premiums because they qualified for a partial exemption.

So the government already recognizes that lower income seniors and Albertans may not be in the position to afford health care premiums, because we've responded to that. Most definitely, we feel that there should not be a financial impediment for these people to access health care services, so this is not totally a new idea that you have. The province already sets exemption thresholds so that those who need the assistance have the opportunity to receive it. The government implements a formula to determine the amount of premium that is to be paid or not paid by Albertans.

8:20

According to our government's philosophy, we provide support for those most vulnerable in society. Health care premium subsidies are not only available for seniors but also for low-income Albertans and are divided into four categories depending on if you're single or have a family, with or without children. It's my understanding that the rationale for the proposed motion and the elimination of premiums is to ease the burden for seniors and low-income Albertans. However, as I just said, exemptions are already provided to compensate seniors and those with lower incomes. In other words, about 60 per cent of seniors already either do not pay anything for their health care premiums or only partial or 50 per cent coverage.

I think that a better way to help those who struggle would be to examine our exemptions system. It seems logical to me, Mr. Speaker, that if the objective is to help those who experience financial difficulty, it may be beneficial to review once again and possibly further increase the threshold levels, because that has been done just recently by this government. This could provide exemptions for more Albertans in lower income categories, and it would ensure that premium deductions are based on incomes rather than by age.

If the cost of health care premiums is a burden for some financially strapped Albertans, then raising thresholds would help those individuals and families who would more likely benefit from a subsidy rather than a blanket or a universal exemption. The main group of Albertans who would benefit most from a total premium elimination would be middle and higher income earners as they pay the full premium. As I said earlier, this government's philosophy is to assist the most vulnerable. Now, I know there are those who would say that I am mean spirited and that I don't care, but I am a caring Conservative.

We must also keep in mind that not all Albertans would benefit from the elimination of health care premiums. Low-income earners, as I said, are already exempt, while those who pay only a portion of the premium would only receive a partial benefit. So this begs the question: how would this motion really benefit low-income seniors as they are already benefiting?

Mr. Speaker, many Albertans have their health care insurance premiums or a portion of them paid by their employer. These individuals would only benefit if the employer decided to pass the savings on to their employees. Therefore, there's no guarantee that these Albertans would even see any of these savings.

I would also like to make the argument that health care premiums serve as a reminder to Albertans that health care services cost money. As mentioned many times here and in the past, many Albertans view health care services as essentially free, and this is not the case as \$20 million a day is spent on funding our health care system. Albertans need to realize that health care services – and they want the best – are expensive, and premiums serve as a good tool to help those who would forget that. Without the premium reminder it may be forgotten that with each visit to the doctor there is a cost, actually a large cost, as we all know, involved. Or if we don't know, we should know. Health care is not free, and any misperception in this line of thought is dangerous as it does lead to overuse of the system. Granted, it is crucial that health care services are available to Albertans. However, we must not forget the costs associated.

Mr. Speaker, the province continues to recognize the importance of priority spending in health care. Funding for health care services for '03-04 will reach \$7.35 billion, which increased by 7.4 per cent over the previous year. Health spending remains the largest expenditure for this government. It is projected for '03-04 that health expenditures will account for 35.3 per cent of the total budget. Now, some provinces in Canada use up to 50 per cent of their budgets for health care. What could you give up in Alberta to cover health care costs as high as 50 per cent?

This province funds its health care system through three methods: federal transfer payments, general revenues, and health insurance premiums. Mr. Speaker, health premiums account for a significant portion of health expenditures. Last year the health premiums brought in roughly \$913 million in revenue, and this equated to 13 per cent of health care costs. This year that figure will likely exceed \$1 billion. Maybe if the federal government would increase their transfer payments by 13 per cent, as is reasonable, why then perhaps we could consider your motion.

Realistically, if premiums are eliminated, our system would require money to come from other areas in our budget, and \$1 billion would have to be cut from our programs and services to make up the difference. Then we could really talk about cuts and not in glasses and dental, as the Member for Edmonton-Highlands referred to inaccurately. The extended health benefit was a universal program that offered only 30 per cent coverage to all seniors, but now – and it folds in with our government's philosophy – it provides a hundred per cent coverage for low-income seniors. And if you don't have 30 per cent of what it costs for a new set of false teeth, then I guess you don't get your false teeth, although we do have the special-needs benefit.

Of course, premiums could be eliminated, and the lost revenue could be replaced through other means, and that could mean perhaps an increase in taxes. Maybe that's another option. Albertans could possibly see taxes go up in order to make up the shortcomings, and from past debates in this province any increases would be met with furious opposition.

Mr. Speaker, in order to take money out of the health budget, reforms need to take place. We're talking about a significant amount of money being eliminated. One billion dollars can't just be dropped out of the budget without Albertans feeling the impact. This money can't be just taken away without changes to the entire health system. It's not that simple. Reforms will need to occur to account for the dollars. The elimination of premiums could possibly be part of health care reforms, but that would have to be a part of a total package that would consider this change.

The province recognizes the importance of health reforms. The annual increase in spending for health care has grown at a faster rate than the province's overall revenues. If this trend continues, the province will not be able to sustain the increases. As a result, the

government is in the process of reforming the health care system. The Premier's Advisory Council on Health was established to review the system and make recommendations for meaningful reform, and the full implementation of the recommendations will be completed by December 2004.

The Speaker: I must regretfully inform the hon. member that this portion of her speaking time has now left us.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate this opportunity, and I am pleased to support this particular motion. The Liberals and the New Democrats have both held this position for I don't know how many years but a long time for good reason.

I think there are a few points that are worth clarifying right off the bat. This is not a premium; this is a tax. If it was a premium, there would be some correspondence to risk. There would be some correspondence to benefit. There would be some choice in whether or not you paid it. This has nothing to do with an insurance premium; this is a tax. That's reinforced by the fact that this actually doesn't flow into the health care system directly. It flows simply into general revenues. So this is a tax that should be cut. It's a tax that should be eliminated. It's simply a verbal sleight of hand that it's called a premium instead of the proper title, which is a tax.

I also note from the most recent third-quarter fiscal update that this is in fact a very substantial tax. We make almost the same amount from health care premiums as we do from crude oil royalties, and that's with crude oil priced at extremely high levels. This is telling us that we have become heavy handed in our taxing through this particular avenue and that we should eliminate this tax.

This is a tax cut that would serve all Albertans. As the Member for Edmonton-Highlands pointed out, it's a tax cut that would leave money in Alberta, in the hands of people who will spend it here, in the pockets of employers who employ people here. This would be a significant favour to small businesses when they provide this benefit, paying the health care premium to their employers. It would be a significant benefit to institutions like universities and regional health authorities and school boards, who pay the partial or entire cost of this for their employees. So, again, there are benefits across the board here.

8:30

I listened to the previous speaker's comments on who benefits and who doesn't benefit and who's hit by this tax and who gets exemptions, and I think it's really worth driving home the point that this is a tax that hits the working poor and the middle class the very, very hardest. The way the exemptions are set up is that you have to be almost destitute to qualify. If you are, say, working at an \$8 or \$9 or \$10 an hour wage, just enough to earn more than \$16,000 a year in taxable income, then you have to pay the full amount. What that translates to is that a family with children earning \$35,000 a year spends about 3 cents of every dollar they bring in in health care premiums. It's a 3 per cent cream off the top for the working poor. A family, say, where one of the parents is at home and one of the parents is working at Wal-Mart or as a secretary in an office or some position like that that doesn't pay terribly well gets hit paying 3 cents of every dollar of income in this premium.

On the other hand, a wealthier family earning \$100,000 a year spends only about 1 cent per dollar of income on this tax. You can see who this is hurting the most. It's hurting people who are lower middle-income earners. In fact, the irony here is that the wealthier the person, the more likely this tax is to be paid for as part of a benefits package. So it's kind of a double benefit for the wealthy and a double bind for the working poor.

Alberta is one of only two Canadian provinces that charge these taxes, and it is a tax that has been going up dramatically under this government. It's yet another example of the many flaws of the Mazankowski report. Based on a recommendation from the Premier's Advisory Council on Health, the government actually boosted health care premiums a stunning 30 per cent in 2002, a huge tax increase. Can you imagine? A tax increase from this government of 30 per cent when they have the opportunity to eliminate this tax and at the same time – and this will appeal to the Premier's new chief of staff – lay off a substantial number of civil servants because those civil servants will not be required any more to implement this tax. So win/win: reduce the bureaucracy; make a tax cut.

In fact, most Albertans are quite prepared to pay for their health care system through general revenues, through the normal taxes they collect, and would be delighted to have premiums eliminated. The question comes up: where would a government offset this tax cut? Well, this government hasn't worried before about offsetting tax cuts, and it is in the enviable position of running substantial surpluses year after year as a result of very generous natural gas and other natural resource revenues. In fact, they've been recording an average of about a two and a quarter billion dollar surplus per year for the last eight years.

So one option is simply to offset the reduced revenue through the surplus. Another option is to forgo or reverse the flat tax that was introduced in 2000 and has cost the government about one and a half billion dollars a year in lost revenues, almost all of which is an overwhelming benefit to wealthy Albertans. In fact, it seems that just about everything this government does is an overwhelming benefit to wealthy Albertans. There is a pattern here.

There are also other ways we could rearrange government priorities. We could, for example, forgo the \$33 million that this government uses to subsidize the horse racing industry. Or we could forgo the many millions that have been spent on committees studying health care reform and on and on and on. There were six new ministries created in 2001 by this government to add extra employment for its MLAs, and that has cost about \$46 million in extra salaries. So this is not a difficult problem. There are savings to be made by eliminating health care premiums.

I would like to hear the debate from the other government members. The speaker from Calgary-West made a number of points which are well worth rebutting, and I'd like to hear where everybody else stands on this issue. Our position is absolutely clear. We will support this motion. We have been for years opposed to health care premiums.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and speak to Motion 502 as put forward by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

First I'd like to recognize the good intentions behind this bill, especially how it relates to Alberta's seniors population. Obviously, it is the goal of government to make continued efforts to improve the standard of living of the people they represent, and one of the ways we do that is by lowering taxes and reducing fees. However, government is also responsible for making sure that the services it is responsible for are both effective and sustainable. Eliminating health care premiums for all seniors immediately and phasing out all health care premiums for all Albertans would affect the number of dollars that are available for health care and seniors' programs.

The idea in and of itself is a good one, but the fact is that it costs money to maintain a high-quality health care system, and Albertans

are very proud owners of such a system. According to the *Maclean's* report last year, those of us in the capital region have access to the best health care system and service in Canada. The overall ranking was based on various criteria such as life expectancy, heart attack and stroke survival rates, as well as local services and preventable admissions. But that quality isn't limited to this region alone. Every year more than 250,000 surgeries and diagnostic tests are performed in Alberta's rural and urban hospitals. Seventy-eight thousand nine hundred and one MRIs were done between April 2002 and March 2003, up 12.5 per cent from the previous year, and during the same time span heart surgeries jumped by 5.4 per cent. Five thousand, one hundred and eighty-one joint replacements were performed, an increase of 6.4 per cent.

I do not believe that we have a crisis in the delivery of health care services, but I do believe that we have a crisis in the sustainable funding of health care services. It costs over \$20 million each day to operate Alberta's health care system, and the costs climb higher with each passing year. There are numerous reasons for the increasing costs, and there is great justification for those costs, such as our population increase, greater health needs of our people, an older population, and more diagnostic technology.

This system has become bigger as Alberta's population continues to boom. Costs are rising to maintain the quality of our ever-expanding system, and it is irresponsible to eliminate a form of funding which helps the province deliver these types of services without having some sort of plan as to how the shortfall would be met.

The cost of health care is expected to rise 8 to 10 per cent across Canada this year. Meanwhile, government revenues are growing by less than half that amount. What this essentially means is that money is being pulled away from other departments and other services in order to pay for the health system we so value. Alberta health care premiums bring in \$913 million in revenues each year, which is equivalent to about 13 per cent of total health care expenditures.

Now, I know that there are going to be some who will point out that health care premiums do not directly flow back into the health system, and that's true. However, when health care spending receives the most funds of the total taxes collected by the Alberta government, it's easy to see that health care premiums are necessary in order for the system to be properly funded. And while health care premiums flow into general revenue, monies flow from general revenue back into Alberta's health care system. The title of this fee is a question of semantics. The reality is, however, that if this amount, just shy of \$1 billion, is not collected in this manner, it will have to be obtained some other way.

8:40

Now, the motion itself focuses firstly on seniors and asks that they be exempt immediately from health care premiums. Those who live on a fixed income can be burdened by monthly expenditures, and health care premiums can be one of those burdens. This government has recognized this, and more than half of our seniors do not pay health care premiums. Of the 323,000 seniors living in Alberta in April of 2003, 164,000, or 51 per cent, did not pay health care premiums, and an additional 20,000 seniors pay only part of their health care premiums. Eliminating these premiums in general, especially in a manner that puts age before more important factors such as income levels, is the wrong approach. I prefer to increase the exemption levels for seniors. To exempt all seniors from having to pay health care premiums would simply download a burden onto Alberta's younger families.

The second part of the motion calls for health care premiums to be phased out over three years. Obviously, the motion is recognizing

the value of health care premiums, or it would simply ask that all health care premiums be eliminated, period. But a timeline is included in the motion, I sense, because the member realizes that if the money is not coming in through health care premiums, then either the government would need to raise the necessary funds using other methods such as increases to personal income tax, or the government would need the time to figure out how to rid the system of nearly \$1 billion in services.

I believe that health care premiums assist in significantly sustaining our highly valued public health care system. Our health regions have made strides in encouraging the use of emergency rooms exclusively for incidents that truly warrant immediate attention. In fact, Alberta is an international leader in delivering health and educational services using telecommunications technology. Initiatives such as 408-LINK help us to understand our health care needs and the most appropriate actions to be taken in serving them. Having the health care charge related to the paycheque is an open way of collecting the necessary dollars needed for the health care system. Again, I would like to reiterate: if the money were not being collected in this manner, it would have to be found in other areas.

As a point of interest, I would point out that Albertans pay the overall lowest taxes across this country. As Albertans we do pay health care premiums, granted, but we do not pay a provincial sales tax, and we do not pay a high rate of personal income taxes. This goes back to my point that if health care premiums are eliminated, these funds would have to come from somewhere else. If we truly want to get rid of health care premiums, then we need to find new ways of funding health services in Alberta. This has been a focus of our provincial government for a number of years. If we want to get rid of health care premiums, we must be willing to discuss substantial and significant ways of funding our beloved publicly funded health care system.

In addition, we need the federal government to honour their funding share of implementing the five principles of the Canada Health Act. One has to wonder whether any health care premiums would be required if the federal government paid their committed and commitment share.

Mr. Speaker, the motion put forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is admirable because it does attempt to alleviate a cost faced by Albertans, but at this point in time the motion is somewhat premature. Right now health care premiums play a sizable role in generating funds for Alberta's health care system. Removing them puts more strain on a system that is expected to become only more expensive in the future unless we reform how we fund our very valuable public health care system to make it sustainable and affordable for our seniors, for ourselves, and for the generations to come.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and speak to Motion 502, sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. I'm very pleased to speak to this issue again as it is one that will never go away. Motion 502 urges the government to get rid of health care premiums. Now, I know that it urges the government to phase it out over three years for everybody other than seniors, but I think that we can safely say that the intent of this motion is to rid this province of health care premiums altogether, an idea promoted by the opposition in this province for many years.

This is an issue that many of us have debated time and time again. I will say that, yes, I would love to support this motion. I would love to stand before you and say that we can do away with our health care

premiums because we can afford it, but I can't say that. I know that we have premiums for a reason, and like it or lump it, they are here to stay for a little while longer.

Mr. Speaker, health care premiums are a very important part of our health care system. For some people they are a burden. Some Albertans do have difficulty paying the premium, but what I don't think people in this province really understand is that we are struggling ourselves to foot the health care bill in Alberta. Health care is a top priority for Albertans, and I think this government does a great job, with the resources it is given, ensuring that our health care system is decent if not fantastic.

Throughout the years as health care has become larger and more comprehensive, this government has met the challenges that have been thrust upon it. One of these challenges is not getting the proper amount of funding from the federal government. I know that you might stand up and say: oh, sure; you're blaming the feds for our woes. It's true. Their lack of foresight on this issue has really caused a lot of problems for this province as well as other provinces around the country.

Every day the price of health care seems to increase in Alberta. We see more and more people moving to this province from around Canada, and they expect to receive excellent services while we send \$24 million a day to Ottawa. However, when these people come to our province, they aren't bringing with them the infrastructure that they used to have. No. They expect to use ours, and that is completely fine except that this powerful growth is putting a strain on all of our top priorities. Health is included.

Alberta is having a tough time keeping pace with the amount of activity that this province is seeing in regard to growth. So when the topic of premiums comes up, everybody seems to always want to get rid of them. What I think everybody seems to forget is that these premiums bring almost a billion dollars into our health system. That is a significant amount of cash, that is desperately needed for our system.

Let us imagine that we did cut the premiums from Albertans. What if we decided, yes, that not paying premiums is a good idea? Where would that leave us? Well, I think that we could safely say that we would be without a few luxuries in this province. You have to remember that \$1 billion is a large part of our health budget, and we would have to recoup that cost somehow because, as you all know, health care is not free no matter what you think. So what luxuries should we be without in this province? Of course, maybe calling them luxuries is a bad moniker, but if we were to eliminate close to \$1 billion from our budget, they would have to be coined luxuries.

If we look at the current budget, what do we see that we would not be able to afford if we cut premiums out completely? Currently health care premiums bring in approximately \$913 million. So we'd need to cut funding for the departments of Economic Development, International and Intergovernmental Relations, Revenue, Seniors, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, the Solicitor General, and Sustainable Resource Development just to make up the shortfall that would occur if no one in this province paid premiums.

Of course, if we put this into perspective in regard to Motion 502, we see that premiums would be totally eliminated in three years. I can almost guarantee that our health costs will be far higher and the amount eliminated from premiums will be far greater than what we see today.

8:50

So I put this back to the hon. member: what would he like to see us cut? What portion of our budget would he like to see tossed to the wolves, as it were, and what services would he deprive Albertans

of? Would it be the entire budget of the Solicitor General? I'm sure Albertans could do without our police. Or would you have all of our aboriginal programs cut? I mean, they don't really need our help; do they?

That is what Albertans must realize: we just cannot cut premiums without some sort of plan to find revenue to sustain our health system. We all know how Albertans react when there are cuts made. Think back to when this government had to cut 1 per cent from every department in 2002, 1 measly per cent. That is barely a surface scratch, but the opposition was up in arms yelling, screaming, and kicking trying to save their precious services.

So how would we get away with just cutting almost \$1 billion from our budget? We wouldn't get away with it. Something like this cannot be dropped; it cannot just happen. There needs to be a well-developed and very well-thought-out plan to make up that revenue. So how would we make up that revenue if we weren't able to cut anything? Maybe we would start delisting certain services. Maybe we would have to bring in more private health care options for Albertans. Or maybe we could just raise taxes, which would fly in the face of our Alberta advantage.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not saying that I disagree with the motion sponsored by the hon. member. In a province that is proud of having very low taxes, I think premiums are a bit of an anomaly. But health care is not free, and if we got rid of premiums, we would be sending the message that health care is free. Oh, wouldn't it be lovely if health care were free? Let me assure you that there is nothing I would like to do more than get rid of premiums. But, again, I am not in support of something that has the potential to cripple not only our health care system but our other programs and services as well.

Like I said before, health care is not free. I know that we all feel that it is public health care and that it's paid for by government, but we cannot overlook the fact that it's the taxpayers' money and premiums that are paying for that system. To remove such a large amount of money out of the system without a plan would be disastrous.

So, Mr. Speaker, you can see why I have reservations about supporting this motion, but my reasons do not stop there. Currently, we are trying very hard to reform our health care system to try and make it sustainable for many, many years to come. The system is in the midst of changes that should be completed by the end of this year. The changes stem from the Premier's Advisory Council on Health report, and the changes that are occurring should help alleviate some of the difficulties the system is facing. The recommendations being implemented will do a lot for our system. I know that one of the recommendations was for Albertans to continue to pay for health care through something similar to premiums to ensure that they realize that health care is not free.

Mr. Speaker, health care is not free, but we do provide millions in subsidies to low-income seniors and low-income Albertans who cannot afford these premiums. I think that it would not be a good idea to implement something like this motion is urging now, because we are in the midst of a great debate over changes to the system. Making a radical change like the one asked for in Motion 502 I think would be irresponsible. It lacks focus and vision.

If we were to eliminate premiums for seniors, who do you think will be paying for their health care? It is well known that this province is aging, and to remove premiums on the basis of age I think is a very poor way to do things. Currently in Alberta there are approximately 330,000 seniors, and less than half of those seniors pay the full premium.

Mr. Speaker, until we can come up with a proper plan to be rid of premiums, I think they should be here to stay. I urge all hon. members to vote against Motion 502 this evening. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to join the debate on Motion 502. At the very outset I would like to urge all members to support this motion, which eliminates seniors' health care premiums immediately while phasing them out for other Albertans in three years or less.

I have listened in vain, I'm afraid, for persuasive and sensible arguments against the motion by government members. What I've heard instead are purely ideological or philosophical arguments, as the Member for Calgary-West would prefer to call it, in favour of corporate tax cuts combined with specious and fallacious rationalizations that levying a health tax on individuals and families somehow makes people more aware of the cost of health care or that it makes health care more sustainable in this province. Far from it, Mr. Speaker. Every Albertan knows that health care is not free. This is a completely specious argument that's being made again and again by government members.

Albertans know full well that health care costs money. The question is whether it should be paid for by a regressive, lump sum tax disguised as health care premiums or from corporate taxes and other more progressive sources of government taxes and revenues. Health care premiums are one of the most flawed taxes levied by this government. My colleague the Member for Edmonton-Highlands has pointed out a number of these flaws. I need not repeat them. I'll briefly describe some more flaws of health care premiums to add to the list.

The health care premium tax is costly to administer, with \$50 million per year spent writing off premium arrears and an additional \$15 million spent on administering them. Add the two of them: \$65 million right there.

Health care premiums are unfair to middle-income seniors and the self-employed, who it is not possible to include in an employee benefits plan. In recent years senior citizens have been hit not only with a 30 per cent hike in health care premiums but also a 50 per cent hike in long-term care fees, an increase in the copayment on their prescription drug coverage, and the loss of universal eye care and dental benefits. Scrapping health care premiums immediately is the least we can do for Alberta seniors living on fixed incomes.

Because health care premiums are not a true premium but a regressive tax cleverly disguised as a health premium, these premiums cannot be deducted as a health expense on tax returns in the same way that extended health and dental benefits can. If an employer pays a premium in whole or in part on behalf of an employee, this is considered a benefit and gets added to the employee's income, on which tax must be paid. Scrapping health care premiums also puts an end to this unfavorable tax treatment.

Health care premiums are a payroll tax, now speaking from the side of employers, that adds to the cost of doing business in this province. Employers are required to deduct and remit premiums on behalf of their employees, adding to the cost of the red tape. Scrapping premiums will cut payroll tax costs for employers like hospitals, school boards, universities, municipalities, community agencies, and businesses large and small.

Worst of all, health care premiums are plain and simple unfair to middle-income earners. A two-adult family making \$35,000 per year pays exactly the same \$1,056 in health care premiums as a family making \$100,000, \$150,000, \$200,000, or more a year. Everyone who now pays health care premiums would benefit from scrapping this tax, but middle-income families, including middle-income seniors, would experience the most relief. In fact, a family making \$35,000 would see their total tax load cut by one-third when health care premiums are fully eliminated. That is significant tax relief to hard-pressed families, Mr. Speaker.

In September 2000 the then Provincial Treasurer and the Premier's incoming chief of staff committed the Conservative government to cut corporate taxes in half, thereby permanently reducing provincial government revenues by over \$1 billion after four years. The original four-year time frame of the corporate tax cuts has been extended . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has now expired.

head: 9:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'll call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 2

Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act

The Chair: Are there any questions, comments, or amendments to be offered with respect to this act? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I did want to make a few comments with respect to this bill. This bill will allow vehicular access to a recently declared environmentally protected area, an access that is currently prohibited under the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act. The bill proposes to allow a throughway to both off-highway and highway vehicles to specifically allow "access to and egress from the Bob Creek Wildland." The bill also provides for the erection of signs and notices marking trails, access ways, and boundaries. The trails named specifically in the act are the Bob Creek trail and the Camp Creek trail. However, the bill is worded rather generally enough to leave it open ended whether or not other trails can or will be added.

I just want to indicate that I have some very serious concerns and reservations about this bill. The concern is that the nonconforming uses could remain prohibited and could set a bad precedent for all protected areas. There are other ways to deal with exceptions that are necessary, such as those by ranchers and so on who do need to access the area and have traditionally done so, by giving special permits to access the trails. That would ensure that the traditional uses could be met, and the access by people who need to be there for economic reasons and historical reasons would be able to continue.

I'm advised, talking to individuals in the area, that the Bob Creek trail has been maintained as a road for some time, a long time, but that the concern is more the Camp Creek trail. It currently has no status as a road. I think, Mr. Chairman, the problem is that we have the potential for an increase in use of these trails. I just want to indicate that there are ways to do this and provide access to this area for those traditional uses without opening it up for general use. Once you allow the vehicles on these trails, you're going to have a lot of trouble enforcing it, and particularly the cuts that we have seen to enforcement staff and budgets . . .

Dr. Taft: Are there any enforcement staff left?

Mr. Mason: Well, we don't even know, Mr. Chairman, in fact if there are any significant resources that remain available to the department to patrol and protect these areas. So you're going to allow these four-wheel drive vehicles in there, you're going to put a bunch of signs up, and the people that do the protection are com-

plaining that they can't even afford the gas for their vehicles to do their job. That's how bad the department has been cut.

So really the fear here is that you're going to increase the recreational use of these trails. Ostensibly the bill is to provide for traditional access for economic activities that have long existed. I think there are ways to do that without breaking the principle of prohibiting these kinds of vehicles in this type of area.

So I think, Mr. Chairman, that with that I will indicate that we'll not be supporting this bill and urge government members to take another look at this. I think there are, as I have said, effective ways to meet the needs of the community in this area who do require the access while maintaining some protection for the area from increased recreational use, which I fear is inevitable if this bill is passed.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You're ready for the question?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is a piece of legislation that is symbolically significant as a representation of this government's attitude towards wilderness and towards protecting land that's in its natural state or at least is close to its natural state. We're addressing here a block of land in southwestern Alberta just north of the Oldman River, I believe. Absolutely beautiful country. I'm not sure I've been to this exact location, but I have spent time down in and around this area. It's rolling rangeland with some wooded area and open prairie, and it is quite gorgeous with the Rocky Mountains on the horizon to the west.

It's also very important traditional land for aboriginal people. This is not, I think, terribly far, for example, from Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. Well, it would be certainly in the same general area.

Dr. Massey: It's in the province.

Dr. Taft: I'm getting heckled by my own members. Ah, yes. Respect.

Now, it's interesting to go back and look at a little bit of the history, the background to the Black Creek heritage rangeland, which was designated in that somewhat infamous program called the special places program in 1999. The special places program started off with, I think, a world of good intentions and ran into an awful lot of compromises, and we may yet be seeing some of those play out here.

Now, I understand that the management plan for this area has been actually drafted, and it states the following, and this is a quote, I understand, from the management plan for the area.

The primary goal of the Wildland and the Heritage Rangeland is as follows: To preserve the natural heritage (i.e., soil, flora, fauna, landscape features, and natural/ecological processes) of the two protected areas in perpetuity.

And this next point is crucial.

Other provincial protected areas program goals (i.e., heritage appreciation, outdoor recreation, heritage tourism) are of secondary importance with respect to the protected areas. The heritage appreciation and outdoor recreation goals may be met, but only to the extent that their attainment does not conflict with or impinge on the preservation goal.

9:10

Now, the question here is: will Bill 2 as it is proposed impinge on the preservation goals of the management plan for this area? It seems to me that it will in fact impinge because it's going to allow an increase in off-highway motorized vehicle transportation into this area. It'll increase vehicle access to the Black Creek heritage

rangeland, and inevitably, it seems to me, that's going to lead to degeneration in the natural condition of this special area.

So unless I hear information otherwise from the sponsoring minister—it's none other than the Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek—I think we'll have to oppose this piece of legislation. I mean, it's well known that off-highway vehicle activity has a detrimental impact by and large on wildlife habitat. We're probably all familiar with the kind of disturbance and damage that's done to the soil and to creek beds where these roads cross creeks. It certainly is noisy. It disturbs wildlife, increases air pollution, and can cause, in fact, significant soil erosion. I saw some photos from last fall of soil erosion in an area north of the area we're discussing right now resulting from off-highway vehicle use, and it was actually quite dramatic and quite disturbing.

Now, I suppose that if there were some absolutely overwhelming justification for this, I'd consider it, but I think that in some ways we not only need to think locally and act locally; we need to think globally as well here. We are in a world in which wilderness is being eliminated. Wilderness is being lost around the planet. In fact, there are some people who have put forward pretty powerful arguments that nature as it has been known throughout the entire existence of humanity has now ended. The whole idea of genuine nature is no longer a reality. It is simply a historical idea, meaning that there is no part of this planet any more that is untouched or unaffected by human activity and that indeed we have gone from allowing natural processes to shape the course of the earth's health to having that overwhelmed by human activity.

So the whole idea from a global perspective that wilderness is rapidly diminishing has to be considered here. We in this country, this incredible country of ours, Canada, and this wonderful province of ours, Alberta, still have corners of this land that are about as wild as any you are going to find in the world. We ought to be stewarding that land; we ought to be protecting it; we ought to be thinking of generations ahead and the value that untarnished natural land will have in perpetuity. I'm afraid this bill doesn't respect that idea. This bill threatens yet more wilderness in Alberta and is something that I think our children and grandchildren will look back at and say: wasn't that too bad; we lost that gorgeous piece of nature.

So I do look forward to the comments from the minister, the Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek to see how he justifies this bill, see how he explains it to us, and how he can attempt to convince us that opening up yet another little corner of Alberta's nature to quads and motorized vehicles is a good idea, because I don't believe it is.

I don't want to consume any more time than is necessary here, Mr. Chairman, but unless I hear something quite remarkably convincing from the minister, I'm going to be opposing this bill. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I've continued to follow this debate in *Hansard* and while I'm able to be in the House, and there was something that the Member for Highwood had brought up that sort of caught my attention last time when he was talking about the lack of snow in the area. Therefore, my discussion about whether it was appropriate for snowmobilers or not was somewhat of a moot point because there wasn't any snow, and I thought: okay. I went looking for a better description for my own purposes of where this area was and what it was like and didn't have to look too hard because we're getting very good in Alberta on having information available on web sites.

This is from an Alberta government web site. It's on the special places, called Alberta's Commitment, from page 31, and I'm just going to read this description because it quite struck me and, I think,

was the deciding factor in my decision not to support this bill. So, if I may, it just says that

one of the most noteworthy accomplishments of Special Places is the designation of over 30,000 hectares in an area known as the Whaleback. The largest undisturbed montane landscape in Alberta is now preserved in Bob Creek Wildland and Black Creek Heritage Rangeland. A series of spine-like ridges, the landscape of the Whaleback alternates between open grasslands and forests of pine, spruce, fir and aspen. Limber pine over 575 years old and 400-year old Douglas fir have been recorded. The snow free, Chinook-swept grasslands are winter range for mule deer and Alberta's largest elk herd while the list of predators includes cougar, wolf and grizzly bear.

Then it goes on to talk about there being over 80 species of birds there, that "many rare plants have been recorded," and of great interest is that

with the co-operation of industry, the Whaleback is permanently preserved free of mining, oil and gas development and logging. Forestry tenures were relinquished and oil and gas rights donated to the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Grazing lessees also supported inclusion of their leases in the protected areas.

So there's been a lot of work, a lot of meeting of the minds, from sectors that may traditionally be seen to be in opposition to one another, and I was quite struck by that.

Given that it is a very special place in Alberta—and I listened carefully to what the minister brought forward as rebuttal to the concerns that have been raised—I'm not satisfied by his points that this is reason enough to step away from our previous commitment to protect this area. I'm aware that my colleague the Official Opposition critic on the environment and on parks and forestry and sustainable resource management has also spoken at length raising her concerns around this. We have had a feedback loop in the community, both the interested constituency of environmental enthusiasts but also from the area. We always seek out what their opinion is on anything, and we've not had a very positive response coming from there.

Given all of that in context, I'm not willing to support this bill. I even looked at whether it was possible to amend the bill to make it more palatable, and I don't see opportunity for amending without, you know, totally scratching the bill, which is going against the whole point of an amendment.

So at this point I'm not willing to support the bill. Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 2 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

9:20

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 3

Architects Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to make a few brief comments in support of the bill and to summarize it a bit.

Bill 3, the Architects Amendment Act, 2004, is a measure that strengthens the professional standards for the architectural and

interior design community. I was pleased to hear supportive comments on the bill from other members during second reading, and I'll take that support as affirmation that we are on the right track with the proposed amendments contained within this legislation. Through different amendments contained in this bill, the licensed interior designers would find a greater inclusion within their related industry. I'd like to touch on some of these amendments and briefly explain the benefits, as I see them, that would result.

Bill 3 proposes that licensed interior designers be defined under section 2 of the Architects Act, which references the definition contained in the act's interior design regulation. Defining this group in the act represents the main intent of Bill 3 as it makes the act more inclusive and at the same time provides greater legislative transparency. This is a measure that has been requested by the Alberta Association of Architects. Also under section 2 is a definition of restricted practitioner.

Under section 3 licensed interior designers would be authorized to perform specific architectural services as defined in the Architects Act's supporting regulations. The proposed amendment would reflect what is currently happening within the industry.

Section 4 would see a licensed interior designer elected to the Alberta Association of Architects governing council. This would ensure that licensed interior designers would be represented in the association's decision-making process. Also, it would improve the communication process between the association and licensed interior designers.

The current act contains no provisions to authorize the development of regulations specifically relating to the registration, education, training, professional conduct, and practice of interior design. This would be alleviated in the change found within section 5 of the Architects Amendment Act, which establishes regulation-making powers.

Amendments under section 7 and part 8 establish the registration, certification, and licence renewal requirements of APEGGA members who are authorized to become restricted practitioners under the act. Thus, they would be included in the Alberta association and the Alberta register of members. There's little doubt in my mind that these amendments would strengthen professional standards as they relate to the licensed interior designers and restricted practitioners. The industry is healthier when regulatory bodies are given the authority to ensure that members meet proper educational requirements and provide their customers with a safe, competent, and ethical service by following the prescribed code of conduct.

I'd like to conclude my comments by once again acknowledging the contribution of the architect profession in helping to develop these amendments. The co-operation between the staff of Alberta Human Resources and Employment and the Association of Architects' representatives was key in bringing forward recommendations to improve the Architects Act.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat, and I'll look forward to hearing the comments of other members.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I know that the Official Opposition critic covering this area, my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar, has already spoken in support of this bill. We have sent it out to our usual feedback loop, and no one raised any concerns with it. The Official Opposition has certainly been on the record in the past as being supportive of self-regulation for certain kinds of professional associations covering scope of practice and various housekeeping matters.

At this point no one has raised with us any concerns about the bill, and I'm willing to support it at this time.

[The clauses of Bill 3 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 4

Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Lest any of us think that nobody follows what we do in here, actually there are people who pay close attention to what we do in here. One of them phoned me after my last round of comments on this bill and gave me some very useful and interesting information. This is a person who has worked closely on this piece of legislation for many years, has some expertise in guide dogs and in service dogs and how they're trained and how they're handled, and in fact relies on a guide dog for her daily life. She pointed out to me that, obviously, she fully endorses Bill 4 and that perhaps instead of extending or expanding this bill and sweeping service dogs into the same legislation as guide dogs, we may want to consider separate legislation for service dogs.

Service dogs, of course, can be trained for all kinds of things. They can be trained to help people who have trouble balancing. They can be trained for people who are prone to seizures. But they can also be trained to be quite aggressive. There are in the United States service dogs who are trained to help people who are having problems with stalkers, and if the wrong person approaches the person being helped by the service dog, the service dog will snarl and growl and, if need be, I guess, attack the potential stalker. That can be a problem in some public arenas, as you can well imagine. So we need to perhaps consider the full range of services that service dogs provide when we come to regulating them and providing legislation.

We also need to be very conscious of the different standards of training that dogs are provided. There are different organizations that certify dogs. There's the international federation of guide dog schools, which has, I understand, quite stringent standards specifically for guide dogs for blind persons. There are other dog schools and dog training associations for different kinds of service dogs, and unfortunately there are people around who have no licence, no particular background at all who claim that they are effective at training service dogs or even guide dogs. Of course, the danger there can be that if these dogs are not properly trained, somebody's life can be put in danger. If you're a blind person relying on your dog to help you across the street or if you have health problems or whatever other issues, the dog can mean life or death to you, and if the dog isn't properly trained, the consequences can be tragic.

9:30

These are some of the issues we need to be aware of, and we may want to look in the future at something like a service dog act or an assistance animals act, because they're not always just dogs. They could be developed in conjunction with a blind persons' rights amendment act or some other legislative framework. There certainly are many issues very closely connected to what we're debating in Bill 4 that need to be considered. I don't want to hold up Bill 4

while those other issues are considered, but in the future I hope that the government pays attention and looks at bringing forward other legislation to address other kinds of assistance animals.

With those comments I'll wrap up and look forward to other comments. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to use this opportunity to ask the minister who is sponsoring this bill, the Minister of Community Development, once again if he can give the Assembly a clear understanding of when we would see what should be the companion legislation.

A number of people have spoken about their, in my case, disappointment that we didn't get the other kinds of service and assistance animals included in this legislation. Fine. I'm willing to accept that this act remained pure, if you like, in that it was really dealing with the needs of blind persons and their guide dogs. I'm perfectly willing to accept that, but there were many of us who were waiting for the update or were waiting to bring us into the new millennium with clear legislation around service and assistance animals.

My concern was that we've now seen the update on the guide dogs and Blind Persons' Rights Act and no companion legislation, so when do we see the companion legislation? Are we going to have to wait another 20 years for that? I'm trying to prod the minister a bit here, but really this is an incomplete picture that we now have. We have resolved one small bit of this issue and have not resolved a whole other large area.

I also want to pick up on something that my colleague, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, said and maybe help to bring him additional information. He was mentioning the service animals that are specially trained to assist individuals who are being stalked or in a position of imminent severe threat. Usually someone has threatened to kill them and has every intention of carrying that out, and there are dogs that have been specially trained – you do hear of them mostly in the United States – to protect that person.

So the concerns expressed by my colleague that somehow they would be snarling and snapping at somebody in a public setting – strictly speaking those animals were trained to stay with the individual they are there to protect, and they are only to react if that person is going to be killed, essentially. The threat of them being killed is very high coming from a particular individual, and the animal is trained to react to that particular menace coming at them. It does allow that individual to get out in society in the same way that guide dogs allow persons with visual impairment to get out and move around in the world and do their business and that seizure dogs help people get out and move around and do what they need to do, and they'll be alerted if a seizure is coming by the animal.

The whole point is that people can get on with their lives, and these specially trained protection dogs are so that those individuals that are under extreme threat for their lives, in fact, can still go out and, you know, have coffee with a friend, do their grocery shopping, or go and gas up the car and do some of those things that everybody else gets to do, but because these individuals are under dire threat, they may not be able to do that. The dogs protect them, and they only react to the one individual. So it's a highly specialized area of service dogs, and these dogs don't go after anybody else in a public area. They are there to save someone's life, and it's a very specific reaction.

Again, part of the frustration here is that we didn't get the second bill that would have covered and outlined acceptable training standards, some sort of identification, and where in public various assistance animals would be welcomed or would be allowed to go

with their owners. I was looking for the complete range of animals: those that are signal animals, for example, that can detect oncoming seizures in individuals or other kinds of health related issues; those that are an assistance animal, you know, for working with kids with autism or somebody in a wheelchair where they can pick up things that have been dropped by the individuals; and the protection animals that I just described.

We didn't get anything for all of those kinds of animals, so we're still in limbo with them. They're not allowed and accepted and protected in public spaces like the guide dogs are. That just simply wasn't addressed, and there's no information coming from the government about when we could expect that.

I'm certainly willing to support Bill 4, but I need to know when the rest of this comes, when we get the companion act that's going to come. So that's my plea to the sponsoring minister, to please move as quickly as possible. I would like to see it in this spring session, at the latest in the fall session, but let's have an answer from the minister. Where are we in the planning process with this second bill? I mean, I know that it takes the government some time to get all of their ducks in a row and to have this flow through their process. Where are we? If this is not going to happen this year, then stand up and tell us because there's been a lot of interest and a lot of people that are asking for this.

We've supported this Bill 4 for the blind persons. We'd like to know when we're going to get what we're waiting for, which is the rest of the service and assistance and signal animals.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[The clauses of Bill 4 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall Bill 4 be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 1

Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I had the opportunity to speak to Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, at second reading, and now, as is the practice, we have an opportunity to go through the bill clause by clause and to look at some of the provisions.

I wanted to start with the preamble, Mr. Chairman. The preamble is one that I think most of us would have difficulty disagreeing with except, I think, for the interpretation or the action that seems to flow from those beliefs. That's really what they are, three belief statements. The first one is that the Alberta government recognizes the benefit of postsecondary education. The extrapolation from that, of course, is the bill that we have before us to encourage young Albertans to continue to postsecondary education.

We have in front of us a financial scheme that's supposed to do that. Unfortunately, it seems to be inconsistent with some of the other actions that the government has taken, and I think, in particular, it's the failure to have in place a long-term plan for the financing of postsecondary schools in the province.

9:40

The result of the lack of that plan is that we have the yearly – I've used the word "crisis" before, and "crisis" may not quite be the term. But each year as institutions prepare their budgets and, faced with fewer and fewer resources of the government, are forced to turn to students and increase their tuition, there's not a crisis but certainly an air of distress and a lot of political action with respect to students to try to make the government aware that if they really did recognize the benefits of postsecondary education, they would make it easier for those students already attending those institutions and make it easier for those people in those institutions that are responsible for postsecondary education and responsible for providing programs. That would make it easier for them, and that would be a true reflection that they recognize the benefits of a postsecondary education.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

The second whereas in the preamble indicates that the government "wishes to raise awareness of the benefits of post-secondary education among children and their parents." I think I mentioned the last time I spoke to the bill that there has been a great effort on the part of the government, and in particular the Minister of Learning, to remind individuals who attend postsecondary schools and graduate from them how much they personally gain from that education. I think that there have been numbers tossed around with respect to the return on investment you get for investing in a postsecondary education.

The other piece of that has really not been very prominent in the government's awareness campaign, and that's the benefits that we all as a community enjoy because students are successful at our postsecondary schools. That goes for everything from the kinds of medical doctors and nurses and health care workers that we graduate and we all are able to draw upon when need arises to the engineers that help design bridges and highways and the kinds of structures we need for the transportation system that we all use to the social workers who help those in our community who are vulnerable or who are in distress and need help: a whole host of professionals that add to life in our community, both essential and the amenities that we enjoy.

There seems to have been little effort on behalf of the government to raise awareness of that kind of benefit of postsecondary education among citizens. I think it's unfortunate, and if the wish is to raise awareness, as this second whereas in the preamble indicates, I think that there could be a great deal more done with respect to the benefits to the broader community of encouraging youngsters to go to postsecondary schools.

The third whereas is one that we have some trouble with, and that's the government wishing "to encourage parents to plan and save for their children's post-secondary education." Now, no one will object or I don't think talk against parents planning for their youngsters to go to postsecondary schools, but the whole notion of saving and how much of the savings are going to be needed by parents I think is troubling. We've seen the withdrawal of support for postsecondary schools, the rather dramatic withdrawal in the last decade. The cuts that postsecondary institutions took in 1994 were the largest of all the budget cuts, 20 per cent, and many of the institutions have never recovered from that withdrawal of funds.

To turn around and to indicate to parents through actions like this – if the message is, "You're going to have to pay more because government is going to pay less," I think it's an issue that needs to have wider debate than what is stimulated by this whereas clause in Bill 1. So I'm concerned about the message that that puts out to

parents, and I'm concerned about the message to government in terms of their responsibility for providing for postsecondary education.

It wasn't that long ago, Mr. Chairman, that Canada and a number of nations gathered at the UN and agreed that they would extend tax-supported education for students past 12th grade. They would extend a tax-supported education a year at a time until students had, first of all, a two-year college degree or diploma without having to foot the bill and then eventually a four-year degree.

It may not happen immediately, Mr. Chairman, but there's no question in my mind that a number of years down the road that's exactly where we'll be. As the importance of postsecondary education becomes more and more critical to the success of a knowledge economy like ours, an information economy, the need to have our students complete those programs is going to become more, and what better way to encourage students to continue past high school than to make that as part of the tax-supported system? I think that it is eventually where we're going to have to go as a society.

If you look at the grants that are outlined and who's eligible for them – I think that I mentioned this before at second reading, the whole notion of a child only being eligible if they were born to a resident in Alberta in 2005 or any subsequent year and the inherent unfairness of that for students who were born a year or 16 years previous to that. Many of them are going to be going on to postsecondary schools, and they are not going to have the same opportunity as the Albertans who by accident of birth are born in 2005, and I think that sends the wrong message to those students.

I also think that it's a shortcoming in terms of planning with respect to the centennial. We would hope that people wouldn't look back on the centennial as the year that they were left out of a plan by the government that would have allowed them to put aside some money, if they so desired, for their education. So I think the unfairness of the bill is unfortunate, I guess, to say the least.

9:50

The notion under section 3(1) of paying a grant of a hundred dollars into a registered education savings plan. There's still a great deal of discussion and a great deal of information about registered education savings plans. I heard a presentation on television just recently where parents were being encouraged to not use the registered education savings plan but, instead, to put that money into a registered mutual fund that acted exactly the same way but ended up paying far greater returns with respect to the money that was invested. So whether the registered education savings plan is the best vehicle to carry this money and to make it grow I guess has been questioned by people, and I'm not sure that I've heard a full discussion of the alternatives that the government looked at before they happened to settle on this plan. I realize that given the federal law in this area, that made it attractive to piggyback on. Again, I'm not convinced that the alternatives have been explored.

I dealt with the matter of eligibility, Mr. Chairman. I think it's a plan that on first blush looked good but on closer examination has some flaws that I think warrant more questions and certainly without some amendment I don't think deserves to be supported by this House.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I just thought I might try and respond to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. When I was listening to what he had to say in dealing with raising awareness of the importance of

postsecondary education, the hon. member spoke of doctors and nurses and teachers and social workers, and I was quite frankly surprised that he didn't speak to any of the skills, any of the apprenticeships, or any of the college-applied degrees and so on that are also part of this. In other words, any approved postsecondary institution is then qualified to use these funds to further education. Whether or not your passion may be professional or in the area of skills, you should be able to follow your passion.

Another comment that the hon. member made was that he was concerned that the notion of saving for future education was troubling because he felt that perhaps it was a signal that government would pay less. Well, I think, Mr. Chairman, that saving for a postsecondary education is really a joint responsibility between parents, students, and government. I don't think saving is ever a bad idea.

With respect to the unfairness that was brought up again with respect to the fact that it starts in our centennial and goes on beyond, I'm wondering what benefit it would be for a 17 year old or an 18 year old to get a \$500 contribution for postsecondary education. Really, the bottom line here is the magic of compound interest as well as the top-up, with respect to the federal government, of 20 per cent. What better return on investment is that?

If we look at the number of children we have in this province, there are 560,000 in K to 12. That means we must have another 200,000 that are from zero to age five. So you are looking at, you know, 700,000 to 800,000 kids. Divide that into \$20 million and what do you get? About \$25. Would that entice anybody to open an RESP? I don't think so.

With respect to whether or not RESPs are the best vehicle, the guidelines are federal guidelines, and I think the hon. member knows that you can find all manner and types of RESP plans, including some that invest in mutuals. So I don't know that the hon. member understands that you can go to any RESP dealer of your choice, and therefore you have a whole gamut of types of investments that you could in fact invest in.

Thank you very much.

[The clauses of Bill 1 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Acting Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Chair: Opposed? Carried.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

Bill 7

Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I'm pleased to be able to rise in Committee of the Whole to add my comments on Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004. Actually, I welcome the discussion that's caused by the introduction of this bill because I think there does need to be a discussion in Alberta about democratic renewal. Of course, senatorial reform, senate selection reform, is part of that package that needs to be considered.

The other ones that often are in the mix at the same time include the election process, whether we need to look at changing how we actually elect people. We have a first past the post system currently. You often hear proportional representation talked of as a viable alternative. The other day on the radio I heard someone talking about a mixed system, which would have been a version of proportional representation plus an additional vote. You would, in fact, cast two votes, an additional vote for the party of your choice. You could vote rep-by-pop for the individual person in your constituency, and then you could cast another vote that indicated your preference for the party. So if you thought the individual was doing a very good job and wanted to support them, if you had an incumbent, for example, but you really had to hold your nose over the overall party platform, you could reconcile those two things.

10:00

So there are still a number of other creative solutions that are coming up around election processes. I think this has to be addressed, and sometimes people laugh at me and say: "Oh, no, no, no. That's not going to happen. Whoever is in power is never going to let go of the system that keeps putting them back in power." But I would argue that there comes a point when the credibility of the party that wins is seriously impinged. At what point? When 50 per cent of the population, 40 per cent of the population, 30 per cent of the population are the ones that are voting? At that point what kind of credibility does the government have when they stand up and only 35 or 40 per cent of the population voted?

Well, how does that give them the great, you know, right to govern? It doesn't. At that point I think even governing parties, even parties that have monstrous majorities in the House, like the current situation in Alberta, even those parties will have to start to look at changing the system and championing a change for the system, because nobody believes them any more. Nobody gives them any kind of high regard because so few people actually participated in putting them there.

That links to another issue that I keep running into, and that is that we are not engaging young voters. A number of people have done work on this and I'm of course now tracking all of this, but what we're finding is that the current crop of young voters – in other words, 18 to 30, let's say – are not learning to vote. Generally, what we have is that lots of people, when they turn 18, don't vote in their first couple of elections because they're busy and they don't feel that they really have a lot of influence and they're not really paying attention. They don't have a lot at stake and stuff in the decisions.

Then they, you know, start a family, or they buy a house or property, and they get a bit more interested in how the laws that are passed and the people that are passing them affect their individual life. They become engaged in the process, and they start to vote. What we're finding with this group of younger voters now is that they're not learning to vote. They didn't vote at 18. They're not voting at 22. They're not voting at 26. It's not happening. They are not engaging in this system. So if we don't do something now to bring them into participation in this democracy, they will never participate, which I think bodes very ill for us in the future if we end up with an entire – what's the word I'm looking for? – age grouping that doesn't participate at all in the democratic process. We've got a problem.

So with the current voting system a lot of them say: "Well, I don't think my vote counts. You know, I don't feel that I participate. I don't think anybody listens to me." You know, I felt that way. I was in my 30s before I actually voted for someone that won, and that's a bit frustrating. I mean, that was hanging in through a lot of elections. It was actually municipal elections. That was hanging in

through a lot of elections where I voted for people that just never won. You think: "Well, what's the point? My vote doesn't count here. Nobody really cares about my input." I guess I'm just stubborn in that I stuck it out so long that I actually started to get to a point where people that I was interested in were winning, and they were engaging enough other people to win.

Mr. Herard: Was the first time you did that when you voted for yourself?

Ms Blakeman: No. It was municipal.

The idea that we're not engaging those younger voters I think is a huge issue. They understand that with the first past the post system they're not getting the representation that they expect to see. I mean, look around. We're not very representative of our population at this point. We've got to make this system better so that we are more representative of the people that actually live in our constituencies. So we have a whole issue around the election processes and what is going to serve us better.

There are also issues around citizens' initiatives, and there are two parts to that. One is the idea of recall, and the second is what's most commonly called citizens' initiatives; that is, the citizens' ability to bring legislation or a bill or an idea, a concept, before the Legislative Assembly so that it is seriously considered. It doesn't mean that the Assembly has to pass the bill, but it does mean that it has to consider it and debate it and look at it. Again, that's a way, because people feel that their elected representatives are not paying attention to them. There's an issue that they want brought up, they keep coming back to it, and they can't get it on the floor to be debated.

So that's where we get these kinds of citizens' initiatives where, you know, you get so many signatures on a petition that supports the introduction of a piece of legislation or an idea to be debated, a certain percentage of the population, and in fact the bill is put in front of the Assembly and is debated, and if it passes from there, it's a different problem. I've always found it very interesting that this Assembly, in particular the governing party in this province, will not support those kinds of citizens' initiatives.

Now, I think there probably is a problem around MLA recall. Watching what's gone on in our sister province, our neighbouring province of B.C., that hasn't been a particularly successful experiment. It seems to have been driven more by, you know, a small group of dedicated people that really, really didn't like their MLA and, you know, set out to get them, and it . . .

Chair's Ruling Decorum

The Chair: Hon. members, it is becoming more and more difficult for the chair to hear, even with the aid of this marvellous instrument, over the loud chuckles and enthusiasm of some of the conversations. If you want to carry on a lively discussion, would you please, with the whip's permission of course, go out into the chamber next door or at least keep it down low enough so that we can hear the speaker, because there's only one speaker being recognized at this time, and it's definitely the Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Debate Continued

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. So what we're talking about here is all the different possibilities for democratic renewal that we could be discussing as we look at this bill which is brought forward, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004.

So far we've talked about election processes. We've talked about citizens' initiatives. We've talked a little bit about actual Senate

reform. This bill is not what it could be, and I wish that it would have been much more, because this is a rich discussion and, in fact, goes to the very heart of who we are as Canadians, that constant striving for representation, access, and equality. I think that's what the Senate represents.

I was one of the lucky people that got to participate in the Shaping Canada's Future Together constitutional discussions that went on across Canada in 1992. I was specifically chosen to participate in the one that happened in Calgary that was centred on the Senate and reform of the Senate. People from across the country were brought together for I think it was five days to look at every aspect of reform of the Senate and what that could possibly look like and what we thought the best idea was.

These constitutional conferences were set up in a very interesting way. Each morning we had presentations made to the entire group of us that really brought out all of the arguments that existed, and we sort of had two or often three sides of an argument laid out for us by learned people, experts in those particular areas. We all listened to this, and it cut through a lot of the blather that you sometimes get in those kinds of conferences where you have people that really aren't very well informed about it kind of mouthing off about their key thing. But there was no excuse for that in this case because we all now had presentations from learned people, and off we went into our breakout sessions to discuss what had been put in front of us.

Of course, we all had the workbooks, and we supposedly had gone and consulted with our various constituencies. Whether that was a geographic constituency or a constituency of like-minded people or shared interests, which is what I was representing, we should have consulted with them on the various questions and then brought that into the discussions that we had. I was really fired up by these discussions because to me it opened up a whole possibility of a way of life and a way of democracy that had never occurred to me. I got quite excited by the possibilities of having more representation. More of what I saw when I walked down the street could I see in an elected Chamber, in an elected Senate, and that was really exciting to me and energizing to me.

10:10

We did look at many of the same things that I brought up here, that sort of: well, if you're looking at an elected Senate, then what would the elections look like? Could it be proportional representation? Would it be a mixed first past the post and proportional? What became possible there in our discussions was that, you know, you could have a younger person elected. You could have somebody that was under 30 that would get elected to the Senate, especially if you were looking at proportional representation.

What we were talking about was the standard way of looking at proportional representation in which people cast their vote and then the votes were added up and, you know, proportionately the top whatever number of people elected were from a certain party, and the party would have a list, and they would then designate which of their people got the designated number of seats. Of course, that is both the huge step forward and the huge drawback because would you, could you trust the parties to actually be fair and representative in the way they put together those lists? Would they have, you know, every second person be a woman, which would be representative of Canada? We've got approximately 50-50 here, so we should have 50 per cent of the people in the Chamber be women. Would there be a certain percentage of people of different race? How far do you carry it? Do you look at sexual orientation? Do you look at religion? What else could you bring into the mix here?

We also looked at how many seats were appropriate across Canada. We're very interesting in Canada because our north takes

in the territories but it also takes off basically the top half, top third, top quarter of each province. So there is a constituency of the north that needs to be represented. If we're going to look at a second kind of representation of various constituencies trying to achieve that equality across the country and that representation across the country, then the north was a particular constituency that needed to be brought into the mix.

In the end the Shaping Canada's Future Together constitutional session that was held in Calgary wasn't successful in coming up with any particular direction that everyone could agree on. Interestingly enough, here we are 14 years later and we're still talking about it, and we can't agree on much here.

Just to go back and look at what's actually being presented in this bill and whether it touches on any of the areas that I've just covered, it doesn't. What it's really looking to do is extend the current act to 2010 because as it stands now, it will expire at the end of this year, December 31, 2004. So it doesn't open this up, it doesn't look at any other kinds of democratic renewal, and it doesn't discuss any of the other things that we could be discussing around senatorial reform, which is just a huge disappointment to me because it's such an exciting area.

Again, if we really wanted to engage some of our younger voters, here's the way to do it. Here's the opening. If we want to talk about a whole new world that could be challenging and accessible to people under 30, this is it, and we're not doing it. We're not discussing it; we're not opening it up; we're not engaging the younger voters. There are some of them sitting in this room that are our faithful pages here. You know, I'm sure they've got lots to say. Probably there's one of them that would be interested in being a Senator if that was a possibility for them.

That's the kind of vision that we needed to look at. You know, how is it possible to get someone that's under 30 representing one of these seats? How could we do that? That would be so exciting. But, no, none of it's considered inside of this bill. We're just talking about extending the date for the same old thing that we've always been talking about.

So, you know, the Alberta Liberals voted against the Senatorial Selection Act in '89 and the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act in '98, which this one is now extending. The agony for me on this one, the agony and the anger, frankly . . .

Mr. Mason: The ecstasy?

Ms Blakeman: No, there's no ecstasy in this. It's the agony and the anger. The Alberta Liberals, the Official Opposition, are strong believers in a triple-E Senate and especially in Senate reform, but this is not the way to do it, and we're not going to support same-old, same-old here. The whole idea was to get a different take on this.

So this is just disappointing considering all the other things that are going on, all the other possibilities that we have to engage the voting public and the nonvoting public that could vote and aren't and, you know, to look at other kinds of democratic renewal and

democratic reform that we're going to have to do. I think it would be much more exciting and fun and getting out ahead of the pack if we could actually grapple with this one and do it. What an exciting thing to be involved with. But instead we have: well, let's just take the same old thing and make it 2010 instead of 2004. That's just a huge disappointment.

We need to look at meaningful Senate reform. We've got three vacancies this year, and this is when we could be having it where it would actually do some good for Alberta to have that discussion, but it's not happening.

I often hear Senate reform talked about by members in this Chamber, members of the government, as a diversion tactic, which I think is particularly sad given all I've said about, you know, exciting possibilities to move forward into the future. To see it sort of flogged as a diversionary tactic to get away from the other things that the government doesn't want direction or focus on is even more disappointing.

I understand at this point that there are others interested, and I'd like to adjourn debate on this bill. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee now rise and report bills 2, 3, 4, and 1 and progress on 7.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 2, Bill 3, Bill 4, and Bill 1. The committee reports progress on Bill 7.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the hour, I would move that the Assembly now stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:20 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 2, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/02

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We give thanks for the bounty of our province: our land, our resources, and our people. We pledge ourselves to act as good stewards on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce some very special guests who are visiting our Legislature and question period for the very first time. They are from the Department of Finance. We have with us Faye McCann, Erin Hnit, Heather Gibson, Shannon Heffel, Arthur Arruda, Marianne Baird, Diem Le, Valerie Goodall, Chris Gallant, and Colin Leschert. These are the young people who work very, very diligently to answer all of the action requests for information that come from all sides of the House. This is the first time they are going to see how all that information is culminated into questions and answers. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 78 students from Meyonohk elementary school in Mill Woods. They are accompanied by their teachers Mr. David Fairfield, Mr. Don Wiley, Mr. Victor Wang and by student teacher Miss Jessica Liddell. They are also accompanied by parent helpers Mrs. Marcie Hanson, Ms Hilda Mah, Mrs. Phillis Wong, Mr. Terry Siebert, Mrs. May Dong, Mrs. Tracy Cheng, and Mrs. Nancy Graham. Meyonohk is a school that reflects the best in multiculturalism in our country. They are in the public gallery, and I'd ask them now with your permission to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Ministerial Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

RCMP Corporal James Galloway

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to make a statement concerning a tragic incident involving an RCMP member this past weekend. It has been only three years since I was appointed Solicitor General, but this recent tragedy reminds me that since that time a total of eight police and peace officers have died in the line of duty in Alberta. I would like to read those names now: Senior Ranger John Graham, Constable Darren Beatty, Park Warden Michael Wynn, Constable Christine Diotte, Superintendent Dennis Massey, Constable Ghislain Maurice, Corporal Stephen Gibson, and now the latest, Corporal James Galloway.

Early Saturday morning, Mr. Speaker, Jim Galloway died in the line of duty during a police standoff in Spruce Grove. He died leaving behind his wife, Marg, three adult children, three grandchildren, and many, many friends and fellow officers.

Yesterday I had the opportunity to speak to Marg Galloway to pass on my condolences and to express on behalf of our government our deep sadness and grief. She told me how his death had shocked his family, of how she still could hardly believe what had happened, that she found herself expecting to see him walk through the door at any moment.

This most recent death has brought back the memory of another death. About a year ago I attended a funeral of a Calgary police member. My role, Mr. Speaker, was to walk behind the casket as it was carried. Police and uniformed officials from around this province and this country had gathered to mourn the loss of yet another brother. I will never forget that day, seeing hundreds of officers saluting as the casket passed by, and I remember the tears that streamed down many of their faces. Today I am once again reminded that while Corporal Galloway's death has devastated his family, it is also a tragedy for the entire law enforcement community. Every member of this community understands the risks they take, the dangers they face, the fact that one day it could be their funeral.

By those who knew Jim, he will be remembered for his leadership, his caring, his dependability, his professionalism, his expertise, his enthusiasm, his vigour, and his passionate devotion to his work. Jim was a police service dog handler with the RCMP's emergency response team. That meant that Jim and his police dog, Cito, often attended armed standoffs like Saturday's, literally hundreds of situations during a career that spanned more than three decades.

As Albertans we need to be reminded that our safe communities come at a price. We need to be reminded that men and women police and peace officers sometimes must give their lives so that we can sleep at night. Corporal Galloway deserves our deepest gratitude for his sacrifice.

Mr. Speaker, today we honour Corporal Galloway and the other fallen officers as well as their families, their friends, and their colleagues who must live with this loss.

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, I join all the members of this House in mourning the loss of Corporal Jim Galloway, who was killed in the line of duty this past Saturday. Police and peace officers are some of the most selfless people who walk amongst us. They put their lives on the line every day ensuring our safety and the safety of the whole community. They sacrifice time with family and friends to serve and protect. Some, like Jim Galloway, even sacrifice their lives in the performance of their duties.

It is important that all Albertans remember the service that these fine men and women perform for us every day. It is important that we remember Jim Galloway, Christine Diotte, Graeme Cumming, Ezio Faraone, Richard Sonnenberg, Johnny Petropoulos, Robert Vanderwiell, and so many other police and peace officers who have made the supreme sacrifice doing the work they loved.

Every September we gather to remember on Police and Peace Officers National Memorial Day those police and peace officers who have laid down their lives. However, we should never forget the sacrifices which are made to keep us safe. We should also never forget that each day thousands of police officers put their lives on the line. The slogan for the memorial service is They Are Our Heros: We Shall Not Forget Them. Let us all reflect on the meaning of that statement today.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in order to recognize an additional speaker, that being the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, we will need unanimous consent.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wish to thank the House for this opportunity to briefly participate in this tribute to RCMP Corporal James Galloway, who died tragically in the course of fulfilling his duties as a police officer last weekend. Corporal Galloway, like all police officers who do so on a daily basis, placed himself in harm's way in the line of duty every day of his long service. All Albertans owe Corporal Galloway and other police officers a deep gratitude for the service they provide to keep our communities safe.

On behalf of my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Highlands and the New Democrat opposition I wish to convey my condolences to Corporal Galloway's wife, Margaret, to his children and grandchildren, and to all members of the Galloway family on this tragic loss. I also extend condolences to Corporal Galloway's friends and his fellow officers in the RCMP as well as other police services, by whom a death in the line of duty is so deeply felt.

1:40

The circumstances in which Corporal Galloway died are doubly tragic, Mr. Speaker. Also dead is Mr. Martin Ostopovich, whose family is also mourning him, and I extend my condolences to this grieving family as well. In due time I trust that an inquiry into the circumstances that led to these tragic shooting deaths will be held to determine if such a tragic shooting could have been prevented and recommendations for how such tragedies can never be repeated. I sincerely hope that such an inquiry will also find answers and bring some closure for the grieving families and friends of the two men who died in such tragic circumstances last weekend.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 1, 1998, the Eight Billion Dollar Man, Dr. West, stood in this Assembly and said, "The full [extent] of Bill 27 is to bring forth a deregulated electrical system to the fullest benefit of the consumer, the customer, and Albertans." But Albertans stopped being fooled by this government about electricity deregulation when they saw nothing but their high-cost power translated in their monthly bill. Now, my first question is to the Premier. Given that electricity deregulation has failed to deliver the fullest benefit to the consumer, the customer, and Albertans, when will this government do the right thing and unplug electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, in answer to the last part of the hon. member's question, we don't plan in any way, shape, or form to unplug deregulation. Deregulation is here to stay. I would remind the hon. member that Alberta has gained over 3,000 megawatts of new power generation. That's a 30 per cent increase to Alberta's electricity supply since deregulation was introduced. In addition, investors have indicated that they propose investing close to \$6 billion by the end of 2006, which will bring another 5,400 megawatts of power on stream.

When we look at electricity, which the Liberals have failed to do – you know, they would rather talk about, well, the five-second sound bite, the Eight Billion Dollar Man, who was devalued yesterday to \$8 million and is now back up to \$8 billion. But

looking at the price of electricity, it's clear that prices in Alberta have gone down since 2001 when deregulation was introduced. The average pool price of electricity in 2001 was 7.1 cents per kilowatt hour. The average pool price last year was 6.3 cents per kilowatt hour, and the average price so far in 2004 is 5.3 cents per kilowatt hour.

I have a chart, Mr. Speaker, that I would be more than happy to table with the Assembly, that shows the month-to-month breakdown and yearly averages of the pool prices. I would be happy to table it. It's time they started to tell the truth.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that the Premier on March 25, 1998, stated in this House in regard to electricity that "competition equals lower prices," how can the Premier now admit last week to Albertans that electricity competition may never equal lower prices?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I went through that last week, and I explained to this Assembly and to the hon. member – but, obviously, he wasn't listening – that the price of commodities generally goes up. Electricity is a commodity like natural gas, like wheat, like barley, like coal, like gold, like silver, like diamonds. Like everything else the price incrementally goes up. Hopefully, we can stabilize the price of electricity, and hopefully if more competition comes on stream, it will go down. But the price of the commodity generally goes up. It's going up everywhere throughout North America.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the Eight Billion Dollar Man, Dr. West, said this about electricity deregulation on April 22, 1998, in this House, "It will bring tremendous competition that will put downward pressure on prices" – and we know that this hasn't happened; ask any Albertan with a power bill – will the Premier now admit that electricity deregulation has failed to deliver on any of the promises made by Dr. West whenever we debated this in 1998?

Mr. Klein: No, Mr. Speaker. It has not failed by any stretch of the imagination, and I know that the hon. member has a very vivid imagination.

To put more light and to bring forward some facts on this matter, I will have the hon. Minister of Energy respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Premier and Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to expose what has gone from a credibility gap from this member to actually a credibility chasm. This member has been at the point of tabling a press release that says that fog is the result of deregulation and then withdrawing that. He's had me in Oregon when, in fact, I was in Wetaskiwin. On and on go the credibility gaps of this member, and I think that today is a very good time to address that.

Not only did the Liberals, Mr. Speaker, support those quotes from Dr. West in the days of 1998 to 2001. We also see where provinces across Canada are wrestling with the very same problem that Alberta has solved. So, in fact, other jurisdictions, not only in North America but around the world, are looking at Alberta as being an example of being able to provide reasonable prices, reasonable generation, a good system that is open and transparent, a system that provides power when blackouts have occurred in other parts of

North America causing billions – billions – of American dollars, billions of Canadian dollars in damage. That has not happened in this province. This member knows full well that there is compelling economic evidence as to the success of electrical deregulation in this marketplace.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The effects of jet lag are apparent.

Now, on March 13, 1998, in a letter to the Premier regarding electricity deregulation, Mr. Ron Southern, an influential Calgary businessperson, lamented former Energy minister Dr. West's determination to ram this unfair and unjust scheme through the Legislature on a poorly informed public. My first question is to the Premier. Why did this government force electricity deregulation on consumers when it was warned by Mr. Southern and many others that there were no economic benefits whatsoever to this unfair and unjust scheme?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I was involved in discussions with Mr. Southern. They were long discussions, and his concern wasn't over deregulation. As a matter of fact, he indicated to me that he favoured deregulation. His concern was over the stranded costs of his assets, his power generating plants. It had nothing to do with deregulation. It had something to do with how he was going to be compensated for his stranded costs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that Mr. Southern also stated in that letter, quote, one department's determination is not an adequate substitute for clear foresight, prudence, and caution in this case, unquote, when will this government listen to the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties and others? The municipal districts and counties last fall passed an emergency resolution urging this government to abandon and unplug electricity deregulation. When will you do the right thing?

Mr. Klein: We are not going to abandon and unplug electricity deregulation, Mr. Speaker. I want to make that abundantly clear. So he can quit asking about it, and he can quit suggesting it. It's not going to happen.

Relative to Mr. Southern, I would challenge the hon. member to ask Mr. Southern today if he would go back to a regulated environment. I think his answer would be a lot different.

1:50

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that Mr. Southern also said in 1998 during the electricity deregulation debate that electricity deregulation will force consumers . . .

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: Hon. member, please. You know, I'm going to do this again. Oral questions, *Beauchesne*: a question "must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate . . . The question must be brief." Do I take it that we're now talking about a letter published in 1998, this being 2004? I'm sorry.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Mr. MacDonald: Point of order.

The Speaker: Absolutely.

Mental Health Services

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, this past weekend a tragic incident between police and a gunman suffering from schizophrenia left two dead and a community in mourning. This government has continued with a long-term program of moving mental health patients out of institutions, but it has consistently failed to provide adequate resources in the community to support them. Police officers are left to respond to people suffering from many forms of mental illness, too often becoming front-line mental health workers. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: does the minister accept this incident as an isolated case?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I've stood in this House on many occasions to talk about mental health programs in this province. In looking at our health care system not in the next year or the next two years but in the next 10 or 15 years, I've indicated that there are two things that loom large on our health care horizon. One is diabetes, and one is mental health. It's the reason why we have devoted much time and much effort to developing a provincial mental health strategy. It's the reason that we spent in the year 2003-2004 \$240 million on mental health services. That was an increase of 4.8 per cent from the previous year. We will always be able to find circumstances that are tragic, and I don't wish to politicize any individual's tragic circumstances, but we do have tremendous resources that we place toward the treatment of individuals with mental health problems.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that there will come a day when we will be able to look at a broken mind no differently than a broken arm, that we are able to integrate our mental health services into the health care system, that we'll be able to deal with issues without the stigma attached to those who suffer from mental illness. We are focused on trying to deliver services as best we can. We are placing resources in the community as we make the move to moving people out of institutional care and into our communities. We are in fact providing our resources at the community level for those individuals to get treatment.

We are moving forward, Mr. Speaker, on a mental health plan. We have protected the budget for mental health, and this has been something that we've done with the co-operation and the assistance and the input of stakeholders throughout this province. So I will not be drawn into a debate on the individual circumstances that may have occurred on the weekend, but we are making every effort that is reasonable to improve the mental health services in this province.

Dr. Taft: Well, given that a new mental health strategy is in final stages of development, can the minister tell us whether there will be an increase – an increase – in community support programs for persons with mental illness in Alberta?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I've indicated my support, and I've tried to indicate my passion for the subject of mental health. We are again moving forward on an important plan, but matters of the budget are properly left for budget day, and there will be ample opportunity to discuss the sufficiency of resources for mental health services.

Dr. Taft: Well, to the Solicitor General: given that confrontations between police and persons with mental health problems too often have tragic consequences, is the Solicitor General prepared to review

training that's provided to police officers in light of the current situation?

Thank you.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, I'm absolutely appalled at the questions coming from this member. We have a family out there that is in deep grieving right now, and to politicize an incident that happened on Saturday is, in my mind, unthinkable. We are going to have a review of the incident that happened, a very clear review. The RCMP in this province want to know what happened; the family wants to know what happened. What I'm going to say right now is: drop the crap; let the family grieve at this particular time.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Cattle Industry

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Until now this government has refused to call an independent investigation into 800 million federal and provincial dollars spent so far on the BSE crisis. Relying on some internal study done by the same officials responsible for doling out the money will not be independent and doesn't pass the smell test. My question is to the Premier. With farm bankruptcies looming, cattle producers beginning to lose hope, high beef prices in grocery stores, and record profit margins for meat packers, what more information does the Premier need before calling an independent inquiry into what is already compelling evidence of something gone seriously wrong with the government's relief plan?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. Deputy Premier reply in more detail, but I would like to preface perhaps her remarks with a statement, and that statement is this. Ninety per cent of our emergency funding for mad cow disease, BSE, which, by the way, can't be resolved through money alone – somewhere and sometime, and maybe the hon. leader of the third party can get on board, the international community needs to talk about the stupidity of the international protocols affecting this so-called disease or affliction. It is not like measles or chicken pox. The chances of getting it are, I'm told, 1 in 10 billion meals, and that's if you eat spines and brains and eyeballs and tonsils and other kinds of crap.

But getting back to the issue, 90 per cent of our BSE funding went to programs designed to get money into the hands of cattle owners and to move cattle through the marketplace. Mr. Speaker, that's what they did. Producers got close to break-even prices for their cattle, and we moved nearly 1.2 million head through the marketplace because of our programs.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier again: what specific evidence of price gouging would satisfy the Premier and lead him to call for an independent inquiry into the claims being made of profiteering and waste of public dollars being made by the beef industry itself?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member has conclusive evidence relative to price-fixing or gouging or any other inappropriate activity, present that to the Competition Bureau. There is a federal agency that is responsible and acts very quickly, I'm given to understand, when there are allegations of price-fixing. If he has a quite specific allegation, stand out there publicly, make the allegation, and then pass the allegation and any evidence he might have on

to the Competition Bureau. They're in a position to investigate thoroughly any allegations of price-fixing.

Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

2:00

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, as a matter of interest to the House, I'm sure, and certainly of information to the hon. member the Commissioner of Competition for the Competition Bureau has appeared before the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and in fact he was referring to a study on the pricing of beef at the slaughter, wholesale, and retail levels in the context of the BSE crisis in Canada.

If I may just be permitted to quote very briefly – and I would be happy to table this; it's a public document – he states:

On the basis of the information available to date, I have no reason to believe that the Competition Act has or is about to be contravened. That being said, I would like to assure the Committee that I continue to examine this important issue that is so critical to this Committee, farmers and ranchers and Canadian consumers and I will not hesitate to take appropriate action if I uncover information which points to a potential breach of the Act.

Mr. Speaker, clearly, this has been and is being reviewed by the Competition Bureau, which is the correct and proper agency to do this.

In Alberta, Mr. Speaker, we have determined that it's important for us to look at Alberta pricing. We expect to have an analysis, as complete as we possibly can do, on this issue by the end of the week, and I have said that I will share that information.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the recent \$1.28 billion jury award in the U.S. against Lakeside Packers' parent, Tyson Foods, for fixing cattle pricing, when is the Premier going to take his head out of the sand and acknowledge that the same kind of price-fixing could be happening right here in Alberta?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, I take great exception to the way the hon. member is wording this: could, might have. You know, this is innuendo at its absolute worse. No one in this government condones gouging or price-fixing. Indeed, there are agencies with huge investigative powers to determine whether in fact this is taking place, and I would ask the hon. member again that if he has concrete evidence, not innuendo but concrete evidence, then please give it to the Competition Bureau, and they will thoroughly investigate this matter.

Mr. Speaker, I will say that finger pointing and accusations and innuendo of excessive profits are the last things we need right now. What we do need is an industry and political movements that will work together to find new markets and develop new products and open old borders and get the message out relative to the ridiculousness of the international protocols surrounding this affliction, BSE.

You know, there were accusations last year that feedlots were taking all the profits. I don't know if we heard the same rhetoric from the NDs or not. The year before, some accused farmers of excessive profits on hay during the drought. I recall that quite specifically.

The fact is that in an open market there are always some that will profit and some that will lose, and that's the nature of a free market. I know that the NDs can't understand that because they don't believe in free markets.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we're getting into a debate here now. That's not the purpose of question period.

The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Aboriginal Consultation on Resource Development

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In May of 2003 during the budget presentations the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development identified that \$6 million had been allocated for the development of an aboriginal consultation policy for resource development. My question is for the minister. The resource industry wants to know: what have you done with this \$6 million?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, the \$6 million was targeted for building cross-ministry capacity and co-ordination. I've said in this House many, many times over that the \$6 million was to make sure that government built its capacity. The expenditure to date is approximately \$4.3 million out of \$6 million. By building capacity, we talk about hiring, training, educating staff with the skill set to meet face to face with First Nations and industry leaders.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, on research, document collections, supplies, travel, stakeholder meetings, and of course administrative services. The breakdown for each ministry is as follows.

The Speaker: That's way too much to be expected in the question period.

The hon. member.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last supplemental is also to the same minister. Can the minister explain what the travelling and training has accomplished in developing these policies?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, I know that the breakdown of the ministry costs certainly can be tabled later. However, we held 735 meetings with stakeholders all over the province. There are, after all, 47 First Nations in Alberta and over a thousand industry members, and the key to the process has been the ability to personally meet with First Nations. Anyone who knows First Nations understands that that relationship is a very important component. We held our first round of meetings. We have gone back to validate what we heard. We will continue to do this to ensure that we have a made-in-Alberta process.

We also want to ensure that we meet with industry representatives for their input, and, Mr. Speaker, I have committed to meet with First Nations as soon as we have the next to the final draft to ensure that they know what it is that we're going forward with in government.

Ophthalmology Services in Calgary

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Health and Wellness confirmed that he declared an emergency shortage of pediatric ophthalmologists in Calgary and then allowed two ophthalmologists from South America to be brought to Calgary. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: can the minister explain why ophthalmologists from out of country are being brought into the country to work in a private clinic owned by the chief of ophthalmology of the region while other ophthalmologists in Calgary are being underutilized?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I think most Albertans and most Canadians

would applaud bringing in physicians from other parts of the world. This province has been a leader in attracting health care professionals from around the country and from other parts of the world. We've gained more than 600 physicians over the last three years. We now have more than 14,000 postsecondary seats in health care.

We've started the first, that I am aware of, program of international medical graduates getting residencies in this province. There are some 160 physicians who were trained in other parts of the world who are not working as doctors now, but we're making an effort to bring those doctors up to speed with Alberta and Canadian standards of practice. We started out last year with eight residencies for international medical graduates, and we're moving this year to 12 residencies in the specialty areas and eight more in family practice for a total of 20. I note also that the federal government is making some effort at putting some resources into training international medical graduates so that they might participate here in Canada and provide much-needed services to Canadians.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to Dr. Maria Castro and Dr. Alberto Castro yesterday, one of them is employed by the University of Calgary and the regional health authority; that's Dr. Maria Castro. In order to get her to come here, it was her wish, her condition that we, in fact, be able to bring in Dr. Alberto Castro as well. Dr. Alberto Castro does work at the Holy Cross centre, but keeping in mind that many of the services provided by Holy Cross are under contract to the regional health authority, while he might not be working for the regional health authority directly, he is still providing services that benefit the public here in the province of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:10

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will this minister admit that it's a conflict of interest for the head of ophthalmology of the Calgary health region to sponsor out-of-country specialists to work in his private clinic in Calgary while specialists already in Calgary go without allocations?

Mr. Mar: Dr. Maria Castro was sought by the regional health authority as being a pediatric ophthalmologist, a specialty which is a very difficult one to fill. The regional health authority satisfied me that they made an inquiry throughout Alberta, throughout Canada and could not find a pediatric ophthalmologist, Mr. Speaker. So Dr. Maria Castro from Colombia said that she was prepared to come if there would be work available for her husband, Dr. Alberto Castro. I've heard nothing but praise for the work that is being done by those two physicians. So if the hon. member is asking me if I would approve such a part 5 special designation again, I would.

Dr. Taft: Given that there are four specialists in Calgary already working as pediatric ophthalmologists, some of them underutilized, will this minister terminate the emergency designation for this specialist in Calgary?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, at a time when people are concerned with issues of wait lists and access to the health care system, I should think that it would be really quite a folly to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Police Services

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Many communities in Alberta are struggling to pay the costs of providing police

services to their residents. The town of Lac La Biche in my constituency is an example of such a community, with a population just over 2,500 and where close to 50 per cent of taxation is dedicated to policing. In fact, the cost is so high that the town has considered the drastic step of dissolving itself, one reason being the difficulty to pay for the service and protection provided by the RCMP. My question is to the Solicitor General. Communities in Alberta argue that the threshold system is not the best resolution for policing. What alternatives can the minister see in assisting rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul is right. Policing costs are a serious concern for many towns and cities right across this province, and the question of what alternatives would best address the problem is a tough one with no easy answers.

We have thought long and hard about the issue, reviewed the current funding formulas, and looked at many options in regard to how we can change this. We have consulted at great length with the AAMD and C and the AUMA to get their views, and they represent many, many communities in this province. In the end, Mr. Speaker, I believe we have come up with an alternative that will benefit all of the communities in this province.

There are financial implications attached to this, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to budget day. I believe that we are going to solve a lot of policing problems in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister: not divulging any budget concerns, can she expand on what alternatives are possible and what has been looked at?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's a good question, and I have to be very careful in how I answer that without worrying about giving up some answers in regard to what we'll look forward to in the budget.

Mr. Speaker, we've looked at many, many things. We looked at population thresholds. We looked at per capita grants. We looked at: does everybody pay for policing? We looked at: what's the best solution to deal with the problem? As I mentioned earlier, in my first answer, we talked with the AUMA and the AAMD and C, who represent all of the communities in this province, came up with an answer, the first time we've had an agreement in 30 years with AUMA and AAMD and C. To the member, I think we're going to have some good news on budget day.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

Mr. Danyluk: No second supplemental.

Aging Provincial Infrastructure

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, my questions today are for the Minister of Infrastructure. Why according to the 2003-2006 Infrastructure business plan is this ministry planning for a yearly decrease in the quality of provincial buildings?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, over a period of time all of the infrastruc-

ture that we're responsible for ages. When you look back to when a lot of the infrastructure was built, a lot of it is getting to be in that category of 25, 30, 40 years old. When you start talking about the mechanical systems in a lot of these structures, you'll find that when they were new, they had a life expectancy of 20, 25 years.

Coupled with that, because of the great economy that we have in the province of Alberta, the population has increased dramatically when you think of the fact that over the last five years just about every year the number of people that came to the province would be equal to a city just about the size of Red Deer. Those people didn't bring their roads, their schools, their hospitals, or any of those things with them.

So we've got a combination of effects here. We've got the fact that the infrastructure is aging, we've got the growth pressures, and of course we've got the aging population, which also adds to the need for those kinds of facilities.

There's a limited amount of dollars, so we have to try to stretch the dollars out as far as we can. We are being very honest. We are being straightforward, as are other ministries in their business plans, and we know that we can't do everything in one year. So, yes, there is an indication that there would be a decrease in the quality, from good to fair, in some of our structures, but that doesn't mean that they are dysfunctional.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: according to the 2003-2006 Infrastructure business plan why are only 79 per cent of provincial buildings providing merely adequate functional service?

Mr. Lund: Well, I think I went into some length explaining my first answer, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that there are a limited number of dollars, and we have to make the best use of those dollars.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is there no measure to determine what percentage of postsecondary institutions are providing adequate functional service?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, we are currently working in that area. One of the things that we are attempting to do now is not only assess the physical condition of all of the structures but also look at the functions that are being provided from those facilities. We haven't completed our work on the postsecondary institutions; therefore, we do not have that measurement. Those are questions, of course, that should be discussed when we're going through the business plan and the upcoming budget.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Cattle and Beef Trade Policy

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development travelled to Washington last week with many of her provincial colleagues for meetings with various American politicians, officials, and industry representatives. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What next steps were discussed with respect to reopening borders to full cattle and beef trade?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, it was a great opportunity to gather with ministers of agriculture and officials from across Canada to discuss these issues in Washington with politicians first and with the industry secondly. The goal of the meeting was to have frank,

open discussions and to get a sense as to where this whole thing was going. I believe the discussions were successful. I came back with a renewed belief in the fact that we will resume normal trade in the, hopefully, near future.

But it was definitely evident from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, whose representatives we had lunch with, the National Processors Association, and the American Meat Institute, that we met with, that their goals are the same as ours. They want resumption of normal trade between our countries.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is for the same minister. The American Meat Institute, a participant in the Washington, D.C., meetings, recently wrote a letter urging Secretary Veneman to reopen the border immediately. How does this contribute to ongoing efforts to re-establish trade between our countries?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, no question that the American Meat Institute is an important player in the processing of agricultural products in the U.S. I would just quote two lines: "The [United States] has the authority and the credibility to lead the way in establishing a rational BSE trade policy. We urge you to take this critical first step." A second line I would read is, "We are writing to urge you to use the full range of your authority immediately to reestablish trade in cattle, beef and beef products produced in BSE minimal risk countries like Canada." Mr. Speaker, that's a very important support for moving that forward.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Children's Services

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Department of Children's Services is currently evaluating a number of new companies. These companies will be hired to screen and to accredit agencies providing services for children in the province. My questions are to the Minister of Children's Services. Why are a number of separate companies needed to provide this screening and accreditation service?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, at this time it would be premature for me to comment too extensively except to say this. With so many activities in our department – including adoption, including the implementation of new legislation, the resources for children with disabilities legislation and the Child Welfare Act – there's a need not only to train staff but to make sure that all of the pieces are in place so that there's not only a smooth implementation but that there is service that continues in the best possible way. With changes in the legislation I think it's important for us to look at other options for training.

Dr. Massey: To the same minister: why is the department soliciting proposals from companies in the United States?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, you know, we've got a lot of wonderful advantages in Alberta, but we don't have a lock on everything. There are some amazing things that we've learned both in the adoption file situation and from certain resources with the disabilities file situation. The solicitation doesn't necessarily mean that there will be an outcome that's an American firm, but if we can find the best at the best possible price to do the best job, I would say that we have no question to look elsewhere for the best price.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: who will bear the cost of the work done by these companies? Will it be out of the Children's Services department budget, or will it come from the agencies?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I believe that the hon. member opposite has gone right from A to Z on this situation. I'd be pleased to table what we're doing, how we're doing it, what the results will be, and who will pay for it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Cattle Industry

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development is asking cattle producers and Alberta consumers to trust the findings of an internal study our officials are doing into what may have gone wrong with the \$800 million BSE assistance program. She's asking that we trust our own ministry's review into whether meat-packing plants lowered cattle prices in response to the subsidy payments, thereby tripling their margins. A question to the minister: why should cattle producers and Alberta consumers have any confidence in an internal study prepared by the same ministry that administered BSE assistance in the first place as opposed to an independent inquiry to get to the bottom of things?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member as usual is wrong, absolutely wrong. You know, it would be really interesting if they became interested in this subject more than once or twice a year. Then they'd be current.

In fact, I have said that I asked for a carcass evaluation, a review of those costs for my purposes, to try and understand whether there was an issue. I have one obvious difference with this hon. member: I like to deal in facts.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Does the minister believe that her ministry, that administered the \$800 million BSE assistance, has the necessary independence to get to the bottom of this mess? Or would they have an incentive to cover things up?

The Speaker: Well, there are two questions there, hon. minister.

Mrs. McClellan: And both of them are totally ridiculous, Mr. Speaker, and hardly deserve an answer.

In fact, in Alberta there has been just over \$600 million spent on BSE, \$400 million by the province and just over \$200 million by the federal government, Mr. Speaker. In fact, if this hon. member went out of Edmonton and discussed this issue with the agricultural community, they would know that they hold my department staff in the highest regard, as well they should.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary is to the Premier. Why is the Premier assigning the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development to investigate herself?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the simple answer is that I have the fullest confidence in a competent minister.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Electricity Deregulation (continued)

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a member of the Advisory Council on Electricity I'm keenly aware that the government has actively taken action on many recommendations in the ACE report. My first question is to the Premier. What is the most current information from industry leaders on the progress of electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, speaking to the policy of deregulation, Nancy Southern, the daughter of Ron Southern, last summer at the dedication of the power plant at the Oldman River dam said that this wouldn't have happened under a regulated system. She had nothing but praise for deregulation.

Speaking to the policy of deregulation, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Ron Southern, alluded to by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, in an August 2003 letter said, "Your policies have allowed the creation of an abundance of generation capacity and, while the transmission no doubt could use some future reinforcements and redundancy, it is in every respect a very robust system." He goes on to say, "Your determination to level the playing field and provide retail competition has been exemplary." He goes on to say, "I truly do believe you are on the threshold of a showcase for the world of successful deregulation of electricity and gas."

The Speaker: The document in question will be tabled.

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, my first supplemental to the Minister of Energy: given that energy costs are down from 2001 and 2002, the majority of calls I deal with are billing issues like true-ups, off-billing cycles, and reconciliation. When do you expect these types of concerns to be resolved?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that it's clear that we're on an ongoing pursuit of excellence in this model, and that hasn't changed. In fact, that pursuit of excellence is reflected in comments from members of the industry such as Mr. Southern, and they're also reflected in the ACE report, which is the Premier's Advisory Council on Electricity. We've never been afraid to face any issue head-on. We, in fact, did this. In fact, the commission came together on numerous issues, and we've put that on the web site, and I will be tabling that report in the House today.

Mr. Speaker, we will continue to be vigilant in the pursuit of excellence for consumer protection. That consumer is being protected both by the utilities advocate here as well as the competitive process in the marketplace, and it's reflected by lower prices in the marketplace, which is a sign of increased generation and an open access, nondiscriminatory transmission policy.

2:30

Mr. VanderBurg: Final question, again to the same minister: given that 20 of the best and brightest minds in electricity sit on the ACE committee, what will you do with this group now that the report is complete?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member is one of those 20 best and brightest minds unless the commission is composed of 21 members.

This is an important commission. This is a commission that has

undergone a very, very direct examination of issues. Unlike the opposition, Mr. Speaker, they do deal in facts. Unlike the opposition they don't deal in innuendo; they deal in reality. And unlike the opposition they have fiduciary responsibilities, corporate responsibilities, shareholder responsibilities to deliver this commodity at a reasonable price to markets across this great province.

They do it every day. Our members are there. The Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne will continue to be a member of that council; that council will continue to give this government good advice. There is also a second member from the government side who, indeed, may be classified as one of those best and brightest minds. We haven't done that kind of an evaluation, but the Member for Leduc is also expected to continue in that role on the advisory council on electrical issues.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds I'll call upon the first member.

Hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition, I've been notified that you were the one speaking on behalf of your caucus under Members' Statements.

Education Funding

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday former Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed told a Calgary awards ceremony what many Albertans have been saying with respect to postsecondary education for years, and I quote: I don't think we're doing the job we could be. Further, Mr. Lougheed lamented: we're falling behind the U.S. dramatically. This government sought the former Premier's advice recently on Kyoto, and now is the time to heed his advice and start looking at education as an investment as opposed to an expenditure.

Many of our young people are caught in a catch-22 situation when they graduate from grade 12. They can either choose to go straight into typically low-paying dead-end jobs or opt to further their studies and graduate under a mountain of personal and public debt. If education is a public good, then why should students have to scrape, save, and go into debt to access programs?

The Liberal opposition agrees with the Council of Alberta University Students when they insist that postsecondary education should be a right not a privilege. The individual benefits for students of such an education while extremely important have been overstressed. The quality of the streets we drive on, the hospitals we visit, and the community amenities we enjoy are directly linked to a well-educated citizenry.

Unfortunately, tuitions are soaring at postsecondary institutions across the province making further education a less appealing choice for Albertans. This government must develop a long-term plan to finance postsecondary learning, making it accessible to all Albertans. There needs to be a realistic approach to tuition fees and resources to help institutions fund and deliver high-quality programs across the province.

Alberta cannot be proud of granting only 4.3 university degrees per 1,000 people when the Canadian average is 5.8. The time for change is now. We must properly fund postsecondary education and provide accessibility to all Albertans who want it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Augustana University College

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak about

changes and new opportunities at Augustana University College in my constituency. On November 21, 2003, a letter of intent was signed by the presidents and board chairs of Augustana and the University of Alberta and the Minister of Learning setting up a framework for a merger between the two institutions.

Augustana, founded in 1910 by Norwegian Lutheran settlers, began operations in 1911 as Camrose Lutheran College. It was to be a residential high school embodying the values of those pioneers and bringing educational opportunities to many students across Alberta and other provinces as travel in those days was restricted. In 1959 Augustana became an affiliated college of the University of Alberta, offering university level courses with the second year of the university transfer program added in 1969. In 1985 Augustana became the first private college in Alberta accredited to grant three- and four-year baccalaureate degrees.

Throughout the many years that Augustana has been a part of the Camrose community, its residents have embraced the students that travel from around Alberta and the world to attend, with many Camrosians joining them in the classroom to take advantage of the opportunity right at home for lifelong learning. Many students earn their degrees as adults from this fine liberal arts and science university college.

Both Augustana and the University of Alberta seek to retain and build on those features that have made Augustana a unique and caring place with high educational standards. The merger with the University of Alberta will be another transition in following Augustana's mission to lead and to serve. It also offers the University of Alberta a unique opportunity to enhance service to rural Alberta.

Today I wish to acknowledge Augustana for 93 years of providing educational opportunities in Camrose and wish them continued success as they move forward with pride in past accomplishments and confidence in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Harry Zuurbier

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am honoured to stand in this Assembly today to recognize Harry Zuurbier, who passed away at his home on Saturday, February 21, 2004, as a result of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease. Harry was just 70 years of age.

Harry was a member of the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta, and as we already had a Harry on our council when Harry Z. became a member, we affectionately referred to him as Harry Two, and he did also. Harry brought to the council an enthusiasm to learn in working for seniors, his great intelligence, and his passion for life.

Harry Zuurbier was born in Ursem, Holland, in 1934, immigrated to Canada at age 19, and settled in Brocket. In 1954 he graduated from St. Michael's high school, Pincher Creek, and taught for more than 30 years in the Calgary Catholic school system. Following retirement Harry refocused his energies as a mediator for the Calgary Police Service, the Better Business Bureau, and as a member of the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta.

Harry is survived by his wife, Catherine, and their sons, Peter and Jacob, as well as his former wife, Marial Piotrowski, and their children, Maria, Paul, Ted, Dianne, and Donna, and two grandchildren, Jessica and Grace.

Last week I was honoured to attend with members of the council a funeral Mass for Harry Zuurbier at Sacred Heart Catholic church

and wish to share some special words of remembrance from that occasion.

Remember him with a smile today
He was not one for tears
Reflect instead on memories
Of all the happy years
Recall to mind the way he spoke
And all the things he said
His strength, his stance, the way he walked
Remember these instead
The good advice he'd give us
His eyes that shone with laughter
So much of him will never die
But live on ever after.

Rest in peace, Harry Z.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

2:40

New Immigrants to Calgary

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to speak about the population diversity in Calgary and about some ideas benefiting Alberta. In 2001 200,000 Calgarians, 2 out of 10, were born outside Canada, accounting for 3.6 per cent of Canada's immigrant population. These new Albertans are a great asset to connect Alberta to the world, and with encouragement this global connection is becoming part of the Alberta advantage.

Of the new immigrants to Calgary in 2002 53 per cent applied under the skilled worker class and 30 per cent under the family class. Most new immigrants to Calgary were between the ages of 26 and 35. These Albertans provide a productive workforce helping Alberta develop its economy to the world scale. Forty-eight per cent of new immigrants to Calgary in 2002 were male and 52 per cent were female, making Calgary more beautiful each day.

Of all immigrants to Calgary in 2002 49 per cent knew neither English nor French. This indicates a need for language training. I suggest that Immigration Canada create language training at the departure point where the Canadian way of life is taught along with the language. This will cost much less and help immigrants to integrate more quickly into the Canadian environment. Yes, Mr. Speaker, there is the ESL, English as a Second Language, program. An ability in our common language, in this case English, is vital to immigrants. I want to suggest that we should change ESL to EFL, English as a First Language, and make it suitable to the type of learners.

Of the immigrants to Calgary in 2002 48 per cent were over the age of 18 and held at least a bachelor's degree or higher. This indicates a need for an Alberta program to help these highly educated and already trained individuals to integrate properly into the economy. Alberta doesn't have to pay the costs of 22 years of education and reaps the benefit. I suggest an internship program be created to help Alberta realize this benefit earlier.

Thank you.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 10

Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I request leave to introduce Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

The bill proposes amendments to seven pieces of justice legisla-

tion. Perhaps the most significant change under the bill will allow courts to order periodic payment of settlements or judgments, otherwise known as structured settlements, in cases involving injury or death. This change to the Judicature Act will provide courts with the flexibility to address both current and future needs of victims and their families.

Other amendments, to the Provincial Offences Procedure Act, will allow for the electronic transfer of ticket information from enforcement agencies to the courts and will generally apply to offences under the Traffic Safety Act.

These changes along with some other minor amendments and housekeeping to the Court of Appeal Act, the Court of Queen's Bench Act, the Jury Act, the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act, and the Queen's Counsel Act will help to ensure that these acts are up to date.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 10 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Bill 15 Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Bill 15, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004.

Bill 15, Mr. Speaker, amends the existing act to raise the limit of nonrenewable resource revenue spending to \$4 billion from \$3.5 billion as the sustainability fund is forecast to be fully funded in this fiscal year.

[Motion carried; Bill 15 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, as promised, I rise to table the expenditures for government's efforts in building an effective consultation with First Nations and industry regarding resource development.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one document to table: five copies of this document which indicates that Tyson Foods in the United States was hit with a \$1.28 billion judgment by a federal jury for manipulating the cattle market and was ordered to change its buying practices.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first is a letter to our office from Delia McCrae, and it is in regard to the Learning Commission.

The second letter that I have is a letter from a concerned parent, Ms Elizabeth McLeod on 79th Street in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar, and this is also concerning Edmonton public school board funding.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Three tablings today with permission. The first is a letter that has been brought to my attention and that I was asked to table. It's from a constituent who has traced

his ATCO Gas bills for the last 18 years, and they've more than doubled in the past six years. He wanted to bring that to public attention.

The second is an eloquent letter from Karen Cox of Bashaw raising many concerns with government waste.

The third is a petition signed by 18 Albertans urging the Legislative Assembly to protect patients' rights.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today there were allusions in question period to a letter, I think in 1998, from Mr. Southern of ATCO Gas, and the Premier, in responding to questions, alluded to a much more current letter of August 20, 2003, which refers to a definition of excellence in terms of the way that the government has handled the deregulation process. I'd like now to table five copies of that letter for the House.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, much as I would feel compelled to read every word of that previous letter into the record, it's my privilege today to table to you and through you to the House five copies from the Alberta Advisory Council on Electricity. This is a signal that Alberta is ready to meet serious questions about serious topics head-on and put together, as said earlier in the House, some 20 of the best and brightest minds in this industry. Here are the deliberations. Here are the results of the reports. It's with pride that I am able to table these in a sense of transparency, openness, and gratitude to the members who served on that committee.

The Speaker: Are there others?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the point of order.

Point of Order Explanation of Speaker's Ruling

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise, please, under Standing Order 13(2): "The Speaker shall explain the reasons for any decision upon the request of a member."

Earlier in question period, Mr. Speaker, my attempt at my second question was cut short. You gave an explanation; I believe it was *Beauchesne* 409. There was a lot of noise from across the benches. I didn't hear your full explanation. As I said earlier this afternoon, I rose to participate in Oral Question Period but was not permitted to follow up my main question. I seek your guidance and your advice on this matter.

In 1986 Speaker Bosley of the House of Commons gave a statement of how question period should be conducted as described on page 425 of *Marleau and Montpetit*. Speaker Bosley stated a number of principles, of which all Legislative Assemblies in this country have taken notice, including that the primary purpose of question period must be the "seeking of information from the government and calling the government to account for its actions" and "members should be given the greatest possible freedom in the putting of questions that is consistent with the other principles."

Marleau and Montpetit continue on page 426, Mr. Speaker, by stating that in Question Period, a member should, among other things, seek information and "ask a question that is within the administrative responsibility of the government or the individual Minister addressed."

Further on, on page 430, Marleau and Montpetit state in part that "members may seek to clarify the answer to a question or solicit further information through the use of supplementary questions." It was my second supplementary question that I was asking, and of course I was not allowed to finish that question.

2:50

Now, Mr. Speaker, there are naturally guidelines that have to apply to initial questions and how they flow with supplementary questions, but a follow-up device flowing from the response – I agree it ought to be a precise question put directly and immediately, in this case to the Premier, and I believe I did that. I believe a review of the *Hansard* Blues, which I haven't had an occasion to do, will confirm that I asked a supplementary question that flowed from the response I received from the government in order to solicit further information about the subject matter that was then at hand.

Mr. Speaker, the second supplementary question that I posed I believe clearly sought information from the government, clearly called the government to account for its actions, and clearly was on a subject that was within the responsibility of the government. I in no way intended my supplementary question that I posed to be any sort of an argument, I didn't pose it to be in any way hypothetical, and I believe it was certainly, as I said before, within the responsibility of the Premier.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I again seek your guidance and your advice on this matter. This has been a matter that has been reoccurring in this Assembly. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview had a question at some point recently that was ruled out of order, and for myself and particularly for the research staff I await your guidance on this matter.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to comment with respect to the request for clarification by the hon. member. I appreciated also hearing the hon. member actually read some of the rules with respect to question period in the hopes that he will abide by some of them in the future.

Beauchesne's 409 on page 121 indicates, for example, in (8) that "A question that has previously been answered ought not to be asked again." Of course, we've heard that over and over again, and even today the hon. member violated that rule.

I only point that out, Mr. Speaker, to say that it's entirely appropriate in my submission to you for the Speaker to interject when the rules are being blatantly violated over and over again. The members of the House will note that I have not been rising on points of order with respect to the frequent misuses and abuses of the rules and misuse and abuse of question period because, unfortunately, under the rules that we have, all of those points of orders are dealt with after the fact when they can be of no force and effect. So it's entirely appropriate – it ought not to be done often, and you've used it only sparingly – for the Speaker to interject when rules are being violated on an ongoing basis.

So I think it would be appropriate to clarify for the House your ruling in respect to the particular question that was asked. But I think it would also behoove me to encourage you to continue, not on a daily basis but when the rules are being grossly violated over and over again, when supplemental questions are, indeed, not supplemental but prewritten. Supplemental questions, according to *Beauchesne's* 414 are supposed to be "necessary for the elucidation of the answers that have been given, within due limits." Often we hear supplemental questions which actually have no bearing or no relationship to the first question or have obviously been prewritten so, therefore, couldn't possibly adhere to the rules.

So, Mr. Speaker, a timely intervention by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar asking for your advice with respect to how he might appropriately put questions in the future.

The Speaker: Well, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview,

your name has been mentioned. Do you have a participation to make?

Dr. Taft: No.

The Speaker: Oh. So I'll assume there was no petition on your behalf.

All hon. members, there's an old saying – I think it's in English literature; I think it was Shakespeare who once wrote it – something along the lines of, "I think you protesteth too much," or something to that effect.

Okay, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, you have an assignment, and that is to do some homework. Homework number one is to read the letter that I sent to all hon. members prior to the commencement of this session. I think it's the seventh such letter that I've sent in the last seven years, and it outlines the rules that we will follow. It outlines the documents that we will use to administer the procedures of the House.

I would also draw to the attention of the member an agreement that was signed by the various House leaders, signed some time ago, about preambles. Basically, it indicated that a preamble was permitted in the first question of the set, but there was to be no preamble in the second and subsequent, and as I recall there are signatures from three House leaders with respect to that document. So would you kindly find such document? Would you have a discussion with your leader, who signed it, and ask for an interpretation of what it meant?

Now, number three. I have read the Blues, and the member is wrong. The member goes on ad nauseam. The member violates the preamble rule repeatedly. These violations occur over and over again, but the Government House Leader asked me to just intervene intermittently, which has been my style: to intervene intermittently. Quite frankly, I could probably intervene 10 or 12 times a day, which would be known as Mr. Speaker's intervention period rather than the question period.

Now, having done that, you will also read the Blues tomorrow for what I've just said today, so there's no mistake because everything I've said here today is in writing.

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: We will now deal with *Beauchesne* 409. I repeat this again for all hon. members not just the member in question that I'm talking about today. "It must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate." All members might want to study *Hansard* to see how all of these things have been violated in most of the questions that come in here.

Secondly, "the question must be brief." Now, "a preamble need not exceed one carefully drawn sentence." Whoa, hon. member. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I'm not even talking about your first question; I'm talking about your second question when I quote:

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier. Given that Mr. Southern also stated in that letter, quote, one department's determination is not an adequate substitute for clear foresight, prudence, and caution in this case, unquote, when will this government listen to the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties and others?

And then, you know what? *The Hansard* people have put a question mark in there, but that's not where it ends. It continues:

The municipal districts and counties last fall passed an emergency resolution urging this government to abandon and unplug electricity deregulation.

It still doesn't end. Then it goes on:

When will you do the right thing?

I mean, there are several. I didn't do this; the *Hansard* people did. Total violation. Total violation.

Now, number three: "[A] question ought to seek information and, therefore, cannot be based upon a hypothesis, cannot seek an opinion, either legal or otherwise, and must not suggest its own answer," – how often do people come in with a question saying: well, you know, we're right; why don't you do the right thing? – "be argumentative or make representations."

The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne asked for, I guess, accommodation from the Minister of Energy today about bright minds. He got one. That violated that one too, but I thought that one was rather frivolous and most people would see through that, so I didn't have to intervene.

And 409(8): "A question that has previously been answered ought not to be asked again." And on and on and on it goes.

Then, Mr. Bosley's quotation is a great one, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, because you didn't use everything in the section. I draw your attention to page 430. I think that Speaker Bosley is in that area, but on page 430 it says this: "In conformity with parliamentary tradition, the Speaker retains the authority to determine when supplementary questions may be permitted."

3:00

So, in essence, if I read – which I did not write; it's not my book; I didn't write this. We take great heed with respect to parliamentary tradition. It essentially means that, to follow through from our Standing Orders wherein I quote Standing Order 2, the Speaker must retain order in the House, must ensure that the practices of parliamentary tradition are present. Basically, decorum must be followed.

Then you go from there. Speaker Bosley and all the other authors of this particular document, *Marleau and Montpetit* on page 430, and I quote again: "In conformity with parliamentary tradition, the Speaker retains the authority to determine when supplementary questions may be permitted."

When the Speaker today suggested to the hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development that she need not proceed to tell the whole world what every department of government is doing with respect to a certain matter, there was an intervention in terms of the conformity to parliamentary tradition. You, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, received the same treatment in a fair, unbiased, nonpartisan, dignified manner. It's the job of the Speaker to do that for the benefit of the protection of the democracy in Alberta.

Thank you very much.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 14

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf of the hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much. It's my pleasure to move on behalf of the hon. minister Bill 14 at second reading, that being the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to have this opportunity to once again, as I've repeatedly done over the years I've

been here, speak to an appropriation bill, this time Bill 14 as the supplementary supply.

This is, Mr. Speaker, the second supplementary supply requested by the government in this current fiscal year. In November 2003 16 ministries, one office of the Legislative Assembly, which was the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, requested a total of \$1.251 billion in supplementary supply for operating expenses and equipment and inventory purchases and capital investment.

This last year was a lot of money especially since the government's new fiscal framework had just been announced seven months earlier. Here we are, a few short months, back again where this government has to come back here for more money because they still haven't figured out after all these years in office how to adequately budget or forecast. That's a real problem. It would be a significant problem in a province that wasn't as wealthy as ours, but repeatedly this government is able to get away with this because there seems to be more than enough money to go around to those departments and those issues that they think are important.

We can't support this, Mr. Speaker. The reliance on supplementary supply estimates to manage a government is neither effective nor responsible management for a \$20 billion corporation. In the business world these guys would be turfed as managers so fast that you wouldn't be able to blink. The current reliance on supplementary supply estimates points to real problems with budgeting processes and the revenues and the way this government has managed their ability to forecast those revenues.

Relying on the supplementary supplies for making up budget shortcomings demonstrates a clear lack of effective management and long-term planning. We saw that reflected when we had the appropriations before us and we had the ministers reporting. Repeatedly they underbudget, underestimate.

I'll take fire management as an example. They have a five-year forecast, an average of what they've spent, yet each year they come in under that forecast when it comes to budget time. Well, what's that all about? Common sense tells you that at least you should be hitting the forecast, and particularly when we've had widespread drought conditions and several years of higher than normal fire forecasts, you would anticipate that the year to come would also be a problem, and you would budget accordingly. But not this government. It is the way they like to do it.

The government brought in a new fiscal framework. They talked about it as the Financial Statutes Amendment Act that enshrined into law several new fiscal rules that they promised would protect Albertans from riding the energy roller coaster. This new framework was supposed to put an end to the stop-and-start program funding and the government's reliance on supplementary supply. Yet this hasn't been the case. Less than a year later the government is breaking its own rules. We see that Bill 2 has capped government resource revenue spending, but the Premier recently announced that new legislation will be introduced this spring to raise the resource revenue spending cap. So how is that responsible fiscal management?

We've got a number of questions still outstanding on what's happened here that we weren't able to have answered when we had the supplementary supply estimates in front of us. In terms of those that are pertaining to ministries that I follow as the critic, it's primarily the fire question that I have, and I would hope that that will be answered.

I know that the minister has the answers to these questions because we have talked to them about them off the record, but I would like them answered here before we get through this bill, Mr. Speaker, specifically, in addition to what I've talked about, what I

see as an inadequate forecasting process for this particular department on this particular issue. Could he answer the question of where the forest fires were during the last four months of the year for which this extra money is being requested, and has the ministry already spent all of the \$113 million requested in supplementary supply for firefighting just four months ago?

So if I could have those questions answered before we pass this last bill, I would very much appreciate it. I'll take my seat now and allow another member to ask some questions.

[Motion carried; Bill 14 read a second time]

Bill 12

Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour, my duty, and my job to move second reading of Bill 12, the Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004.

Bill 12 streamlines and clarifies how government manages and invests funds, clarifies its wording and definitions, and makes other technical amendments. Mr. Speaker, the act is a key part of the province's financial management. It identifies how the government is to manage and control the financial resources of Alberta and provides for accountability by assigning authority and responsibility for financial management.

There are three main aspects that I would like to address in a very brief way, the first being amendments relating to how certain aspects of investments are administered, the second being amendments relating to the consolidated cash investment trust fund, the third being amendments that would allow for improved controls around the authorization of disbursements by accounting and expenditure officers.

The first change relates to the allocation of investment costs amongst various participant funds. Rather than conducting transactions for each investment fund for which the province is responsible, for example, it's more efficient to create a pooled fund. Structured not unlike a mutual fund, you buy it for your own investment and invest all the various funds as units in this pool.

As the province manages funds and surplus cash, each transaction bears a cost, including the cost of buying and selling, the personnel cost of managing and administering the investment, and so on. It is most efficient to have these costs allocated to the pooled fund and reflected in the value of the units held by the various funds that invest in the pool, just as each investor in a private mutual fund pays a cost for the management of the bigger mutual fund. So the amendment that we are proposing simply clarifies that the investment cost can be allocated to the pooled funds. This is the existing administrative practice.

3:10

Next, amendments would clarify that where the Minister of Finance is a trustee of funds, such as the pension fund, these funds may be invested in units in the province's pooled funds. Again, this is to clarify that the existing administrative practice of public sector pension fund participation in pooled funds is appropriate.

With respect to the CCITF, the consolidated cash investment trust fund, there is a further change relating to the establishment of these funds. This practice is very outdated, Mr. Speaker. It was written some 15 or 16 years ago, and we propose streamlining the legislation and replacing the details of administrative practice in the statute with provisions for contractual agreements. With these changes the minister may enter into contractual agreements with financial

institutions and with the participants in the fund for the management and pooled investment of the participants' surplus cash. This will streamline and update our current cash management practice, and participants in the fund will see no significant changes to the way the funds are managed.

The final change that I wish to address relates to the authorization of disbursements. Now, this amendment allows Treasury Board to make regulations or issue directives establishing controls with respect to the disbursement authorization. When the Financial Administration Act was written, it did not contemplate many of today's common practices; for example, the world of electronic payments. So this amendment would authorize the establishment of alternative approval procedures to allow a greater flexibility for the authorization of disbursements by expenditure and accounting officers.

Treasury Board will also be given the authority to approve alternate procedures. Treasury Board directives and regulations are publicly available, so there will be full accountability and transparency of our internal processes. This does not change the principle of expenditure officer and accounting officer authorization, but it does provide for improvements to the authorization controls.

Mr. Speaker, the changes proposed under the financial administration amendment act would streamline how the government manages and invests fund and will clarify wording and definitions. The proposed amendments are designed to improve efficiency in administering investment opportunities and improving the effectiveness of controls on payment authorization.

I urge all the members to support this, and I hope it's self-explanatory. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

An Hon. Member: Question.

Dr. Taft: Nice try.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 12 is going to work its way gradually through here. I don't think it's going to get a lot of opposition from us, but perhaps as the debate moves along we will be able to make some suggestions to improve the legislation. The object of this bill, as I understand it, is to streamline and clarify how the government manages and invests funds, to clarify the wording and definitions, and to make a few other technical amendments to legislation.

It's also attempting to update the legislation to keep the province's investment activities in line with electronic fiscal transactions, which might save money in the management of government funds by reducing transaction fees. I would be interested, actually, in whether there's any estimate of how much money this transition from paper to electronics might save and, in fact, how the electronic information will be backed up.

I think, though, given that this is second reading – we're looking at intent here in a fairly general discussion – a point has to be made that the province should actually be in the position of having to manage far more wealth than it has. The volume of nonrenewable resource revenues that have flown through the provincial coffers since this particular government was elected is absolutely staggering. Over 90 per cent of it is gone forever. So is the oil and gas.

So here we are looking at legislation that adjusts the technicalities of how government manages and invests funds, but we never raise the much bigger issue of how large the amount of funds we're dealing with should be. In my view it should be vastly greater than what it is now, and if we'd had wiser management, it would be vastly greater than it is now. But here we are today reduced to debating details, and details are important.

I appreciate the efforts of the Member for Little Bow in briefing us. At this point there does not seem to be a lot to oppose in Bill 12. It largely adjusts language, brings language up to date. There are a few questions, and perhaps some day I'll even ask the member if he can arrange a tour, a visit to the government's investment offices.

I am curious to know how the amendments proposed here are actually going to improve the efficiency in administering investment opportunities. Has there been any cost-benefit analysis done? Are we able to say, "Yes, by bringing in this legislation, we're going to be saving \$100,000 a year in transaction fees" or whatever? That's just a pure example. Or are we doing this without a cost-benefit analysis? Any information along those lines would be helpful. I would hope that somewhere behind the scenes somebody has looked at the details to justify this legislation and said, "Yes, this is going to save us money," or "Yes, this is going to allow us to be quicker," or "Yes, this is going to do something for us." More detail on that of course would be helpful.

I think that until we get into committee, I will probably leave my comments at that and look forward to any information that can be brought to me by the Member for Little Bow on this or perhaps by the Provincial Treasurer.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow to conclude the debate.

Mr. McFarland: Mr. Speaker, I'd be happy to provide the information to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and I'll undertake to do that. In the meantime, I'd like to call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 12 read a second time]

Bill 13

Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate February 26: Mr. Marz]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had moved second reading previously. If I could just take this opportunity to provide some highlights of the legislation for the members before I turn the floor over to other members.

This legislation is proposing to update the act to reflect the present practices in Alberta. It'll also address concerns over noxious and restricted weeds and propose to increase penalties for violations of the act and provide consistency with other existing legislation. It will also delete parts of the act that are covered in other legislation so that there's no duplication and provide a streamlined process to update the legislation when required.

These adjustments will continue a very long tradition of Alberta heritage in this province of grazing livestock throughout the forested area. It dates back to the early 1900s. Grazing is a sustainable land use that also assists in managing natural grasses that in times of forest fires can help control that situation.

With that, I'd be eager to listen to comments from the other members and happy to answer any questions.

3:20

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 13, the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004. This bill was first described to me as being something that

may not be that big of a deal, but as we look at it, we've got many, many questions outstanding on the bill. The initial groups that we sent this bill out to to review have raised some pretty grave concerns and are hoping that we can hold this bill over for some time while they can look at it in more detail and look at the implications.

As we see it, this bill proposes to give broader, more sweeping powers to the government with regard to forest reserves and their management in the province. I'm going to put my questions on this bill on the record in second because until we have the questions answered, in principle we won't be able to support it.

So we see now that this act applies to all the forest reserves in the province and not those established after the year 2000, when there were some previous significant changes. It looks to us that it gives rather sweeping powers to anyone in government and that they're assigned to deal with the forestry reserves and not just the forest officers, specifically referring to section 7 of this act.

In section 6 we want to know why the reorganization of the acquisition of land is done the way it is and why there's the order of preference that there is: expropriation, purchasing or otherwise acquiring, or exchange. So some more specifics on why that section is in there and how the ministry would expect that to be used.

Then we see in section 6(b) that "any personal property" is added to this section, so if we could have the questions answered on why that is happening. Also, it states in the bill that it allows the minister "to purchase or otherwise acquire any estate or interest in land and any personal property in conjunction with it." This is a pretty general statement. So can you give us some examples of where we expect to see this being used and whether or not there are going to be any specific conditions on it?

Also, we see additional power being given to the minister through section 6(c), "where the Minister considers," to determine adequate compensation for land exchange. Already this year alone, Mr. Speaker, I've had two complaints to my office about people thinking that land had been exchanged in an unfair process, that it didn't seem to be a fair value exchange. So in the interest of being open, transparent, and accountable we want to see that process work for all people. Would the minister answer the question of whether or not when transfers are done they could be made public at that time so that the appearance of value is not subjective, that it's open to interpretation by all people in the community? It doesn't look like that would happen here, and we would like that added.

We also see that this bill removes the authorization by the LG in Council "to prohibit or restrict . . . any business or commercial activity" in a forest reserve. That's the one that's got a number of the communities that we sent this bill out to very upset. So if that can be addressed in terms of why that's in there, we'd appreciate it.

Section 7 removes "the Lieutenant Governor in Council may make regulations," and replaces it with "the Minister may make regulations," always a highly contentious issue for us and for many people in this government and in this province, that the ministry has such an overriding authority. So if that could be answered as to why that change is being made and why we couldn't leave it the way it was and whether or not there are any expectations that those regulations may be posted in public before they're put into force.

It's standard practice at the federal level of government for that to happen so that impact statements can be made and there can be some discussion about whether or not the regulations being put forward are going to hurt, help, or even substantially hinder the way people can protect areas and do business. So is there any move to do that in this case? That would eliminate a lot of the concerns from people in the first instance.

Section 7(b) also gives the minister the authority to make regulations regarding

- (i) vehicular, pedestrian or other traffic,
- (ii) the conduct of any business or commercial enterprise, or
- (iii) any other kind of behaviour.

So what it looks like to us is that that essentially removes prohibitions and restrictions rather than increases them, and when we're talking about forest reserves, once again that's a problem.

Because of the power that section 7 gives the minister, section 11(2) becomes subject to any regulations that might be made by the minister under this act. This could mean that such regulations could usurp the authority of both the Forests Act as well as the Public Lands Act. So if we could get some comments on this. In particular, we are concerned about whether or not this will blur the separation of the sale and leased timber rights between the Forests Act and the Public Lands Act. If so, why would this be the case? If not, that's great. Just explain it to us, and we can send it to our groups that are concerned and have a further debate when we get to committee.

It also takes out all references to signage in a reserve until section 9, which is also amended to give the minister all authority in this area. So why that was done, I guess, is the question.

We see that the prohibitions are removed relating to traffic in forest reserves as well as the use of firearms and air guns. Once again, who was the lobby group that you were working on behalf of here, and why would you do this?

We also see that the minister is allowed to establish fees for services. Any time we smell user fees coming down the pipe, we want to be sure that that's the most effective way to manage the areas because, generally speaking, it's been my experience in this House that it isn't.

Overall we think that this bill weakens the protection of forest reserves. We do like the idea of higher fines for offences against the act, so that's a good move. The questions around the fines are: why are the fines for administrative penalties in section 8 as high as those for offences and penalties in section 10? Do you anticipate seeing more administrative penalties? Are they easier to enforce; less easy to enforce? Are they less serious; more serious? What's the justification for going here?

If we take a little bit of a look at the background of forest reserves, we saw under the Forest Reserves Act of 2000 that

all forest reserves within Alberta are set apart and established for the conservation of the forests and other vegetation in the forests and for the maintenance of conditions favourable to an optimum water supply,

and we agreed with that statement. We see some undermining of this by the late agreements that have come in when much of the land and forest reserves was turned over to forestry companies to manage with the idea that their primary use would be for logging. I think we need to have a public discussion about whether or not that should be the primary use and whether or not the forestry companies are always the best stewards in this particular instance.

We are also very concerned that these agreements continue to be made behind closed doors. The lack of public consultation signifies that we could have future problems with public access to forest reserves being denied and other kinds of problems occurring for the management of the flora and fauna in the areas because what happens traditionally is that there is more of a focus on the economic harvest and less of a focus on the water management strategies and the conservation strategies. So I would like some comments about this.

At first glance it looks like this bill represents the shortcomings that we've seen in forest management, and we've had quite a bit of contact. Just so the minister and the member who introduced this bill know, the stakeholders we've consulted so far are the Alberta Wilderness Association, CPAWS, the Sierra Club, and the Environmental Law Centre.

3:30

While a lot of people could say, "Oh, you just talked to green organizations on this," in fact I would have to say that at the very least everyone has to respect what the Environmental Law Centre has to say on this bill because their primary focus is proper management in the areas of the province. They have a high stake in ensuring that we have a lot of continuity here in how we manage our forests and the interrelation between them and water. So I think it's pretty hard to discount some of these comments that we've heard.

One of them talked about: the amendments speak to the issue of this government allowing the forest industry to control access to our forest reserves, which were initially created to ensure conservation and protection of water. As such, these proposed amendments may look like they are trying to guarantee access to forest reserves for other uses like industry and that the future public access may be denied, as it is now in B.C. So if we could have some comments on that.

There's always the concern about turning the public responsibility over to the private sector, which would make it impossible to co-ordinate an effective forest management strategy and will place our forest reserves in the hands of private interests. Cases such as the hearing that stopped logging at the Bar C Ranch Resort show that the pressure that is being put on forestry companies is happening now for those companies that are not acting responsibly. These are clear indications that SRD as a ministry has to take back the management of forests and involve the public in its decisions.

We've heard time and time again in this Assembly that the forest companies are good stewards and good managers, but as that case particularly showed, it isn't always the case. It's a horrendous fight for members from the general public to get involved in and very costly in terms of time and money to fight these cases, but we've had more than one in the last few years. So we have to consider that and those ramifications when we talk about this.

I go back finally to my last concern about this province and about how it's managed environmentally, and that's that I've said for more than a decade that before we make any decisions to change how we manage the land, the landscape, and flora and fauna, we really have to talk about cumulative impacts when we go into an area, particularly when it's a direct focused attack by industry. Not that they can't be good players and good stewards, but when they're not looking at it from a cumulative impact position, then they're missing some of the mitigating circumstances that could make a difference in how we sustain these forests for the next 50,000, 100,000 years. So my major concern in this area is that we're not talking about those particular issues any time we see an environmental bill before this Assembly, and that's a real problem.

It really seems to me that this bill is more than just about Alberta livestock producers having access for cattle grazing in the Rocky Mountains forest reserve. I think that this is a bit of a slippery slope, and I think that we're going to see some fairly significant concerns. Certainly, over the years we've had many alarms sounded about Canadian forests and about how we need to overcome some barriers to manage forests well in this province. This is a good time to talk about them in this bill and to be concerned about cumulative impact and to discuss who it is that should in fact be managing a natural resource like that: industry or government. I firmly believe that it's government's role.

With that I'll hold my questions and concerns until they're answered in committee. I would expect that the answers will come back in committee, and we'll see how we proceed from there.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Bill 13, the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004. Certainly, the importance of conserving our wilderness areas and our forest areas in this province needs to be a top priority, and to some extent I think the bill moves in this direction. But there are a number of questions that need to be answered before we on our part can support this bill.

Just a few questions. How will the minister determine the qualifications of Crown employees to administer and enforce the act if forest officers are no longer considered the standard to do that? Who will do it if not forest officers? Will that, in fact, permit the government to appoint people who are not government employees; that is to say, contract this work to private companies or individuals?

My second question has to do with the destruction of weeds. This has created some concern in the environmental community in particular because the question that comes to mind is the use of herbicides in our forest envisaged here. If so, is this going to be at the unfettered discretion of the minister, or in fact could we not do it in a different way that places a greater threshold to the use of any kinds of chemicals to maintain weeds in the forest? Certainly, an elaboration on this part would be important.

There are many fragile ecosystems and many ecosystems within forest areas that could be damaged if herbicides were misused, and the question of when they'll be used and on whose behalf is an important one. Is it the government's intention to use weed control measures including herbicides in order to extend the use of these forests for ranching and other purposes? So questions with respect to that need to be answered.

A third set of questions, Mr. Speaker, deals with the question of watershed management. The wording about maintaining "conditions favourable to an optimum water supply" currently in the legislation is being changed to read: within the confines of the reserve. So the question becomes whether or not water management can be effectively carried out within the boundaries of a particular forest reserve.

I guess I'd like to raise the concern that in many cases it may not be possible to maintain water conditions for a particular piece of land if you just look at that piece of land. What happens outside it, upstream or in aquifers that overlap with the forest reserve, I guess leads me to conclude that it may be possible to damage the water supply in a forest reserve by not protecting that water supply in an area adjacent to the reserve but not actually in it. That's a very serious concern, and we're hearing quite a bit about that from people who are following these matters and are very concerned about the conditions relating to water supply in these reserves.

3:40

Now, Mr. Speaker, a fourth point that I'd like to refer to is a question about whether or not businesses and commercial enterprises are going to have an easier time gaining access to the forest reserve. Is it the government's intention to ensure the original meaning of this, that it was setting up these protected areas so that they would not be compromised through the introduction of industrial activity?

I think there are lots of very important questions, Mr. Speaker, that must be responded to because I think that what the bill is purported to do and the actual effect of some of the language may not exactly be the same thing. Again, we have an extensive use of regulation and that, of course, puts much of that beyond the control of this Legislature.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I want to indicate that it's of paramount importance to us that the preservation of water supply to these forestry areas is preserved, and

if that means controlling activities upstream but not on the reserve, then that needs to be done. Particularly, we are also very concerned about increasing industrial and commercial activities within the forest reserve. That seems to be a direction of the government in general, but it's not necessarily going to retain these forest reserves as sustainable forest areas.

I guess the last point that I'd like to make is the question dealing with user fees. I certainly think that we need to know more about how user fees will be used: who's going to pay them, what for, generally what kind of amounts are intended, and so on. Certainly, people that make money operating in these areas should be compensating the Crown, and their activities ought not to be financially supported by the taxpayer. But people who legitimately use it for other purposes I think need to have some protection against being charged fees that will unduly burden them. So we make a distinction between people who are exploiting the forest for economic reasons and the public, who may just wish to use it for other purposes, recreation and so on.

So, Mr. Speaker, those are my questions and comments. I certainly think that strengthening some of the penalties is a good aspect of this bill, and I think that when I've heard some of the responses to these questions in committee, I'll be in a better position to indicate to the House the position that we will ultimately take with respect to the approval of this piece of legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have just a couple of comments about Bill 13. If you look at section 6, the Lieutenant Governor in Council is given some rather sweeping powers to be able

- (a) to expropriate any land in or adjoining a forest reserve,
- (b) to purchase or otherwise acquire any estate or interest in land and any personal property in conjunction with it where the Minister considers that the land or personal property is required for the carrying out of any policy, program, service or other matter relating to the administration of a forest reserve, or
- (c) to exchange public land in or adjoining a forest reserve for land outside a forest reserve where the Minister considers that adequate compensation is obtained for the public land, and to pay further compensation on the exchange.

So sweeping powers for the minister and for the cabinet.

I was struck when I was reading the bill with the kinds of concerns that we've raised with respect to another bill that was introduced this session, and that was Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. Mr. Speaker, what I fear is the precedent set.

Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act, makes the kind of power that's given here to the minister and to the cabinet questionable. It seems to me that if you read this bill from the viewpoint of someone who sees it as being in the public interest, a bill that will allow the government to act in the best interests of forest reserves – and that's what I think most of us would hope is the motivation for the bill – that assurance I think is chilled somewhat when, in the very session that the government is taking this kind of power onto itself for the protection of forest reserves, we see it overriding in another bill protection that we all thought was in place.

I don't think any of us thought that the government would do anything that would interfere with the Whaleback. I remember when the Whaleback was being discussed, the area that's being set aside to protect that area, how strongly people felt about that, yet here we see it being set aside. So I guess the question it asks is: how good is

the legislation? Does it really provide the protection, or the very first time that a special interest group comes along, a company that wants to do something, will all of this be set aside and those groups accommodated?"

So, as I say, I think it's rather interesting that we would be considering both of those bills at the same time during this session, Mr. Speaker. I think the existence of the first, Bill 2, weakens the arguments and support for Bill 13, the Forest Reserves Amendment Act.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the member in his comments was really questioning the value of legislation and then cited the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act as the one that he claims was the change in policy or change in legislation. I would like to ask the member: if, in fact, there's a commitment by government that has been made prior to the legislation for some certain thing on land, should the government go through with its commitment on that land? I would like to know his opinion of that.

3:50

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Sorry, Mr. Speaker. I don't have the background that the minister has. I'd need further clarification.

Mr. Lund: Well, I guess to set the record straight, the fact is that there was a commitment back before the Whaleback and/or the Black Creek were designated, and the commitment was that those trails that are existing today would not be shut, would not be closed. Unfortunately, the way the legislation was written, they did get closed. So the legislation that the hon. member was referring to as if it was some kind of a backtracking of legislation is absolutely not true. There was a commitment as a matter of fact. The people that had that land under disposition prior to the designation – part of the condition of them allowing this to move forward was the fact that those trails would not be cut off. So there was not a backtracking of commitment.

Dr. Massey: Well, then I guess my response is that that's sloppy law-making. Surely you wouldn't bring a bill to this House knowing that there was a prior commitment and not include that commitment in the bill.

Mr. Lund: Of course, the difficulty that happened in that whole scenario was that the minister that was involved in the designation – there was an event called an election in between the time that the negotiations were going on and the legislation. So there was a gap, and that's how that all happened. But I firmly believe that when government makes a commitment on anything, then it should be followed through, and I feel very strongly about that.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Yes. My point stands. It's sloppy.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This bill seems all too consistent with a couple of general trends of this government. One is the

consolidation of power into the hands of fewer and fewer cabinet ministers, and we're seeing that played out here over and over when powers are actually pulled out from the Lieutenant Governor in Council and are given specifically to the minister, which certainly bypasses or short-circuits any normal democratic process of cabinet discussion or, even better, bringing decisions out for public consultation. That concentration of power is consistent over and over in this government.

I guess it's an approach of philosophy, although it seems ironic that it's coming from a government that complains so much about not having enough power from Ottawa and wanting more and more power delegated from the federal government while at the same time as a provincial government it wants to hold onto more and more power itself.

I also see this bill as making accountability more difficult. It's partly because of that consolidation of power into the hands of the minister that it becomes more and more difficult to have a sense of what goes on in the decision-making process. It pulls the decision-making process further and further behind closed doors. As a result, it becomes more difficult, I think, to hold the government accountable because of this bill.

This even can in some points get pretty dramatic under Bill 13 when you have, as I understand it, in section 7 that sweeping powers may be granted to anyone in government that the minister assigns to deal with forest reserves, and that's not limited to just forest officers. It could be almost anybody, it seems. So there is a substantial increase of powers there.

Alberta's forests are perhaps one of its least recognized resources by the general public. There was a time about 15 years ago when Alberta had the largest virgin boreal forest in North America and some of the largest in the world. Virtually all of that forest, certainly a huge majority of it, has long since been assigned for use by the forestry industry and the paper industry. We have as a result seen a real decline in the percentage of Alberta that is actually in wilderness condition, especially the percentage of forest that's in a wilderness condition.

Here we have a risk under this legislation, and perhaps that risk will be dispelled when we get into committee, but right now it looks like there's a risk that we have the government actually allowing the forest industry to increase its access and to increase control of access to our forest reserves. These were originally set aside for purposes of conservation and water management, and it seems now that we're seeing that curtailed and limited more and more severely.

In particular, when it comes to water, which is going to be a vastly growing issue here, we are by all accounts narrowing the mandate of forest reserves and forest reserve managers to be concerned about water management outside of the limits of the forest reserves. So while these forest reserves were initially created to ensure conservation and protection of water, including water outside the range of those reserves, there is now a risk that with these amendments under this particular bill we'll be curtailing the mandate of forest reserve managers to only considering the effects of water within that reserve.

I expect that there's going to be some significant debate on this legislation as awareness of it grows and as various groups make their views known and have time to study it. As unfortunately happens with so much legislation, it passes through this Legislature with terrific speed, and given the small resources of the opposition and of people in the public, a thorough review of the legislation can't always happen. Sometimes this leads to mistakes and sloppy legislation, as was pointed out by the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods just a few minutes ago.

So I will be looking in subsequent debate, Mr. Speaker, for government members or the minister or the sponsoring member to

perhaps consider amendments to reduce the consolidation of power in the hands of the minister. Why are we having it do that? Are these cabinet ministers not already powerful enough to do their jobs? Why do they have to be able to have fewer and fewer lines of accountability and fewer and fewer counterbalances to their decision-making? That'll be, perhaps, my key concern as I watch this legislation unfold.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills to close debate.

Mr. Marz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I commit to the members that spoke that I'll review their comments and questions in *Hansard* and be prepared to answer their questions once we get into committee. So, with that, I would call for the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 13 read a second time]

head: 4:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 11
Alberta Personal Income Tax
Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to move Bill 11, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004, for third reading.

This bill, Mr. Speaker, introduces amendments that will make technical and clarification changes to ensure that provincial legislation remains consistent with federal legislation, with current administration, and with other parts of the act.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's interesting that in the discussion of the last bill there was a bit of comment about when legislation gets rushed through too quickly and not enough people are involved and the stakes get made and then we're back having to revise bills in the subsequent session. I wonder if that might be what's happened here as well.

This particular bill, which is fairly brief, fairly small, basically addresses technicalities, and it seems to make some corrections, in effect, to legislation that was passed earlier. So one of the lessons here might be that if the government took a bit more time in drafting legislation and debating it and distributed it a bit more widely, we might actually be able to avoid having to keep coming back to correct bills in subsequent legislation.

So this is more or less, I think, a housekeeping bill. I don't think it requires much in the way of comment on this, although there are a couple of questions such as the one about: why do we have to be discussing the bill in the first place? Why wasn't the job done correctly last spring when we passed what was then, I believe, Bill 4?

I guess we might as well move things along, so I will stop my comments there, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul to close debate.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to say that there were changes that were made to the federal acts and federal bills, and this government, I believe, was very prompt in identifying those changes. That's why it's before you here today.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a third time]

Bill 5
Family Support for Children with Disabilities
Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf of the Minister of Children's Services.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to move for third reading Bill 5, Family Support for Children with Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004, and I do so on behalf of the hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Mr. Speaker, I know that our Minister of Children's Services would like to extend her thank yous to the MLA for Red Deer-North at the very outset of this debate at third stage for all of the incredible hard work and time and effort that she put into this particular issue and this particular bill on behalf of all of Alberta's children and the youth in our province.

It is groundbreaking legislation through this particular Assembly, and I think all members here are aware of that. The minor amendments outlined in Bill 5 are very necessary prior to proclamation and implementation of the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act. I think we should express confidence in this legislation, that it is going to be a beacon of light, as it were, across the entire country with reference to the coverage of services for children with disabilities. This particular legislation is, of course, the first of its kind in Canada because it will provide separate and distinct legislation to cover services for the children with disabilities.

I know, Mr. Speaker, that through the various consultation processes and research that has been done for the drafting of this bill many parents and service providers throughout the province were contacted and spoken with and listened to, and we have listened to what they have said to us. Indeed, this legislation itself came out of what we heard from the families of children with disabilities and from other key stakeholders who expressed concern that the unique needs of children with disabilities were not being sufficiently addressed in some cases within the provisions of the child protection legislation.

There are 10 child and family services authorities and the ministerial advisory committee and the expert advisory committee who have actively participated in the process as well, and they, too, need to be thanked. I also know, Mr. Speaker, that our Minister of Children's Services would like to extend her thanks in particular to our colleagues the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Minister of Learning for their insight and willingness to address the challenges that have arisen as this legislation has been developed.

For the past several months we have seen consultation with an even wider range of people, including parents, service providers, and other stakeholders, regarding the drafting of the regulations that will accompany this particular legislation. So the public consultation process that ended just a few days ago in February I think has resulted in very necessary and very good improvements to the services that we are already providing and will provide in the future to children with disabilities.

Specifically, this new legislation will ensure greater consistency in services for children and families and will also ensure that families

and children receive appropriate supports and services based on their assessed needs. This act will broaden the scope of the existing resources for children with disabilities program to focus on supports for the child and the family rather specifically.

The Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act will provide a wide range of family-centred services and supports that will preserve, strengthen, and empower families in caring for their child with a disability. As I have said and other members in this House have said, children are our most precious resource in this province. These are God's children, and they deserve the same opportunity that any other child in Alberta is being offered. The legislation is also going to provide that opportunity well into the future.

Mr. Speaker, I want to add my personal thanks from the Ministry of Community Development, and in my capacity as the minister responsible for the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities my personal thanks are added to the Minister of Children's Services and also to the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Red Deer-North. This is an excellent bit of work here, and we're all thankful to you. I hope that this act will in fact positively affect and change the lives of children living with a disability and their families. I'm looking forward to the proclamation this summer of the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act, which will of course be a very momentous occasion for our province and for all children with disabilities and for their families.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With that, I'm pleased to lend my support to third reading of Bill 5 and do the same on behalf of the Minister of Children's Services.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

4:10

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few final comments on Bill 5. Bill 5 essentially takes the definition out of Bill 23 with respect to disability and expands upon it.

It's a bill that everyone wants to succeed, Mr. Speaker. The definitions are extremely important to families that have children needing services and needing help from the government. The wording is crucial. I thought it telling, because I'm fairly well acquainted with the area, that I still found myself asking the minister for examples of the various categories. I think that that's going to continue to be a problem for parents, and it wouldn't surprise me if we're back here a third time at it trying to clearly define what is meant with respect to the act. I hope that's not the case.

When the minister was good enough to give examples, it became clear. Unfortunately, those examples aren't in the act. It's really an act that requires plain English, and it's an act that has to be written with an eye on the prospective reader, which is parents in this province who are seeking assistance for their youngsters. So I hope that we won't be back here, but it wouldn't surprise me if we are, Mr. Speaker, making modifications to it.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, I'll support the bill and, as I said, hope that it does the job that it was intended to do, and that's to bring some clarity to section 1(c) of Bill 23.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to stand on third reading of Bill 5, the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004.

I just want to go over the five amendments that this act involves, and those amendments include clarifying and broadening the

definition of disability; changing the phrase "therapeutic services" to "child-focused services"; requiring the director and the appeal panel to consider a family's specific circumstances as set out in regulations when making decisions that affect services to be provided; the fourth one, stipulating a residency requirement for children and families receiving services under the act; and the fifth and last amendment, allowing a parent under the age of 18 to enter into a legal agreement regarding supports for their disabled child.

I think that during debate last Tuesday the hon. Minister of Children's Services clarified issues that were raised by members of the Assembly.

I'd like to thank all members for their support of this legislation, and I would just like to say thank you again, Mr. Speaker, and move third reading of this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to speak to this bill, Bill 5, the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004. This bill, I think, does what it sets out to do. It tightens the definition of disability, eligibility, services, and guardian, and it gives some direction on decision-making under the act. At least on the surface it looks like these changes will facilitate how families with disabled children are assisted and will help to ensure that children with conditions that could be treated medically are not grouped under the label disabled and hence may be eligible or ineligible for services.

So, Mr. Speaker, I just want to indicate that the New Democrat opposition thinks that this bill is generally positive, makes changes that are going to do more good than harm, and we are pleased to support the bill.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29? Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf of the Minister of Children's Services to close debate.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, there are many occasions when members of this House take strong stances in opposition to certain things that are sometimes advocated, and on the other side of that coin there are occasions when everybody knows what is serving the common good and comes to agreement. I think we see that case here, which is again reflective of the comments that I alluded to in the opening remarks.

I'm pleased to conclude debate at this time on this important and historic legislation.

[Motion carried; Bill 5 read a third time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 7 Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Minister for International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Mr. Jonson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to make a number of comments with respect to Bill 7 at committee stage. I think it's important to emphasize that this bill provides for a very simple and straightforward measure, and that is extending the application of the Senatorial Selection Act until 2010.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, Senate reform has long been a priority for this government, and there is a renewed interest in change with respect to many aspects of looking at the future structure of our government, not just in Alberta but, as I've said, in other parts of Canada. As an example, it was not too long ago that, as I recall, statements were made on this topic by the Premier of Nova Scotia, and he was indicating that the Senate structure needed to be examined, needed to be reformed. They had their views on that particular topic, but it was certainly important to them as well, and I sense that there is a similar interest in many other parts of Canada.

So as far as the bill is concerned, Mr. Chairman, Bill 7 represents an important but relatively small component of the government's overall activity in this very important area of Alberta's place and Alberta's future as far as Confederation is concerned, but also it's a matter for consideration by other provinces all across our land.

I want to emphasize, because there were certain remarks made by the Member for Edmonton-Centre evening last, that this is only a small component of our overall effort in looking at various aspects of Alberta's role in Confederation. As members should be aware, we do have a committee chaired by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford that has been struck and has been hard at work going across the province from north to south and east to west and into our major urban centres providing a vehicle for Albertans through public hearings to express their views about how our place in Confederation could be enhanced. That, of course, has application possibly to all the provinces in Canada. They might want to examine this overall matter and pursue various initiatives as well.

The committee has been very busy in doing their work. I think that for a topic of this type it has had considerable media coverage. It has had, I think, a pretty good attendance given the time of year that these hearings are being held and the lack of co-operation of the weather on certain particular evenings, and there's certainly been no shortage of views and recommendations coming from the Alberta public on this overall issue.

4:20

There have been, yes, additional comments with respect to Senate reform. There have been comments with respect to gun control, the collection of taxes, the future of the Canada pension plan as it applies to Alberta. The list is very, very long. It will be, I think, a very important but also a very challenging task for the committee when it is done to bring all of this material, all of these viewpoints, ideas, and recommendations together as a report to myself as minister. But, of course, I am only one person involved in this overall work. It will be something that will have to be considered by government, and certainly we will want to, I would expect, further consult and get a reading of the public's views once we have a report to present from the work of that committee.

At the first ministers' level I believe that there are two things that I'd like to comment on. In a general way there has been additional impetus given to working on new arrangements and more effective ways of relating to and working with the federal government in this country. The first ministers of the provinces and territories have agreed to set up a structure called the Council of the Federation. It's had its first meetings, and there is there, I think, a new sense of co-operation and cohesion as far as the provinces are concerned in terms of the way they present various recommendations and enter into various agreements with the federal government. To this point

in time the federal government has been responsive to a large degree to the ideas and initiatives being put forth from the Council of the Federation.

We look forward, Mr. Chairman, to being very active in the area of interprovincial relations and federal/provincial relationships, and we are far from just dealing as a government overall with Senate reform. Bill 7 is a time-sensitive matter. We need to extend the Senatorial Selection Act so that the provision is still there for the selection by the province of our future Senate nominees, and I would request the Assembly's consideration in having this passed.

I would just like also to assure members of the Assembly that the whole matter of improving overall governmental relations and our place in Confederation is a very high priority with our Premier, with our caucus, and we are certainly working on matters far beyond this particular bill, Bill 7. Bill 7 is one important step in an otherwise very important area with many, many facets to it.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and address Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004, and very pleased to announce today that Alberta New Democrats are prepared to support a triple-E Senate. That stands for eliminate, eradicate, and erase.

The position that we have taken for many years, Mr. Chairman, has been to eliminate the Senate, to abolish it. I like to think that the New Democratic Party in Canada was the leader in Senate reform and is prepared to go further than any other party in reforming the Senate. It is a rather useless encumbrance, and that is not to say that many of its members are not distinguished Canadians and actually do good work, but having a Senate of the form in Canada is not useful and not democratic. So the question is then: why eliminate it instead of reform it? To go back . . .

Mr. Dunford: I'm sending a copy of your speech to Tommy Banks.

Mr. Mason: I hope you'll include, hon. member, the part about the distinguished Canadians who do good work.

It is something that we think is not acceptable in a democratic society, to have something appointed essentially by the Prime Minister, and we question the need for a check on the democratic passions of the House of Commons.

I might point out that this was certainly the view about the time of Confederation, and the House of Lords, upon which the Canadian Senate was modelled, was considered to be a check on the democratic passions of the population. There was a great deal of nervousness among the privileged classes of Britain in those days about the extension of the franchise, first to all men and later on to women as well. There was a real concern that democracy might get away on them, and they might find themselves having to work for a living. But, in effect, that has never been the case. In fact, there's been a long period of struggle in Britain, in Australia, and in Canada to restrict the upper House's powers and its ability to prevent and hold up legislation that the democratically elected House decided to put forward.

It's interesting to note, Mr. Chairman, that a number of provinces used to have upper Chambers that were appointed in the same fashion; that is to say, by the government for extended terms. They have gradually been eradicated, and the last to go was that of Quebec, which was eliminated in I believe 1967 or 1968. They did away with the Red Chamber in Quebec.

The history of these upper Chambers in Canadian history going

back before the Canadian Senate and before Confederation was that they were essentially appointed by the British Crown in order to retain control, Executive Council, and were in fact an instrument of British control over the colonies that came to make up Canada. Gradually, as responsible government developed and colonial Legislatures evolved, they came into conflict with the appointed Executive Council, the governor and council.

That has largely been resolved today in the sense that in Canada as in Britain the Senate, or the upper Chamber, no longer has the ability to permanently hold up legislation which has been approved by the lower Chamber. So it has now some power to delay.

4:30

The question is whether or not this is necessary and whether or not it's necessary to have a Senate to represent provincial interests. I think that that's a very debatable proposition. I believe that provinces in this country do indeed have a considerable amount of power and particularly when they can work together. That doesn't eliminate a considerable amount of frustration with the actions of the federal government from time to time, and that's not limited to Alberta or even to western Canada. So I think we would be far better off, Mr. Chairman, to eliminate the Senate and work towards a more co-operative style of federalism, and I think that some steps have been taken in that regard.

Now, I think that some of the activities of this government, Mr. Chairman, have been political and partisan in nature and quite counterproductive. I'm thinking about some of the actions the government has taken with respect to Kyoto, with respect to the Wheat Board, with respect to the gun registry, and so on. These activities are not designed to resolve these issues, and I certainly think that constructive efforts in those areas would be of some use. But they are very often based on simply distraction and attempting to get Alberta voters fired up about the federal government in Ottawa as a means of distracting them from issues here in Alberta. So, for example, I'm thinking of electricity deregulation. I'm thinking of automobile insurance, the cuts to education, and so on.

I don't believe that this use of fed-bashing, if I may call it that, is constructive, and it certainly doesn't work to strengthen the unity of the country. I think there are legitimate interests that Alberta has in Confederation, and they do need to be represented, but the government has in my view misused its platform in order to distract attention from a serious and growing number of problems here in this province.

Mr. Chairman, I want to talk a little bit about proportional representation. I think part of the reason some people feel alienated in western Canada has to do with the system of individual geographical ridings which we use in Canada, and it's one of the few democratic countries left in the entire world to use this type of system. I think there are only about three or four. Most democracies now either use a form of proportional representation or mixed member proportional representation, which does allow the retention of geographical districts and makes sure that there is geographical distribution of the representation in the Assembly or the parliament, but the numbers are proportional to the votes cast for the party.

I think that it would be quite beneficial to people's feelings of alienation if we had that sort of system. I think it would go a long way towards relieving that because every vote would count. For example, if you lived in Quebec and you wanted to be a Reformer, you wouldn't feel that your vote was lost because your candidate had no chance of winning. Similarly, if you were a Liberal candidate in Alberta, you might feel that you might still – yeah.

So, Mr. Chairman, I think that it is an important reform and one whose time has come. I think the idea of the triple-E Senate, which

was just adopted from the United States, is not suitable to Canadian conditions despite all the attempts to try and make it appear as if it's a relevant institution. I don't believe that we should be having to import our institutions from the United States, which has quite a different constitutional structure altogether.

I just want to say as well, Mr. Chairman, that I'm very interested in the exercise going on in British Columbia right now, where the government there has essentially convened a group of citizens drawn from all walks of life and all areas almost by lot, as I understand it, and put them to work drafting changes to the political system and the democratic system in that province. One of the things that they've arrived at I think is a proposal for a form of proportional representation in that province, and British Columbia may well be the first province to bring that system in. Of course, British Columbia is highly polarized, and some of the smaller parties are not represented at all in the Legislature, and I think it's the intention that a greater number of voices will be heard if that sort of system is brought into place.

I would have preferred that the government of Alberta do something like that rather than establish the committee that it has. The committee that has been travelling around the province I guess has had a couple of strikes against it. One is that it has only got members of the Conservative Party on the committee, and for a committee to go out and try to represent and hear from Albertans of all different opinions and perspectives, I think it's important that it be representative of the Legislature rather than just the government. I think that this has been one of the reasons why only certain perspectives have been brought before the committee.

I also think it's the case that the terms of reference of the committee have brought forward people who are for one reason or another dissatisfied with Alberta's role in Confederation. I'm not suggesting for a moment that only those people have come forward, but it has been a bit of a magnet, I think, for those people who have hard-core provincial rights and Alberta-alienation types of views. I just want to indicate that I think that the government could have taken a much broader perspective and talked not only about Alberta's place in Confederation but talked about how democracy works in Canada and how it works in Alberta. It could have been an all-party committee, it could have had a broader mandate, and I think that it would have heard from a broader cross-section of Albertans and probably would have been able to provide us with a more balanced and broad perspective.

Mr. Chairman, I want to indicate that that's more or less my comments on Bill 7. We will not be supporting it.

I think, just in conclusion, it's important to review the history a little bit of the government's efforts in respect to electing Senators here. Of course, under the government of Brian Mulroney an elected Senator or two were appointed by the government, but in the Senate election most recently that was not the case. It was held in 1998. The election coincided with municipal elections held across Alberta that October, and there was a lot of protest from municipal governments at having the senatorial election foisted on them. The two top vote winners were to be put forward by the provincial government.

4:40

It had a serious credibility problem from the start, Mr. Chairman. The Prime Minister at the time, Mr. Chretien, made it clear that he had no intention of appointing the winner of the election. Before the vote was held, he filled the vacant Alberta seat by appointing Douglas Roche, a former Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament.

Now, Mr. Roche, it turns out, has been one of the most outstanding Senators that that Chamber has ever seen, and notwithstanding

my views on the Senate, I do want to indicate that Mr. Roche and a number of other people, including Mr. Banks, have done an outstanding job in an institution that, unfortunately, I cannot support.

In that election, Mr. Chairman, neither the Liberals nor the New Democrats fielded a candidate. The Reform Party ran two candidates, and there were two independent candidates. One of the independents was actually somebody who had run for the Reform nomination for the Senate but came in third. So really what you had were three Reform candidates for the Senate, two of whom were official and the other independent was unaffiliated. So it was seen at the time by many people as a Reform Party exercise, and I think that's what it was, Mr. Chairman, and a futile one at that.

Public interest was extremely low. Because people were voting for municipal councils at the same time, it was difficult to know exactly how many people didn't bother to cast a vote for the Senate elections, but I think estimates are that as many as half of the people who went to the polling stations that day left their Senate ballot blank.

So it turned out to be a big embarrassment for the government, Mr. Chairman. You know, quite frankly, we haven't heard that much from this government about Senate reform since then, but they have put this little bill in here just to keep their Senate bill alive, and I suppose that they need to do that in order to satisfy certain sections of their supporters. But I think that election showed just how indifferent most Albertans really are about the government's triple-E Senate reform project.

You know, I think, Mr. Chairman, they are far more concerned about the government's handling of the BSE crisis, about the government's handling of the deregulation crisis, about the government's handling of the education crisis, or about their handling of the auto insurance rates crisis. All four of those crises are far more at the top of mind of Albertans than the triple-E Senate or the Canadian Wheat Board or any of the other little federal issues that this government would rather be talking about.

I think that the public is seeing through the exercises that the government goes through when it's talking about some of these federal issues, and they know that it's not the kind of thing that they particularly care about. They are not the kinds of things that affect them in their daily lives, and I think that they feel that the government is off base and out of touch by putting so much emphasis on these peripheral and marginal issues. That's what I think this is, and I think this bill is merely an attempt to keep this issue alive so that the government at some time can raise it again when there might be a little bit more interest and so that they can escape criticism from their supporters to whom this is a somewhat important issue.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It gives me great pleasure to rise and join the debate in Committee of the Whole on Bill 7, the Alberta Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004. I'd just like to make a few remarks. I do support Bill 7. As a matter of fact, the Alberta government has long advocated for Senate reform, and it's something that I do personally believe in as well.

Alberta has held the only two Senate elections in Canadian history. Our province has lobbied other Canadian governments in support of Senate reform, and we continue to raise the issue with the Prime Minister at every opportunity. As a matter of fact, I understand that this has been as recent as the last first ministers' meeting in January. Our hon. Premier was there, and I know that Senate reform was one of the items on the agenda.

In 2002 the Alberta Legislature reaffirmed its support of a triple-E

Senate by passing a resolution calling on the Prime Minister to respect democracy and appoint one of the province's elected Senate nominees. Following that, our Premier wrote the former Prime Minister again asking that one of Alberta's elected Senate nominees be appointed to fill a vacancy in the upper House. Now, the former Prime Minister chose not to respect the wishes of Albertans on this matter.

With Senator Thelma Chalifoux having reached mandatory retirement age in February of 2004, just last month, and with Senator Doug Roche due to retire in May of 2004, Alberta will actually have three Senate vacancies. That is exactly half of our allotted seats, Mr. Chairman. By agreeing to appoint elected provincial nominees, the current Prime Minister would take a small but important step towards comprehensive Senate reform. It would also demonstrate that the Prime Minister is listening to the concerns of western Canadians, who overwhelmingly support Senate reform, as I will talk about later. Perhaps the Prime Minister, while he's at it, could listen to Albertans and cancel the gun registry as well.

In our federal system the Senate was designed to represent the interests of the provinces in Parliament. So to abolish it, as the NDs have just said, is to lose any hope of a provincial check and balance. Mr. Chairman, what that would do is essentially cut the legs out of any hope for the provinces having a say as to provincial jurisdiction within federal legislation.

Because the current Senate lacks a democratic foundation, it is not performing its function. Currently, Mr. Chairman, it's not an effective counterbalance to the House of Commons. The people, not the Prime Minister alone, should be able to choose their Senators. Again, the NDs don't seem to want to recognize the people's choice, which is really sad for democracy. However, it is the people that have spoken in Alberta, spoken very clearly, yet the Prime Minister has not listened to those concerns.

The Senate should be reformed so that it is elected with equal provincial representation and effective power. That's what a triple-E Senate is. That's what pioneers like Bert Brown have worked so hard on for so many years. People like Ted Morton have also worked hard to see this happen. Not erase, eradicate, and eliminate, as the NDs say, but elected, equal, and effective, Mr. Chairman.

Currently, Mr. Chairman, the Senate is also flawed because the provinces are not represented equally. In the Senate there are currently 10 seats for New Brunswick, 10 seats for Nova Scotia, four for Prince Edward Island, 24 seats for Ontario, 24 for Quebec, six seats for Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and B.C., six seats for Newfoundland and Labrador, and one seat for each of the three territories. This is not even close to equal, not even close.

In 2003 the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations introduced through a government motion a model constitutional amendment to reform the Senate. The key provisions of Alberta's proposed model for Senate reform are simple: six Senators per province – that's right; even for Ontario and Quebec six Senators per province – and two Senators per territory. That's the first point.

The second point is elected Senators, elected by the people for the people – elected Senators.

Thirdly, absolute veto power over legislation that is affecting provincial jurisdiction. Mr. Chairman, the current health care debate is a good one. It's something where the provinces are trying to exercise their provincial jurisdiction, yet we have some federal legislation sitting there that could possibly encumber the provinces from doing anything. A reformed Senate would provide a much-needed balance to the House of Commons. Everybody knows that Albertans want that, that we need that. It would also force the federal government to make better decisions on a day-by-day basis for the benefit of all Canadians.

4:50

More recently, last December the Premier established an MLA committee to consult with Albertans on the current state of federal/provincial relations. Further discussions on Alberta's Senate reform resolution will await the outcome of those consultations. Mr. Chairman, I do look forward to the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford's report. I understand that it's going to be an exciting one and one that is definitely thinking outside the box.

In the meantime, we need to address the fact that the current Senatorial Selection Act will expire on December 31, 2004. As we've been discussing, the act establishes the procedures for the election of Alberta's Senate nominees. It was previously extended in 1994 and 1998, and I believe that we will continue to extend it and to improve upon it until it happens, until we finally get some satisfaction in Senate reform.

The proposed amendments in Bill 7 would extend the life of the Senatorial Selection Act to December 31, 2010, so that senatorial elections may be held in Alberta again. That's what the people want, Mr. Chairman. In fact, a recent Canada West Foundation poll showed that 80 per cent of Albertans support elected Senators, so it is important to Albertans, even though again the New Democrats say that it isn't. It is important. Eighty per cent of Albertans support elected Senators. Therefore, I support elected Senators, and I support Bill 7.

Mr. Chairman, I hope that all my colleagues in this Chamber will join me. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My comments on this bill will be fairly brief. In committee I understand that we're to debate section by section. I think that including the title, this bill is only 42 words long, so I will only be debating one section, which is section 2, which reads as follows. "Section 54 is amended by striking out '2004' and substituting '2010'."

Well, I think that's a poor piece of legislation.

An Hon. Member: It's that simple.

Dr. Taft: It's that simple. I think we're missing the whole point here. It's been an interesting debate, though. It's been interesting hearing the perspective from the New Democrats to abolish the Senate completely, which, you know, is not bad. It's been interesting listening to Tory members talk about bigger dreams for Senate reform and equal Senate representation from every province and that kind of thing. Again, a very interesting debate, interesting points.

What I'd like to focus on is the section that I would like to see in here, which would have to do with democratic reform within Alberta, because I think that we could lead this whole debate by example. We could show the federal government what democratic reform is like by reforming our provincial government processes. There are just a few examples I'll lay out.

The Member for Edmonton-Highlands referred to the efforts by the B.C. government, which look really very interesting, in assembling a group of citizens chosen by lottery representing every area of the province and giving them a mandate in law with a budget and with facilitators to come up with a new electoral process for B.C. and then making a commitment to take that proposal to the citizens of British Columbia in the next general election. That's exciting. What I would like to see in a bill addressing democratic reform would be ideas like that.

Some other examples that we could look at in Alberta would be strengthening the legislation governing our Auditor General to give the Auditor General of Alberta the same power that the Auditor

General in Ottawa has to conduct investigations, to make reports public, to subpoena witnesses, and so on and so forth.

We could bring in whistle-blower legislation. Why not do that? I think that would be a great idea, and that would set an example that would be important for the federal government and for other provinces.

We could strengthen the power of our Public Accounts Committee, which was recently compared by a World Bank analyst to public accounts processes in Third World countries. He was in fact shocked and appalled at how little power the Public Accounts Committee in Alberta has. Interestingly, it's been to a large extent the work of the Public Accounts Committee in Ottawa that has led to the exposure of the scandal in Ottawa. I only wish we had a Public Accounts Committee with the same strength here.

So those are some things that I wish were in this very, very brief bill.

As it stands, I'm wondering what's going to happen if the Senators who won the last election die before the deadline, before 2010. What if they change their mind? Or, heaven forbid, what if they get appointed to the Senate? What if the Prime Minister were to appoint Ted Morton to the Senate? Wouldn't that be interesting? Then what's this legislation all about?

The people who were chosen as the so-called Senators-in-waiting were chosen through a process that in the eyes of Albertans had very, very limited legitimacy, and that was now so many years ago that extending the deadline for another six years is silly, and I think it's a distraction from the much more important issues that this province faces.

So I've made my comments clear, and from the very first word all the way through to the 42nd, which is the last word of this legislation, I'm opposed to this bill.

On top of that, Mr. Chairman, I would like to adjourn debate. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: To adjourn debate, hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview?

Dr. Taft: Mr. Chairman, might I make a correction? I would move that we adjourn debate until 8 o'clock this evening. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: No. The motion is not in order. I'm wondering if the hon. member wanted to have a vote. Were you calling the question?

Well, anybody else wishing to participate in the debate then? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I do have a few comments to make.

Do you want us to adjourn debate, Gene?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Yes.

Ms Carlson: Okay. I'll leave those until 8 o'clock tonight. Thank you.

I'll adjourn debate now on this bill.

The Deputy Chair: Well, that motion is not in order, but the motion to adjourn debate is.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would move that we rise and report progress on Bill 7.

[Motion to report progress on Bill 7 carried]

5:00

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports progress on Bill 7.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I would move that the House now stand adjourned until 8 this evening and that we return and reconvene in Committee of the Whole at that time.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:01 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 2, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/02

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the committee to order. For the benefit of those who might be unfamiliar with this stage of the Legislature, it's the informal session, where hon. members are allowed to move around quietly from one place to another and engage in very quiet conversations, where we only have one member standing and talking at a time, and they're allowed to take off their jackets. It's the part where we are able to go through either the budget item by item or in this case, in Committee of the Whole, we go through an act and can go piece by piece.

Before we begin this evening's deliberations, I wonder if we might have consent to revert very briefly to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's, indeed, a great pleasure tonight for me to recognize and introduce some members of my constituency who are here observing proceedings. They are with the Education Watch initiative, which, as many people here would know, is a specific initiative on behalf of education in our province. It's a nonpartisan, Alberta-based parent advocacy group who are advocating for improved funding and better learning environments in Alberta public schools.

Joining us tonight are Lynn Erickson, Terri Tumack, Lori Almborg, Catharine Schoendorfer, Barb White, Trina McCloy, Joanne Abbott, and Roger Abbott. These constituents have young children in Velma E. Baker school and at Kate Chegwin school in my constituency. I've had the pleasure of meeting with some of them before; I'll look forward to probably meeting with them again. I would ask that they please rise, receive our thanks and also the warm welcome of our Assembly this evening.

Thank you. My other introduction, Mr. Chairman, is on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. This is a young lady named Linda Inglis, who resides in that constituency, and she's also part of the Education Watch initiative. She has one child at Westminster school and another child at Ross Sheppard school. I would ask everyone to please warmly greet and receive Linda Inglis to our Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my great pleasure to introduce tonight 10 visitors who are joining us in the public gallery who are part of the Mill Woods Youth Council. They are accompanied by Mr. Shane Isfield and Miss Paige Denham. Just to tell you a little about this council, they do a wonderful job helping and supporting youth in Mill Woods. They have a very small budget, but from that budget they will take applications for funds for things like support for sport programs for children who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend due to financial difficulties and things of that nature. They're a welcome addition to Presidents' Council, which we all try to attend every month. I would like you all to very much welcome

them as they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Bill 7

Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: I believe I was speaking to it and adjourned debate, Mr. Chairman, this afternoon.

Yes, I'm happy to finish my comments on this particular bill, which I had hardly started. This is one of the silliest bills I've seen in this Legislature.

An Hon. Member: Silliest?

Ms Carlson: It is. Two lines.

What does it do? It changes the date of expiry for those silly Senators-in-waiting that were elected in one of the lowest voter turnouts we've seen in this province. [interjections] Well, perhaps some of you would argue that all Senators are silly, but that's a different argument. Tonight we're talking about this particular silly bill, which is two lines. It extends the expiry date from December 31, 2004, to December 31, 2010. Who knew, you guys, when you drafted this silly piece of legislation back then, that it would actually expire before your Senators were appointed? Who knew that?

Rather than participate in really effective Senate reform, which is what we need, you wanted to do this: just waste a lot of money on an election to choose a couple of Senators that wouldn't be put in place. Instead, you could have spent that money and spent all of the wind that you expended on this particular topic over the years in really effective reform, which is certainly what we support and continue to support.

We have to see at this time, when we've got two Senator vacancies right now in Alberta and a third one coming up, that we work co-operatively with the federal government to ensure that we get a Senate that's representative for Alberta. That doesn't just mean filling a couple of vacancies. That means giving us some sort of proportional representation out here that's going to actually give us a voice.

Mr. Bonner: Doug Roche.

Ms Carlson: Well, Doug Roche was a very good Senator, and now he's another one who is retiring here very shortly.

Mr. MacDonald: He's an independent Senator.

Ms Carlson: An independent Senator. We could have more like that if we had an effective kind of proportional representation platform that we took here. That's something that both sides of this Assembly would be happy to co-operate and work on together, because there is no doubt that Alberta needs a stronger voice, and that's the only way that we're going to get it. Based on population, as electoral divisions go for at least another 10 years, we're only going to have 26 elected voices in this province. When you think about the over 300 MPs in Ottawa, that isn't a very high percentage. So the best way for us to get a more effective voice in Ottawa regardless of the government in power is through effective Senate reform.

So I urge members to not support this bill, to instead take the money on the development of this and any future conditions and work co-operatively on effective reform. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I can understand the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's concern and derision of the Senate as a silly Chamber, because most of the present Senators are Liberals appointed, generally speaking, by a Liberal Prime Minister, and that's what makes that body often a seat of derision, that it doesn't often deserve.

In my experience – and I'm sure I reflect the attitude of most members of this Chamber – the people that are in the Senate of Canada are by and large very worthy individuals. This debate is not about the individuals that presently occupy the Chamber although as in all Chambers some are more worthy than others. This is about the kind of country we would want to have.

I would remind our Liberal colleagues here tonight that the first elected Senator appointed in Canada came from Alberta, and it wasn't all that many years ago. His name is Stan Waters, and he ran against Bill Code in the election for Senator to represent Alberta. I'm sure Liberals in the House would not ever want to hear a person of the stature of Bill Code described as unworthy, because he's not.

When the electoral race took place in Alberta that resulted in the Senators-in-waiting that we have now, it's fair to say that political parties were not particularly engaged. The Alberta political parties were not particularly engaged in that election with the exception of the Reform Party. The Senators that ran representing the Reform Party at that time won, and they won handily. They ran under the complete and clear understanding that the chances of their being appointed to the Senate were something akin to remote and zero. They knew that there wasn't much chance of their being elected, but that's not what that was about, and that's not what this is about.

This Senatorial Selection Act and the continuation of the act that we have in place have far more important ramifications than the two people that are presently the Senators-in-waiting or perhaps the new people who will replace those two when the next election is called if they don't run again and aren't re-elected.

8:10

What this act is is a manifestation of the absolute desire, the fact that Alberta will not rest until we as a province achieve balance in the country. Right now it's widely agreed that there is a good deal of alienation in our country from east to west and perhaps to a lesser degree from north to south, but there is no question that there is a great deal of alienation in the country. The Canadian Unity Council in their most recent in-depth polling indicated that alienation is something in the order of 40 per cent throughout most of western Canada. It's certainly centred in Alberta, and one of the reasons for that is that Alberta contributes a tremendous amount to our country.

Alberta contributes not just financially, but we contribute ideas and we contribute spirit. We contribute an ethos that is very different from any other province or region in the country, and we also contribute a substantial amount of money annually, in the billions of dollars. We're a country, and we understand that, but we do not as Albertans or in British Columbia or Saskatchewan or Manitoba have the weight in the centre of the governance of the country, in Ottawa, commensurate with our contribution to the country, with our population, and certainly not with the financial resources that we contribute to the country.

That imbalance is reflected in legislation that comes from the centre of the country, which may be good and may be appropriate for

certain regions, the heavily, densely populated centres of Toronto, Montreal, but in a country as broad and diverse and vast as ours, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. So the struggle to have a Senate that represents the regions or the provinces of the country as it was originally determined that the Senate would represent has as its core the potential to resolve the alienation problem that our country faces, and that's one of the reasons why this is such an important debate.

Now, just a little over 140 years ago, in 1864, when the founding fathers got together and decided that we had to have an upper House, Sir John A. Macdonald said:

We resolved then that the constitution of the upper house should be in accordance with the British system as nearly as circumstances would allow. An hereditary upper house is impracticable in this young country. Here we have none of the elements for the formation of a landlord aristocracy – no men of large territorial positions – no class separated from the mass of the people. An hereditary body is altogether unsuited to our state of society and would soon dwindle into nothing. The only mode of adapting the English system to the upper house is by conferring the power of appointment on the crown (as the English peers are appointed), but that the appointments should be for life.

So Sir John A. Macdonald understood the problem. They limited the number of Senators that would be in the upper House. I believe it was 24, 24, and a combination of 24 from the Atlantic provinces. They understood that the upper House had to be composed in a manner that would not have deadlock. They didn't want the representatives of the upper House to be popularly elected because they wanted the members of the upper House to have a different political and a longer range view so as to be a check or a balance on the lower House. It wasn't a deeded or a hereditary aristocracy that would be in the upper House. It had to be an upper House of the people.

So how was that to be achieved? This is the elemental difference between what was envisioned by Sir John A. Macdonald and the Fathers of Confederation in 1864, when these debates took place, and today. At that time, the upper House was to be appointed by the Crown so that those in the upper House appointed by the Crown would not be subject to the same pressures, the same responsibilities, the same concerns as the lower House: needing to be elected, needing to be popular to be elected, and therefore perhaps not having as long a range of vision.

Well, as we all know, what has happened over the intervening years is that the upper House has become a resting place for political supporters, fundraisers, bagmen, deadwood from the House of Commons that the Prime Minister wants to move into the upper Chamber so as to provide space for someone else to come in. For Prime Ministers the Senate of Canada is a very, very handy place to have around because it does offer a very cushy and a very warm and nice and prestigious landing spot for ministers, front-benchers, or others that the Prime Minister wants to get out of the House to get other people into the House, to open up a slot and to reward the party faithful.

After the scandals of the Senate in recent years made it a much more visible House, to be fair, there have been some appointments that have brought tremendous credit on the institution of the Senate, but that does not absolve us of the core problem that we have, and that is that we do not have in Canada a House that represents the regions of Canada. There is a possibility that through the Council of the Federation the Premiers will get together and we will have a pseudo-Senate as a direct result of the Council of the Federation, but that's only a possibility, and that's only if the Premiers can get together to make it happen.

What we do have is the reality of a Senate that is at present a final

resting place for friends of the Prime Minister. It does not fulfill its very important function in our country, and it must be reformed.

8:20

Now, whether or not it is reformed as a triple-E Senate, we don't know. Our legislation calls for a triple-E Senate. But it's very, very likely that across the country over the next few years there will be a tremendous increase in the interest of things electoral as another generation takes the reins of political leadership in our country. We all know that political participation across the country is not nearly as high as those of us in this House think it should be or high enough to be good for the future of the country. We have to put our minds to work to figure out how we can get more people engaged in the political life of our country. So this is going to be something that will be considered. I think that at present in Canada there are five Legislatures that have either full-blown or slightly less than full-blown electoral reform commissions in place right now.

The Senate of Canada is a particularly important constitutional body, especially now, it's fair to say, that the Supreme Court has taken on a law-making role not envisioned by the Fathers of Confederation, who designed our parliament after the Westminster model, and we now have the introduction of the civil code through the Charter of Rights interpreted by the Supreme Court. So it's fair to say that we probably do not have a Westminster democracy today as much as we have a democracy influenced by the court. We have to have checks and balances. There are none today. The Senate of Canada offers our country the potential to have a check to the absolute power that's vested in the office of the Prime Minister.

So, Mr. Chairman, although on the surface this bill is not all that exciting, once you get past the surface, this bill and what it means to the potential of Alberta, what it means to the potential of our country to live in harmony, what it means to the potential of our province to be a full partner in this country, to contribute, to be recognized – and not just our province but all of the provinces because we are a federation of provinces. We're not a unitary state. If we have the resolve, the unrelenting resolve to see this through to the end, we have the capacity to change our country and to change it for the better and perhaps even to protect our country.

So with those words, Mr. Chairman, I'm going to take my seat and hope that the members of this body will support this bill and take a renewed interest in the capacity of our province to lead our country once again. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's with interest that I listened to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, a constituency that oddly enough is named after the first Liberal Premier of this province. It's quite interesting to hear the hon. member's historical analysis of the Liberals and Liberal patronage in the Senate. I would have to remind all hon. members of this Assembly and particularly the hon. member of the role that the Mulroney Conservatives played in appointments to the Senate.

Now, the federal Progressive Conservative Party was the party that originally came up with this idea of the GST, and they had to go to extraordinary constitutional lengths to get more Conservatives into the Senate in order to pass the GST.

Mr. McClelland: So let's fix it.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. The hon. member says, "Let's fix it," and that's a good idea. But for the debate, Mr. Chairman, it would be the right thing to do to make clear to all those that all parties in the past

have used Senate appointments in what some would consider to be an unsavoury manner. So to label one political party and not the other is in my view wrong.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to briefly enter into debate. I wasn't going to comment, but I heard the comments made by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, talking somewhat derisively about the Senatorial Selection Act and the purpose of the act and the effect and benefit that the act has had.

I have to enter into the debate first of all because I believe that fundamentally Albertans do support the concept of a triple-E Senate – equal, effective, and elected – and that getting there from here is not a direct journey. In fact, having constitutional change in this country, as we've seen, is problematic at best, so we need to have some steps along the way to show that provinces are unalterably set on this course, that want to see it happen.

I also wanted to speak specifically about the Senatorial Selection Act because it provided two purposes. First of all, it resulted in the first appointment of an elected Senator in this country in the person of Stan Waters, so the act, in effect, worked in its first instance because of the time and place and circumstance. But I would submit to the House that the act has efficacy in and of itself in that the quality of appointments to the Senate from Alberta has been far superior, in my humble submission, to those in the rest of the country, and you have to ask why that's happened.

While we don't agree with the concept of appointing Senators, the fact of the matter is that since this act has been in place, not only has Stan Waters, who was elected under the provisions of this act, been appointed to the Senate, but I believe also Senator Doug Roche has been appointed to the Senate. He was a Conservative Member of Parliament who provided exemplary service. Not everybody in the province agrees with his political philosophies, but everybody, I think, has to agree that he provided exemplary service to the province and to the country as a Member of Parliament, and he has continued to provide that service in the Senate.

He was one of the few people who you might have identified as a Progressive Conservative appointed by a Liberal government to the Senate, and one has to ask why. I would submit that when appointments were considered at that time, the Prime Minister looked at Alberta and said, "How am I going to deal with Alberta and Alberta's proposal for an elected Senate and the concept of having this Senatorial Selection Act?" and went out of his way to find an appointment that would be a good appointment to the Senate and would deny all the challenges that people might have, that people were appointed as political hacks or as a patronage appointment or all those other derisive things that people say when Senators get appointed in this country from other jurisdictions.

You can say the same about Senator Thelma Chalifoux. You can say the same about Senator Tommy Banks. You could say the same, I think, about Senator Jean Forest. Alberta has had exemplary appointments to the Senate, unparalleled anywhere else in this country. In my humble submission the reason for the quality of the appointments to the Senate from Alberta is because the Prime Minister, when he's making an appointment to the Senate from Alberta, has to look very, very carefully, has to make sure that the appointment is of outstanding quality so that people don't rise up and criticize the appointment because they don't like the quality of the people.

8:30

So this act has had efficacy not only in putting forward Alberta's position that the Senate should be an elected, effective, and equal

Senate, and until that can be accomplished, we should at least have the opportunity to elect nominees from this province. Not only has it had efficacy in putting that forward, but it has actually offered a very real benefit to the people of Alberta in that we have better quality of appointment of Senators because of this act, in my submission.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to make a few comments here, as well, on this particular bill, and I want to start off by making it perfectly clear that myself and my caucus colleagues believe very strongly in Senate reform. Of course, it was a Liberal bill – and I believe it was Bill 210 – calling for triple-E Senate reform in this province, and we fully support that same position today. We also feel that this would address the imbalance that does presently occur in the Senate if this were to take place.

But we do have a lot of problems with this particular bill, Bill 7, the Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004. Certainly, one of the reasons that we have difficulty with this is that when elections were held in 1998 and the two members were elected, they were elected by approximately only 25 per cent of the eligible electors in this province. Now, here we have an amendment to a piece of legislation that's going to extend that period another 10 years.

So here we have two members sitting on the sidelines hoping that perhaps the Prime Minister of the day may appoint them to the Senate. We also have two people who were elected by only 25 per cent of the eligible voters, yet we are going to extend the period when they can sit on the sidelines another 10 years. So that will take us to the year 2014. When we see that they were first elected in October of 1998, then we're going to have a 16-year period approximately when we have elected members sitting on the sidelines. I don't know anywhere else in democracy where you can get elected and not have to be re-elected and maintain your position for 16 years. That is certainly not the way democracy works.

So from that very standpoint this is not a very good bill and certainly not an amendment that I can support. Thank you very much.

Mrs. O'Neill: Well, Mr. Chairman, as I understand the bill, it does not point to the extension of the two gentlemen that have previously been elected to the Senate for the period that the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry indicated. This bill is intended to allow the process to continue the availability of the electoral opportunity, if you will, for the citizens of Alberta to possibly elect members to the Senate, who might even eventually be in-waiting should there be the opportunity for appointment. But we would, if this process is followed through, have an indication of those who are willing to let their names stand and, secondly, whom a number of people in this province believe should be vested with this honour and this opportunity.

I just want to be very clear that we can't misread the bill, however brief it is, to be understood that we are by virtue of it proposing that the two individuals, Mr. Bert Brown and Mr. Ted Morton, continue as Senators-in-waiting, if you will, or however people have been referring to them. Their term, if you will, ends this year, expires. So let's be very, very clear on that.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 7 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 6

Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004, certainly is, I think, worthy of debate, discussion, and I would strongly urge all members of this Assembly to have a second look at this and consider supporting this legislation. If they have any questions or if they have any concerns about this, now is the time, I believe, to have them addressed.

Now, we're considering making amendments to the Income and Employment Supports Act, that was originally passed in 2003, and in particular in committee here amending section 49 to allow Human Resources and Employment officials to enforce all child support agreements that cannot be pursued by maintenance enforcement by protecting the privacy of people who provide the whereabouts of the parent who had not paid maintenance. I'm also told that this bill will resolve conflicts between other pieces of legislation. I see the hon. member nodding his head. I would consider that to be an affirmative, Mr. Chairman.

Now, the hon. member earlier said that the intent is mainly to help parents get child support by allowing Human Resources and Employment to enforce all child support agreements not covered under maintenance enforcement. When we look at this bill and we see the amendment to the Income and Employment Supports Act, there is a change here that allows the director to provide employment and training benefits to eligible people with disabilities or an employer, training provider, or other person to be used for the benefit of an eligible disabled person. In section 24 we are substituting for "Minister" the "Director." Hopefully, this will resolve some problems for some people in the province.

That's all I really have to say in regard to Bill 6 at this time, Mr. Chairman, but I would urge all hon. members to consider supporting this legislation. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

8:40

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll take this opportunity to address some of the questions that were raised during second reading of this particular bill and perhaps even some of the questions that were just raised by the speaker who preceded me.

One of the questions that was asked, I believe by the Member for Edmonton-Centre – and I'm just paraphrasing her question – was to the effect that the parents or one of the parents have to be on an assistance program through the government, programs like AISH or supports for independence, in order to be eligible to have the government assist them to seek and obtain child support agreements or court orders. Well, there currently is a structure in place to assist custodial parents to pursue the noncustodial parents to obtain child maintenance and to instigate child maintenance enforcement. This bill does not attempt to change that.

The bill's goal is to basically give the department and those who pursue noncustodial parents – or shall we call them delinquent dads

to drive the point home? – more teeth to allow them to find those individuals, to assess their assets, to ascertain what their income level is, to find out whether they are working or not, and bring them back to the responsibility of raising their own kids, if not in person then at least through financial means.

So at this point the department is of a great deal of assistance to single parents who are in receipt of any benefits from the Department of Human Resources and Employment, be it AISH or the old SFI or, as we currently know it, Alberta Works. But it also extends assistance to those who get off the benefits and become independent yet are considered to be low-income earners or those who are in receipt of benefits such as medical health benefits, be it for adults or for children. It is the goal of this government to extend those benefits to a wider range of Albertans, but obviously there are costs attached, and at this point it is available to the group of Albertans who are in need, who can't pursue those child maintenance orders on their own and require that assistance.

Another question the Member for Edmonton-Centre raised was to the effect of: what is the correlation between Alberta Works and this program? Well, there is a great deal of correlation. As we all know in this House, we passed new legislation in 2003, to which my predecessor just spoke, which basically absolves us of the terminology of SFI, supports for independence, and we have a new global program in place.

It is the goal of this government and particularly of the department to pursue initially the noncustodial parents whose ex-spouses happen to be recipients of low-income benefits. It stands to reason because, after all, if there are children out there who are in low-income families, those children are primarily the responsibility of their parents, not of the government. Government is the last resort to which, unfortunately, the custodial parents have to turn. If the government is to be of assistance to custodial parents in raising their kids, it only stands to reason that we primarily pursue the noncustodial parent and have him own up to his responsibility and contribute to the raising of his or sometimes her children, although unfortunately it happens mainly to be his children. So the correlation is quite large because most of the individuals who are seeking assistance through the department to enforce their court-ordered child maintenance agreements are individuals who are in receipt of additional provincial programs such as Alberta Works.

The third question raised, I believe also by the Member for Edmonton-Centre, was regarding pursuing noncustodial parents for maintenance agreements or support agreements. Her question was: are we just looking for money that would be in fact coming back to the government, or are we willing to pursue this on behalf of court orders where monies would not necessarily be subrogated to the department? It's a good question. However, our main priority is to assist those who really need help to begin with.

There are many families out there who have child maintenance agreements ordered by courts who simply are affluent enough to be able to pursue those court orders on their own and to enforce those court orders on their own by simply hiring a lawyer for a fee or by hiring a private detective or whatever means need to be employed in order to track down that delinquent parent. However, unfortunately, those who are in receipt of government low-income benefits don't have the luxury of being able to hire legal counsel or a detective to track down the delinquent father. In this case, it is the department that has assumed the responsibility of assisting those parents.

Does it have anything to do with subrogation of dollars? Obviously, as a result, it will because if there are monies coming from a father towards a child and the single mother in the meantime is receiving low-income benefits from our province, it only stands to reason that we hold the father responsible primarily for the cost of

raising his children. Then the government becomes a secondary payer and not a primary payer. However, it is not exclusive, because in many cases single parents raising children are not in receipt of any financial benefits from the province. All they're receiving is a medical services card, and then the province will not be subrogating itself to any dollars but will simply be able to assist that single mother with the additional monies that she will now be receiving from the delinquent parent in order to allow her to have more resources available for the raising of the children.

I'm glad to hear that at least the Liberal opposition appears to be in support, and I'm glad to clarify the questions. I would urge all members to support this bill. I think it's a very important piece of legislation. Unfortunately, in our society it is not uncommon to have breakdowns of families, and we accept that. We have learned to accept that in our families.

However, what we accept is the fact that adults do divorce, but one person in your family that you can never divorce is your child. That child, whether there was a breakdown of a marital union, remains your child and your responsibility, not only a parental responsibility but also a financial responsibility. As MLAs too often we see that not everybody concurs with that. There are many individuals out there who feel that the moment their marriage has fallen apart, their financial responsibility towards their children also disappears. Too often those individuals turn out to be quite crafty, shall we say, in their ability to disguise their income or employment to begin with or assets for that matter and, by doing so, make it virtually impossible for the other ex-spouse who happens to be in a financial predicament to be able to pursue them, because to pursue them you have to have resources to begin with, and that's one thing that they don't have.

So I think it's a fabulous step that this department has taken in introducing this bill. What this bill really will do is it will give the department one more tool to be able to track those parents down without primarily worrying about issues of privacy and from where they obtain the information or who reports the information to the department.

As we all know, most Albertans agree that being a delinquent parent is not the proper thing to do, yet because of the fact that if you were to report that person to the department and they were to find out that you did that, that could severely jeopardize your relationship with that delinquent parent, many hesitate to report. Well, with the advent of this bill and with the passage of this bill into law, that is one less concern that Albertans will have to have. They will be able to report the individual or assist the department in locating the individual without having any consideration for the fact that their personal information will be disclosed and perhaps the relationship with the delinquent parent will be jeopardized.

So, again, I would urge all members of this House to support this particular important piece of legislation simply to assist those who are in financial need and to drive the point home that it is everyone's moral and financial responsibility to raise their own kids. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is indeed a pleasure to rise this evening and make a few comments on Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004. A few years ago I had the opportunity to listen to Senator Jesse Jackson, and he made an interesting comment at the start of his speech. He said: you know, the poor people in the United States today aren't seniors on fixed incomes; they're not our new Americans; they are single mothers with young children. This particular bill, Bill 6, the

Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004, is a bill that certainly addresses this very situation.

8:50

One of the strengths of this particular bill is that it does indeed show the value we have for children. We do need tougher legislation in this province, certainly, to deal with noncustodial parents who do not pay for child support. The other situation we also have is that even when we do have our legislation, we have to make certain that it is applied to the fullest in order that children and the custodial parent are receiving the dollars that they deserve and the dollars that are rightfully theirs to feed and house and educate those children.

One of the ways that I think we could have done it – and I would have liked to have seen this – is that we have far more interprovincial co-operation between agencies where we can track down the deadbeat parents, the parents who are noncustodial and who are not paying their fair share.

Another issue that we seem to have with parents who phone the constituency office in Edmonton-Glengarry is that in too many cases the money that is coming from the noncustodial parent does not arrive in a timely manner. When parents are trying to raise families and pay rent and buy food and whatever else, they certainly want predictable and stable funding in order to pay their bills.

As well, I think another area that we have to look at when we're talking about parents and particularly the noncustodial parent who is in arrears to the custodial parent and their children is how they can go to court and get this amount reduced and then go on from there, for all the time that they were in arrears and the custodial parent and the children were doing without and they were struggling because of that.

I would have liked to have seen legislation that would address where noncustodial parents hide their assets or perhaps have legislation where we can seize assets of those particular noncustodial parents who are in arrears so that they aren't driving new fancy vehicles, they aren't living a lifestyle that is luxurious in comparison to what their former spouse and children are.

As well, I think we have to have some type of system whereby we can crack down on these people who are in arrears, who work for cash or in some other manner get money. It is a very difficult task for us to trace. So certainly this is one more tool that we can use to address some of these situations.

I think that we can go a lot further in passing legislation which would definitely put more teeth into collecting in a timely fashion the monies that the noncustodial parents owe and certainly forcing those parents who have not made it their number one responsibility to care for their children so that we do pass legislation which will assist those custodial parents and children in getting their money and getting it in a timely fashion.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to make those comments.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to speak a few words on Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004. When we as the government were first looking at this bill, the question arose in my mind in terms of the balance, in terms of how vigorously we go after these financial debts that parents owe. It seemed to me that we were going after these debts in a manner that was much more intense and put much more of the force of the law behind it than most any other debts that we collect. You know, that was sort of something that struck me at first, and I started thinking: well, how far do we go with this?

I found out that there are many states within the United States where rather than just going after a parent, going after their financial needs, the parent who does not pay their support payments is actually thrown in jail. So in terms of where we are as a government compared to all the other governments, we tend to be sort of in the middle of the road with this.

But it also got me thinking about what a parent contributes to their child's upbringing. I know it's quite difficult for us. You know, we tend to be a little older, and it's hard to remember what it was like as a child in terms of how much we needed our parents. But I think most of us have children ourselves, and we can at least look back that far and remember the really intense relationship with our young children.

So what this brings me to is that even though we work really hard on getting the financial backing of parents for their children, we should be working just as hard at making sure that children have access to both their parents. I think that as a Legislature we should be looking at opportunities for enforcing the access just as strongly as we enforce the financial side of parental responsibilities.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[The clauses of Bill 6 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report bills 6 and 7.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 7 and Bill 6.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: 9:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 2

Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise one final time here during third reading of Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. In my comments I hope I will be addressing some of the concerns that some of the members expressed as I talk about the general spirit and intent behind the nature of this important bill.

I want to begin, Mr. Speaker, by simply saying that Alberta Community Development's primary mandate with respect to provincial parks and protected areas is to preserve representative examples of the various natural landscapes in the province in order that Albertans can enjoy these many areas for many years into the future. The negative impacts of recreational motorized vehicles on the natural environment, particularly in more sensitive areas within the foothills and mountains, are generally not compatible with the many other activities that occur in provincial parks and protected areas, where Albertans and visitors alike travel to enjoy the peace and the solitude of the great outdoors that our province has to offer.

Now, with respect to protecting this significant area in the Whaleback, a commitment to continue to provide for some level of recreational vehicle access through the heritage rangeland was made to local ranchers and other stakeholders prior to the establishment of the two Whaleback protected areas back in 1999. To put it another way, we needed to do this in order to establish these protected areas.

So Bill 2 provides a unique and specific exception that will allow two short existing trails – in other words, trails that are already there and have been for decades – within the heritage rangeland to continue to be used to access the existing trail system in the adjacent Bob Creek wild-land, where limited recreational off-highway vehicle use is already permitted. These existing trails have been there for many years and have always provided the main access into the Bob Creek wild-land, and that includes off-highway vehicle access.

The monitoring of off-highway vehicle use in Black Creek heritage rangeland and in the adjacent Bob Creek wild-land by my department staff will of course continue. Reports from the local residents and, on occasion, incidents reported by a responsible OHV user also contribute to the monitoring of use in this area. My department staff patrol this area on a regular basis and find compliance to be generally very good.

OHV users have reported that overall the use in the area is relatively low. Most OHV use occurs during the hunting season, and during that particular time of year there are more frequent patrols and enforcement measures that my department staff undertake. Ranchers are in this area on virtually a daily basis during much of the year, and they also provide us with important monitoring information.

Trails such as the ones we're talking about can be closed due to fire conditions and for other reasons such as flooding or wildlife hazards or generally poor trail conditions and so on. But trails will continue to be monitored and closely watched as required.

In the end, Mr. Speaker, we are very mindful of our preservation commitment to this generation and to future generations of Albertans. In fact, Alberta has approximately 12.5 per cent of its total land base already in some form of protected area status, be that provincial parks, wild-land parks, natural areas, ecological reserves, recreation areas, national parks, heritage rangelands, or the Willmore wilderness.

Now, with the Whaleback areas that are part of this bill, Bill 2, that is before us tonight, we made a commitment to continue to provide for some level of recreational vehicle access through the heritage rangeland prior to these protected areas being established, and Bill 2 simply provides a specific exception to allow the two short existing trails that I alluded to earlier within the heritage rangeland to continue to be used by recreational vehicles and to provide access through those two trails into existing trail systems in the adjacent Bob Creek wild-land. This exception was always anticipated in managing these two special areas.

Once this has been addressed, we will also proclaim a section of another important piece of legislation governing our protected areas

to prevent general recreational OHV access. The Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act is what I'm referring to, and that is the one that defined the parameters for establishing and protecting heritage rangelands, including the general prohibition of off-highway vehicle use in such areas as a means of assisting with their ongoing protection.

Dispositions, as I indicated during earlier stages of debate, are permitted for such uses as grazing and trapping and so on. This prohibition, however, that I have just alluded to has not yet come into effect as we had a very unique situation affecting the Black Creek heritage rangeland, which, by the way, is the first officially declared heritage rangeland in our province. We recognized that this situation was unique, and it had to be addressed before we proclaimed any general prohibition of OHV use in heritage rangelands, which will come into being in the not too distant future.

So that addresses a few important concerns. I just have a couple of other ones very quickly, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to reiterate that with respect to the heritage rangeland, the Black Creek heritage rangeland specifically, and the Bob Creek wild-land, both of which are beautiful areas in the Whaleback, no final management plan has yet been arrived at. There has been a draft management plan made available to the public. We've had public consultations in a couple of locations and received a lot of input, but that particular final management plan is still being worked on.

With respect to the issue of alternative access that has been referenced, this too was explored, but as I indicated earlier, the topography, the drainage patterns, the configuration of the heritage rangeland precluded any reasonable access from elsewhere to accommodate the commitments made back in 1999 and to accommodate the unique features that formed the perimeters of these two special areas, so we're going with what already exists in order to provide access into the Bob Creek wild-land.

I want to also emphasize the importance of the local ranching community, the farming community, and the MD of Ranchland, all of whom have requested this particular solution to the unique problem that exists down there. They have been very forceful and adamant in ensuring that the government lived up to the commitments that were made back in 1999, and had we not made those commitments then, Mr. Speaker, we would not have been able to even get to the protected status level of the larger picture which we're trying to serve, so, please, let's keep that in context.

With respect to the monitoring of OHV use, which some others have commented on in the House, I want to say that we will be doing more frequent patrolling and enforcement, particularly during the hunting seasons and so on. Also, just to reiterate that ranchers are there and they are very vigilant, and they, too, report any problems that might be encountered.

The other point is with respect to the additional work that we will still be doing around creating specific strategies to implement the management plan once it's finalized, and that, too, will require the co-operation of all the local stakeholders and others that we've been hearing from.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's important to again emphasize that the Black Creek heritage rangeland is Alberta's first, but we will also be looking at re-establishing as heritage rangelands over a period of the next several years six other heritage rangeland natural areas in the province. Today's bill, Bill 2, is specific to one heritage rangeland only, and it applies only to two short existing trails in that Black Creek heritage rangeland itself.

9:10

The heritage rangeland designation as a classification requires,

however, an understanding of the unique relationship that ranchers play in maintaining native prairie vegetation on these sites through carefully managed cattle grazing. A heritage rangeland designation will sustain the traditional ranching approach to the management of native grassland ecosystems while ensuring the preservation of ecological integrity and biological diversity associated with these sites.

That is the thrust of what we're doing here. We're not opening up the entire heritage rangeland. We're only saying that two short trails will be allowed to carry off-highway vehicles through the heritage rangeland to the Bob Creek wild-land. So the proposed bill does not affect any other provincially protected lands, as some people may have thought. It is very specific, only to the Black Creek heritage rangeland itself.

Mr. Speaker, I think that basically concludes my comments on Bill 2. I hope it also alleviates some of the concerns that some members may have. We fully understand what the ecological benefits are, the economic benefits, the educational benefits, the recreational and health benefits, the scientific benefits, the spiritual and cultural benefits, and so on. We fully realize what those are and how important they are to Albertans and to future generations of Albertans.

So that having been said, I will look for the support of members on this important Bill 2 as we conclude our debate. If there are other questions or concerns that were raised during other parts of the debate, Mr. Speaker, between myself and my staff we will endeavour to get answers out to those members as soon and as quickly as possible. With that, I will take my seat and hope for your unanimous support of Bill 2.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Well, Mr. Speaker, you're not going to have unanimous consent on this bill because the minister's comments have not satisfied the stakeholders that are in contact with me.

The minister himself said that motorized vehicles generally are not compatible with preservation goals, and then he goes ahead and allows motorized access. He knows, I know, we all know that off-highway vehicle and highway vehicle activity is known to have a detrimental effect on wildlife habitat. It disturbs the wildlife. It increases air and water pollution, it causes soil and stream and bank erosion, and it is in direct contradiction with what the initial intent was of having this Black Creek heritage rangeland established. Allowing this kind of traffic into the rangeland sets a dangerous precedent for the protected areas in Alberta, where currently we already have less than 9 per cent of provincial Crown land set aside for nonmotorized access. They made a bad deal, and it's not getting any better with this bill.

Thank you.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I just want to get on the record a couple of comments relative to this bill. I think it's really important to recognize that prior to the designation of the Black Creek heritage rangeland and, for that matter, the whole setting aside of the Whaleback from industrial activity and general traffic in the area, there was an agreement with the ranchers and the people in the area that these trails would remain open. Unfortunately, as the act was put together and the designation occurred, these trails were part of the designation.

If people want to have a look, there are other areas where we set aside parcels of land and where trails have been used for ages, and

we excluded them from the designation. Unfortunately, that did not happen in this area, and I think it would be an absolute insult to the people in the area that agreed to work with the government and set this area aside and preserve it into the future. As part of that agreement these trails were going to be open, so now we're fulfilling what we agreed to back in 1999.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd also like to add just a couple of quick comments in support of this bill. Frankly, I agree with my hon. colleagues that this is a pretty big success story overall and that it's very important to look at the big picture and the agreements and what has been in place there for many, many years. From an environmental perspective this is a 98 per cent success, and instead we hear people focusing on the 2 per cent negative portion to this. I would suggest that, in fact, this really has been an overall big success story, and I hope that members of this House will solidly support this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development has moved third reading of Bill 2.

[Motion carried; Bill 2 read a third time]

Bill 3

Architects Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. member who sponsored the bill, I would move third reading of Bill 3, the Architects Amendment Act, 2004.

A thorough explanation was given at the time it was moved for second reading of the need for the changes to the Architects Act to bring it into alignment, allowing for the designation of licensed interior designers and bringing them into the scope of the act. I would commend the act to the House for passage.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I certainly at this time in third reading would like to express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, the sponsor of this bill. He went out of his way to explain what was being accomplished here by this Bill 3, and I appreciate that.

Certainly, I have read in a number of publications the efforts that the hon. member has made to discuss this legislation with as many of the 600 practising architects and 60 licensed interior designers as possible. I'm left with the understanding that other people were in discussions also with the hon. member. So with those remarks, I hope that the changes that are proposed here to define "licensed interior designer" and allow for one licensed interior designer to be elected to the council of the Alberta Association of Architects work out.

9:20

I would like to think that now that we have this accomplished with the architects, perhaps it's an opportunity for the government to look at the building code, which certainly the architects work from. I think it's time for a comprehensive review of the building code in this province to ensure that consumers who are buying condos –

condos are springing up all over the province, but one has to make sure that our building code is adequate to not only protect the purchasers of those condos but also to protect the builders as well. Let's make sure that our building code is sufficient to protect all parties here. Now that this has been accomplished, if I could encourage the hon. members on the government side to give themselves another job to do, it would be to have a look at our building code to ensure that it is satisfactory in this day and age and in this marketplace.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 3 read a third time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:21 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 3, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/03

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 32 grade 6 students and their teacher, Ms Natalie Gago-Estevés, and Mrs. Joanne McMillan, parent and school council chair, all from the Brander Gardens elementary school in my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. They're here today to observe and learn with keen interest about government. I had an opportunity, while we had pictures taken earlier, to receive questions, and I can tell you that this group asked some of the most intelligent questions that I've ever had as a member of the Legislature. They're seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask that they please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on this beautiful Alberta day to introduce to you and through you a constituent of mine, Mrs. Anna Nascimento. I haven't had a chance to have questions from Mrs. Nascimento, so I can't comment on them, but I'm sure they're going to be very good ones when we get a chance to talk. Like many Albertans she was proud of the Alberta Learning Commission and is here to see that process unfold as we discuss it. Would you please join me and give her the warm welcome that she deserves in our gallery.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the balance of the Assembly 16 visitors from the Department of Energy. It's part of our new employee orientation program. I'll read their names and then ask them to stand at the completion of the names so they can be recognized and receive the warm welcome of the House: Ms Josie Kumar, Diane Smith, Janette Appelt, Alexei Jernov, Michael Martell, Pawel Swisterski, Robert Parker, Janette Pole, Susan Friedrich, Veronica Henriquez-Torres, Patricia Chatzoglou, Cecilia Bloxom, Dawn Von Semmler, Barrie Harrison, Anna Ellert, and Baxter Patey. I think it's important that I say that there is no relation between Diane Smith and myself. Please rise.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure

today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly some guests who were instrumental in shaping the Residential Tenancies Act, those amendments which are going to be tabled in the House today. These people and the organizations they represent were crucial in our ongoing efforts to listen to Albertans, to work through a diversity of views, and to help the government pursue a balanced vision, one that is acceptable to both landlords and tenants.

There are over 300,000 rental units in the province and a demand for more, and in the middle of their busy days these folks worked on these amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act to ensure that they keep pace with the rental housing industry and make Alberta's legislation among the best in Canada.

May I ask our distinguished visitors – they are seated in the members' gallery – to please rise when I call their names: Gerry Baxter from the Calgary Apartment Association, Ron Holland from the Edmonton Apartment Association, Brock Ketchum from the Calgary Better Business Bureau, Hope Hunter from the Boyle Street Co-op, Colleen Burton-Ochocki from the Edmonton Landlord and Tenant Advisory Board, and Katherine Weaver from the city of Edmonton. From my own Department of Government Services I'm pleased to welcome Rick Solkowski. I ask the Assembly to give them the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce a couple of constituents of mine, one of whom, I'm pretty sure, voted for me because she's my wife, and the other one, I hope, will be able to vote for me someday. That's my five-year-old son. So I would ask Lucas and Linnette to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured today to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly 50 home-schooling students from Keg River to Milk River, from Lloydminster to Canmore. They are studying through the Centre for Learning at Home, which is headquartered in my constituency, in Okotoks. They are accompanied today by Bernadette Palamarek, Cindy Pukalo, Lori Snoxell, Leah Boorsma, Kari-Lynn Hastman, Maria Blunt, Leon and Tracy St. Denis, Raelene Devich, Mary Lynn Schneider, Carol Durnford, Elaine and Nolan Chapman, Jennie Almost, Heather Gautreau, Kim Frisch, and Deb Van Ember. I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure of mine to rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 22 of the best and brightest students this province has to offer, who, I'm sure, someday will be very interested in pursuing my job given their energy and their intelligence level. I'd also like to introduce Mr. Rick Dawson, the teacher; parent helpers Mrs. Barbara Bitzer, Mrs. Donna Fischer; and the bus driver, Mr. John Bruketa, with whom I had the distinct pleasure of discussing the importance of rural development for the success of this province. I'd ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to

introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Assembly a constituent of Edmonton-Gold Bar, Mr. Jim Guthrie, who is accompanied by three visitors from the Soviet Union who are employees of the oil company SeverTEK. This company is just completing a \$355 million oil processing facility and a 110-kilometre pipeline in the Russian Arctic. SeverTEK employees include Canadians, and SeverTEK has purchased much of its equipment from Alberta companies.

On this trip these guests are meeting with as many Alberta oil field supply companies as possible and are here to learn more about the safety and environmental best practices that happen in Canada in Fort McMurray and also in the Northwest Territories. They are seated in the public gallery. I would like them now to rise as I call their names: Mr. Jim Guthrie, Alexander Seleznev, Alexey Boichenko, and Nina Salikova. I would ask them now to receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have a number of introductions today. The first are some parents and their children who are here watching the proceedings of the Legislature, interested in the welfare of Alberta's public education system. They are in the members' gallery, and I'll ask them to rise. The first is Liz Miller. She has four boys in elementary, junior high, and high school. I might add that I believe her father-in-law was once a member of this Assembly. The second is Kathy Pontus, who has two children in Windsor Park elementary. The third is Stacey Pelechaty, who has a child in Windsor Park, and finally Karen Ferrari, a mother of three with two children in Windsor Park elementary. As I say, they will be watching our proceedings with close interest as we comment on public education. Please give them a warm welcome.

1:40

Mr. Speaker, I have one other introduction. I'd like to introduce Carol Carbol. She's a licensed practical nurse very concerned about the future of public health care in Alberta, particularly interested in issues surrounding the use of P3s to build hospitals and about the impact of moving nurses from site to site, the impact of that on patient safety. I would ask Carol to rise, and please give her a warm welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly a constituent of Edmonton-Glengarry, Jimmy Ragsdale. Jimmy has a keen interest in politics both at the provincial and federal levels. He is seated in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask Jim now to rise and please receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my haste and excitement I forgot to mention that the students were from Allan Johnstone school, the same school that last year won first place nationally for a Scholastic book award. I'd like that in *Hansard*.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Cattle Industry

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Cattle producers in Alberta are in financial trouble. Programs supporting the cattle feeder industry which were implemented last summer did not trickle down. The cow-calf program initiated this past fall has not been sufficient given the stall in today's market movement. [interjection] That's interesting. My first question is to the agriculture minister. Why did the government decide to use trickle-down formulas to insert money into the market rather than a program to support market demand, which would have kept a functional market in place?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I take exception to the hon. member's assertions. First of all, it's an insult to the cattle industry in this province, that I believe knows a heck of a lot more about their business than the hon. member. Every program, all five, was designed with the cattle industry at the table. They were developed fully – fully – looking at all of the ramifications, all of the benefits, all of the effects, with a very strong concern that we know most emphatically that when there is ever any government intervention, it can cause some distortion in the market. The industry worked hard to ensure that the programs that were developed minimized that opportunity for distortion in the market. So, again, it is an insult to an industry that has proudly contributed to this province for this many years to suggest that the design of those programs did not work.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: what steps is the government taking now to help small cow-calf producers who got too little help too late?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, again the hon. member displays his lack of knowledge of the industry in the question. Last summer when I met with cow-calf producers – I didn't actually see the hon. member present at any of these functions, but he may have been – I was told by cow-calf producers of the great concern they had that they'd be selling 50-cent steers this last fall if we didn't intervene. Well, we did intervene and in a program that was designed by the industry to solve all of the effects of this through that chain of the industry. Cow-calf producers last fall saw prices that were as high or higher than the year before and an additional blessing of better weights because we did not have the drought conditions in the majority of the province.

Mr. Speaker, where the issues came with the cow-calf producers are the producers who decided not to sell their calves last fall for one or two or three reasons. One could be that you're in a tax position where you don't sell until spring and you can't change that quickly and, secondly, maybe because they were speculating that if the border opened, the prices would in fact improve. That's their management decision, not mine.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister: given that this government led producers into a false sense of security by giving the impression that the borders would be open in the new year, is it not now your responsibility to share some of the financial burden currently being felt by the small cattle producers in this province?

Mr. Hancock: Point of order.

The Speaker: Point of order recognized.

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, that tops it. It really does. I'm fairly used to questions that display ignorance of an industry by the Liberal opposition, but that tops it. I can't see any shred of evidence, and I'd invite the hon. member, although it would be out of character, to produce some evidence that this government – this government – gave the industry a false sense of security.

What this government did do and is doing and has continued to do for the past 10 months is work shoulder to shoulder with that industry to do everything we can to assist the federal government, who is our negotiator on international agreements, to move ahead on border opening. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I spent two days in Washington last week doing exactly that. My consensus and the information from that meeting are that the U.S. industry, politicians, cattlemen want that border open as much as we do.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier stated, "It's clear that prices in Alberta have gone down since 2001 when deregulation was introduced." As proof the Premier tabled a chart of electricity prices, and this document was prepared by Alberta Energy. It clearly shows that Albertans' monthly power bills have skyrocketed since 2000 by as much as 41 per cent for some customers. My first question is to the Premier. Given that the government's own research clearly shows that monthly bills excluding rate riders have still increased for Edmonton and Calgary power customers, why is this government still clinging to Dr. West's failed electricity deregulation scheme?

Mr. Klein: It wasn't Dr. West's scheme, and it didn't fail.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that electricity deregulation has not brought "tremendous competition that will put downward pressure on prices," as Dr. West promised on April 22, 1998, why won't this government listen to Albertans and unplug electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will say that Dr. West promised that deregulation would bring about the generation of more power, and that has happened. Alberta has gained over 3,000 megawatts of new power generation. That's a 30 per cent increase in Alberta's electricity supply since deregulation was introduced. In addition, we understand that investors are contemplating another \$6 billion by the end of 2006, which will bring on another 5,400 megawatts of power.

So, Mr. Speaker, notwithstanding the fact that prices have indeed stabilized, we now have a secure supply of energy, and even this member should be feeling a lot more comfortable than he did before deregulation.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much. Very quickly, Mr. Speaker, I would draw the member's attention to a study done by the Independent Power Producers Society of Alberta. They clearly say, through a well-documented study, that today's prices are what the regulated prices would have been from the period 2000 forward, so he knows

very well what the real prices are. He knows the price of power has dropped in this province. They know that Albertans are getting some of the best power deals in North America.

1:50

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: if this extra generation, in this case 3,000 additional megawatts of power, is supposed to drive down prices, why has the opposite happened in Alberta and prices have gone up?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the price of electricity has stabilized. How can anyone believe this member when he quotes from a 1998 letter written by Mr. Southern? Mr. Southern as recently as August of 2003 wrote us a letter saying that notwithstanding the carping and the misinformation and all the stuff that the Liberals put out, deregulation is working. It's working well, and this government has managed it well.

Calgary Emergency Health Services

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, last week the Premier brushed off questions I raised from patients and their families about shocking conditions at the Foothills emergency ward. This government has blown up and sold off hospitals in Calgary to the point where it has far fewer beds for its population than any Canadian city outside of Alberta, and Calgary is still years away from a new general hospital. To the Premier: does this government accept responsibility for conditions in which a sick elderly man, repeatedly vomiting, spends hours lying on a dirty floor in the Foothills emergency room on a makeshift bed of coats in the heart of one of the wealthiest cities in Canada?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member would send me the information, all the details relative to this situation, I'll make sure it's investigated thoroughly.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, I tabled this material last week when I questioned the Premier then.

Does this government accept responsibility for conditions in which an 80-year-old woman with symptoms of a stroke is left for eight hours in the Foothills emergency room and eventually leaves without seeing a doctor?

Mr. Klein: Oh, Mr. Speaker, I apologize. There was a letter that was tabled. It was entitled Politicians Playing Doctor, and I guess it was sent from Monica Blackwell to Marlene Graham, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed. But I'm sure that the hon. minister is having this matter investigated, as indeed all complaints are investigated, including the one that he raised during his second question.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I can provide some more detail on this. To put this in context, there are some 250,000 visits a year that are dealt with at the emergency rooms in Calgary hospitals. Of the two letters tabled by the hon. member last week, one was about the circumstances surrounding the care of an individual written by a friend of that individual, and in the other case it was a family member who was writing about actually quite a number of different incidents that she alleges to have observed in the health care system.

Mr. Speaker, patient confidentiality, I think, is something that needs to be respected here on the floor of this Legislature, so we should not engage in the debate over the specifics of an individual

whose circumstances may warrant some further investigation. But I can say that in this particular case both writers of the letters and their families have been contacted by the regional health authority, by the patient representative who assists people in resolving some of the complaints. There is a proper complaint resolution process that the Calgary health region has. I'm assured by the health region that the writers of these two letters have in fact been contacted and that they're going through the process of ensuring that their complaints are resolved to their satisfaction.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question, again to the Premier: does this government accept responsibility for throwing Alberta's health care system into such crisis that the Calgary health region has had to invent a new term signifying an absolute overload of emergency resources, code burgundy?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that statement is not only wrong; it is vicious, malicious. It misrepresents the situation here in Alberta, where we're spending over \$7 billion on health care, over \$19 million each and every day. Yes, there are going to be instances, as there were back in 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, as there will be in 2004, '05, '06, and every year and every century. There is going to be a problem or problems with the system. It's a huge, huge system that breaks down from time to time.

But all the Liberals can concentrate on is picking out what is not good about the system. You know, there are probably I don't know how many thousands of people that go through the system each and every day, and many of them, most of them, all of them with the exception of a few come out alive and well, and 80 per cent of them say that they were treated very, very well indeed. But the Liberals don't concentrate on the 80 per cent. They will search high and low and turn over every rock to find a little bit of dirt. That's what they're all about, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Cattle Industry (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta taxpayers feel betrayed. They have eaten more beef and gladly contributed \$400 million to assist Alberta beef producers only to find out that two large American-owned packing companies may have received most of that money. This morning the Tory MLAs at the Public Accounts Committee dutifully voted down a motion for the Auditor General to investigate. My question is to the Premier. Will the Premier overrule his stonewalling backbenchers and ask the cabinet to order a special investigation by the Auditor General?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Deputy Premier and minister of agriculture has said that she will release publicly the expenditures to address the BSE crisis. I mean, where does this guy think the Auditor General has been? The Auditor General investigates all expenditures by all departments for all purposes in government, and if he finds that this \$400 million – and it's not going to go unnoticed by the Auditor General – was used improperly, he'll let everyone know. You're darn sure.

Since the hon. member alluded to Alberta beef producers, he obviously believes in the Alberta Beef Producers organization. Do you not? Do you believe in the Alberta Beef Producers association?

The Speaker: Hon. Premier, please.

Mr. Klein: Any member can ask any other member a question.

The Speaker: Well, actually, it doesn't really work that way. The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that the Auditor General told the Public Accounts Committee this morning that he could only look at the various expenditures and so on and couldn't do a value-for-money audit without being instructed by the cabinet, will the Premier take back that misinformation and stop stonewalling?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out, the Auditor General can investigate anything he wants. During the course of his normal duties he examines all expenditures by all departments.

But, Mr. Speaker, getting back to the Alberta beef producers – and the hon. member alluded to the Alberta beef producers. Well, I have a letter here from the Alberta Beef Producers, and it says:

We are concerned about the criticism that the financial support programs put in place to respond to the border closures resulting from the discovery of BSE in Alberta did not achieve their objectives. The programs stabilized our industry's situation and allowed for flow through to cow-calf producers who sold production in the fall of 2003.

2:00

He goes on to say:

Your government's leadership kept the beef cattle marketing system functioning by ensuring that cattle feeders received quick and vital financial support to offset their very significant losses created by the immediate over-supply of cattle for slaughter and sale within Canada.

This is from the Alberta Beef Producers, who go on to say:

Minister McClellan's persistence and leadership in negotiations with the federal government has also contributed to the recent changes in the Canadian Agricultural Income Stabilization Program and in their change in policy to not require slaughter under their national cull animal program.

The letter further states . . .

The Speaker: I appreciate that, but I think there's still another supplemental. There may very well be an opportunity, and we'll also table the letter as well.

The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, a lot of arm-twisting went on yesterday.

Will the Premier, who no doubt wants to avoid any hint of a cover-up, please tell the House when and under what circumstances he will ask for an investigation by the Auditor General?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, the hon. member alleges a cover-up, but 32,000 members, Alberta beef producers, say that indeed there has been no cover-up, that quite the opposite has occurred, and that this government has provided leadership, strong leadership in keeping the beef cattle marketing system functioning, and all this member can do is stand up and try to smear the Alberta beef producers. That is shameful.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Mrs. Jablonski: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, we are

hearing a lot about the BSE compensation packages, and I, too, have a question for our Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. That question is: since the Auditor General will not even begin to audit the 2003-2004 financial reports for at least four weeks, could the minister tell us when we will receive a list of the payments made to date in the compensation package?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I have said consistently that I will be very pleased to supply that information. However, I have resisted requests to file that information with anybody, including the media, until the program is complete. That would be totally unfair because the cheques that go out to producers go out as their claims are answered, and I don't want that to be a partial list.

There is no secret about where that money went, Mr. Speaker. Every cheque is made out to a producer, a feeder, and the exact amount that they have received. We are 95 per cent complete. We have a few claims that had to have some further information supplied. I should say also, for the hon. member's information and for the House's information, that we have done audits throughout this process to ensure to the very best of our ability that those dollars did in fact flow to the owner of the animal.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister: will the new CAIS program do anything to help our local smaller producers?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it is designed to do that with the changes that have occurred to it, and you heard the Premier reference the Alberta Beef Producers' comments in their letter. While the CAIS program, or the Canada agriculture income stabilization program, was designed to assist producers in all aspects of primary and secondary production through difficult times or through swings in commodity prices or markets, it became very evident with the disaster the magnitude of the BSE incident that it would not be adequate under its present form.

So we worked hard with other provinces and the federal government over the summer and, indeed, were able to negotiate two changes to it. One was 60 per cent negative margins being recognized, and the other one, I think a fact that we should be very proud of in our province because of the size of the industry here, reminding members that we have 71 per cent of the slaughter, over 60 per cent of the feeding, half of the breeding stock, as well as a very large percentage of purebred stock, is that the caps were too low at \$975,000. Nationally they are looking at a \$3 million cap; in Alberta we're looking at \$5 million.

We want to be fair to all of our producers, Mr. Speaker, because the hurt is the same whether you have a thousand animals or 10,000 animals. It just goes up in degree. There is no point where it breaks off and doesn't become a hurt. So those changes will help our producers, and we look forward to other provinces coming on board and signing that agreement so that we can get on with the support our producers need.

Sour Gas Well Emissions

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, proposals currently before the EUB would allow sour gas wells to be drilled in and around Calgary, encompassing about 300,000 people and a hundred thousand homes. The sour gas concentrations in these wells are high, posing serious threats to health and comfort. People prefer not to live near sour gas wells if they have a choice. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: what is

this minister doing to ensure that residents in and near Calgary will not be adversely affected by these proposed sour gas wells?

Mr. Boutilier: Well, as the member, Mr. Speaker, is fully aware, this is in front of the board, but I can certainly assure every member of this House and all Albertans that the safety of all Albertans is a priority of this government. The oil and gas industry is one of the pillars of the Alberta economy. However, as with any heavy industry there are inherent risks.

Now, with respect to sour gas we have a very comprehensive plan in place to ensure the safety of both the workers and the residents and a protocol to go along with that procedure.

Dr. Taft: Okay. I'm sure that reassures them.

Given that a recent report entitled Impact of Oil and Gas Activity on Rural Residential Property Values says that property values in this area could depreciate by 10 per cent if they're located in the emergency planning zone of sour gas wells, what is this minister doing to ensure that Calgarians will not suffer this hit to their property values?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, every municipality in this province has emergency response plans and every corner of the city of Calgary, that the member mentioned. So he should be very much aware that emergency plans are in place in every area, consequently, to be proactive in dealing with some event that may happen. Without question I believe that the emergency response officials in the city of Calgary are exemplary, in fact to the point where they're unmatched in any other province in Canada by comparison to the city of Calgary. The people of Alberta are well assured, Calgarians included, that their interests are being protected relative to what is being asked today.

Dr. Taft: What is this minister doing to ensure that the city of Calgary, the city itself, will not lose millions of dollars due to reduced property taxes as a result of these sour gas proposals?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, one of the strengths of the Alberta advantage is that people are coming to this province because of the environment that this government has set. Consequently, the values of people's homes are in fact increasing because of that environment that we have set. So, to the hon. member, I do know that Albertans are very pleased by the fact that their values are appreciating because of that environment, because we've set the environment right in protecting Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

2:10

Provincial Recreational Trails

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I received numerous copies of letters addressed to the Premier regarding the recently released Recreation Corridors Legislative Review report. People throughout Alberta are expressing concerns that their issues were not heard by the committee or included in the report, such as the fact that many people simply do not want trails or that municipalities may have their authority to decide on development of trails taken away. My question to the Minister of Community Development: will the minister confirm that he will not remove municipalities' authority to decide if trails may be developed in their jurisdictions by designating provincial recreational trails in Alberta to be continuous?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I don't recall having read anything in that report that would suggest anything of the kind. I can certainly assure this hon. member and all members of the House that I've never said anything about removing any of that type of authority. I think it should be made fairly clear that the Recreation Corridors Legislative Review report is just that: it's a report provided to me. I have not yet responded to it. I have sent it out to the public for additional comment and input, and to my knowledge virtually everything that the committee heard was fairly and accurately reported in that report. In addition to that, I've also received quite a bit of correspondence on it, so I understand that there are some anxieties out there.

Let me just emphasize again, Mr. Speaker, that no decisions have been made yet with respect to that report. It's coming through the process, and as part of that process I want to assure the member and others that local decision-making is paramount. Municipalities would first have to make approval of any potential trails or corridors in their areas, and that is throughout the report in several places, and I have indicated that many times in my conversations with the individuals and/or in my written correspondence with them.

Mr. Marz: Well, will the municipalities, given that they are going to have authority to continue to approve these, be able to put conditions on those approvals?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, as part of that local decision-making process I think the issue of conditions would certainly be part of that review, and that would also fall under the purview of the local municipality. The issue of governance of existing trails – and I believe we have something like 18,000 kilometres of them in the province – or the potential creation of new trails with various conditions or whatever might be deemed locally important would be addressed at the level that I indicated earlier in the first question, and that is at the level of the local municipality in question. In fact, under the guidance of the Municipal Government Act there is that provision for a local land use jurisdiction and authority by the local municipality, and I think the report that was chaired by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul references that quite emphatically.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that abandoned rail lines previously had responsibility for fencing and that responsibility should have been transferred with the ownership of the land, will the conditions a municipality may apply to an approval include fencing to a certain standard?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, whenever there has been an abandonment of a right-of-way, then so, too, does whatever agreement may have been in place cease to exist, and the lands in question are treated as any parcel of land would be treated under the Municipal Government Act. The basic premise of the Line Fence Amendment Act references the containment of livestock, so municipalities would not be able to compel a trail operator or a trail developer to build a fence or erect a fence or whatever have you unless it was specifically with respect to the issue of livestock containment.

That having been said, the MLA report does suggest that fencing and many other items that are referenced in that report would need to be negotiated at the local level, and in that respect so, too, I would expect that the standards would be referenced as you are questioning.

Finally, let me just say that no decisions have been made on this report. The results are coming in. We'll take our time to have a look

at it, and we'll also look at what the benefits of these trails are, because active and healthy recreation lifestyle is being pursued in some municipal areas but not in others.

Sour Gas Well Emissions

(continued)

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, sour gas is lethal. Even minor exposure to this gas has been linked to long-term serious health effects for people and animals. My first question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. When planning and protocol fail, how does this government respond to a hazardous sour gas release? People want details.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much. I appreciate the question by the member. It's very important that there is an emergency response plan in place. I spoke earlier about a situation in Calgary. We have an approach, in fact two mechanisms. We have a protocol in place. As well, if citizens, in fact, are to smell sour gas, they can of course respond to 911, and the emergency response team is executed. Accordingly, there is a protocol in place with the AEUB officials as well as industry officials as well as emergency response officials.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: will this minister and his government accept liability in the event of a hazardous sour gas leak?

Mr. Boutilier: First and foremost, Mr. Speaker, it's important to recognize that there are emergency response plans in place. This government has a reputation of being very proactive.

Relative to issues of liability we hope and pray that situations like this will never happen because of this government's proactivity.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the Solicitor General. How does this government plan to protect Calgary residents and all Albertans from acts of terrorism on sour gas based facilities?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's another good question the hon. member has asked. I have to tell you that Alberta is in the lead in regard to dealing with terrorism. We have an SIM unit that we put together. Our Premier in 2001, on September 12, after the devastation in the United States, called together a team of the government led by the hon. minister of intergovernmental affairs. We have many ministers on the front bench involved in this.

I had the opportunity of speaking at a keynote conference with industry players from across this country, and the federal minister at the time, Minister Easter, was there, and he said to me: "Heather, why would we invent something? Alberta has taken the lead on this." So we're well prepared for terrorists in this country and have been for some time.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy to supplement.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would just like to add that Alberta is the world leader in handling sour gas facilities. The industry is world best. The board is world best. There is absolutely no doubt as to their excellence because they're being asked daily by groups such as the World Bank and others to impart this knowledge to others.

Since the 1982 Lodgepole blowout, Mr. Speaker, there is a very

sophisticated process on emergency response and emergency response planning, and there has never ever been a civilian fatality from sour gas management in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Low-income Albertans

Ms Kryczka: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, last month I met with some truly low-income Calgarians representing AISH and the working poor. They are finding it increasingly difficult to afford the basic necessities of life, including transportation. AISH receives \$10,500 a year and many working poor earn about \$12,800 a year. These people depend on public transportation to get to work, to doctors' appointments, to their day programs, or to volunteer agencies. The problem is that they can't afford the \$65 per month adult transit pass, causing them to lose their ability or incentive to get to work. They don't understand why seniors below \$18,000 annually only pay . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, work with me. Just get to the question. Okay?

Ms Kryczka: The first question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Can you explain whether this situation is more of an income problem or an affordable public transportation problem?

2:20

Mr. Boutilier: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Municipal Government Act, as you know, enables municipalities to provide municipal services such as transit, which is, obviously, a very important service, such as the member described in Calgary. I can relate that this is a local issue where the members of council will determine the best policy.

I can say, though, that in my past experience as a former mayor we had a program in place, that I know many municipalities utilize, in terms of helping Albertans that are in need, in the special circumstances that, in fact, the member has just raised. I would suggest to you that working locally with the municipal council, using some discretion on some cases – as you know, the province of Alberta in terms of helping those that are in need has removed over a quarter million Albertans off the Alberta tax roll that do not pay one single cent of tax, based on the kind of discretion that we've used in the policies that have been within this province.

Ms Kryczka: My first supplemental is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Given that affordable public transportation is needed to help low-income Albertans first meet their basic needs and, second, help them gain the skills and training needed to succeed in the labour market, which are two goals in the department's 2003-06 business plan, what are you going to do?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to first of all make a differentiation in terms of low-income Albertans. In the question it was lumped together, and there has to be, I think, a definition. If we're talking about low-income Albertans that happen to be on the assured income for the severely handicapped, the so-called AISH program, then I think the hon. member needs to know and understand that AISH is not a needs-based program. It is a program that provides income support to the person, and of course it would be expected, then, that transportation is included in that.

Now, if we have another low-income Albertan who is not working but is eligible to work, one of the cornerstones of moving that person

from welfare assistance into the workforce is the fact that they need help with transportation to and from the job. Then, of course, we can look at that on a needs basis and provide the bus pass.

Ms Kryczka: My second supplemental is also to the same minister. Would the minister consider forming a committee with provincial and municipal representation to attempt to improve this situation in Calgary and in other urban centres?

Mr. Dunford: Well, there's been a joke around here for a while that if you're on one of Clint's committees, honk your horn. You know, they were kind of making a bumper sticker out of it. So I'm not so sure that we need another committee in this particular instance, Mr. Speaker.

There's a committee that is already in place that is looking at this, and it is called the Advisory Committee on Barrier-free Transportation. We've been working with some of the major municipalities around the province in order to determine this.

As far as AISH is concerned, this AISH program has to be reviewed. It is a legal requirement that this fall we start into a formal review of the AISH program, and of course we will put together the formal structure, then, in order to do that.

Sour Gas Well Emissions

(continued)

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, despite the fact that the adverse human health effects of sour gas exposure are well known, this government has yet to conduct an objective, scientifically based study on the issue. This lack of research demonstrates a questionable regard for the health of Albertans. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. When will this minister finally complete this study?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Wellness has been working not only with our own provincial health officers but in collaboration with the minister responsible for Environment. This is an ongoing matter. My recollection from my time as being Minister of Environment is that they were a lead ministry in this particular area and, in fact, have equipment that is used for the monitoring of air quality throughout the province of Alberta, including equipment that is able to detect things like sour gas. So we continue to work on improving the quality of our air in this province, ensuring that the health of Albertans is safe.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that the EUB's Advisory Committee on Public Safety and Sour Gas recommended over three years ago that this government conduct a comprehensive study, not a snippet but a comprehensive study, on the health effects of sour gas, how does the minister explain that this study still isn't done?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'm not familiar with the recommendations of the EUB in this regard.

Ms Blakeman: To the same minister: given the recognized dangers to human health and the proliferation of sour gas wells, will the Ministry of Health and Wellness acknowledge its responsibility to Albertans and advocate against sour gas development in and around populated communities?

The Speaker: One is up already. The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to add as well that working with our emergency response plan, companies, the industry, also have dependable systems of monitors in place to warn of any potential incident, which is part of the emergency response team. I failed to mention that earlier. There are sensors and monitors in place as well, in answer to the question posed by the hon. member.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, this is an important question. I think that because they're now spreading confusion and misinformation and talking about something that they really don't know the effects of, I'd like to talk with a little more clarity on what the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board does with respect to this important and large-producing amount. We produce a lot of sour gas in this province. In fact, at the University of Calgary there's the sulphur research centre. In Caroline, where we produce sour gas, they have some of the world's best handling equipment.

Now, when sour gas comes in an application like this, there is a process at the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board. It's an open process, Mr. Speaker. The party opposite could very well apply for intervener status and go and make their own statements. One of the problems they would have is that their interventions would have to be based on fact. I think that may pose a problem for them.

These open hearings, Mr. Speaker, consider the need for wells, well spacing orders, location of the proposed wells and facility, environmental impacts, health and safety impacts, land use impacts, condition of existing pipelines and facilities, and their operators' corporate safety record, compliance record, insurance. Then, in fact, the ongoing side is all monitored by the Department of Energy, and it continues to advise on any changes. Now, this means an emergency planning area. It means a way of alerting everybody to the effect of sour gas in case there is some issue that goes on. I can tell you that the Alberta record is unparalleled in the oil and gas drilling universe and will remain so. It's something we've worked on since 1954.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important to put forward the salient features of what occurs with sour gas management, how we've got a policy structure with the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, how we've got a Department of Environment that monitors its particular pieces, how we have industry standards that use stainless steel in their couplings and in their pump jacks. There's a great deal of research and information already done on this. There's an \$18 million study on the effects of sour gas on animals.

The Speaker: Thank you. I would invite the hon. minister to return tomorrow under the Routine for Ministerial Statements.

Cattle Industry (continued)

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, one month ago today an official in the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development said that allegations that packers are gouging cattle producers were investigated but that no wrongdoing was found. Later this week the ministry will release another study, which no doubt will reach the same conclusion despite powerful evidence to the contrary. A question to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development: why should cattle producers and consumers put any faith in the carcass evaluation study to be released later this week since her officials already decided a month ago that packers didn't do anything wrong?

2:30

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it wasn't my officials that decided a

month ago. My officials have undertaken to do a carcass evaluation for me because – if the hon. member were familiar with slaughtering animals and how that animal is marketed, he would know – the information in that preliminary or for-discussion-only document from the beef industry that they refer to was incomplete and inconclusive. Instead of standing up in this Legislature and talking like this was a done deal and that the cattle producers supported this, he would explain that it had all been sent back to committee for further study because it was incomplete and inconclusive, but the hon. member wouldn't know that because I understand he wasn't invited to the meeting and wouldn't be a part of the discussion.

Mr. Speaker, I have said in this House that this is a serious issue. We have a multibillion dollar industry with spinoff components of it in every reach of this province including the capital city, where about 100 companies process agrifood products and ship to a hundred companies in the world, and similarly in Calgary and in many other communities. This is too serious to politicize, and to try and make political gain by coming to attention 10 months after the fact and realizing that we have a problem is unconscionable.

Dr. Pannu: To the same minister: are the same officials who did the study a month ago that cleared meat packers of any wrongdoing also involved in doing the study to be released later this week?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I am struggling to understand which study the hon. member is referring to. I referred to two documents. One was to the federal standing committee on agriculture from the commissioner of the Competition Bureau. That is not who is doing the work for me. The people who are doing work for me are the people who have access to the information as best we can get it, which is my department.

Mr. Speaker, to suggest before the study or the review, which is really what it is, or the evaluation is done that it's going to be wrong speaks to the political nature of the question. The honourable thing would be to wait until the information comes forward and challenge it with fact. That's what's missing in this discussion.

Mr. Speaker, anybody can stand up in this House and bandy things around, but I would ask the hon. member – although I understand that that community may not be a high supporter of the NDs – that they take into account the hundreds of thousands of lives of employees of that industry in this province whose livelihoods are at stake.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary to the minister: will the minister table in this Assembly today the findings of an earlier ministry investigation into allegations of price gouging, and if not, why not?

Mrs. McClellan: I can't table something that I am not aware of. I've asked the hon. member to send across to me the information that he has that suggests that my department has done a study. Have they formed an opinion? Have they looked at this? Perhaps.

I asked them to do a carcass evaluation for me because I like to deal in facts, and, Mr. Speaker, I don't have that yet. I did check with the department yesterday again, and they anticipate that they would have that information for me on Friday. I have said that I will share it, and share it I will. But I would ask the hon. member again as a courtesy to send a copy of the document to me, and I would be pleased to respond to him. I don't think I've ever backed off from responding to any question in this House.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven to participate today.

The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Saville Sports Centre

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On February 28, last Saturday, the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta celebrated the grand opening of the Saville Centre, which houses new curling sheets and tennis courts on the south campus of the University of Alberta. Mr. Bruce Saville was a major donor to this fabulous new sports centre which appropriately and proudly banners his name.

Let me tell you about this facility which is designed to serve the university community as well as the broader community. It has 10 state-of-the-art sheets of ice for the use of professional and amateur curling teams as well as students and future phys. ed. teachers plus eight indoor tennis courts which will accommodate international meets and programs for young and older able and disabled tennis players plus a 9,000 square foot gymnasium, steam baths, hot tubs, locker rooms, and a lounge that will accommodate 600 people.

Mr. Speaker, the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the U of A can be very proud of this wonderful facility which was built with the vision of John Barry, under the leadership of Dean Mike Mahon, and with the generosity of Mr. Bruce Saville.

Second Playing Space, Timms Centre

Mr. Maskell: Mr. Speaker, the arts in Alberta are a dynamic contribution to our cultural, economic, and social fabric. Today I want to recognize an exciting new development in Edmonton's growing arts scene.

On March 1 the University of Alberta unveiled its newly equipped Second Playing Space in the Timms Centre for the Arts, which will provide students, faculty, and community theatre groups with a new learning and performance venue. Second Playing Space is a wonderful and needed addition to our theatre community. With the upcoming renovations at the Jubilee Auditorium and the loss of the Kaasa Theatre in the lower level, it will help smaller theatre groups to showcase their craft, particularly during the summer months.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of myself and the Minister of Community Development I ask all members to join us in congratulating and in thanking the University of Alberta and Ruth Timms Nishioka for their outstanding support for the arts in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Alberta Seniors

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to recognize Alberta seniors who have been forced by this government to fight for more money for seniors' programs. Just last week more than 20 seniors from the Coalition of Seniors Advocates, COSA, demonstrated outside of Calgary's McDougall Centre in an attempt to get this government to recognize that seniors have been hurt by their cuts to the programs and desperately need to share in the provincial surplus.

These brave men and women are fortunate to be able to take a stand on behalf of all seniors. Many of those hurt by this government's cuts and underfunding are not physically able to demonstrate. Many are in long-term care where they're now paying 42 per cent more for care than this time last year.

Alberta seniors deserve better. Our seniors deserve universal

programs for dental and optical care, premium-free health care, a safe home, and reasonably priced access to care should they need it.

Fortunately, seniors won't take no for an answer, and groups like COSA, SUN, Alberta Council on Aging, Elder Advocates of Alberta, SALT, One Voice Seniors Network, and the Liberal opposition are willing to fight for the rights of all Alberta seniors.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

David Angus

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am honoured to have the opportunity to rise this afternoon and recognize a dear friend, a constituent, and an Edmonton business leader, Mr. David Angus, who very recently joined the board of governors at St. Michael's University School in Victoria, B.C.

St. Michael's University School is a co-educational, independent K to 12 and boarding school of 850 students which specializes in educating students looking to pursue higher learning. Ninety-nine per cent of the students graduate and pursue postsecondary education including top universities across Canada, United States, and the world.

David and his family have had a long affiliation with the school, Mr. Speaker. David attended St. Michael's from 1957 to 1962 and graduated as head prefect. His two sons, Sasha and David, and daughter, Jennifer, are also St. Michael grads. I'm pleased to say that Sasha is currently enjoying an illustrious career with our own Minister of Economic Development. I would like to take this opportunity to thank David on his commitment to our city and business sector and congratulate him on his appointment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

2:40

Spitz Sylvan Lake Ice Marathon

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Mr. and Mrs. Evert van Benthem, Mr. and Mrs. Dirk Appel, and Mr. and Mrs. Peter Yss, and the Foothills Speed Skating Marathon Association. On February 26 and 28 the association held the second annual Spitz Sylvan Lake Ice Marathon, a tribute to speed skating and the three men's Dutch heritage.

Folks in the Netherlands treat speed skating like we treat hockey. It is their national sport, and their Stanley Cup is the Eleven City race, which covers 200 kilometres and draws more than a million spectators.

Evert van Benthem is the only two-time winner of the Eleven City race, and today he farms in Spruce View. Together with Mr. Appel and Mr. Yss and their wives they re-created the Eleven City race on Sylvan Lake in '03, and they continued the tradition this year. This year more than 100 skaters came from the Netherlands to participate in the 200-kilometre race along with competitors from Canada and the United States. As well, many local skaters competed in other events. In total, more than 500 speed skaters competed on the weekend. It's safe to say that this year's event was an exceptional success, and I can hardly wait to see next year's, which we all know will be even better.

So thanks to them and thanks to you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Edmonton Garrison World's Longest Hockey Game

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On February 18 I had the pleasure of attending the official opening of the Edmonton Garri-

son's longest outdoor hockey game. It's also my pleasure to recognize Sergeant Rick Dubé, a driving force behind this event, and the 39 other Edmonton Garrison-based soldiers in their great efforts to set a new Guinness world record in playing the longest hockey game. This event was supported by the United Way, with all fundraising proceeds to be donated to the Stollery Children's Hospital Foundation. Last week, unfortunately, due to Mother Nature and plus 6 temperatures the game had to be called after playing 87 hours and 20 minutes on extremely bad ice conditions. The score was 1,186 for the black team versus 951 for the red.

Congratulations to all on your efforts, and good luck for next year. They are also accepting donations today. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

International Women's Day Edmonton Committee

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. March 8, next Monday, is International Women's Day. There'll be numerous events held to celebrate this day around our city, our province, and the world. The International Women's Day Edmonton Committee has organized events to celebrate International Women's Day for many years.

For the past two years the committee shifted their focus in the way they celebrate March 8 by participating in V-Day, a global movement to stop violence against women and girls. Through V-Day campaigns local volunteers and college students produce an annual benefit performance of *The Vagina Monologues* to raise awareness and funds for antiviolence groups within their own communities. By organizing and presenting these performances of Eve Ensler's original works, this vibrant and energetic committee last year raised \$10,000 for the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters.

This year the beneficiaries are Planned Parenthood Edmonton and the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton. The benefit played to a full house this past Saturday.

I recognize and congratulate this committee for their commitment to women here in the province of Alberta and around the world.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Bill 16 Residential Tenancies Act

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the Residential Tenancies Act.

We heard earlier today that there's been extensive consultation with stakeholders, landlords, and tenants regarding the changes contemplated in this bill, and it will update what is already very good legislation.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 16 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 16 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to table the requisite number of copies of the Safety Codes Council 2002 annual report. As you know, the Safety Codes Council is a valued partner of this government and in particular my department, Municipal Affairs. The council works on behalf of all Albertans, and it's my pleasure today to table the requisite number of copies, and certainly I want to say that I appreciate their good work.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me today to table to you and for the House the government response to recommendations of the Advisory Council on Electricity.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Premier I would like to table for the House five copies of the letter which he referred to in question period today from the Alberta Beef Producers, which references that the support of the government has been vital to the carrying on of the industry and the good work that's been done by the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in that regard.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the benefit of all hon. members of the Assembly a letter that I received from the hon. Minister of Energy on September 30, 2003.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling a document showing that Alberta Agriculture had investigated allegations regarding the packers gouging feedlot operators but had found no wrongdoing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: Hon. members, we had a discussion yesterday about interventions and points of order and the like. Before I get to the two points of order that have been identified today, let me just note seven additional possible opportunities for intervention today by the chair.

Let's see. On two occasions the chair did intervene to ask the Premier to terminate his answers and sit down and did the same thing for the hon. Member for Calgary-West.

He might have intervened once when the Premier mentioned the name of the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed in this Assembly, which is a no-no, and then the hon. Solicitor General got around that same thing by referring to a certain member by the name of Heather. Then the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment did the same thing by referring to an hon. member as Clint. So it's kind of an interesting approach.

There would have been a point as well when the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness – Government House Leader, this is a point for yourself and the hon. Opposition House Leader and the House leader of the third party, and this could have been an intervention by the chair, but it was not – mentioned that one should not mention the

names of certain individuals with respect to a certain issue, yet a document had already been tabled in the House identifying the names of those individuals, and the leader of the government had already mentioned one of those names in a response. So there's a circuitous thing in here that if a document's going to be tabled that has names on it and becomes part of the public record, well, just how are we supposed to not deal with it if it is part of the government record?

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, a couple of words were used here that certainly could have caused interventions. One was the word "cover-up," and the other one was the word "arm-twisting," almost to suggest that something that happened that was innocuous shouldn't have happened.

Those are just seven or eight interventions that really could have occurred but didn't occur.

Now we'll deal with the hon. Government House Leader and his point of order.

Point of Order

Preambles to Supplementary Questions

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, because I think that really highlights the point of both points of order this afternoon. In fact, I counted a considerable number more that I thought would have been appropriate for intervention.

The point of order that I am rising on first references the second supplemental to a question by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and I'm rising under *Beauchesne's* 409. The supplemental was something to the effect – and I don't have the Blues, so I'm not quoting exactly – that given that the government lulled the industry into a false sense of security. There are a number of problems with this type of statement.

First of all, under *Beauchesne's* 409 "it must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate." There's been a practice in this House to get around the concept of the rule that says that you can't have a preamble to a supplemental, which is also rule 409(2) that a supplemental does not need a preamble. There's been a method of getting around that by putting "given" in front of a statement as the first clause to a question, thereby saying that it's not a preamble, that it's actually part of the question. I think that in actual interpretation anything that is extra to the question is a preamble whether it's part of the same sentence or not, but that's a question for another interpretation.

2:50

The part that I'm concerned about here is the continuing use of preambles in questions and supplementals by members of the opposition to put matters of argumentation into the equation rather than to state facts upon which they are going to base their question. It's not a given that the government lulled the industry into a false sense of security. It could not be a given that the government lulled the industry into a false sense of security, and it was entirely inappropriate, Mr. Speaker, to put that in as a preamble to the question, which is often done, therefore requiring that one negate the preamble rather than answer the question.

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much for the opportunity to rise and respond to the Government House Leader's point of order. Just very quickly I will note that in the concern that he raised about beginning sentences with "given that," in fact on February 25 – that's a long time ago – I think about 1998, page 557, the Speaker did note that starting a supplementary question with "given that" was quite

acceptable. We are following, as always, good advice, but just to clear that up in case there was some dispute over it.

Now, what we have, in fact, was that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar said, "Given that this government led producers into a false sense of security by giving the impression the borders would be open in the new year" and then went on with a question about responsibility and sharing financial burdens. We are basing that on our understanding of, in fact, what people who have contacted us have said.

Now, is it possible for both things to be happening at the same time in this House, where we have the minister stating without any uncertainty that she did not give an impression that the borders would be open and members from the opposition feeling that, in fact, that impression had been given? Of course, that can happen. It's not at all uncommon that we have the two sides of the House often having different experiences over the very same issue. We may well be contacted by different people expressing different points of view.

So was the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar contravening something by saying that producers had a false sense of security? No, I don't think he was. In fact, when I looked at the documentation around the time that we're referring to, part of the facts in this is that it was around "the impression the borders would . . . open in the new year," which would have been January or February: now.

If I look at a news release put out by the government on October 31, in fact there's quite a bit of discussion from the minister, which is then quoted in other newspaper articles. She does comment on the rules that have been put forward by the U.S., and in fact if those are accepted, then the borders would be open within 60 days. So that puts us into the time period that we're talking about, and indeed – and I will not table the news release in the House – we have the minister responding to that. It is "extremely good news." It's "very encouraging," very "encouraging to note." A number of things.

So that's easily available to anyone in this House. In fact, her points about it being encouraging and it being very good news are in fact reflected in other newspaper stories. So even according to *Beauchesne* 494 it is quite possible that we have two points of view having to be both taken as truth at the same time.

The question itself did seek information, and it was therefore satisfying the major requirements of *Beauchesne* 409, and it was asking the correct minister, who had within her administrative responsibility the issues that were under question. So I would contend that there is no point of order under *Beauchesne* 409 with reference to the question from the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Others?

Hon. members, the chair has listened very carefully to the arguments given by both the Government House Leader and the Opposition House Leader, and having listened attentively to all of the discussion with respect to it, anything that would impute motives and false motives of a particular nature, of course, would definitely have met the test for a point of order.

In this case it appears to be a disputation of facts, recognizing that this is a highly, highly emotional issue, had been a highly emotional issue at the time, and will continue to be. Countless numbers of producers on almost a daily basis are contacting Members of this Legislative Assembly and asking them the question: when do you think the border will be open? And responses are given at various times.

I hope that that's not a false sense of security given by everyone, but virtually everybody in the cattle business in the country of Canada is contacting not only the members of this Assembly but federal Members of Parliament and everyone across this country for

some form of assurance. I hope that wasn't imputing a negative kind of thing with respect to this, so we'll deal with that.

I'm not sure if *Hansard* caught the words, but there were some words echoed at about the same time as this question was being raised, something to the effect of: what an idiot. I'm not sure if *Hansard* will pick that up. It won't be helpful, again, because it certainly would not be pertinent language but, nevertheless, perhaps echoed.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I rise under *Beauchesne's* 409. Not to belabour the point, but the fact that the Member for Edmonton-Centre went into some debate over the preamble clearly indicates in my view that that was argumentative and called for debate.

I would suggest that the same is true of the supplemental question raised by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, in his preamble, when he referred to the Premier brushing off questions about a person he was referring to who had attended at a hospital in Calgary. That is an allegation, and it is an allegation of some serious import.

Now, again, in reference to what has just recently been said about using the term "given that," turning a preamble into a question, I wouldn't at all want to debate that you can't make a statement in a supplemental starting with given that. That's a time-honoured tradition, it seems, of the House. The question of whether it's a preamble is really a question of what's in the statement, not that it starts with or doesn't start with given that. The point that I was making is that you can't turn a preamble into a question simply by adding given that. You have to really deal with the context.

In this case there was a preamble, and in this case the preamble clearly, I think, didn't adhere to the proprieties of the House pursuant to 409(7) in that it imputed motives and cast aspersions because clearly it is an aspersion against the Premier to suggest that he's brushing off a serious allegation with respect to people who have to attend at hospital or who have serious illness. We spend a huge amount of time in this House and in this government, huge amounts of people's money are spent by government, 36 per cent of the budget, if I remember correctly, last year on health care issues.

I won't go further into the details because I think there were quite considerable answers given in question period today. I don't think there's anything wrong with the opposition or anyone in this House asking questions on important matters, but in asking those questions, it is wrong to impute motive or cast aspersions on the character of other members of the House by suggesting that they don't treat those questions with respect to individuals that are being talked about in a serious manner. This definitely was a violation of 409(7).

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think that once again the Government House Leader and I are engaged in questions of interpretation and definition. He is referring specifically to the use of the words "brush off," that were part of the preamble for the question from the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. Well, what does brush off in that context mean? It means sweep aside. It means not deal with, in essence. If he'd like to argue with me about those definitions, I welcome him.

When I go back and actually look at the question and that exchange that happened on February 25 occurring on pages 150 and 151 of *Hansard*, in fact there's a direct question from the Member

for Edmonton-Riverview to the Premier asking the Premier what excuse he offers specific to a particular person, situation, stroke victims in a particular hospital.

When I look at the answer that the Premier gave, he comments for some several sentences on his approval rating, which I don't think is specific to the question of either stroke victims, elderly people, or the Foothills hospital. If I continue on and look at the rest of the answer given by the Premier in response to that direct question, he gets into discussing things like electronic health records, physician funding models, wait list registries, and telehealth and then gets into some MRIs, again not dealing directly with the question that was asked of him.

So did he brush off the direct question around stroke victims and that particular hospital? I think it could be argued or certainly interpreted that he did. He did not refer to any of the things that were the key ingredients of the questions that were asked.

Has the Member for Edmonton-Riverview offended *Beauchesne's* 409(7) in imputing a motive? Certainly not. He doesn't impute any motive to the Premier's comments. Does he cast aspersions upon the person? No, I don't think he did. He gives a fairly accurate recounting in his terms of the exchange that occurred between himself, the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and the Premier the week previous. So I would argue that there is no point of order here.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, everything must be taken in the context of the question and the impact of the words. In this case part of the give and take in question period would suggest that "brushing off" here is not detrimental to anyone with respect to this particular matter. However, they do become personal, and that's where the chair has a problem. If we stick to questions with respect to government policy, then we avoid these kinds of situations.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: We'll call the committee to order.

Bill 14

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll just rise to make a few brief comments about the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004. One of the things that is quite evident as we go through the review of this appropriation is that over the past year Alberta has faced its share of uncertainty, with forest fires, with agriculture, with increased revenues needed for specific growth patterns in different departments. These are the kinds of things that one would normally expect a piece of supplementary supply legislation to address in the sense that when best knowledge is used to make projections in a budget and we end up with different growth patterns, different disasters, different relief programs that are needed, you show that if we have in effect done a reasonable job of budget estimates, we can expect that in some years not all of them will be right on.

If we look at some of the issues that come up in dealing with the appropriation bill – I went back and checked in *Beauchesne*. It says

basically: to further existing programs. And the one that's interesting is "for a new expenditure on behalf of a newly-enacted statute."

Yet what we're seeing are a lot of new expenditures here for new initiatives that are not supported by a statute. In effect, the government is putting in place new initiatives, new programs mid-year rather than during the legislative debate that comes in a legislative session. It doesn't come through proper budget debate of new programs, doesn't come through notification of intent in the Speech from the Throne. So what we're seeing here are quite a number of actual new initiatives just being put through in supplementary supply without full legislative recognition and debate being introduced.

If you go through and look at them, in Health and Wellness there's the Alberta Wellnet; in Human Resources there's the skills investment program; under Infrastructure there were the dollars that were needed for the natural gas rebate. That in many ways is not a new program because it was put in place as an ongoing program which they didn't expect expenditures for, and therefore they were not in the budget for last year. If we get down under Innovation and Science, there are new initiatives that talk about compliance with the Auditor General, and these should be in effect brought through the legislative agenda again where there's an open debate on how we make sure that the new initiative does comply with the Auditor General's requirement.

When we get down to Learning, we see that there's a new initiative in apprenticeship, trade, and occupation. There's a new program, the Alberta heritage scholarships, under Learning, as well.

When we get into Revenue, there is the purchase of an investment risk management system. This is the kind of investment that should be dealt with through proper budget debate when the process is complete rather than through supplementary supply.

When we get to Seniors, there are also a couple of new programs there in support of the needs of seniors. Under Sustainable Resource Development I guess this is an ongoing one that I talked about originally, the risk associated with needing to have an increase in dollars for inadequate estimates in the original spring budget.

If we look through here, there's really a pattern that emerges in the sense that there are a lot of new initiatives that are funded through this supplementary supply bill that are in support of programs that have not truly had the full public debate that would be associated with programs that were passed and enacted during the full budget debate in the spring. I think we need to look seriously at that and see whether or not we are using the supplementary supply fully.

I think that if we go through there and look at some of the individual components, the main thing that we see is that, you know, in Health there are programs that come out for the West Nile virus. I don't think any of us really understood what the implications of it would be on Alberta a year ago, so the fact that there's new money being added now to cover what we had to do in the past to be proactive on that front would be really quite useful.

3:10

The other is for the increased cost of the nongroup health benefit program, and this is, I guess, a matter of: are those increased costs for the same program, or is this increased costs for new initiatives that are put under Blue Cross coverage? So we need to look at it from the point of view of, you know: is it just expanded use?

It would help us judge and review the effectiveness of the supplementary supply system and the purpose behind that supplementary supply if that kind of information were made available because, you know, we're talking here about \$2,165,000 being put in for nongroup health benefits. What was the reason for it? I guess that what we need to do is have a little bit of an explanation for each of these items similar to what we get in the main budget when we're

given that kind of information. There needs to be an explanation of what it's being put out for.

You know, when we end up with basically almost a 10 per cent additional allocation in the budget, one begins to wonder what the purpose of the original budget was when the government over a period of a year introduces that many new programs, introduces additional expenditures in that many ongoing programs that they're dealing with. To even further complicate it, we're dealing here with the fact that in the fall session we passed another supplementary bill that, in effect, also increased expenditures to the government by about a billion dollars, and that's in association with, you know, the issues of, again, forest fire fighting and the BSE program supports that were put in place.

So, you know, the degree to which we get full coverage and full debate that can come out on these really needs to be looked at so that as legislators we can go back and talk to our constituents about whether or not these were good.

In terms of the focus that comes out as we look at this, the main programs that we saw under the seniors' program – this is basically a government action. When they started talking about how they were going to help low-income seniors, what they were going to do for the affordable housing program, that, especially the affordable housing program, was being proposed at the time of the last budget, and the dollars that were needed for that should have been estimated, should have been predetermined and put into that spring budget rather than being left and then put into a supplemental budget.

What it does is it sends a signal that, you know, this is important to Albertans, that we will be dealing with it. The exact amount can be adjusted later. But what we end up with is having to have a program there that talks about where this government stands on things like affordable housing, access to housing for seniors, access to care in long-term care facilities.

The idea that we don't seem to have the long-term plans in place that allow for a more accurate estimate of our full budget in the spring seems to be something that the government needs to address. They handled the idea of stability; they handled the idea of natural resource revenue variation. That, in effect, is being looked at now in the budget.

We need to go farther and make sure that as we go into dealing with our full budget process, we do have some mechanism in there to justify the estimates that are made with respect to the uncertainty that's associated with budget on the expenditure side. We've done things now to talk about the uncertainty that's associated with revenues. Let's start looking at how we make sure that risk analysis and risk management get put into dealing with the expenditure side because, you know, we're off by quite a bit on some of these programs when we look at them relative to their original expenditure levels.

Mr. Chairman, I think that kind of gives an idea of where I think this should go. The programs specifically are in an order that they do reflect all of the components that are associated with the main intent of the budget, but there's still again those new initiatives that came because of government action halfway through the year to programs that were already being discussed at budget time and to new initiatives that showed because the government didn't commit to the appropriate expenditure pattern at the time.

I think that it's important that as we go through looking at what is that purpose behind a supplementary budget, we really go back, you know, and read what *Beauchesne* says and talk about the purpose of it. It shouldn't be just, you know: well, we don't have to deal with this now because we've got supplementary supply; we can put it in there. We should be looking at what is an appropriate budget when we do the overall budget and the overall financial planning position

for our province, and then this should be in effect fine-tuning rather than a change in direction, rather than a real new program initiative process.

I think it's important that we do make sure that there is consistency and that there is predictability to our budgets because when we start doing this, it in effect increases the baseline of the budget, which we act on again next year, which expands that base, and in effect it gives us two chances to up the budget when we should be looking at what we are doing to make sure that dollars are spent appropriately, that dollars are spent effectively, and that we do get the intent out of the dollars that we spend in this province.

You know, some of the monies that we have spent in the last year have been questioned. They've been addressed by different groups as being not what was expected, and if we're going to be able to carry through and fully answer the questions that these groups raise, we need to be able to say: yes, there was full documentation given; there was full explanation given; there was full interrelationship provided as we did the budgeting process. That only comes with the debate that goes on in the spring budget as opposed to the limited debate that we have to deal with individual programs in the context of the overall plan of the province when we get supplementary appropriations.

You know, it doesn't seem like what we're doing here is effective planning. It's kind of: well, we had to change directions; let's make do. I don't think Albertans want us to make do. They want us to show that we do have effective planning in place, that we are committed to stable budgets, predictable budgets that don't have to be dealt with on a three-times-a-year basis.

That's what we've been doing. Almost every year that I've been in this Legislature, we've had the budget passed, we've had a fall supplement, and we've had a spring supplement before we get interim supply, before we get the next budget. That doesn't create confidence in Albertans that we're really thinking about what we're doing when we put together budgets, that we're thinking about what we're doing when we're putting together a plan of action and a plan of public support, a plan of good government for the province.

So I think it's really important that we end up making sure that in the future we have better processes in place for our budgeting on the expenditure side and that we do have a relationship between those expenditures and the debate that goes on in the Speech from the Throne, the debate that goes on in the primary budget in the spring, so that when we go out to Albertans we can say: see; this is how it fit.

3:20

If we look back over the last year, Mr. Chairman, I think there are a couple of real issues, the BSE and the forest fires of last summer. Nobody could have predicted those at budget time. So supplementary estimates in connection with that type of uncertainty, I think, fits into the general purpose of supplementary supply, you know, kind of the philosophical intent of supplementary supply. It's something that was not anticipated. It was something that could not have been addressed in the original budget.

Most of these programs that we're giving extra dollars to here, most of the programs that are new initiatives were being discussed last spring, were being dealt with last spring, and their estimates should have been in the budget for them. The ministers have leeway in their budgets as they're presented. They could have fit fine-tuning into that leeway and made it work.

So I think that that's one of the things that struck me as I went through and looked at this supplementary supply, that we really had to make sure that in the future we look at how our long-term plan fits with the wishes of Albertans and we build that into a stable budget-

ing process on the expenditure side. That hasn't been done through the new financial approach taken in the spring, when we put in place the stability funds, when we put in place the transfer of dollars from the natural resource revenues. So we need to look at that. We need to make sure that we do have stability built into both sides, the revenue and the expenditure of our budgets, so that we do have predictability and direction given for Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. My first set of questions I'm going to direct to the Minister of Seniors and housing. If we could get responses from him, that would be great. I know that the Minister of Justice was supplying us with answers last week, so I'd appreciate hearing directly from the man in charge.

A couple of questions. The money that's going to the year-round and seasonal beds in the homeless shelters: I understand that that is dedicated to Calgary. The complete amount of money that's requested through the supplementary supply has all gone to Calgary, and I'm aware that they were under some distress to get assistance, but I'm also aware that there's an equal demand in Edmonton. Being an Edmonton MLA, I'm wondering why Edmonton didn't share in any of the money. If he was going to come forward and ask for additional funds for money already spent – I understand this is already gone – why didn't he come forward and ask for money for Edmonton as well? Why does Edmonton have to wait? That's question one.

An observation and a question as well. The additional \$4.5 million to assist the increased number of low-income seniors with the cost of long-term care accommodations. Now, this is around a planning, timing question, if you will. The notification for the increase in long-term care was given somewhere around the 19th, 23rd, or something of June for increases to take effect on the 1st of August, so inside of the fiscal year that we're still in.

I'm wondering why the choice was made to institute the increase for the 1st of August because it inevitably was going to require the minister to be coming and asking the Assembly for an increase in order to cover those who are experiencing financial distress as a result of this August 1st increase. Why the choice of August 1? Why didn't the minister wait to have the rates go up until the 1st of April, 2004, in which case the increased funds that he's requiring could have been part of the next budget cycle?

So when I see this as a package, I do question the minister about the timing of the increase that was given. Why did they choose the 1st of August when it meant they were to come back? I'm basing this on a premise that it's not something to be proud of nor is it something to be taken lightly that the government has to come back and ask for supplementary supply, this being the second supplementary supply that we've had in this fiscal year.

I mean, ideally we have a plan and the government is able to stick to it. That's why we debate the budget at length and it's approved, and I expect the government to stick to it. So if they don't, then I'm expecting there's some sort of extraordinary reason for that; for example, fire prevention or fighting fires, fighting floods, or emergency services. That certainly can't be expected.

But in this case it was very expected. There was notice given. I would argue not enough notice, but there was certainly notice given for the increase. Why the choice about when it happened? So if I could get details around that, please.

The \$5.5 million for increased provincial funding under the Calgary, Alberta, affordable housing agreement: is this flow through? Is this money that has come from the feds? It's passing

straight through the province. They're not adding anything to the bank balance. They're just shooting it straight on out to the worthy projects. Can I just get confirmation on that? That's my impression: that, in fact, the province has received this and is now spending it. Yeah, there's no incoming revenue line shown here, but I'm presuming that's what is happening. So if I could get the minister to respond to that as well.

Could I know to what projects or to where the \$4.5 million was directed? Who is the recipient of that?

Now, going back to the lodge costs. At the time the reasoning of a number of press releases and responses that we heard from various members of government around the increase for long-term care was that this would result in better: more staff, higher levels of staff, better food. I think one of the ministers was saying that this was about fresh fruit and good garden vegetables for everyone to eat.

What I'm hearing is that they really haven't seen any difference, and I think some people would argue very strongly that there has been less service, less of everything in long-term care. So when do we expect to see better? When do we actually see the fresh fruit? Is there some sort of time that I can pass on to those people that phone me and say, "When is this happening? We haven't seen any improvement at all."

I've gone through the *Hansard*. I did read the responses from the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, the Attorney General. I don't see the answers to these questions. If somehow I missed them, my apologies. I hope I'm not repeating. But I'd like to know: what was the increase in the number of seniors that required assistance as a result of the long-term care fees increasing?

We've actually got two different kinds of people that would be requesting assistance through Alberta seniors' benefits or the special needs program. You have people that were already receiving Alberta seniors' benefits who now need the additional funds from the ministry to be able to pay the increased bill. The question I'm asking specifically here is: how many people slid below the line? In other words, they now require assistance that they didn't need before. So what's the increase in the number of people who've asked for assistance that's directly tied to the increase in the long-term care rates?

The Member for Edmonton-Whitemud did give some numbers. He was talking about that 48 per cent of seniors living in long-term care were eligible for supplementary benefits. That doesn't mean that they asked for them and took them. Later he's talking about a different number, with 57 per cent receiving supplementary assistance, which is actually a larger number. So I'll just ask for clarification there.

3:30

I'm also interested in how many more seniors requested Alberta seniors' benefits assistance citing increased power bills and increased insurance costs as the reasons that they now needed to come to the government for assistance. Has the government done any kind of analysis going back three years or going back five years to say that these are the pressures that seniors are experiencing? I've noticed that there's a new section in the budget document that the government is producing in which they talk about the pressures that they feel are particularly affecting them, environmental factors I think sometimes they call it. So what are the factors that are affecting seniors needing to come to the government for assistance? I think that's part of why we see the need for this additional 4 and a half million dollars.

I'm also looking to the minister for a discussion around efforts to reduce the need for funding from the government for homelessness; in other words, to find some kind of housing for them, affordable

housing in the sense that it's low-cost housing. I had a meeting with members from the Edmonton builders association – I think that's who it was – and they raised a number of points. They're cognizant of the need for and their part in providing social housing. They were looking for some consideration from all different levels of government so that their costs were lower. If they understand what the need is, I'm wondering where the government is coming from.

There are always two sides to homeless funding. One is enough mats on the floor, and two is places that people can go and actually not need a mat on the floor, move into some sort of housing, even if it's a boarding house situation, someplace that they call home, where they go to over a long period of time. What I see is more and more and more need for mats on the floor. So we're not actually addressing the homeless problem. This was raised on February 25, but the answer that was given was inconclusive.

So I'm giving the minister an opportunity to shine here with the plans that he has around this so that we don't see him coming back next year looking for another \$900,000 – it's almost a million dollars – in assistance. Maybe next year he'll be looking for that assistance for Edmonton, seeing as this year it went to Calgary. I hope that doesn't have to happen, but I'd be interested in what the plans are here.

I also have questions for the Minister of Learning, but if I could prevail upon the Minister of Seniors to answer those questions, I can sort of complete that package. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'll try to address the questions as best as I can here. With respect to the homeless and the request for funding there, I don't play nor will I play the Edmonton versus Calgary game, so when I hear that Calgary got some and Edmonton didn't, there's something wrong. It's rather irritating, because we look at what is required. It's not only irritating; it's also very misleading. I guess that since Edmonton got more through our Alberta/Canada housing program by some \$600,000 last year than Calgary, then I should reduce Edmonton's commitment there to keep it even, although the needs in Calgary, I'm sure, are equal to or higher than in Edmonton.

With respect specifically to the \$900,000 Calgary hit a crisis, if you will, in the need for mats, as you put it, which I certainly find extremely difficult to deal with in terms of my acceptability of them, because a large number of mats on the floor is not my idea of how people should be accommodated.

We took over the operation of the Sunalta Shelter for a variety of reasons, which I won't go into now. That was a part of that money. I'm sorry; I don't have the figures in front of me. We can break that out for you, if you wish, at some point later. The other part was that we decided to be proactive in the case and made an arrangement with the Calgary Drop-in Centre for some 200 emergency mats – these will all expire on March 31 – which is a crisis, if you will, that I'll be looking at again.

Edmonton did not come into the equation, thankfully, and I repeat: thankfully. Other than for the people with addiction problems – and remember that Calgary Drop-in Centre takes in everybody; that doesn't apply for all shelters. In Edmonton we had a problem with folks with addictions who didn't have a place to stay. A couple of years ago a 30-person trailer was opened up at the Herb Jamieson Centre. I'm sure you're familiar with that. This year through a partnership between ourselves and the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing fund, we've added another trailer there, meaning that basically almost all the people who would appear on a basis with some sort of intoxicants and were not eligible in shelters did, in fact, have a roof over their head.

So that left us Urban Manor. Urban Manor is not a homeless shelter. Urban Manor is a transition house, and this is where we have all sorts of confusion between what is a homeless shelter and what is transition. All homeless shelters don't have homeless mats. They have transition beds. We're trying to rationalize this whole thing in terms of what their functions are, who they're serving, and how they should be funded. That's something that will take a while to sort out. I believe Calgary Drop-in Centre looks after 800 and some odd people. All of those are not mat people by a long shot. A good number are transition.

Getting back to the Herb Jamieson Centre, not counting the trailers, we fund Herb Jamieson for 265 spots, whether they're used or not. I've just got the numbers for the first three weeks of February here. Here are the numbers that used Herb Jamieson. Remember that 265 is the magic number. I'll just go through February 1 through 23, and that's the last number I have here. February 1 was 183, then 184, 182, 209, 202, 169 on February 6, 181, 198, 195, 194, 192, 192, 179 on February 13, 188 on February 14, 195, 218, 217, 206, 189, 160 on February 20 – that gave us, thankfully, 105 spots that could have been used – and then 166, 190, and on February 23 it was 202.

The same cannot be said for Calgary. You would see that they were loaded right up to capacity. If you wish – I'm not going to table this right now – sometime I can share these with you, because we get the report on a nightly basis.

So to answer your question, Calgary had the need. Edmonton, thankfully, has a need for housing, but we didn't have an urgent, immediate need for mat spots. I hope that answers your question with respect to the homeless and the request there.

We'll do the affordable housing now too. The \$5 million, or \$5.5 million I believe it is, is new money to match monies that were already in the budget from CMHC. So we had a choice of either increasing it to match that or had the possibility of letting some money lapse or negotiating with CMHC to see if they would bring it over to next year. I was very fortunate in the fact that Treasury Board agreed that we had the projects provincially on the books where we could prudently use this money. It's all allocated through projects. The projects, incidentally, as they're released, are on our web site. It's easy.

We do have a process that we have to go through because we are 50 per cent partners with CMHC. We have to agree on the projects; we have to agree on the funding per project. That system, quite frankly, has levered a lot of money out of other areas, unbelievable amounts of money, and I must say at this point that I'm extremely pleased that Alberta is a leader in actually getting through the program. We're the only ones that have matching dollars.

A few months back we were the only ones that had suites already occupied under this particular program. We've had arrangements – and they're all available to anybody. Some are not-for-profit, some are municipal, some with Canadian Mental Health, and in fact we have some private projects both in Red Deer and in Edmonton where people who have, I guess, a big heart have come forward and have guaranteed affordable rates for people in need for a 20-year period. The agreement that the other provinces signed was for 10 years. So we've stepped way ahead of the group on this whole affordable housing business, and so far it's working quite well. As you know, we have two more years to go on the program.

So that, hon. member, was new money, which would translate into \$11 million, roughly, that would still come in this year, which would then end up being considerably more when you consider what the other partners, the municipalities or whoever, on the projects would put in. So it was a very good thing there.

3:40

With respect to long-term care there was far more than the 4 and a half million dollars to pick up the difference. I believe we have somewhere between – now, I'll have to verify these numbers at some point – 8,500 and 9,000 seniors who receive support from us. A good number of seniors which we did not assist – when the rates came through, they had changed their addresses from home to the long-term care facilities. We didn't know that because our cheques go through direct deposit. So they weren't actually accessing all of the funds that they could and should have and were entitled to.

The other thing that we did was implement at this time, as you know, the desire to have a \$265 residual income in there. That also drove it up a little more than what we had anticipated. So the amount of dollars that went into picking up the long-term care rates was considerable, and we had a 4 and a half million dollar shortfall for the year. That isn't the total picture. It wasn't bad planning. It was a matter that we didn't anticipate that those folks would be there.

The other things that I might add. There are two comments. One, the money went out prior to their needing the increase, so they had it in their pockets. Secondly, if you're wondering why August, why not wait, that's a very good point to raise. The reality is that some not-for-profit operators were telling us – and I had no reason not to believe them – that they would be in fact looking at closing beds, and that's something that in this climate we really couldn't have, plus the fact that the rates went up to I believe \$42 for a semi-private bed. It's not unreasonable for the services they receive.

In keeping with our philosophy of looking after the people in need, we have done just that, and my colleague from human resources, who also has people in there, has had to come up and work some things out there too. It was a good move. It was prudent. The timing I didn't like any more than anybody else. I'd have liked to give a longer notice, but I believe it was close to two months or whatever it was.

The point that you must remember is that anybody who had a need received the money beforehand, so in fact some actually ended up with a greater amount in their pocket than they had before the increase. We implemented the fact that they had to provide free cable, wander bracelets, incontinence supplies, which were all part of it, and the number of beds that were required. These were all surcharges that you didn't see, and that was bundled into it. So from that aspect I think it was done very well. As I say, we had the system going, and quite frankly the Auditor General will be looking at the involvement of seniors and ourselves, which we welcome.

We will be looking at some other things in terms of our ministry with respect to accommodation and responsibilities there. I believe the General Hospital is in your constituency. If you take the trouble to go talk to the people there – Caritas operates it – you'll find that they anticipate through this increase about an additional \$670,000. Now, I'm going from memory here, so if I'm off on a number, please don't hold me to it.

They have already committed to two things: one, getting more staff, which has been a cry there, quite a considerable amount more, plus they're looking at menu improvements – whether or not that includes the fruit that you mentioned, I don't know – as per the tenants' wishes, which will cost them an additional \$300,000. As it pertains to the operators of the General Hospital long-term care, all of the increase that they're receiving, they'll show you, is going right back into tenants' benefits, if you will. So we can't ask for a heck of a lot more than that.

I think that covers the questions. If there is something I've missed out, either give the office a call or drop us a note, and I'll try to cover it for you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I was interested in participating in the debate this afternoon on Bill 14 and certainly interested in the comments from the hon. Minister of Seniors.

Whenever one looks at the issues surrounding seniors, that the income does not necessarily meet the expenses at the end of the month, it is a double-edged sword. When one looks at, for instance, just what the third-quarter fiscal update said about seniors and seniors' expenses, certainly it had increased almost \$50 million from the budget. That included \$22 million for seniors' benefits to assist low-income seniors with increased long-term care fees, \$12 million for the special-needs assistance program, \$8 million for operation and maintenance costs of housing facilities, \$5 million for affordable housing, and \$1 million for homeless shelters. Well, that should certainly be an indicator, a signal that many seniors are having a great deal of difficulty whenever you see that expense increase.

To see here in Bill 14 that there is close to an \$11 million allotment, \$10.9 million in total for seniors' programs—I would urge the hon. minister and the government to have a look, have another close look in the next couple of weeks before the budget is printed at what is going to be coming next year for retired persons in this province. You look at energy costs; you look at insurance costs. There's no doubt they are high. We're not going to go into this in a great deal of detail, but the programs have to reflect those costs because those costs have certainly changed.

Now, Mr. Chairman, this is the second supplementary supply request by the government in the current fiscal year. Last November 16 government ministries and one office of the Legislative Assembly, the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner—and I think that request certainly was centred around the fact that the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner had to be expanded to look after the new private privacy legislation. But this request for a total of \$1.2 billion in supplementary supply for operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases and capital investment was made. It is a large sum of money to request especially since the government's new fiscal framework had just been announced seven months earlier.

We'll certainly have a budget in a couple of weeks, at least I hope we do, and the government will most likely be introducing an interim supply bill in the near future. I as one member of the Official Opposition am aware that there are always situations which arise, but the continued reliance on supplementary supply points to some real problems with the government's budgeting processes and their review/forecasting ability. Relying on supplementary supply to make up for budget shortcomings demonstrates a clear lack of effective management and long-term planning.

3:50

I thought that a lot of this would have been solved with the stability fund. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East had been talking for, well, it seemed to be years about a stability fund, and I guess that in this case imitation is the finest form of flattery because the government finally listened to the hon. member and came forward with the stability plan. Now, many people, including this member, are surprised at how large it has grown, but it certainly makes fiscal stability stronger whenever we can smooth out the peaks and valleys in budgeting. But it can't be used as a re-election fund, and that's what my big fear is.

There is a lot of money. We have a lot of resource revenue. Maybe we should have more. Maybe our royalty collection system needs to be looked at because time is running out as the western

Canadian sedimentary basin declines in production of both conventional crude oil and natural gas production.

I'm certainly not advocating that we spend all this surplus at once to get re-elected. I think some of it should be squirrelled away, squirrelled away not for the next election or the one after that but for the next generation. I would like to see something stronger put in place to prevent governments in the near term from getting at this money.

Perhaps we should have a benchmark there, Mr. Chairman. Let's say production of natural gas fell by 50 per cent from its current level by the year 2018. If the production levels fell and there was a reduction in government revenue, then and only then could we access this money that has been squirrelled away. We have to start saving money for the future, whether it is through the Alberta heritage savings trust fund or some other mechanism. These times, unfortunately, are not always going to be with us. We certainly have spending requirements with public health care, public education, and I think we can meet those. I think we could meet those. If we look after the pennies, the dollars will look after themselves.

If we had to reduce the size of cabinet, I think that would be a good place to start, and if I was doing that, I think I would have the hon. Member for Medicine Hat in the cabinet, not outside. I think the hon. member should be there, Mr. Chairman. I don't care who's in it; it just should be smaller. That's one place to start.

We have this new fiscal framework in place. Bill 2, the Financial Statutes Amendment Act, came about in the spring of 2003, yet we have this amount of money to discuss this afternoon, Mr. Chairman. When you consider that this is a government that portrays itself as prudent and conscious of every dollar, I don't know what is wrong when we need so much money at once in supplementary supply for the second time. I can certainly see where there are emergencies. We've discussed those. But I don't know what signal this sends the Alberta taxpayers.

As you go through this, Mr. Chairman, you see Infrastructure, Innovation and Science, Learning, Health and Wellness, the Human Resources and Employment department, Revenue. Revenue is, interestingly enough, requesting \$875,000 for the acquisition of an investment risk management system, and I for one would like to know if the minister could provide more detail on the investment risk management system. I certainly hope this is not what I think it is.

Now, Sustainable Resource Development. A total of \$14.8 million is requested to provide for increased firefighting costs as a result of the severe drought conditions. This emergency assistance will be funded, as I understand it, from the sustainability fund. I like the word "stability" fund better.

This ministry requested a total of \$113 million for firefighting in the first supplementary estimates last fall. Where were the forest fires during the last four months? Has the minister already spent all of the \$113 million that the department requested in supplementary supply for firefighting just four months ago? I would have to question this ministry's budgeting skills because certainly there have not been many fires lately, at least not in the forest. There may have been some in this Assembly, but the forest has been spared.

Human Resources and Employment. Before I conclude, Mr. Chairman, I would like to note that the total amount requested here is \$28.6 million, which can be broken down as follows: \$14.6 million for supports for independence to address caseload and cost-per-case increases and \$14 million for skills investments. How many Albertans are applying for supports for independence at this time? By how much has this number increased over the past year and the past five years? Hopefully, in the budget that is coming forward, there will be an increase in the supports for independence payments and also for those Albertans on AISH.

Now, is the ministry at this time planning on increasing SFI rates? Certainly, we know that inflation is squeezing the poor in this province, whether it is energy costs, whether it's rent costs, food costs. Many people are very, very concerned about the cost of living. There seems to be a reduction in constant dollars if one were to look at SFI benefits in Alberta. If you look at the period of time between 1992 and 2002, the purchasing power of the benefits that SFI clients have has fallen by almost 30 per cent in the last decade. Again, I think we can manage to finance these programs and set some money aside at the same time. It's going to take diligent and prudent management.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I think we can't forget the needs of those who cannot for whatever reason look after themselves with full-time employment, and I would urge the minister in a province as wealthy as Alberta, with the lowest minimum wage in the country, to stand up and, please, on behalf of those that have been budgeting on very little, look at their needs in the budget. This amount, hopefully, is a sign that the ministry finally acknowledges that those rates are not adequate, and hopefully we will see a permanent increase in those rates in this next budget.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4:00

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak to Bill 14 while it is in debate in committee. I was present last week when this House spent two hours looking at the supplementary supply request that was put before it. This was done on Wednesday evening, February 25, and I had a whole lot of questions that I raised and observations that I made at that time. Various departments, from Seniors to Learning to Human Resources to Health and others, were ones that I focused my comments on and raised questions with regard to the supplementary supply requests made by those departments.

In general, first I want to say that this is the second supplementary supply request that has come before this House during the current budget year. We had dealt with the first supplementary supply request in December of 2003 and at that time in the House approved, of course, extra spending, including \$780 million in BSE assistance that was put through supplementary estimate number one. In the current supplementary supply estimates, number two that is, \$35 million is being added on top of the money allocated for natural gas rebates last fall, totalling \$216 million. In total, about \$1.1 billion in excess spending was added to the budget in the fall sitting. Another a little over \$120 million is being added in supplementary spending that this bill deals with so to a total of close to \$1.3 billion in extra spending over the period of the current fiscal year.

Some of the requests deal with clearly unexpected events: the BSE, the forest fires and the disaster relief required as a result, the report of the Learning Commission and the government's response following the release of the report to reduce some pressure at the classroom level through the hiring of some teachers, 1,000 of whom had been let go just in September last year. So some of these elements in this request are quite justified because not everything could have been predicted, particularly dealing with natural disasters or the mad cow disaster that the province has been facing and trying to cope with.

Some others could have been avoided. For example, some of the increases in the seniors' costs were due to the shift in government policy requiring seniors to pay anywhere from 38 per cent to 50 per cent more for long-term care costs. That certainly is something that could well have been avoided and therefore need not have been

included in the past year if only the government had cared to wait until the next fiscal year to bring in this policy. I'm opposed to that policy, but even if the government had chosen to bring it forward, it could have waited until next year.

So the route of the supplementary supply request to deal with unpredictables is an appropriate route, but to deal with other predictable expenditures that the government decides to undertake is such that the supplementary supply route is not a desirable route to take. It's much more prudent for the government to think through its policies ahead of the budget and build into the budget whatever resources those shifts in policy are likely to require. While I'm dealing with this general sort of pattern of the way in which government creates the need to seek supplementary supply resources and estimates from the House, it leaves something to be desired.

The unpredictable costs? Yes, we should be as a House always willing to deal with those through the supplementary supply route. But ones that are predictable, the result of deliberate changes in government policy, should not be funded through supplementary supply. I think the government should have the discipline and the foresight to plan properly and wait until the new budget is approved by this House. So that much for the general sort of comments.

One concern, Mr. Chairman, that I expressed during my participation in the debate in the House last Wednesday evening, February 25, had to do with the review of SFI and AISH rates that the Minister of Human Resources and Employment indicated he was going to undertake during this coming year. I had urged him at that time to start the review early rather than late in the year. He had indicated that he didn't think that it was possible for him to proceed with it until September or October this year.

I hear from my own constituents, many of whom are dependent on these government social programs, that they are desperate to see some increase take place in the rates because they are finding it impossible to pay their bills given the present amount, which has been frozen over the last five years now. On a daily basis I get requests from them for me to urge the government to expedite the review and to make changes in the rates so the payments go up as a result of this review, and the sooner this is done the better. Clearly, the Minister of Human Resources and Employment is not in a position to build it into the budget that will be presented here to this House in a couple of weeks, on March 22, I think, but I would like to urge him to advance the dates of the review that he is willing to undertake so that he can increase those rates as soon as possible and then use the supplementary supply route in this case to request the additional funds that will be needed in order to respond to the revised rates for AISH and SFI programs.

4:10

Mr. Chairman, the other question that I had on the evening of last Wednesday that I would like to return to had to do with seniors' programs. The Minister of Justice on that day presented, first of all, the supplementary supply estimates for that department and did his very best to respond to the questions and the inquiries that members of the House made to him, including myself. I would like to draw the attention of the Minister of Seniors to the *Hansard* issue 7 that includes the debate on the supplementary supply for Wednesday evening, February 25, in which I asked some questions for which the Minister of Justice was not in a position to give detailed answers, and he hoped that the Minister of Seniors would look at those questions that I raised and provide the answers.

For the benefit of the Minister of Seniors I want to draw his attention to the questions that I asked starting on the bottom of page 183, the left-hand column, and going on to about one-third or one-quarter of the right-hand column on that very page. There are

several questions there if the minister would be so kind to address them for me.

Part of the question that I had asked, that I've just referred to, was in the form of a bit of a comment related to the concern that seniors and seniors' advocates have been expressing consistently over the last several months now following the death through a serious accident of Mrs. Nelson in this city with respect to the declining quality of the care that seniors receive in the long-term care facilities. That's happening at the same time as seniors are having to pay 37 or 38 per cent to 50 per cent more for the care that they receive.

So the question then is: when these increases were being introduced, they were justified in part, both by the government and certainly by the long-term caregivers association, a private, for-profit group, on the grounds that extra money is needed to increase the quality of care. What we have seen since the introduction of these increases is quite the opposite of what was argued in support of bringing in those extremely high increases all at once. So that was a comment on my part, and I think that the Minister of Justice and Attorney General appropriately called my observations comments to which only the Minister of Seniors can respond.

So I will conclude by asking if the Minister of Seniors would like to respond to my concern. I reiterated in a sense the concerns of seniors' advocates concerning the declining quality of health and, therefore, concerns about the safety of residents in long-term care facilities. And, secondly, to the minister of human resources: I hope he had some time to reflect on whether or not he can advance the date at which the review of AISH and SFI rates will start, if he can tell the House whether he, indeed, is in a position to start the review much sooner than he anticipated in his response to my question on last Wednesday, February 25.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I take exception to the hon. member's comments. There are some inaccuracies. For example, the Long Term Care Association includes most of the long-term care providers: for-profits, not-for-profits, and public providers. Public providers, I stress again. They're all in the association. So it's quite erroneous to say that it appears that it's just for the for-profits.

I think it's extremely inappropriate to judge a system on a sad incident that, indeed, should not have occurred, but to take that incident and say that that is a measure of what happened when the rates went up I think is very, very misleading and again erroneous. The rates did not go up 50 per cent. They went up significantly, yes, but they're still the second lowest in Canada, the second lowest in Canada at that rate.

Also, I would like to point out that in addition to what the tenants pay, there's an average of another \$95 a day that the province through the health authorities puts forward to look after the health needs of these people. In my reply to the questions from the Member for Edmonton-Centre I indicated one facility – and granted, it's only one facility – where, in fact, they have indicated that these increased revenues are going to flow back for an improvement to the care that they are giving.

The long-term care provided for the vast majority of the residents in those facilities is excellent. Will you have complaints periodically? Yes. Will they be valid in some cases? Yes. But to say that the whole system is deteriorating on the heels of the increased rates is not accurate by a long shot.

Should we be monitoring the system? Yes. Are we going through and doing our due diligence to ensure that the system will be at the

highest possible level? Yes. That's why the Auditor General is involved. That's why the two ministries responsible for housing, Health and Seniors, will be looking at this to ensure that we have the best possible care, the most appropriate care for the people not only in long-term care but in the lodges, in any facilities that we have and are involved with as a government.

So I'd ask the hon. member, before he jumps to conclusions, before he jumps on the bandwagon of people who have been looking for problems continuously and then indicating on one incident, one tragic incident, that the system is somehow all wrong, to reconsider the comments that he's making. If he has legitimate questions to ask, I certainly would be more than pleased to answer them.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that we adjourn debate on this matter at this time.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 8

Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm glad to get the opportunity in Committee of the Whole to comment on Bill 8, the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. I believe that this act is in fact flowing from the Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee, chaired by the Member for Calgary-Lougheed, that was established in August of 2002 to review the competitive advantages that it has, some governance and accountability. It's now reported back almost a year ago, in April of '03.

4:20

It seems that the Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee recommends that the Blue Cross exemption from paying premium tax be removed. There were no changes to the corporate structure of the income tax regime, but this is certainly going to cost that organization money, which will of course be passed on to Albertans, and I'm sure that they will certainly see this as an increased cost in health care.

So we've got a level of the playing field. This is always interesting to me when we get a nonprofit sector that's offering a service and then there seems to be agitation from the profit sector that this isn't fair, that somehow there's an unfair advantage that's given to the not-for-profit agency and, goll darn it, they should not be allowed to do this, and they've got the famous level playing field. I'd like to see this level playing field some day. I'd really like to see it because I've never actually seen all these changes result in a level playing field. Most importantly, they do not result in a level playing field for Albertans. It results in a fairly steep incline out of their pocketbook.

And what is so wrong? We had a nonprofit agency that was providing insurance for additional services closely connected to the health care sector. There was a reasonable premium. People could choose not to purchase it if they didn't wish to, although most seniors are involved in it because it's offered as a program through the government. What is so wrong with that service?

Health care – oh, maybe that's where it all falls apart. Here's where the Liberal opposition and the government members really part ways: whether health care is a commodity, something that can be bought and sold and subjected to supply and demand and market-

driven forces, which seems to be where the government comes from, versus where the opposition comes from, that this is a necessary service. Access becomes a very important key component of it, and it needs to be as accessible as possible to all people.

The idea that we need to sell more health care or increase the demand for health care that somehow results in an additional payment – I mean, I don't think that health care is like selling hamburgers or running shoes. It's just not. We don't really want to create a demand for it. We don't really want people saying: "Gee, my neighbour had a hip operation. I want one too, and could I get it in blue, please?" It's not a situation that we want to see ourselves in. We want to reduce the demand on the system.

The other example I can think of with this was that we had seniors' residences, some of which offered a cafeteria-style breakfast and lunch, I think, not dinner. There was an argument from the nearby business community that this was an unfair business advantage, that these seniors' centres were offering food for a charge. It was a minimal charge, but it was a charge. The nearby restaurants wanted this unfair advantage removed. Either they had to charge so-called market rates or they had to stop doing it because the business community was at a disadvantage; it was not a level playing field.

Well, when you really looked at it, what was going on here? I mean, most of these were cafeterias that were housed inside high-rise apartment buildings that were filled with self-contained units for seniors. Part of what they were trying to do with the cafeteria was to get people out and get them socializing. This was part of a preventative health approach. If they could get people coming down into the cafeteria and socializing with other people, there would be friendship and support and better mental health, and this, in turn, would pay off in terms of overall better health and less cost to the system. In fact, the argument was finally won.

This was all taking place in the context of tax-exempt status, and this was another part of the unfair advantage that these little cafeterias had. So the fact that they were providing a service that was beyond that of simply food production or offering of food to be purchased was a determining factor.

I fail to see how the argument is different here. We have a nonprofit that was offering a reasonable service. It benefited Albertans. It was offered at a reasonable cost to them. I fail to see who was being incredibly disadvantaged here, except if you buy into the argument that health care should be available to those with the most money to pay and should in fact be moving towards a privatized system. Then this makes sense to me.

I don't see what was so wrong with the system that we had, that had been in place for some time, except that you've got certain industry interests that want a piece of the pie. They want some of the action. But I don't see that once you bring in those for-profit operators this is going to offer a better service at a better price to Albertans.

So once again we're bringing in a private sector here, and in some cases a private sector that is going to benefit from taxpayer dollars in that the government already offers Blue Cross to seniors at no cost. So these private operators are going to get taxpayer dollars. This isn't simply a matter of additional services that people either pay for and get or don't pay for and cannot access. It seems to me that the private sector is always interested in health care when they're going to get access to taxpayer dollars, and that's certainly what seems to be happening here. So I don't see this as an advantage at all for Albertans.

We have these amendments that are levelling the playing field between Alberta Blue Cross and the private health insurance companies, and part of the levelling of this I think is that it's now going to require Blue Cross to begin paying this 2 per cent premium

tax like the private health insurance companies do on their private insurance programs. Now, I'm not sure why we have an additional tax in here, because one presumes these private industries are already paying business taxes as levied upon them. So what's the additional levy for, and why is it connected around the health program? If I could get an explanation of that, that would be helpful.

The bill is also introducing the payment in lieu of tax, the pilot program for net income from Blue Cross's operations excluding the government-sponsored benefits programs, and those were the ones for seniors that I was talking about.

I did try to review *Hansard* to see if the sponsoring member had responded to some of the points that my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview had raised. Unfortunately, the section that I downloaded just contains his comments. So if the member did respond, I'm not aware of it, and I apologize if I repeat here. In that case, feel free to refer me to *Hansard* and the page number, and I will quite happily read it on my own time and not take up the time of the member or of the Assembly.

4:30

My hesitation is manifesting itself in opposition to this bill. I don't feel that the changes that are proposed here ultimately are in the best interests of Albertans. I think what it does is put the interests of private health insurance companies ahead of ordinary Albertans, and frankly I never feel that large corporations, particularly insurance companies, really need my help as a legislator to do well. They seem to do just dandy on their own. But I do find that ordinary Albertans often do need my help in the form of legislation that makes it easier for them or more accessible to them or ensures that there is equal access to services. We have so-called ordinary Albertans – I'm not going to use that term any more; I don't think any Albertan is ordinary. They're left to pay for increased insurance premiums and, I think, decreased support from health initiatives.

Now, I know that my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview has a couple of times referred to questioning the rationale of the sponsoring member for reversing what seemed to be the position of the committee that she was chairing, that the committee came out with one series of recommendations and then those recommendations got flipped around. As I heard the Member for Calgary-Mountain View say earlier: you must be reading the graph upside down; turn it the other way around, and you'll see. It sounds like there was one series of recommendations which were then turned upside down, and the reverse was in fact recommended.

If I could just get an explanation of why that happened. You know, was there information that the committee didn't see or didn't understand that would have caused the reversal in what the recommendation was coming out of the committee? I guess the argument is that if that's the basis for what this bill is proposing, then perhaps it's coming forward under flawed circumstances or with a flawed reasoning behind it, and it's not sufficient to uphold the bill.

We have the two so-called levellings, which are the 2 per cent insurance premium that would now be required of Blue Cross and then the removal of Alberta Blue Cross's tax-exempt status on its non government-funded business and making it subject to the same so-called pilot program, which does require Blue Cross to remit an amount equal to the combined federal and provincial taxes that would be applicable on income from its nonprofit business. We can certainly, without trying too hard, see how that's going to affect Alberta Blue Cross, and of course they're going to end up passing that on to Albertans.

This is not a victimless decision here. This is going to affect Albertans in their pocketbook instantly, and there's no question that's who ends up paying the difference here. What we've really

done is give a huge advantage to the private health care companies by giving them access to government-funded programs like the seniors' Blue Cross at the same time as downloading increased costs upon Albertans. Given that rationale I find it very difficult to—well, no, I don't find it difficult at all. I will not support this bill under those circumstances.

There's not much more that I can say about the bill except for the regulations. Once again what we're seeing is a shifting, a creation, a furthering of these sorts of empty shell bills where there's really not much meat in the actual bill but where everything else is referred to the minister or to Executive Council to make changes a little further on. Those changes don't ever have to come back before the Legislative Assembly, so we don't hear what the comment is or what the rationale is from the members of the Assembly. It's impossible for their constituents to follow through and find out why their member was supportive of passing a certain bill. It's all done behind closed doors, and no minutes are kept. There's no *Hansard* recording of it. People have no way of understanding what the rationale was or what the arguments and thinking were behind the changes.

I protest this every time I see it, which, frankly, is every bill the government brings forward. So if the members opposite are getting a little tired of hearing this speech, I'm a little tired of giving it. If the government would kindly stop doing it, I could stop giving the speech. Then we'd all be a little happier.

So those are the points I want to make on this bill. I could see the member making notes as I spoke, and she's always very good about giving detailed explanations. We're in Committee of the Whole, so she can stand up and give me some answers right now, and that would be excellent.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak to Bill 8 in the Committee of the Whole debate. The Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, Bill 8, is a very interesting bill. It's brought forward by a minister and by a government that's at the same time committed to reducing health care costs and to making health care in this province, and perhaps beyond, affordable and sustainable.

This bill, Mr. Chairman, is also a bill that runs against the recommendations of the government's own committee on Alberta Blue Cross, a committee that was chaired by one of the prominent Tory backbenchers, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed. That committee recommended against what this bill is trying to accomplish; that is, to remove the exemptions with respect to taxation for ABC, Alberta Blue Cross, which is a creature of this Assembly's own statutes, to operate in this province as a nonprofit provider of health care coverage, particularly for supplementary health services.

[Mr. Johnson in the chair]

Mr. Chairman, Albertans are curious why a government that on the one hand is trying to scare everyone into believing that our health care expenditures are unaffordable and that therefore the health care system in its present form is unsustainable and needs radical surgery, which, I guess, Dr. No is likely to spearhead in providing, then brings in legislation that will in fact add to the costs of health care coverage in this province. I think the government's own committee very clearly states that that will be the case, and in spite of the committee's recommendations against proceeding with this, the government has decided to go ahead with it nevertheless.

So Albertans are watching. They're curious and they're not pleased with the fact that this is what's happening here. The government's argument is a very specious argument, Mr. Chairman, in defence of removing some of the exemptions from taxation that this bill is trying to do with respect to Alberta Blue Cross as a nonprofit agency, which has served public interest and public good most effectively, in my view. Its argument is that it must operate under exactly the same conditions as the private insurance companies do. A strange argument to call it a level playing field. Why is it incumbent on this government to put first and foremost the interests of private insurance companies, who are doing well, thank you, without the help of this government and doing exceedingly well, and do so by sacrificing the interests of Alberta citizens?

4:40

That's what's so amazing, that the level playing field argument is used to justify the unjustifiable; that is, to increase the burden of seeking health care coverage to Albertans, many of whom are retired seniors, employers who provide supplementary health care through Alberta Blue Cross. The government is absolutely determined to nullify this part of the Alberta advantage that has been enjoyed by close to a million Albertans in this province.

The primary responsibility of government, Mr. Chairman, is always the protection and enhancement of public good and public interest, but this government simply does not seem to recognize this primary obligation of a government democratically elected by its own citizens. It seeks, rather, to enhance the advantage of private insurance companies, who have the right to operate, but they operate in the interests of their own shareholders, not in the interests of all citizens in this province or elsewhere.

An additional impact of this bill, Mr. Chairman, is on people outside of Alberta, particularly tourists who come here from outside of Canada. Many of them see Alberta Blue Cross as an insurer of choice because it provides out-of-country visitors to Alberta supplementary health care coverage or travellers' coverage of health care services at rates which are exceedingly good, enhancing the attractiveness of Alberta with respect to tourists. So the tourism industry itself benefits from the lower and most reasonable premiums that are offered by Alberta Blue Cross under present conditions.

This bill is set to change those conditions, thereby making premiums for the coverage presently provided by ABC, Alberta Blue Cross, more expensive not only for Albertans but also for out-of-country, foreign tourists and visitors to Alberta who find spending time in Alberta resorts, Alberta cities, Alberta's countryside as part of their vacation attractive because Alberta Blue Cross makes available to them coverage for medical purposes at rates which are most attractive.

The burden of meeting some of these extra costs that will result from the so-called level playing field argument which is embodied in this bill will have to be shared not only by individual subscribers to Alberta Blue Cross, who are more than a million in this province, but also by taxpayers in general. Any increased costs that will result from it will in part have to be paid for from our taxes.

So it makes no sense, Mr. Chairman, to proceed with this bill for the reasons that I have given. The question is: why is the government doing it? I think the chair of the Alberta Blue Cross government committee, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, in a TV interview two weeks ago admitted that the reason that the government is proceeding with it is because it was lobbied to make changes in Alberta Blue Cross by the private insurance industry. That is the only lobbyist, the only agency, the only entity that has sought changes in Alberta Blue Cross, changes that will make Blue Cross coverage more expensive for everyone who uses it.

So let there be no doubt that this bill reflects not the concerns, the demands, the expectations of ordinary Alberta families, regular Alberta families who benefit from the operations of ABC. It does not represent the concerns, interests of Albertans in general. It simply represents the interests of the insurance company with a powerful lobby, which apparently has the ear of this government. This government has found it appropriate to ignore the damage, the additional costs that these changes will impose on over a million subscribers who are Albertans, who pay taxes to this government, and it decided to proceed with this legislation, that will hurt the interests of these Albertans, so that a small group of lobbyists can be appeased.

This bill, Mr. Chairman, is a clear example of how this government sets its priorities. When it has to choose between the interests of its citizens as taxpayers, hard-working Albertans who work day and night to pay their bills and use the health care services, on the one hand, and the private insurance companies which are seeking to enter the field that is presently occupied by Alberta Blue Cross as service provider, it chooses the private, for-profit insurance companies' interests and proceeds with a piece of legislation that will do absolutely nothing – absolutely nothing – to reduce the cost of coverage of the services that ABC provides for over a million Albertans, who to this point have been beneficiaries of the operations of Alberta Blue Cross, which, as I said, is nothing other than the creation of a statute which was passed by this Legislature itself.

So in my view this bill, in essence, in addition to increasing the costs to subscribers who are Albertans, in addition to favouring the private interests of the stockholders of those insurance companies that want to sell supplementary health insurance in this province, is also a statement about how it deals with its own history. Institutions that Albertans have built over the years to serve them, serve them at low cost, serve them effectively, are the very institutions that are being undone one by one by the actions of this government.

Bill 8, Mr. Chairman, therefore does not merit the support of this House. It is a bill that needs to be defeated, and I will certainly be voting against this bill. Thank you.

4:50

The Acting Chair: Any further speakers to Bill 8? The Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm just going to take this opportunity to respond to the comments raised in Committee of the Whole by the members for Edmonton-Strathcona and Edmonton-Centre. Regrettably, I think there is a great deal of misunderstanding on the part of those two members as to what these amendments are designed to do. Particularly, the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona does not perceive the purpose and intent of these amendments.

The discussion this afternoon has centred around two of the major amendments, which would require Alberta Blue Cross to commence paying the 2 per cent premium tax on its accident and health insurance premiums that it brings in during the year, as is required of private insurance companies that offer private insurance, as well as the requirement for Alberta Blue Cross to commence paying a payment in lieu of income tax, both provincial and federal, on its private insurance programs only.

I can't emphasize enough that there will only be 15 per cent of Alberta Blue Cross's customers affected by these amendments. Alberta Blue Cross has well over a million clients in the province of Alberta, most of which are served by its government-sponsored and government-paid-for or subsidized programs. So if my math is correct, there will be in the vicinity of approximately 150,000 Albertans who are receiving private insurance that are affected by these two main amendments.

At the outset, and I believe I made these remarks in second

reading as well, it is our philosophy that when an entity which is a government entity – and Alberta Blue Cross is not owned by government; it is a creature of legislation. It isn't owned by government. It's not owned by shareholders. It is a nonprofit. It is certainly controlled by government, because government has the right to wind it up should that ever become necessary. It certainly has a connection to government, so it is our philosophy that whenever such an entity competes with private enterprise in the provision of goods or services, then it is proper that that government entity not have a competitive advantage which is built in and provided by government.

In this case, the status quo right now is that Alberta Blue Cross does not pay income tax, and it does not pay premium tax on its private insurance business where it competes with private industry. This is the competitive advantage that we are addressing and for which we are levelling the playing field to provide a fair market situation.

Just perhaps for greater clarification I'm going to go over what business is not affected by these amendments. Now, under the Alberta health care insurance plan we have three categories of coverage. We've got the basic health services, we've got extended health benefits, and then we have Alberta Blue Cross nongroup coverage, which is the 85 per cent of its business that is not affected by these amendments. I'm just going to give a description of what that is.

This Alberta Blue Cross nongroup coverage is available to all Albertans, and it is supplemental health insurance plans for drugs and other selected health services. These supplemental plans are funded by Alberta Health and Wellness and administered by Alberta Blue Cross for a fee paid for by government. Premium-free coverage is offered to seniors and their dependants, to recipients of the Alberta widow's pension and their dependants, and to people who have been diagnosed as being palliative and receive their treatments at home.

There is also a universal plan available to all Albertans under the age of 65 and for their dependants, subject to the payment of a quarterly premium. None of those programs will be affected, nor will any of the programs provided by a second government department, that being Alberta Human Resources and Employment drug benefit programs, which include these categories: supports for independence, AISH, and the Alberta child's health benefit. So none of those programs, representing 85 per cent of the business of Alberta Blue Cross, will be affected.

What will be affected are the prepaid supplementary health care plans to employer groups and also individual health plans for Albertans under the age of 65 who are self-employed and are without an employer-sponsored health benefit plan as well as individual health plans for Albertans 65 years of age and over which would complement or augment their government-sponsored seniors' coverage that they already receive. The third category is travel insurance, which Blue Cross has been providing.

The argument that there will be, potentially, an increase in cost that will be transferred to the subscribers of those types of insurance only stands to reason. However, Alberta Blue Cross has given its undertaking to pursue strategies, to find administrative efficiencies, and to be more appropriate in the reserve fund that they maintain so that they will limit the impact on their customers, their clients, their private insurance clients, and they're hoping to keep that increase to 1 per cent or less. By example, a calculation has been done for a family paying \$140 per month for this comprehensive, extra private insurance, which could include for dental and glasses. Even if the premium increase was as high as 2 per cent, that would translate to \$3 per month in increased premiums, so certainly nothing that is unmanageable.

I hope that that explanation has made it a little clearer, particularly for the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, who has been stating in questions in question period and again this afternoon that this is going to impact over a million Albertans, for it is not going to do that.

5:00

One of the aims of the amendments is such that we will segregate the government business from the private business that Blue Cross engages in, and it will be very clear from an accounting point of view that one is not cross-subsidizing the other, which was one of the complaints that gave rise to this review.

Now, the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has stated here this afternoon that I admitted in a certain TV interview that I personally was lobbied by an insurance company and that's why I changed my mind on one of the recommendations in this report. Well, I didn't see that TV interview, and I'll eat my hat if I said that. I have to assume that perhaps some of the comments that I was making were summarized in a way that led to that conclusion.

Now, I think members and the members opposite all have a copy of the report of the review committee, so I would refer them to pages 19 and 20 of the report for a full discussion on the issue of whether Alberta Blue Cross should be exempted from income tax. Three options were discussed. One was to maintain the status quo, which would leave Alberta Blue Cross tax-exempt. One other option was to introduce the payment-in-lieu-of-tax program on all of the net income from all activities of Blue Cross. The third was to introduce this program just in respect to the business that falls into the private insurer's category, and that was the one that was chosen by the majority of government members.

The reason that the members on my committee felt that there was perhaps a good reason for leaving the status quo in place was that as part of its legislated mandate Alberta Blue Cross is required to participate in programs which benefit the health of Albertans, and in fact Blue Cross does this by participating in the Alberta Tobacco Reduction Alliance and also the Alberta Centre for Injury Control & Research and a few other programs, which does involve an expense. The thinking was that private insurance companies don't have to do that and don't have that particular expense. But in the final analysis it was the conclusion of government that those requirements were not sufficient to maintain the status quo and that it was preferred that the playing field be levelled for both income tax and the premium tax.

So I hope those comments go some distance in providing clarification for the purpose of these amendments. Those are my comments, Mr. Chairman.

The Acting Chair: Is there any further speaking to Bill 8? The Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and return to my concerns about Bill 8, the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. I have, I think, put before the House my reasons for why I am concerned about the bill. I just want to put on record a statement here which was posted at 5:24 p.m., Thursday, February 9, by CFCN.ca. The title of the statement is: MLA goes against own committee on Blue Cross. I want to read it verbatim because the Member for Calgary-Lougheed raised some questions about remarks that I made earlier. This is what follows, word by word, Mr. Chairman.

A Calgary MLA is admitting that she ignored her own committee's recommendations on Alberta Blue Cross. A committee studied whether or not the non-profit health insurance company should be allowed to keep its tax exemption. The majority of committee members recommended that the company should keep its tax-free

status. But Calgary Lougheed MLA... says she went against that advice when it came time to write the report's final summary. "I personally felt that it was more consistent that they be required to pay income tax," said [the Calgary-Lougheed MLA]. "But that wasn't the consensus view." [The Calgary-Lougheed MLA] also admits the reason she looked into the issue of revoking Alberta Blue Cross' tax exemption was because private health insurance providers asked her to. The final committee report, chaired by [the MLA], predicts consequences for Albertans if the company loses its [exemption]. It says Alberta Blue Cross users would face fee increases and the company won't be able to provide the same level of service. It also points out that the company offers services to small businesses and rural Albertans that private insurers don't. But in spite of the recommendations, the province still intends to remove the exemption.

That's the end of the statement, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to put it on record to share with the House and the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed the basis of my comments there.

I have three different amendments. I'll start with the first amendment. I move that Bill 8, Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be amended in section 1(9) by striking out clause (a). I would like the amendment to be distributed, Mr. Chairman, and I'll wait before I proceed with my remarks.

The Acting Chair: Okay. Amendment A1.

Dr. Pannu: You'll call it A1?

The Acting Chair: Right. We'll just wait a minute until the amendments have been distributed.

Proceed.

5:10

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The intent of the amendment, amendment A1, is to strike out that clause (a) of section 1(9). The rationale for that is quite clear. Section 1(9)(a) is proposed to be struck from the act because it allows the cabinet to place unnecessary restrictions around both the programs and services that can be offered, governing the nature and extent of those programs.

Surely, the board of directors of Alberta Blue Cross, an organization that has been providing services over the last 50 years under the direction of the board of directors, should be responsible for determining the nature and scope of Blue Cross's activities so long as those are consistent with the legislation under which it is established. The Blue Cross directors should be able to do so without the political interference of the provincial cabinet. The provision that I propose should be struck out could open the door for the cabinet behind closed doors to decide to limit Blue Cross activities, require them to divest of some programs which are deemed to be not to the liking of the private health insurance industry. So that in a nutshell is the rationale for amendment A1, Mr. Chairman.

I think that if the House votes for this amendment, it will certainly protect Alberta Blue Cross from political interference by the cabinet, which I think is an appropriate thing to seek to have in place. Alberta Blue Cross has worked without political control and political interference by the cabinets of this province for the last 50 years and done so faultlessly. There is no evidence, based on the past behaviour and performance of Alberta Blue Cross, which would justify the cabinet seeking these exceptional powers to be able to alter the mandate of Blue Cross.

If anything I think the cabinet needs to keep its hands out of the business of Alberta Blue Cross and allow Alberta Blue Cross to serve Albertans, as it has done with distinction over the last 50 years, without encumbering its ability to do so. I think the provisions of section 1(9) would encumber the Alberta Blue Cross and its board of directors' ability to continue to provide those valuable services at

low cost to Albertans who seek to make use of those services.

So I would like to urge all members of the House to support this amendment, vote for it so that we can continue to enjoy the benefits that Alberta Blue Cross over the last 50 years has been so ably able to deliver. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Graham: Mr. Chairman, I'm going to be really brief here. The purpose of section 1(9) of the bill is to provide a definition for what actually is the Alberta Blue Cross plan because there never has been a definition for the 50 years that the member speaks of. So for just the reasons that the member was talking about, it's important that we define what the program is so that it will continue in the form that it is in.

The other reason for wanting to get a definition is to limit the ability of the corporation to get into areas of insurance which could bring with it a high risk to the corporation, thereby adversely affecting other programs it provides. This is all about protecting what we have now, because all of the programs that it provides will be included in the definition, but it will protect subscribers from here on in so that they won't be subject to unnecessary risks.

So this is a good thing, and I would urge all members to defeat the amendment.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Acting Chair: The Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Shall I proceed?

The Acting Chair: Yes.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, the next amendment that I would like to move is that Bill 8, Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be amended (a) in section 1 by striking out subsection (8) and (b) by striking out section 2.

The Acting Chair: The amendment that is being distributed will be called amendment A2.

Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, please proceed.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to speak to amendment A2. The bill in its unamended form requires Alberta Blue Cross to pay Alberta Revenue an amount equal to what they would have paid in federal and provincial corporate income taxes if they were a for-profit corporation. A2 would strike from the act an amendment to the Alberta corporate income tax that makes Blue Cross subject to paying the 2 per cent insurance premiums on its non government-sponsored programs.

In requiring Blue Cross to make payments in lieu of taxes, the government has disregarded the advice of its own Blue Cross Review Committee, which was chaired by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, a committee that warned that this would drive up premium costs and possibly lead to its privatization or will be perceived to facilitate privatization.

It fails to recognize that Blue Cross has a public service mandate to be a not-for-profit provider of extended health and dental benefits. Taxing Blue Cross like a for-profit corporation will drive up costs for policy holders and transfer those benefits to companies like Great-West Life.

Again, it seems to me that there's no useful purpose to having Blue Cross pay the insurance premium tax. It is not the job of government to serve the interests of the private health industry. It is the government's job to keep extended health and dental benefits as

reasonably priced as possible. That's why I would ask hon. members in this House to support this amendment and vote for it.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

5:20

The Acting Chair: The Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would now like to take this opportunity to present my third and final amendment. I have copies of this amendment ready to be circulated.

The Acting Chair: This will be amendment A3. Please just wait a moment until they are all distributed.

Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, please proceed.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. With your permission I'd like to move that Bill 8, Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be amended in section 1 by striking out subsection (7). Now, to speak briefly in favour of the amendment, I just want to draw to the attention of the House, Mr. Chairman, that until now the Insurance Act has not applied to Alberta Blue Cross in recognition of the fact that it's not an insurance company but rather a nonprofit provider of extended health and dental benefits established under provincial legislation.

This amendment strikes out a provision that's completely unnecessary and possibly interferes with the board of directors of Blue Cross to run their business as they see fit. The Blue Cross legislation currently states that the Insurance Act does not apply to Blue Cross operations. There's no need, therefore, to further restrict the scope of Blue Cross's activities to provide whatever insurance products they see fit on a nonprofit basis to Albertans. The only test that should be applied to whether Alberta Blue Cross should be restricted in the range of services to be provided is whether or not it does that job efficiently, effectively, and in a cost-effective manner. No evidence has been produced to show that that is not being accomplished under current legislation by Alberta Blue Cross in the services that it provides.

Again, I want to emphasize, Mr. Chairman, that Alberta Blue Cross works well. It is important to leave it to itself to continue to provide those most valued services at the lowest possible cost to Albertans. Therefore, I urge my colleagues in the House to support this amendment and vote for it.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A3 lost]

[The clauses of Bill 8 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Acting Chair: Shall the bill be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 9

Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments? The Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks for the opportunity to speak to Bill 9, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act. What we're looking at here is that this is bringing in exceptions. The rules that we have on the books right now say that minors are totally banned from possessing tobacco, but that doesn't help for those convenience stores where you've got someone that's under 18 working at the front counter, especially in the mom-and-pop operations. So this is changing it to allow minors who are working in convenience stores to be able to handle those tobacco products as, sort of, point of sale.

It would also allow the stings that the government occasionally gets involved in where they send in under-age people to try and capture someone willing to sell cigarettes.

Mr. Hancock: They're not under age.

Ms Blakeman: I'm sorry. They're not under age? They just look like they're under age; is that the trick? Okay. All right. So the trick is they look like they're under age, but they're not. So really this is just affecting the store employees.

It's also giving us a wider definition of public place for the purposes of enforcement of the act.

My concern about this is that we keep coming back and sort of

adding on pieces to what we're doing rather than having a comprehensive tobacco control legislation. You know, I raised the other day during question period that we're still allowing smoking in the Edmonton Remand Centre, and I get fairly consistent commentary from the staff that are having to be exposed to that second-hand smoke. So I would prefer that we saw one large comprehensive piece of legislation rather than the piecemeal.

I don't think that what we've had so far has been terribly effective. There seems to be some desire from the government to follow through on this but not enough to be forceful enough to make it happen. So we just are completely lacking comprehensive tobacco control legislation.

Our Liberal opposition MLAs are on record as speaking out against the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act not because we want youth to be smoking – no, that's not it at all – but because this focuses on the wrong part of the problem.

The Acting Chair: As per Standing Order 4(3) the committee stands adjourned until 8 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 3, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/03

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 9 Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

[The clauses of Bill 9 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

For the benefit of our visitors up in the gallery the committee stage is a very informal stage where you'll see people moving around and taking off their jackets, but if you were to come during the other session when the Assembly is meeting, it would be much more formal. Your MLA will be introducing you shortly. He's just trying to get some information about the group.

Hon. members, before we proceed with the next item on the agenda, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to introduce to the members of the Assembly the Boys and Girls Club of Red Deer. I believe it's called the Keystone Club, if I've got that right. You're going to have to help me with the names because I can't read this very well. I believe the adults that are accompanying the club are Gerald Laurin, Trish Gislason, and Veronica Stasiuk. These are fine visitors from the lovely city of Red Deer, the host of the 2004 Scott Tournament of Hearts and many other events in the past. We're delighted that you can spend some time visiting us tonight, and we hope you enjoy your visit. Would you please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Bill 14 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have an opportunity at Committee of the Whole to make some further

comments about Bill 14. The bill asks for \$120,672,000 in supplementary funding. It's broken down across a number of departments, and it raises a number of questions with respect, for instance, to the new fiscal framework.

Bill 2, the Financial Statutes Amendment Act in the spring of 2003, put in law several new fiscal rules that were supposed to protect Albertans from riding the energy roller coaster, and that new framework was supposed to put an end to stop-and-start program funding. It was also at the time touted as a bill that would reduce the government's reliance on supplementary supply, yet in less than a year we're back with a request in front of us.

It makes it difficult, I think, for Albertans to understand this kind of start-and-stop spending, and it's certainly difficult for institutions – for hospitals, for schools, and for infrastructure – for those people supplying services to be caught in a budget cycle that is unpredictable. It also makes it very hard to make sense of the business plans and to really take seriously the business plans when we see some of them modified. We've seen, for instance, in this past year budgets in some of those departments modified twice through a supplementary supply.

That's not to say, Mr. Chairman, that there are not legitimate reasons for supplementary supply for the government to have to respond to unforeseen circumstances. I don't think we'd be unreasonable enough to expect that that wouldn't happen. But it's the regularity with which it seems to occur that we find bothersome, and we find it difficult, again, to put credence into the kind of planning that's put before us at budget time and in the business plans knowing full well that before the year is out, those plans will likely, if past practice is any indication, be changed.

It's a practice that each time it comes before the House we've remarked on. We've been supportive of some of the supplementary supply requests, as I indicated, but we think the practice is one that has become incorporated into the way the government does its planning, and we think that that's an unfortunate turn of events. The stability fund was supposed to be in place to take up the slack and to give the government the kind of flexibility it needed, but it doesn't seem to work.

There is money here with respect to the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development department and the costs attributed to implementing the Fort McKay First Nation land claim settlement, and it seems that this was a sum that could have been expected.

There are some I think defensible requests in Health and Wellness. I think the West Nile virus threat was something that was thrust upon the government, and some of the increased health benefits program costs couldn't be foreseen, but I think things like Alberta Wellnet for the pharmaceutical information network are more appropriately budget line items at budget time than requests at supplementary requisition.

Similarly, for Human Resources and Employment it would seem that there are legitimate requests there when you have additional caseloads and increased costs per case. Those are things that you can't predict. But with respect to the skills investments program, again that would seem to be more appropriate as a budget line item.

In Infrastructure the gas rebates are really, again, something the government can't control, although it's hard to understand why a sum wasn't put in the budget in anticipation of what might have been. It raises the question, because this is the second time this year we've been back for rebate money, about the quality of the planning that's being undertaken.

8:10

Innovation and Science. They raised the questions before about Imagis and the questions that the Auditor General has raised about

that program and the shortcomings that seem to be associated with it and that still have to be addressed.

The Department of Learning. It's a curious sort of set of requests in Learning because at the time of the arbitrated teachers' settlement, the government's refrain was: there's no more money. The minister and the Premier went out of their way to make that abundantly clear, and they used that phrase over and over again: there's no more money. Yet we have in front of us a total of \$14,600,000 in supplementary supply requested to alleviate cost pressures, increased costs.

So it's a little hard, I think, for Albertans and in particular for teachers and school boards to understand why at a point several months ago, when they were faced with increased costs, the government's reaction was no more money, yet here in front of us there obviously is more money, another \$16 million, that's been put into the system. It seems that the previous statements could have been nothing more than political and had little to do with responding to legitimate costs that boards were facing as a result of the arbitrated teachers' settlement.

The \$3,500,000 for future cost of student loans issued and the heritage scholarship money is understandable, but the other increases again seem to be arbitrary and put forth in a spirit that's not consistent with what the government said was the real situation just a few short months ago.

The request for Seniors, the need for additional year-round and seasonal beds in homeless shelters, the costs of long-term care accommodation fees: large dollars being put into those. It seems, again, that the planning that leaves those seniors facing huge increases and then requests coming along for this kind of injection this late in the year raises questions about the kind of planning that's going on with respect to accommodation for seniors.

Mr. Chairman, those are some of the comments that I wanted to make. I guess one last one, Sustainable Resource Development. Again it seems to be a legitimate request for a supplementary requisition. No one can predict the kind of firefighting situation that the province is going to face, and you do your best guess in terms of estimates. Obviously, no one could have predicted what was going to happen last year, so it does seem to be a legitimate use of the supplementary requisition process.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome the opportunity to make a few comments on Bill 14, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004. I have to start my comments with the whole idea that not too long ago in this Assembly we passed Bill 2, which was the highly touted new fiscal framework for the province. This occurred in the Financial Statutes Amendment Act in the spring of 2003. What this particular act did was enshrine into law several new fiscal rules that promised Albertans would be protected from riding the energy roller coaster. This new fiscal framework was supposed to put an end to stop-and-start program funding and the government's reliance on supplementary supply.

Yet here we are again in this Assembly less than a year later, and we are not following the framework that was in Bill 2. Bill 2 capped government resource revenue spending at \$3.5 billion, but recently the Premier announced that new legislation would be introduced this spring to raise that resource revenue spending cap by \$500 million, to \$4 billion, most of which is earmarked for health and education. In that regard, I certainly know that both of these areas can use that money.

Now, then, as well, I had a call here last week from the Glenarry

Child Care Society. They've been in operation now for 32 years. Most of the children that are there, in fact 90 per cent of the children, are in single-parent families. They owe a tremendous amount of money for the cost of utilities. The single-parent families are now responsible for 68 per cent of all costs, and these costs range, just to operate the building, in the neighbourhood of \$5,800 to as high as \$6,500. They are a nonprofit society, and they certainly cannot keep going at this pace.

So what happens in that situation, where those people are certainly trying to take care of their families, trying to have an affordable place for them to leave their children when they are studying or working? In that case, I know that when they look at the supplementary supply that we are debating tonight, some assistance certainly will be of some help but, again, not enough to keep the costs reasonable for these people.

This Bill 14, the supplementary supply, is the second supplementary supply requested by the government in the current fiscal year. In November 2003 16 government ministries and one office of the Legislative Assembly requested a total of \$1.251 billion in supplementary supply for operating expense and equipment and/or inventory purchases and capital investment. This was a considerable amount of supplementary supply to request, especially since the government's new fiscal framework had just been announced seven months earlier.

So we still have not in this province reached the point of stability. We are still coming back to this Assembly again and again for supplementary supply, and we still have not conquered the challenge of: how do we deal with our boom and bust economy? It seems that we have continual spending and continual extra demands for money.

Now, one of the areas that we have listed as some of the requests for supplementary supply is in the area of Infrastructure, and there is a total of \$35 million requested to provide for natural gas rebates. The same ministry requested a total of \$180 million for natural gas rebates in the first supplementary estimates, in November of 2003, so in this winter it brings the total amount requested by Infrastructure for natural gas rebates to \$215 million.

8:20

One of the questions that have arisen because of the amount requested in total of \$215 million, \$35 million of which is requested in this particular set of supplementary estimates, is: how much money in total is the government expecting to distribute to Albertans as natural gas rebates? If, as well, we could learn how much money was spent on natural gas rebates for January and February and how much those rebates are targeted to be spent this March. Another question that we would certainly like to ask is: has the \$180,600,000 requested by this ministry in supplementary supply four months ago been spent entirely?

So while I'm sure many, many Albertans are looking forward to the rebates, Mr. Chairman, and quite rightfully so, I think there are still some answers here that are required, and I look forward to those. Thank you very much.

[The clauses of Bill 14 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee now rise and report bills 14, 8, and 9.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: bills 8, 9, and 14. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
 Second Reading
 Bill 10
 Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to move Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, for second reading.

Mr. Speaker, it's almost a tradition in the House in the last number of years that there be a Justice Statutes Amendment Act to bring together minor amendments to a number of justice acts under a single bill for debate and amendment. This year is no different. Amendments to seven acts are proposed in Bill 10.

Perhaps the most significant change proposed is a new provision which will allow our courts to order monetary awards to be paid in instalments. Simply put, this change will help to protect current and future needs of Albertans impacted by injury or death. These changes are similar to the changes that were introduced last year in the Insurance Act Amendment Act for judgments in automobile claims.

Presently a court has no jurisdiction to award damages to be disbursed by periodic payments to a claimant rather than in a lump sum without the consent of the parties. Because the consent of all parties is needed to allow for periodic payments, most court judgments are made in a lump sum payable upon the judgment being made.

Courts and the legal community have indicated that lump-sum awards can present significant problems. Over the years this can create additional challenges for victims of serious injuries or for families who have lost an income earner. For example, lump-sum payments are subject to inflation and tax on investment income. The difficulties are greatest where there is a continuing need for intensive and expensive care and long-term loss of earning capacity.

Periodic payments provide protection from premature dissipation of awards by accident victims either spending their awards or greatly reducing them through investment choices. Mr. Speaker, I don't have the exact figures at hand, but in the global area research would suggest that when you have lump-sum awards, even of large magnitude, up to 80 per cent of the people who achieve those lump-sum awards have spent them, have no money left two years after the award has been received. So when you have a person who's been

provided with a judgment to compensate for loss of future income or to compensate for expenses going into the future for care because of a catastrophic injury, you can see that a lump-sum award in those cases doesn't actually do the trick.

The structured settlements have proven to be a very good solution to many of the problems associated with lump-sum awards. A structured settlement usually consists of an immediate cash award and an annuity. If structured in the normal way through an annuity, payments to the plaintiff are not subject to tax. The initial cash award is usually in an amount to cover special damages incurred before trial including out-of-pocket expenses and legal fees, immediate capital needs to pay for items such as a specially equipped house or wheelchair van or prosthetic devices, and then the initial cash payment is followed by periodic payments.

Where damages are claimed in court for personal injuries, for the death of a person, or under the Fatal Accidents Act, any party may ask a judge to order that damages be paid in whole or in part by periodic payments. The judgment must identify the specific damages for which the periodic award is to be made. For each of those damages it must also set out the amount of each payment, the date or the interval between each payment, the recipient, any annual percentage increase in the amount of each payment, the date or event on which payments will terminate, and it can include other material provisions that the court considers appropriate. The court may order financial security to ensure that the payments will be made.

On the consent of all of the affected parties the court can order that there be a future review and changes to the award as the court considers appropriate. On the death of a plaintiff any remaining periodic payments will be paid to the estate of that person until the termination date unless the judgment provides otherwise.

Payments for loss of future earnings are exempt from garnishment, attachment, execution, or any other process or claim to the same extent that wages or earnings are exempt under Alberta law. Payments for the cost of future care cannot be assigned to anyone unless the assignment is to a provider of care for the cost of products, services, or accommodation provided and is approved by the court. These provisions would apply to all court cases whether commenced before or after the day that the amendments come into force.

Mr. Speaker, Ontario and Manitoba have general enabling legislation for structured settlements of this nature. British Columbia and Saskatchewan have provisions for structured settlements restricted to automobile accidents, similar to the provisions under the Insurance Act. These amendments with respect to structured settlements would be amendments to the Judicature Act.

Now I'll address changes to three justice acts that all involve the validation of rules of court. There is a Rules of Court Committee, which features representatives from the Court of Appeal, Court of Queen's Bench, Provincial Court, the Law Society, and Alberta Justice, and it makes recommendations for changes to civil court practices and procedures. It has been our practice to embody those recommendations through an order in council without change.

8:30

These changes, including those affecting substantive law, are forwarded by the Rules of Court Committee to the Minister of Justice for consideration, and as I said, normally we accept the advice of the Rules of Court Committee. To be clear, substantive law involves anything that affects a litigant's rights. For example, there is a rule that if a party does not take steps to advance a claim after five years, the action will be dismissed. Another example would be any change to policy or procedure which involves which costs may be recovered in a civil proceeding.

After the recommendations for changes are submitted by the Rules of Court Committee, they are implemented through an order in council and then validated in legislation at a later date through, usually, a Justice Statutes Amendment Act. A separate validation process is necessary because provincial legislation does not explicitly state that the Lieutenant Governor in Council can make changes that affect substantive law.

So with Bill 10 we are making three changes to address this issue today and for the future. First, with a minor amendment to the Judicature Act the *Rules of Court* will be validated for the first time since 1997 as per the process that I just explained. Second, amendments to the Court of Queen's Bench Act and the Court of Appeal Act will state that the Lieutenant Governor in Council may make the rules of practice and procedure that affect substantive law as long as they do not conflict with federal or provincial laws. This will eliminate the need for a separate validation process in the future and remove any confusion as to whether or not the rules are valid between the time in which they have been approved by order in council and validated by statute.

From a public and a legal community perspective these minor changes will have no direct impact because the rules committee will continue to be the body which recommends changes that it deems appropriate to the *Rules of Court*, and those changes will continue to be affirmed, of course, through order in council.

The next area of amendment deals with the area of electronic documents. Alberta Justice is always looking to take advantage of new technologies to streamline the way we do business or to enhance existing programs to reduce costs. A minor change under the Provincial Offences Procedure Act will set the stage for us to do just that. This amendment will allow the courts to process tickets electronically.

Currently our court administrators are struggling to process the 1.3 million paper tickets that they receive annually, and it goes without saying that processing tickets electronically should be a much more efficient way of handling ticket volumes. This will allow enforcement agencies to file tickets with the court by transferring data electronically. This will generally apply to offences under the Traffic Safety Act. The change is expected to provide significant cost savings for court administration and the enforcement agencies, usually police, while having no impact on defendants who will still receive paper tickets by mail.

The amendment removes three barriers that have prevented the use of an electronic version of the tickets: the need for a ticket to be in a prescribed form, the need for a peace officer to sign an electronic ticket that's filed with the court, and the need for a justice of the peace to review the electronic ticket before a conviction can be entered. It's strictly an administrative change and will have no impact on a defendant's ability to plead guilty by paying a fine or to plead not guilty and have the case heard in court before a traffic commissioner.

Another minor amendment is proposed to the Court of Appeal Act which will allow for a judicial quorum, more commonly known as a panel, of fewer than three Court of Appeal judges to be used in situations as set out by the *Rules of Court*. This will allow the Court of Appeal to consider more matters than it does now. As part of this process, the Rules of Court Committee will recommend those matters which could be heard by panels of fewer than three. It's a relatively minor change which was specifically requested by the court, and providing this flexibility will help ensure the efficient use of Court of Appeal resources.

The next amendment that I'd like to raise is a minor amendment to the Jury Act. Currently if the amount in a civil case involving a personal injury or contract exceeds \$75,000, either party has the

right to have an action tried by a jury. The judge has limited discretion to limit when an action can be tried by a jury. Currently the courts may direct a civil trial to proceed without a jury in certain circumstances such as cases that involve scientific or highly complex investigations.

The amendment to the Jury Act under Bill 10 will give a judge discretion to direct, where appropriate, that parties use the summary trial procedure set out in the *Rules of Court* instead of a trial by jury. The summary process is quicker, less expensive than a jury trial, and recent case law from the Court of Queen's Bench has highlighted the need to give judges this discretion.

Another amendment under Bill 10 will allow that a Queen's Counsel appointment may be revoked where the holder has been disbarred or resigns in the face of discipline under the Legal Profession Act. For those who are unaware, Queen's Counsel, QC, is an honorary title that recognizes selected members of the Law Society or the Bar for both their professionalism and their contribution to the community. Every two years a committee made up of the judiciary and the legal community reviews nominations, and recommendations are made to the Minister of Justice. Criteria include competence, professional qualities, and contributions to the administration of justice but most importantly, from my perspective, the contribution that's made to the community.

Amendments to this legislation will provide that the designation may be revoked by an order in council. This is being done to ensure the integrity of this honorary designation while allowing us to continue to recognize members of the legal community who not only make important contributions to the profession but make very important contributions to our community as a whole.

Finally, we have a minor amendment to the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act, which I'd like to briefly mention. The motor vehicle accident claims program provides victims of motor vehicle accidents involving uninsured motor vehicles or unknown drivers. The Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act protects both types of victims by ensuring that they have someone to recover personal injury damages from. This minor change under Bill 10 will simply incorporate the definition of motor vehicle from the Traffic Safety Act, which was brought into force last year, simply a housekeeping matter to have the same definition used under both acts.

The change will have no impact on claims already under consideration by the program or claims to be put forward in the future other than those things which people may have argued could be considered motor vehicles. Golf carts, for example, will no longer obviously qualify.

With that I'd like to encourage all members of this Assembly to support Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. As I say, it makes some relatively minor amendments to existing Alberta legislation but helps to ensure that our laws are up to date and ready to meet the current needs of Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, as Bill 10 was introduced for first reading yesterday, I have agreed with members of the opposition that we should adjourn debate to allow more time for preparation, so I would move that debate be adjourned at this time.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 15

Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to move second reading of Bill 15, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, last year I introduced legislation in response to the

report of the Financial Management Commission that amounted to new fiscal framework for Alberta. I am pleased to report to this Assembly that the fiscal framework, including its centrepiece, the Alberta sustainability fund, is working successfully.

The sustainability fund is fully funded, even though it has responded to forest fires that swept through our province and to the BSE crisis that has hit our agriculture industry and the rural economy. It has also cushioned Albertans from high natural gas prices by providing rebates.

The sustainability fund has also garnered us attention from the main credit and lending agencies. In its 2003 analysis, that confirmed Alberta's triple-A credit rating, Moody's credit research wrote:

Fiscal policy in Alberta has been very focused and effective for many years. The changes made this year with the introduction of the Sustainability Fund and Capital Account will only act to further strengthen the fiscal framework and help to ensure positive future outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, the fiscal framework is working. It provides a fund of \$2.5 billion that will sustain our core programs in the event that revenues fall, to respond to emergencies and disasters and to provide for natural gas rebates. I would remind all members of the House that this money is not available for ad hoc program needs or to dip into at will. It is there to sustain our core programs in the event that revenues fall.

Part of the fiscal framework included a limit on the amount of nonrenewable resource revenues available for programs. Currently our new fiscal framework limits budget spending of nonrenewable resource revenues to the lower of \$3.5 billion or the average of the three previous years. We propose to amend this to \$4 billion. I said last spring in this Assembly and elsewhere in public that over the course of the first three years we would monitor that limit of \$3.5 billion. I said that if it was a little too high or a little too low, I would come here and say that it should be higher or lower.

What's changed in the past year? Two things. Mainly, first, we're seeing strong forecasts of energy revenues in the medium term. These strong revenues give us the flexibility to address increasing costs. Secondly, the sustainability fund is fully funded. With that cushion of \$2.5 billion available to protect our core programs such as health care and education, we are in a position to adjust the formula. Re-evaluating the amount that goes into the fund is appropriate at this time.

8:40

The second proposed amendment I wish to address is a new addition. It proposes a new clause that would allow for First Nations settlements to be paid through the sustainability fund subject to cabinet approval. In essence, it would be similar to the existing emergency and disaster clause. The reason for the proposed amendment is that we can't budget for these types of settlements because of the potential impact on negotiations. At the same time, a large settlement could easily erode the contingency fund that we have in our budget.

Mr. Speaker, the new fiscal framework instituted with Budget 2003 is working well for our province. It will provide predictability in funding and allow regional health authorities, school boards, municipal governments, and others the opportunity to plan for the future.

The amendments proposed today are reasonable and sustainable changes that will have a positive and lasting benefit to Albertans' priorities. I therefore urge all members of this Assembly to support Bill 15.

Mr. Speaker, I too would like to move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head:

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 8

Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 8, the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, is based on the work and recommendations of the Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee, which reported to the Minister of Health and Wellness in 2002. In that regard, I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of that committee who worked with me in coming up with the recommendations. The committee consisted of Peter Hegholz, director of financial planning for Alberta Health and Wellness; Herb Schlotter, corporate counsel, Alberta Health and Wellness; Arthur Hagan, deputy superintendent of insurance and financial institutions with Alberta Finance; Carol Patrick, senior analyst of tax policy with Alberta Finance; Richard Whitehouse, director of risk management and insurance with Alberta Revenue; Bernard Rodrigues, external consultant, who was the former superintendent of insurance for the province.

I'd like to say, Mr. Speaker, that the subject matter of this review, which at first blush I thought would be fairly straightforward, ended up being a very complicated and complex investigation of the structure and the work of this organization, and I have to say that in my seven years of being in this Legislature and having participated in a number of different reviews and different subject matters, this was probably the most challenging one that I have participated in from a complexity point of view.

Initially, the main reason that this review was undertaken was because of concerns coming forward from a number of sources, including MLAs, that the Alberta Blue Cross corporation enjoyed advantages over private insurers operating in the health insurance field. So the main object of the review was to investigate this and see if in fact such advantages existed.

In the process of doing that, the review committee undertook quite an extensive review process, looking at Alberta Blue Cross from a thorough legal review, a document and historical review, a review of other provincial programs operating in the country, a financial review of the organization, an accountability review of the organization in terms of its governance, and a review of all of the types of business that it conducted. This formed the basis for the recommendations that were forthcoming to the minister. I can advise the Legislature that the investigation was very thorough, and it was done with the co-operation of Alberta Blue Cross.

In the final analysis, Mr. Speaker, I can say that everyone on the committee was of the view that Alberta Blue Cross is an excellent organization and has been providing supplementary health care plan services to Albertans for over 54 years in a very positive way. It is an Alberta organization headquartered in Alberta, has always been governed by provincial legislation, and is bound, of course, by national rules governing Blue Cross organizations in Canada, but it has always operated on a not-for-profit basis and never had any shareholders. From day one it has always been exempt from the Insurance Act and, therefore, never paid premium tax nor has it ever paid income tax.

Alberta Blue Cross, Mr. Speaker, has over a million Albertans as its clients for its various products and services. Eighty-five per cent of its business is involved in the administration of government-sponsored programs, most of which are government funded. They are within the Department of Alberta Health and Wellness and

within the Department of Alberta Human Resources and Employment. Fifteen per cent of its business involves employer group supplementary health care plans and certain individual health care plans as well as travel insurance. This 15 per cent of its business is where it competes with private companies operating in the province.

So the amendments that we see in the bill serve to level the playing field with private providers specifically in that area where Alberta Blue Cross competes with those providers in providing private insurance. The bill also provides clear rules for the responsibilities of directors acting on the board of directors for Alberta Blue Cross and also sets out responsibilities for the board, such as hiring auditors and the like, bringing the requirements of the governance of Alberta Blue Cross in line with that required for other corporations acting within the province. It also includes amendments which would define the various programs included in the Alberta Blue Cross plan which have never been set out specifically before. It sets out the ability for cabinet to set this out in regulation.

That in the main, Mr. Speaker, is the thrust of Bill 8. I think this bill has been quite thoroughly debated through the various stages in the Legislature, and I think it's good for Albertans, and it's good for Blue Cross.

I urge all members to support this bill in third reading. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

8:50

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to be able to make a few comments about Bill 8, the Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, at third reading. I think it's a first in the House that I can recall where a review committee makes the recommendations and the chair of the committee changes a major review. I guess it's hard to understand with respect to process how such a situation could come about. We just heard the member outline how thorough and comprehensive the review of the Blue Cross plan was.

One of the things that they looked at, of course, an important thing with respect to Blue Cross, was whether or not the nonprofit health insurance company should be allowed to keep its tax exemption. The majority of the members, as we understand it, said yes. They recommended in the report that the company should keep its tax-free status. When the final summary was written, the chair of the committee went against the consensus and recommended the course of action that the government now has adopted, and that is that Blue Cross lose tax-free status.

As disturbing as that is to Albertans and what's going to happen to them with respect to paying more, it's even more difficult in terms of Albertans understanding exactly what happened and what they can expect when review committees spend a lot of time looking at an issue and make a set of recommendations and use a lot of public resources in conducting their review to find that the recommendations can be arbitrarily changed and the recommendations go against the consensus of the committee.

It's a curious piece of work, Mr. Speaker, to say the least and one that, I think, people are still finding difficult to understand. Knowing the integrity of the chair of that committee, I find it really hard to understand how we ended up with the piece of legislation that we have before us this evening with such a contrary recommendation.

It does raise some questions that the opposition has raised in the past and maybe we should go back and work at again, and that's the whole notion of a lobbyist registration and some effort to get a handle on the role that lobbyists are playing in the drafting of

legislation in the province and influencing decision-making. I'm not sure whether in this instance it would have made any difference, but it does raise that issue for those of us on this side of the House. The rationale that's used to indicate that Blue Cross shouldn't keep its tax-free status is understandable in one context but certainly not when viewed in the context of the work of the committee if, as I said, the review is as thorough as the chair has assured the Assembly that it was.

So it's a bill we won't support, Mr. Speaker, but it's a bill that's troubling in terms of the way that it's arrived here.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Bill 8 on third reading. The New Democrat opposition identified this bill at the beginning of the session as one that was particularly troublesome and which caused us a considerable amount of worry. It is, as the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has said, interesting how the provisions of this bill were arrived at and how they evolved through the process of Conservative caucus decision-making.

But I think the real question is that there is some consistency in the approach to this bill with the government's approach to a number of other areas. One that comes to mind is electricity deregulation. When we have challenged the government repeatedly on the higher costs that consumers are paying for electricity as a result of deregulation, we get a variety of answers, things to do with debt load or it's just inflation or, you know, we can't do anything about it or any number of things.

One of the things that we do hear frequently when we spin the wheel for the answer of the week on electricity deregulation is that consumers now have choice. You know, choice is an interesting argument. It's used in a number of areas by this government to justify policies that would otherwise be completely indefensible because they increase the burden on the citizens of this province in any number of ways.

You have the same argument made with natural gas, you know, and you begin to wonder, Mr. Speaker, whether one molecule of methane is different from another molecule of methane or whether or not one flow of electrons at a certain voltage is any different from the flow of electrons from another company when, in fact, they're generated in the same places, carried along the same lines, and are in every way indistinguishable. But you have choice, and the choice comes with a significant increase in cost.

Normally what you get is a bunch of phone calls at 6 o'clock at night, when you're trying to have supper, from people trying to sell you their particular product, which is exactly the same product packaged in slightly different ways. With one you might get a set of steak knives, with another you might get a chance for a trip to Hawaii for a winter holiday, but the bottom line is that choice in this government's philosophy means paying more for precisely the same product.

We're going to have the same thing now with Blue Cross. Blue Cross is actually a tremendous organization that provides a tremendous service, and I recognize that some of its programs are not going to be covered by this so-called level playing field, but it has provided supplementary health care on a not-for-profit basis. There are member plans in Canada in B.C., Alberta, Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nunavut, Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic provinces. They are members of the Canadian Association of Blue Cross Plans, and that association is responsible for maintaining and monitoring the standards of performance of its members and

so on.

9:00

Collectively, Mr. Speaker, Blue Cross plans cover approximately 7 million Canadians. The coverage represents 30 per cent of the supplementary health and dental market in Canada. The Blue Cross plans generate in excess of \$2 billion in annual revenue. What they've done is given very economic and very comprehensive supplementary health care coverage to Albertans for many, many years.

Now, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed has indicated that this will only apply in areas where Blue Cross competes with private companies, and I'm not sure that she's putting it exactly correctly, Mr. Speaker. I think this applies to areas in which private health care companies would like to compete more vigorously with Blue Cross, and of course when it's offered on a not-for-profit basis, it can do so more cheaply.

For the life of me, Mr. Speaker, I can't understand what it is about more cheaply that this government doesn't get. More cheaply means that the people of this province get the product that they need, get the service that they need at a lower cost. In order to let private companies compete in this business, they will now have to pay more. So what? What is it about letting private companies in that makes it worth all of us having to pay more for our supplementary insurance?

Now, I know that hon. members have said and the government has said that the increase will be fairly minimal, but, Mr. Speaker, this government has been adding up a number of minimal costs in a bunch of areas, and it's beginning to cost a lot of money. The question that I can't understand is: why should we pay one penny more for supplementary health insurance just so some private companies can get in on the action? It doesn't make sense. It's not in the interests of the public of this province. It is only in the interest of private health care companies and their shareholders. So if that is who the government wants to serve, they should stand up and say so because they're not serving the public.

Mr. Speaker, we've seen a similar approach, I guess, in reverse with respect to the whole question of car insurance. Rather than adopt a public monopoly, which is suitable for that kind of service and which can deliver a much cheaper product, the government is insisting on retaining a bunch of small, multiple, and less efficient organizations competing, allegedly, with one another in order to provide the same service. The result has been considerably higher auto insurance prices in this province than in the other three western provinces, that have public auto insurance.

Now, there's a difference between a public monopoly – this is for the benefit of the Minister of Finance, who doesn't understand the difference, apparently. A public monopoly is operated in the public interest, is regulated, and is generally the most efficient way and the lowest cost way of providing certain types of services such as insurance and utilities. These are commonly the types of services that are provided through public monopolies.

It's very different from an unregulated private monopoly or near monopoly, as we have seen in the case of the packing industry for beef in this province, where two packing plants comprise 90 per cent of the business of beef packing in this province and, in the absence of an open border with the United States, have established a near-monopolistic position that allows them to fleece beef producers in this province while the government looks the other way.

Mr. Speaker, what we have here apparently is a government that is systematically favouring private interest at the expense of the pocketbooks of the ordinary voters who put them in power. Well, it won't be long before the people that put them in power – that is, the ordinary voters of this province – will realize what's going on, and

with any luck they'll come to that conclusion before the next election.

So, Mr. Speaker, I just want to indicate that I am totally opposed to this bill. I'm disappointed, quite frankly, that the committee's recommendations were not adopted because I think there was some common sense there, but obviously there was an intervention of some private-sector interests between the time the committee made its report and the time this bill was put before this Assembly. I think that's too bad because the changes will only benefit those private-sector interests and will harm the interests of the vast majority of the Albertans who depend on this service for their supplementary health insurance.

Mr. Speaker, with that I will take my seat and urge all hon. members to follow the lead of the original committee report and reject the approach that is contained in this bill. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

Anybody else wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed to close debate.

Ms Graham: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess that for the members who have spoken tonight, the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and the other hon. member, I would just recommend my comments and remarks that were made in second reading and in Committee of the Whole, which took place earlier today, which I think would go a long way to answering a lot of the concerns that both of you have raised this evening.

Lastly, I would like to say very specifically that to the best of my knowledge there was certainly no private insurer that intervened at the last moment, certainly not with me and to the best of my knowledge not with any other of my colleagues, to cause any change in our views. There was one recommendation that is being referred to, that being the exemption from the payment of income tax, and the consensus of the committee was that Alberta Blue Cross not be required to pay income tax or a payment in lieu of tax.

However, the position of this caucus, based on the philosophy of this government, was different. But I just want to make it very clear that that was not the result, to the best of my knowledge, of any lobbying effort from any company to myself or any other member of my caucus.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I would conclude my comments and ask you to call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for third reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 9:09 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

For the motion:

Calahasen	Griffiths	Mar
Cao	Hancock	Marz
Coutts	Hlady	Maskell
DeLong	Hutton	McClellan
Doerksen	Jacobs	McFarland
Ducharme	Johnson	Pham
Dunford	Klapstein	Renner
Fritz	Knight	Smith
Gordon	Kryczka	Taylor
Goudreau	Lukaszuk	Woloshyn

Graham Graydon	Magnus	Yankowsky
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9:20

Against the motion:

Bonner Mason	Massey	Nicol
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Totals:	For – 34	Against – 4
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[Motion carried; Bill 8 read a third time]

Bill 9 Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 9, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004, makes certain specific amendments to a bill that was proclaimed almost a year ago, in April of 2003, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act, which was the result of work done by the Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, who has been a big proponent of nonsmoking, along with the leadership also shown by the Minister of Health and Wellness. They have been very instrumental in assisting this government in implementing the overall strategy to reduce tobacco use in the province not only for youth but for adults as well.

Being someone who quit smoking five years, about two and a half months, and so many hours ago, it being the most difficult thing I ever did in my life, I wholeheartedly support anything we can do to stop people from ever starting in the first place. I wish I had been one of those people. I was silly enough to have started when I was 21 years of age.

In any event, Mr. Speaker, with the proclamation of the original bill, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Act, last spring, it has come to light that there were some improvements that were needed in the bill to make it more effective and more enforceable. The amendments that we see in Bill 9 accomplish, it is hoped, three main purposes, and that is to allow for regulations to be developed to define necessary exemptions for when youth can possess tobacco for very limited purposes, those purposes having been described in the debate in second reading and Committee of the Whole; secondly, to provide a broader definition of what a public place is where youth are not permitted to be in possession or to be smoking; thirdly, to provide for evidentiary rules for the use in court of prosecuting infractions relating to the use of certain inferences and certificates of analysis.

So all told, Mr. Speaker, this bill goes a long way in helping us to advance our strategy to help Albertans avoid smoking or compel them to quit. I would hope that all members will see their way clear to support this bill.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have an opportunity to make some comments at third reading of Bill 9, the Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004.

The World Health Organization a number of years back set forward an outline of what they thought a comprehensive tobacco control strategy might include, and part of their outline is a legislative component. It's interesting, Mr. Speaker, to see how comprehensive the legislative strategy that they propose is. One of the proposals they make is that "the accessibility of tobacco products

should reflect the gravity of harm associated with their use," and they go on to list a number of things that that effort should include.

- a taxation law that reduces affordability;

I think that the government has moved in that direction.

- an end to tobacco sales in health care, educational and athletics facilities;
- an end to tobacco sales in vending machines and from self-service displays;
- the effective elimination of tobacco sales and distribution to children.

Of course, this goes to Bill 9.

They also indicate that

there should be full and free consent among users and potential users of tobacco products. This would entail the following:

- an end to all direct and indirect forms of tobacco advertising, because tobacco advertising is inherently misleading;
- an end to the misleading messages conveyed on tobacco labelling and packaging;

I think there's been great progress made in this area.

- prominent, detailed and frequently updated health information on . . . tobacco packaging and at point of sale;
- full public disclosure of . . . toxins and additives;
- mandated public health education efforts.

I think we've moved a long ways in terms of having some of these strategies in place.

Further, they recommend that there would be "guaranteed assistance to those who wish to cease using tobacco products and assistance for tobacco users seeking compensation for their harm."

They have a rather comprehensive legislative agenda. Part of it, that I don't think we've addressed here and that has been an issue in the province to our west, is "a guarantee of a smoke-free public spaces, workplaces and public transit." It's been an issue in British Columbia, and that's where workers in facilities who were forced to work in and deal with second-hand smoke have been successful in having that harm removed.

They also recommend that there be "guaranteed and simplified methods of redress for those harmed by environmental tobacco smoke." So, again, as I say, a comprehensive list, and we watch the government as it moves. We understood that there was a comprehensive strategy that was proposed, and the government for some reason backed away from it. Instead, we've had a more piecemeal approach. I guess that given the devastating effect of tobacco on people, we should welcome any progress with respect to curtailing it.

It's for that reason that we'll be supporting Bill 9 and encouraging the government to look at recommendations from organizations like the World Health Organization and to bring forward a comprehensive tobacco strategy that would be effective in curbing the use and penalizing those who promote the use and working to have in place effective public education programs.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to support Bill 9. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

9:30

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that most sections of this bill are certainly positive and acceptable to us. There is one concern, and that is the section that allows the creation of regulations which can exempt persons or classes of persons from the application of provisions of this act. I guess I could go along with that if the act specified, for example, ceremonial purposes in First Nations ceremonies and so on where tobacco is an important piece of the ceremony.

Where the concern comes in is the intention that the government

has indicated to allow minors working in stores to vend tobacco products. That's not an exemption to this that we feel comfortable supporting, Mr. Speaker. I think that minors ought not to be selling tobacco products when there is such a strong emphasis on cracking down on selling tobacco to minors. If you go into virtually any store that sells tobacco products, they have signs there about IDing anyone that looks like they are underage, and there is a really strong focus.

I know that during the time I was on city council, we adopted strong measures in connection with stores that sold tobacco to minors. The federal government enforcement was very, very thorough and strong, and they would go in and do sting operations on a regular basis to stores, including corner stores and bigger stores right across the city. They would come before us with the convictions that they had obtained and ask the city council to enforce its bylaw, and we would lift the tobacco licence of any store thus convicted.

Now, what happens to that process when minors are selling tobacco themselves? They then have access to the tobacco, and the line is blurred. It becomes more difficult to enforce this direction. Both the city of Edmonton and the federal government were and still are quite vigilant with respect to this issue, and I think that this particular change when these regulations are brought forward will make that effort more difficult. It will introduce more ambiguity and perhaps potentially more opportunities for the law to be circumvented.

So on that basis, Mr. Speaker, I have to regretfully inform the House that I will be unable to support this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed to close debate.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Would you please call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 9 read a third time]

Bill 7

Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: On behalf of the hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations I would move Bill 7, Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004, for third reading.

As has been discussed earlier in the House, this is a very modest act. It simply changes the expiration date of the act from 2004 to 2010, thus keeping the mechanism in place for Alberta to elect persons to stand for the Senate of Canada in their continuing objective to encourage Senate reform.

It has been said in committee – but I'll repeat it now – that the extension of the act does not extend the terms of those people who were elected as Senators-in-waiting. Those terms expire this year, but it is useful to continue to have this act available to us to continue as part of the ongoing pressure, commitment, and lobbying to keep the issue before the Prime Minister and the government of Canada with respect to the concept that in this country provinces who do not have the population of Ontario or Quebec still need a voice in government, and that voice could be provided by an equal, effective, elected Senate.

If we have in some small way improved the selection process even as it stands now by having a Senatorial Selection Act – and, as I commented in committee, I believe that in terms of the appointments

that have been made in Alberta, we have clearly surpassed the quality of appointments made elsewhere in the country, not being done so blatantly on a political basis but having been done on a meritorious basis. I refer to my own constituent, Senator Tommy Banks, in that category and Doug Roche as well, an excellent Senator for Alberta albeit appointed.

I truly believe that the Senatorial Selection Act has had two effects. One is that it keeps a mechanism in place for us to do a Senatorial selection process, one which did see the first elected Senator appointed, Stan Waters, which does continue to keep in the public eye and in front of the federal government the need to have Senate reform and one which puts a mechanism in place which forces the Prime Minister, when putting forward senatorial candidates and ignoring the wishes of the provinces in doing so, to be very, very careful about the appointments that he makes.

So I would encourage us to pass this bill and extend the act.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Government House Leader on behalf of the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a third time]

Bill 6

Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 6, the Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004, be now moved for third reading.

Mr. Speaker, this piece of legislation is an enabling piece of legislation allowing the Department of Human Resources and Employment to pursue noncustodial parents with respect to enforcing child maintenance court orders.

I believe everyone in this Assembly would agree that definitely the thought behind the bill and the purpose of the bill are valuable ones. Unfortunately, in this province we have too many noncustodial parents who have absolved themselves of the responsibility to meet their financial responsibilities towards their children, having had their marriage dissolved. This bill will simply allow the minister and the department to more thoroughly investigate those noncustodial parents, finding out their assets, finding out their means of income, finding out perhaps even their whereabouts in order to successfully enforce child maintenance agreements to the benefit of those children who are now in low-income families and definitely could use those dollars.

Mr. Speaker, as such, I would encourage all members of this Assembly to support this bill and pass it into law.

Thank you.

9:40

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the mover indicated, it's a bill that we'll welcome. I think all of us in our constituency offices deal not daily but at least on a weekly basis with individuals trying to gain the support for children that the courts have ordered and that those youngsters and those families need, and anything that will move that process along and will help those families gain the kinds of resources that courts have judged should be theirs I think is worthy of our support. It remains a huge problem, an unfortunate one in terms of individuals not living up to their responsibilities, and

Bill 6 I think is one more tool in trying to rectify the situation and to bring some fairness to the individuals that are involved.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs to close the debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a third time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:42 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, March 4, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/04

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As we begin our deliberations in the Legislature today, we ask for strength and encouragement in our service of others. We ask for wisdom to guide us in making good laws and good decisions for the present and the future of Alberta. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to the House members from a small school in Calgary-Varsity called the Truth Academy. So I would ask Sherri Long, Alana Bentley, Chris Roy, and Esther Hellquist to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly, and I hope they do find truth in the Assembly this afternoon.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a group of 39 students, teachers, and supervisors from Boyle school in my constituency. They are seated in the members' gallery. I would like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce 11 guests here from Alberta Revenue who are visiting, part of the public service orientation tour. I'll have them stand as their names are read: Brett Armitage, Catherine Bittner, David Buzzeo, Brandee Carson, Pamela Gibbs, Dan Hallet, Sunny Kakar, Nussry Jomha, Raj Mann, Phyllis Phan, and Keltie Watson, all from investment management, tax revenue administration, risk management insurance, internal audit, and communications from the department. They're in the public gallery. Can I have them stand and have the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you a constituent of mine, Ms Dianne Williamson. Like many parents she was very impressed by the government's response in the Learning Commission and is here to watch that come out in play today. I would ask that she stand and be recognized and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it's a great pleasure

for me to introduce to you and to members of the Assembly a gentleman who's with the MD of Opportunity, but he's also from Red Earth Creek, which is quite a ways from here. He's with some staff from the MD. I would ask that Georges Jadot please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions today. The first is four individuals: Catherine Walker and Greg Bishop from Alberta Learning's Learning Resources Centre; Rick Hayes, director of special programs of Alberta Learning; and Gordon Bullivant, executive director of Foothills Academy in Calgary. Catherine and Greg are recent recipients of the national excellence in education award for their outstanding accomplishments in the area of learning disability resource development. Gordon Bullivant of Foothills Academy has been recognized for the high-quality work for students with learning disabilities. I would ask them all to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The next guest is the mayor of Brooks, who has had meetings up here this morning and tomorrow. I would ask Don Weisbeck to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a constituent of mine from Eaglesham. Mr. Lester Webb is 85 years of age and has farmed in Eaglesham for over 70 years. In his career he has built and flown two aircraft and – would you believe it? – has also built 37 violins and still plays the violin in an old-time country band. Mr. Webb indicates that he is the one that entertains seniors up in the Peace country. He's accompanied by friends Dale Wells and Fran Wells. I would ask all three of them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise with great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House someone I've known for many, many years and very cleverly married more than 20 years ago. In the House I often speak about the importance of fathers, and this man is a very excellent father to our two children. If Dennis Beck would please rise to receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly Mr. Ed DeJong, who is a resident of Fort Saskatchewan and a former employee of Dow. I'd ask Ed to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly some very special guests who are here this afternoon to observe proceedings. They are Mr. Phil Schwartz and Ms Sandra Manzardo, who are with the safe care implementation project in Victoria, B.C. Accompanying Mr. Schwartz and Ms Manzardo is Ms Kanuka, who

is with Children's Services, Edmonton and area child and family services authority.

The B.C. government is in the process of developing new legislation and implementing a new safe care system to help sexually exploited youth similar to our protection of children involved in prostitution legislation. Mr. Schwartz and Ms Manzardo are visiting us to learn from our experience in this area as well as to co-ordinate support services for sexually exploited youth between our two provinces.

Our guests are in the members' gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to rise and introduce to you two very civic-minded members of my constituency. The first is Carole Oliver, who is a trustee for wards 6 and 7 for the Calgary board of education, and the second is Art Johnston, who is a retired sergeant of the Calgary police department and a fellow colleague of our Member for Calgary-Buffalo. As well, he's planning on running for MLA in the new riding of Calgary-Hays in the next election. Would you please rise, Art Johnston and Carole Oliver, and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with pleasure that I introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Jennifer Krauskopf. Jennifer is a student in office and records administration at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. She is on a one-day job shadow mission with the Official Opposition. With your permission I'd ask Jennifer to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Cattle Industry

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday in this Assembly the hon. Member for Red Deer-North, in questioning the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in regard to the BSE compensation package, like a lot of Albertans was also looking for answers. The hon. minister in response to that question stated, "There is no secret about where that money went." My first question is to the hon. minister of agriculture. Will the government provide the list mentioned yesterday by the hon. minister of who actually got money in this province under the BSE aid package?

1:40

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I answered that question yesterday. Ninety per cent of the \$400 million went directly to producers. The remaining 10 per cent went into increased surveillance and testing with the new level 3 lab, improvements to the level 2 lab to allow Bio-Rad testing, some market development money, and some export market programs. So that was the other 10 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, I have said repeatedly, not just this week, that I have no problems releasing that, but I will release it when it is completely paid out. The program is about 95 per cent. Contrary to what objectives the hon. member might have in this, my objective will be to present it fairly and openly and in its entirety. I could stand here

today and tell you how it will be used by others, but it will be every dollar, every cheque, every name accounted for when the program is complete. We're at 95 per cent. I don't think it's too much to ask to just finish the job.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: did the minister meet last week in Red Deer with the Alberta cattle industry to discuss further financial support?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I met with the four cattlemen's associations: the Feeder Associations, the feeder council, the Western Stock Growers', and the auction market and agent buyers' association. I was invited to attend their conference, to speak at their conference, and to take questions from the floor at that conference, which I did. I was able to stay for most of the rest of the afternoon, till about 4:30, 5 o'clock, and listen to some of the presentations, discuss many of the ideas that they were contemplating with individual members throughout the afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, for the member's information, I also spent three hours with them in this building the day of the throne speech, immediately after it, discussing the discussion paper that was presented at that conference. They asked if they could come. Some eight of them drove to Edmonton to sit down and have a discussion so that I clearly understood that these were discussion points, that the information wasn't as complete or conclusive as they would want. They wanted to make sure that this minister and this government, who have worked with them shoulder to shoulder for the last 10 months, were not blindsided by any of this.

It's unfortunate that they didn't invite – well, maybe it's not unfortunate. Anyway, it was their choice. I think the hon. member would have had an opportunity to be better informed about the contents of that paper.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: how can Albertans be sure that any further aid package gets to every producer that needs it?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, that has occurred, and it's very unfortunate that the opposition members have seized an opportunity, they believe, not to help the industry but to try and discredit the government with the industry. That will not happen.

Every producer of fed cattle, whether they were small, feeding five head, or large, feeding 50,000 head, was enrolled in that program. Every cow-calf producer who registered their herd was eligible for payment under the market cow and bull program. Mr. Speaker, nobody was excluded.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Prices

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before the Minister of Energy discreetly tabled the embarrassing report from the Bolger commission on Tuesday, the Premier tabled information providing that monthly electricity bills have skyrocketed for all Albertans because of electricity deregulation. Clearly, the Premier's intention was to defuse a hot-button issue, but as we witnessed yesterday, he only succeeded in blowing his own fuse. Now, my first question is to the Premier. Given that the Premier knows that the only way

electricity prices are going is up, why didn't the Bolger commission report regarding the future forecast of electricity prices in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. minister respond to the specific question relative to blowing my fuse.

Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity of listening to the radio on 630 CHED in the car on the way back to my condominium, and I heard the hon. member, and his tone and his style were nowhere like they were in the Legislature. The question was: why were you called an idiot? "Well, you know, the people across the way can't take the heat," and so on.

Let me refresh the hon. member as to the tone of his question and how, if I might use the term, idiotic it was.

Again to the same minister: given that this government led producers into a false sense of security by giving the impression that the borders would be open in the new year, is it not now your responsibility to share some of the financial burden currently being felt by the small cattle producers in this province?

That was so idiotic, Mr. Speaker, and that's what leads to the frustration. He gets on and he says: oh, they can't take the heat. Then the questioner says: well, what would you do? He didn't answer the question because he doesn't know. He doesn't have the answers. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the floor.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that the Bolger commission report states that electricity prices will be volatile when the province moves to a monthly flow-through price, how much more will consumers end up paying because of this volatility which is a direct result of electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, he likes to blame Steve West, who will come on as my chief of staff, calling him the Eight Billion Dollar Man. He'll blame everyone. He won't acknowledge the fact that deregulation of electricity has brought on more power and stabilized prices.

I'll have the hon. minister elaborate.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, it is always beneficial to shine the light of truth, particularly in front of some of the students that are here from that group.

So let's talk a little bit about truth. Let's talk about a tabled report that says what is working well.

Alberta has a more reliable supply of electricity . . . New supply was added by private sector companies rather than by government . . . New electricity capacity is more environmentally friendly . . . Retail competition is fierce in the large commercial and industrial market . . . The wholesale power market is working well.

Mr. Speaker, I'd encourage the member, now that the report is tabled, to actually read it.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the Bolger commission report states that the price for electricity in Alberta may be higher at times because of exports, how much will Albertans pay for electricity during these periods, and how long will these periods of high electricity prices last because of electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the question itself leads to speculation, but

that is a tactic that the Liberals try to use: create suspicion, use innuendo, use speculation.

Relative to the question I'll have the hon. minister answer.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, if the member would just, please, take the time to read. It's pretty good-sized print, and it's well written. If you'd just take the chance to read it, it says that, you know, the commission declined to predict the future of electricity prices.

For example, if you take a look at an article from Ontario, the energy minister there is saying that Ontarians would be happy with increased prices. That's a Liberal minister, but I guess that's the kind of thing that the Liberals think of.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, what we do know is that we're getting accurate pricing in a competitive market, and most importantly we're delivering the supply to all-time record highs because of all-time economic growth.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

1:50

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Tuesday the Minister of Energy repeated several times that Alberta's electricity deregulation scheme is "pursuit of excellence," but everyone knows that the only excellence this government is pursuing is discriminating against Alberta electricity customers for the benefit of generators, retailers, and transmission companies. Consumers, when they read their power bill, see the big print, which is the high cost of electricity in this province. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. How does Alberta Energy's own research, which the Premier tabled on Tuesday and which shows that monthly electricity bills have skyrocketed because of electricity deregulation, fit into this government's pursuit of excellence?

Mr. Klein: Table your own bill. Table your bill. I want to see how bad it is.

Mr. Smith: That actually is a very good idea, Mr. Speaker. Members have suggested that maybe the member would want to table his last bills from living in the city of Edmonton. I think that would be a very good demonstration of what prices are. So let's see if he'll do that. [interjections]

The Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Minister of Energy has the floor.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I really believe that to allow competitive market generation into Alberta is the pursuit of excellence. We're going to continue on that pursuit, and we're going to continue to find the excellence. I think the biggest referendum on electrical deregulation was held March 15, 2001.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Energy: how does a complete void of retail competition for residential electricity customers in Alberta fit into this government's pursuit of excellence?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, that's actually a very good question.

An Hon. Member: Well, I wouldn't go that far.

Mr. Smith: That's true, but I'm exaggerating for the purposes of emphasis.

There is a regulated rate option, Mr. Speaker, which offers individual consumers in Alberta a specific regulated rate or a protection of electricity rates that are filed and openly reviewed by the Energy and Utilities Board. This is the first time in the history of Alberta that this has ever been done.

So, yes, it is a pursuit of excellence. Are we there? We're a lot closer than what we were in 1998, and we haven't blacked out, even though this member says that deregulation caused the coldest month on record in January 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: if this government's pursuit of excellence is so obvious, why does this government need a \$3 million propaganda campaign organized by the Public Affairs Bureau to sell Albertans a defective product they do not want, electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I wouldn't call it a propaganda campaign; I would call it a fact campaign. The reason we have to conduct a fact campaign is because of the Liberals and their propensity to come out with things that simply are not the truth. For instance, last week they came out and blamed deregulation for power outages in Calgary. They came out with a press release saying: this is deregulation. Then they had to pull back the press release immediately because they found out that it had nothing to do with deregulation at all.

Mr. Speaker, that's why we have to advertise: to get the facts out because this team over there are out busily amongst the people of Alberta spreading lies, propaganda, misinformation, and falsehoods. So we have to advertise to get the truth out.

The Speaker: I'm going to ask for temperateness here. There are words being used in this Assembly that will not inspire any teacher with his or her children in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Klein: I apologize for using the word "lies," Mr. Speaker. They are not telling the truth.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Cattle Industry (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The government is pulling out all the stops to discredit the New Democrat opposition in its efforts to get to the bottom of the BSE compensation program. There are no lengths that this government will not go to in order to prevent a real investigation into where the \$400 million really ended up. They will even stoop to putting pressure on beef producers and their organizations to disavow their own report. My question is to the Premier. Will he tell this Assembly just what pressure the government used in order to get beef producers to change their tune and say wonderful things about this program?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there was no pressure whatsoever. What happened was that a discussion paper was tabled. It was put into the hands, somehow, of the NDs and the media, who took it as gospel. You know, one of the dangers in politics – and the hon. member knows about it – is that if you think about it and you muse out loud, it becomes policy. You know, there's that old saying that yes means yes, maybe means yes, and no means maybe.

Mr. Speaker, the beef industry has been very close to this government in terms of working with the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in coming up with programs to address this very serious situation. They understand that the bottom line is to get the borders open. That is the bottom line. They understand that the bottom line also is to explain to the international community the safety of our beef and how ridiculous the international protocols are with respect to BSE.

But they did discuss – and I underline discuss – some things that perhaps – and I underline perhaps – could – and I underline could – be done in the interim. The NDs, of course, took this as fact.

So they, in turn, issued a press release today because they said that this has gone too far. Saretsky states: "Our consolidated beef industry action plan talks about" – talks about – "better ways of helping the beef industry in the short and long term. We're trying" – underline trying – "to find ways to reduce government programs, restore market stability and address the growing size of the beef herd in this country." Their actions and their motives are commendable.

But what he says – and this is very, very important – is:

The real shame from this entire episode of finger-pointing is that the needs of the province's beef industry are being ignored by the provincial opposition parties. Time and energy are being wasted by looking at the past. It is better for everyone to spend our time and energies on helping the industry survive and move forward.

Indeed, their press release is entitled *Rather than Debate the Past, Beef Industry Wants to Look Forward*. That's what this government is doing. We are working with the beef industry.

The Speaker: We'll have a tabling as well.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, can the Premier tell the House why Mr. Bard Haddrell, executive director of the agricultural information division of this government, was sent down to browbeat cattle industry representatives and whether this official asked these beef organizations to issue that release attacking the New Democrat opposition?

Mr. Klein: No, they didn't. First of all, I'm going to have the hon. Deputy Premier respond. Mr. Speaker, sorry; what was the question now?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, did Bard go to browbeat them?

Mr. Klein: No, no, he didn't go down to browbeat them. But there was something else attached to that.

Mrs. McClellan: That was it.

Mr. Klein: Oh, fine. I'll have you respond then.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, Bard Haddrell is a member of executive committee of the department of agriculture. He has attended probably 90 per cent of the meetings with the industry. Mr. Haddrell, again, attends these meetings on the industry's invitation, as all of us do on this side of the House and as my staff do.

Mr. Speaker, in fact, I'm going to be meeting with this group again. This is a fairly common occurrence. I don't send out press releases because I'm meeting with them because sometimes it's two or three times a week. But I will be meeting with this group, and I expect that Mr. Haddrell will be with me, as he has been at most of them.

2:00

Mr. Speaker, the industry are upset not with this government; they

are upset with the opposition parties. They're disappointed in the media because until this issue the coverage has been very, very balanced. They're disappointed. They're not upset. They're not angry. They're disappointed that what has been a very astute group of reporters missed the point at their convention that this was a discussion paper, missed the point at their convention, which was open to the media, that all of this work was being sent back to committee.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'm not calling them; they're calling me. I'll turn them over to you any time, but they don't seem to want to talk to you. I don't know.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that hundreds of farmers are phoning the New Democrat opposition – all our staff are busy on the phones – can the Premier please tell us why they keep throwing dust in people's eyes about the real issue instead of ordering an independent investigation by the Auditor General into whether or not meat packers indirectly benefited from BSE compensation programs? Tell us why.

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, the question contains a number of allegations. I know what I wanted to say: that the Alberta Beef Industry Council did not point a finger or name specifically the ND opposition. The hon. member seems to be sensitive. He said that the council is picking on the NDs. Well, they aren't. They specifically said the opposition parties, which means the Liberals as well.

Mr. Speaker, there is a number. I've said it before: if the hon. member or his leader or any member of the opposition or any citizen has a complaint relative to how that money was used, whether in fact meat packers were making excessive profits, were doing anything untoward, there is a number. It's the number of the Competition Bureau. The number is 1-800-348-5358. If there are any problems, I would invite anyone to phone that number and lodge their complaint. Indeed, I heard on the CBC a spokesperson for the Competition Bureau saying that she wants and invites people to come forward with complaints and allegations.

Now, relative to the Auditor General, because this was specific to his question, Mr. Speaker, this is what is frustrating. It has been posted on the web site. It is public knowledge, and it's under www.oag.ab.ca, and it talks about the spectrum of operations for the Auditor General. It says, "We add credibility to the Government's financial reporting and improve the financial administration of the Province and more! We . . ." And there are a number of bullets. First bullet: we "do system audits (value for money) and attest audits (provide assurance)." They can do it already.

The Speaker: A reminder again: exhibits are not to be used in the House. We've had, actually, illustrations of people who have used exhibits in the House in the past.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Sulphur Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The University of Alberta has recently released a study showing that sulphur dioxide from air pollution affects the health of cattle. With the effects of BSE already negatively affecting the cattle industry, this is yet another blow to the industry that many of my constituents will be very worried about. My first question to the Minister of Environment: what can you tell my constituents about the results of this study?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, first of all, let me say that this is a lab study done in a laboratory for a PhD thesis, and the results may not be relevant for a couple of reasons. First of all, the results may not be relevant because there were only 36 cattle tested in the lab, and they were exposed to sulphur dioxide at up to a hundred times the concentration of Alberta's air-quality guidelines. Our guideline for a 24-hour period of sulphur dioxide in Alberta is .05 to 1 part per million. These cattle were exposed to between 1 and 20 parts per million.

In hundreds of thousands of hours of monitoring Alberta's air quality, Mr. Speaker, we have never reached 1 part per million of sulphur dioxide. So I think the results were done in the lab, and we just simply can't put too much faith in them in terms of how it actually affects the environment, how it affects the cattle, because the concentrations were much, much higher, up to a hundred times higher, than you'd ever find in Alberta's air.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that our cattle industry needs accurate information about the possible health effects of oil and gas production on their livestock, what is the minister going to do with this information?

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, we've already taken action on this. About four to five years ago under the leadership of the former Minister of Environment, who is now the Minister of Infrastructure – and very forward leadership it was. He commissioned a study with three other provinces: Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia. Four provinces are all working together on a study that's run out of the University of Saskatchewan, and the appropriate name for the group that's running it is the Western Interprovincial Scientific Studies Association.

This is a study that is peer reviewed from the start, the design of the study, to the end, when we start looking at the results, on the results of things in the air as they affect cattle or other animals as well. This study is looking at over 30,000 cattle in three western provinces – 30,000 in three western provinces – and the study, as I quite clearly pointed out, is peer reviewed. The study is costing in the area of \$18 million.

We're at a stage in the study now, Mr. Speaker, where the field research is being done. WISSA, the western group, is doing the analysis of the data as we speak. That data analysis is being peer reviewed, the results will be peer reviewed, and we expect to have the final results of this study about a year from now or by the middle of 2005 at the latest.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question, to the Minister of Energy: what safety procedures are in place to prevent the release of sulphur dioxide?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. A very good question. Albertans are protected. Albertans are the best protected in the world with respect to a sour gas regulatory regime. We protect Albertans with a very disciplined, rigorous method that includes open discussion at the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, a very strong system that ensures that there's the appropriate equipment, a very strong system that ensures the appropriate emergency response. In fact, in the long-range effects with respect to flaring and sulphur

dioxide in the atmosphere, the board and the Clean Air Strategic Alliance have moved ahead of schedule in reducing flaring in this province by some 62 per cent. Albertans are well protected with this industry. World class.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Government Expense Claims

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Four days ago the Liberal opposition sent a letter to the Premier politely asking him to answer 23 basic questions about government expenses. Despite claiming on several occasions that his government is open and transparent, the Premier has not provided any answers to these questions and, in fact, indicated in this House that it would cost thousands of dollars just to answer even six of the 23. My questions are to the Premier. Can the Premier explain why he has not provided even one answer to any of the 23 questions contained in the Liberal opposition's letter?

Mr. Klein: That is a good question. I didn't say that it would cost thousands of dollars to address just six questions. Mr. Speaker, with all due respect, all you allowed me to do was to read six questions of the 26.

2:10

The Speaker: Please. It is not the chair's fault. You may continue.

Mr. Klein: I apologize, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, four days, indeed, have elapsed since I received the letter. It's going to take some time to get the answers prepared. What I did suggest at the time was that this letter should be placed on the Order Paper as a written question because it demands a number of details in its answer, so I would suggest that the hon. member do that. In addition to that, we will do our best to get the answers in as timely a manner as possible.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, again to the Premier. We're not asking him to answer the questions now, and we did table them, so everybody knows them. Why, by asking us to use written questions, is the Premier forcing Albertans and the opposition to jump through another set of hoops in order to get the answers?

Mr. Klein: You know, Mr. Speaker, I find that her question is somewhat contradictory because in her previous question she said: why is it taking so long – understanding that the letter was given to me only four days ago – to get the answers to these questions? Then she says: well, I understand now that the Premier's office needs time, that Executive Council needs time. We will get the answers as quickly as we possibly can and provide, where appropriate, the answers to those questions.

But I would suggest again that the proper way, the parliamentary way, to do this would be not to hold a news conference five minutes before giving me the letter – right? – then sending me the letter. The proper way would be to place it on the Order Paper and have the questions come through the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Well, they still don't have to answer written questions.

Can the Premier, then, if he's agreed to give us the answers, give me a date now when I can expect to see them? I'm open. A month? A week?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I can't give her a date right now, but perhaps I can answer one or two of the questions right now. What was the first question? You have the letter in front of you. The hon. member has the letter in front of her. Ask me the first question. If she wants to ask me the first question, I'll try and answer it.

The Speaker: Well, unfortunately, the hon. Premier will have to take his place. Our rules clearly prohibit any member from having one question and two supplementaries, and that would be a total violation of the rules.

The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Audit of Agricultural Relief Programs

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, there is no question in anyone's mind about the devastating impact of BSE on Alberta producers. Albertans know that the provincial government has provided roughly \$400 million in compensation to help cattle farmers survive this crisis. Some of my constituents in Red Deer have heard speculation that this money didn't get into the hands of those who desperately needed it. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Given that our government has provided agricultural relief programs in the past, what is the standard audit process for programs such as the BSE compensation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There is a process in place that we have adopted as a government. It's one that's been open and accountable and one that has been revered by our own Auditor General as being one of the most open in all of the jurisdictions in Canada. In fact, I think that was enunciated at a Public Accounts meeting a week or so ago.

Mr. Speaker, insofar as individual programs such as the current one that has been under debate here in this House, the process is that the accounting people within the department of agriculture will in fact have put in place processes to deal with this program. They will have already, as the minister of agriculture and rural development has already said in this House, a pre-audit function where they will make sure that applications that come through for this program are, in fact, in order before monies are released.

Now, in another few weeks we will hit our year-end. At that point the Auditor General's staff will come in and audit all departments of this government including the agriculture department. This program will be audited by the Auditor General in due course through the audit process that will be completed before his report is filed with members of this Assembly. If there are any difficulties, they will be identified by the Auditor General's staff and made known to the department of agriculture for rectifying.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what happens if this audit process identifies potential problems with any of our relief programs?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, through the audit process and working with the chief financial officer within the Department of

Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, any adjustments that have to be made will be made, and in fact the Auditor General will make sure that there's a follow-up in that process and make corrections if there are any there. They will evaluate the system, they will evaluate the manual processes, and they will evaluate the reporting that takes place by that department back through this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the Minister of Finance: what is the role of the Public Accounts Committee in this audit process?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, actually, the Auditor General performs the audit, and the audit function is his responsibility. What does happen, though, Mr. Speaker, is that once he files his report with this Assembly, that this year had 90 some odd recommendations, that is referred to a select committee of this Legislature called Public Accounts. They then meet with the Auditor General and review his report and the accounts that are presented, and each ministry is called before that committee to answer questions by the Public Accounts Committee. They're really not part of the audit process, but they review the Auditor General's report in detail, as all members should. In fact, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I believe, is the chairman of that committee, so I'm sure he's well aware of the process of Public Accounts.

Southeast Calgary Hospital

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the Alberta government has a plan to construct a P3 megacomplex within the emergency planning zone of six proposed critical sour gas wells just southeast of Calgary. These wells will contain 36 per cent hydrogen sulphide, which is lethal in trace amounts. To the Minister of Infrastructure: why would this ministry consider planning such a large-scale P3 project in an area that could put the public safety at risk?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what portfolio the member thinks that I'm now covering. Yesterday or the day before it was Transportation. Today it sounds like it's Energy. I'm just not sure where he's coming from.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: what steps has this government taken to co-ordinate surface and subsurface planning and development since October 2003?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member is talking about some P3 that I'm not aware of and mixing that in with sour gas. I guess it's gas wells that he's talking about. I just simply don't know what he's talking about.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: will this ministry relocate the proposed P3 hospital project outside of the emergency planning zone in the event that sour gas wells are approved by the EUB?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, we as Infrastructure or government have not even seen anything to do with this so-called P3 hospital. I think that what he's confused with is the fact that the Calgary health region has suggested that when they do get into building the south Calgary hospital, it probably – probably – would be a good candidate for a P3, but that's not something that we're doing, and it's not something that has even progressed to any extent. It's been talked about, but that's not this department.

2:20

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, if I might provide some light to this subject. The Calgary health region has expressed some concerns with respect to the development of sour gas wells in the area, and they have made submissions before the EUB with respect to how wide a range the emergency planning zone should be. I'm not intimate with the details of what the nature of Calgary health region's submissions are, but I do have a great respect for them to place first and foremost the interests of patients and Calgarians and people who will possibly use a hospital that may be located there sometime in the future. I'm also equally confident that the EUB will take into account all the information, including the submissions of the CHR, in determining what is an appropriate emergency planning zone.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Softwood Lumber Trade Dispute

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. Last December federal government officials from Canada and the United States developed a proposed interim agreement on trade in softwood lumber between the two countries. My first question to the minister: has the minister discussed the softwood lumber issue with the federal government on our current status of discussions within Canada?

Mr. Jonson: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I did discuss the softwood issue with the federal minister in December and raised Alberta's concerns about the proposed interim agreement. As you know, other provinces and many industry groups shared our concerns, and subsequently the federal government indicated to the United States government that the interim agreement was not acceptable.

I think, though, Mr. Speaker, it's important to indicate that as a follow-up the Canadian federal and provincial officials met earlier this year to discuss ways to resolve our outstanding issues. Alberta remains open to considering a new proposal if changes are made to the agreement itself and to the federal quota allocation model. In the meantime we will work with the federal government and other provincial governments and industry to deal with the various issues involved.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. It is my understanding that we are still talking about a proposed interim agreement. What is the status of the negotiations with the United States on this softwood lumber dispute?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, as I said, the Canadian government has informed the United States government that the proposed agreement is not acceptable, and there are a number of key issues involved in this overall matter. The federal government's and the provinces' concerns were quite numerous, but I'd like to just feature some of the key ones.

One was that in the proposed agreement there was a lack of exit ramps for provinces that decided to make forest management changes. There was a limit on the share of the U.S. market that was of concern. Also, the industry was very concerned that as a result of that agreement, if it had been put in place, only 52 per cent of the duty deposits that have been paid would be returned from the United States.

So overall that is the situation, but we continue to be poised to engage in further discussions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. In light of the proposed interim agreement where is your department with the changing circumstances pertaining to the community timber program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The whole softwood lumber negotiations continue to be a very challenging area to the industry. I work very closely with the industry. Of course, the other ministry is the leader in the softwood negotiations, but I do work with the industry very closely here in Alberta, and through their executive and our government officials we'll continue working with the other ministry in that particular area.

But I just want to mention how important the forest industry is in Alberta. You know, it continues to be a challenging area. Of the overall economic diversification plan we have in Alberta, next to energy and the agriculture industry, forestry comes in third as far as job creation, purchases, and taxes and continues to be very important.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Class Sizes

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the Learning Commission first reported, parents on Commission Watch have heard much talk and seen little action. They are waiting for the promised changes to appear in the classes and the schools that their children attend. My first question is to the Minister of Learning. When will parents begin to see the smaller primary grade classes that were recommended in the report?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for that question because, as the hon. member fully knows, today we had another announcement on seven more recommendations of the Learning Commission. These were recommendations that were very positive. They were brought forward after in many cases about eight months of negotiations with the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association and arrive at what I feel is a very good compromise between all three parties: Alberta Learning, the ATA, and the ASBA.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has asked a specific question about the amount of dollars and the class size. This year alone we have already added another \$110 million into the learning system, into the K to 12 system.

As everyone here knows, budget is going to be coming up very, very soon, and at that time I will make more announcements about the monetary dollars for the Learning Commission and for Learning in general. Mr. Speaker, I'm sure you would not look too well upon this if I were to break budget confidentiality and say some of the things that were in the budget here now.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you again. It was more talk again today.

My next question is to the minister. How soon will parents see actual class sizes reported, as recommended by the commission, and not the averages used by the minister, which really hide the reality of 30-plus students in many primary grade classrooms?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, actual class sizes were used. Actual class sizes were used by the individual jurisdictions, and the individual jurisdictions put out their average class size. We then put out the average class size for the province. The hon. member has the average class size data that was given to him, and it was subsequently put on our web site.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, and again to the same minister: will the new business plans include a measure of class size so it can be monitored?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, we continually monitor class size, and again that will be something that we are looking at. As well, it will not just be in the business plan; it will also be in the accountability statement that school boards will have to put out to their own constituents. This is extremely, extremely important in the accountability back to the constituents, the accountability to those people who have their kids in the school divisions and under the school boards. This is a huge step forward, and it's a huge step in the accountability of the whole system.

So a long answer to the hon. member's question, but, yes, school class size will certainly be one of the issues that will be in the business plan, that will be discussed in the business plan and will be discussed even more so in the accountability statements from the school boards.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now we'll call upon the first of four members. In the interim, happy birthday to the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

2:30 Learning Disabilities Awareness Month

Mr. Herard: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, this week marks the beginning of Learning Disabilities Awareness Month, a month that is proclaimed nationally to draw attention to the challenges and the many successes that people living with learning disabilities experience each day.

Up to 10 per cent of the population of Canada live with learning disabilities. These disabilities affect how people acquire knowledge, organize, remember, understand, and use information. We now know that learning disabilities are a neurological condition and they could be lifelong.

This month gives us a cause to celebrate and salute the many people and organizations that help those living with learning disabilities to reach their full potential. Three of these people are here with us today, and the hon. Minister of Learning appropriately introduced them. I'd like to recognize Catherine Walker and Greg Bishop from Alberta Learning along with Gordon Bullivant, executive director of the Foothills Academy of Calgary, who are recent recipients of the national excellence of education award.

Catherine's and Greg's awards were for outstanding accomplishments in the area of learning disability resource development, and we

do have a lot of good people in the Learning department, Mr. Speaker. Gordon's award on behalf of the Foothills Academy was for the school's high-quality work with students with learning disabilities.

On behalf of the government of Alberta I'd like to thank the many individuals and organizations, including Alberta Learning, the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta, and our postsecondary institutions, for working together towards a common goal. Because of your ongoing hard work and research we are closer to identifying specific factors that can predict successful life outcomes for those living with learning disabilities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Scott Tournament of Hearts

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, there's no bodychecking, no bump and grind, and no exhilarating speeds, but the 2004 Scott Tournament of Hearts hosted in Red Deer, Alberta, reached exhilarating attendance records and stopped hearts as fans focused on fatal shots that missed their mark by millimetres.

In 2001 the Scott Tournament of Hearts, the Canadian women's curling championship, won the Gemini award for the top live sporting event on television. So why would a curling championship beat out a hockey event in Canada? Well, in Canada there are 1.2 million people who curl every winter. In the rest of the world the total number of curlers is 100,000, including 17,000 in the U.S. Curling competes with hockey for popularity because there are 1.2 million people who actually play the game. In the book *Burned by the Rock* Jean Sonmor explains: "These Canadians are farmers, fishermen, stockbrokers. They run computers, hairdressing salons or supermarkets. The mix is as diverse as the country." Curling is a major winter pastime in Canada.

Scott Paper, a division of Kruger Inc, has sponsored the Tournament of Hearts for the past 23 years and has agreed to sponsor this tournament for another six. They are the longest national sponsor of amateur sport in Canada. So with toilet paper, facial tissue, and paper towels adorning the hallways and runways of the curling championship, 113,000 fans and 12 championship teams experienced the friendly faces and helping hands of over 700 volunteers from central Alberta.

Team Alberta made a valiant attempt but were knocked out in the round robin. The heart-stopping final game played on February 29 between Team Canada and Team Quebec was a final fit for Canadian fans. Quebec won the hearts of the crowd as they cheered for the young and tenacious team, but Colleen Jones and Team Canada with the experience of six national championships won the tournament.

Congratulations Team Canada. Congratulations, too, to Al Redel, chair of the tournament, and the 700 volunteers of central Alberta for demonstrating why I call Red Deer paradise.

May everyone in Canada look forward to next year's Scott to be held in St. John's, Newfoundland-Labrador, where I'm sure they plan to break the Red Deer record for sales in the Heart Stop Lounge.

Traffic Safety

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, traffic safety is an important indicator of the quality of life in any community. Now more than ever traffic safety is an important issue here in Alberta.

Even with education and enforcement programs designed to lower the rate of traffic collisions in the province, fatalities and injuries

resulting from collisions are still unacceptably high in Alberta. In terms of population growth Alberta's fatal collision rate decreased from 2001 to 2002; however, 2002 saw the number of collisions on Alberta's roadways rise by almost 9,000 to over 116,000 total collisions.

In 2003 drunk drivers continued to wreak havoc on city roadways despite years of public awareness campaigns and efforts by police to catch offenders. Sadly, in a recent survey by Stats Canada Edmonton and Calgary ranked first in drunk driving offences among Canada's nine largest cities. The issue of drinking and driving becomes particularly predominant during the holiday season, when people tend to consume more alcohol. In cases like these we must ask ourselves why for some it is still considered socially acceptable to drink and drive and why so many people continue to make the choice to do so.

The issue of traffic safety is particularly important because it affects Albertans on a number of levels. Collisions, of course, cause great emotional trauma, but they can also have grave financial consequences for both individuals and communities. Victims and families of victims require emotional and financial support to cope with loss and medical bills and with vehicle repairs and higher insurance premiums. Communities must repair damage to public property caused by collisions as well as make programs and services available to those who have been involved in accidents. Based on estimations by the Alberta Motor Association the overall cost of collisions to society will be over \$4.2 billion in 2003.

The government's recent announcement of an independent review into its current traffic safety program recognizes this. What is needed is a comprehensive review of the current situation in Alberta so we can better address the issues around traffic safety that continue to elude us. I look forward to seeing the results of the independent review in May.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Low-income Albertans

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We'll need to listen more carefully regarding the needs of low-income Albertans. We also need to listen to the Alberta Federation of Labour when they say:

Welfare is the income source of last resort for Albertans, the final strand in the so-called "social safety net." In theory, at least, welfare is supposed to protect each of us from becoming completely destitute in the event we lose all other sources of income.

In a society where many of us live from paycheque to paycheque, any job loss carries with it the potential, however slight, to become a financial catastrophe. But if you lose your job and you can't get Employment Insurance, or if you can't find a new job before your EI benefits run out, welfare is supposed to be there to prevent your family from losing everything and ending up homeless.

Of course welfare benefits in Canada are set at a level that means many recipients will, in fact, end up living on the streets. Certainly most Canadians wouldn't be able to keep up their mortgage payments or pay rent if they had to rely on income from welfare.

Welfare Incomes 2002, published by the National Council of Welfare, estimates the basic welfare income of four "household types" in each province of Canada. In three of the four categories, Alberta's welfare benefits are among the lowest in the country.

As we saw in the case of the minimum wage, Alberta treats its poorest citizens more harshly than do other provinces in Canada, despite the fact that it is the wealthiest province. While persons with disabilities, for example, may have their welfare income

supplemented by other services, does anyone seriously believe that these Albertans can enjoy a reasonable quality of life on a cash income of \$7,600 a year?

For the welfare households consisting of a single parent with a child, the picture is equally bleak. In this instance, Alberta ranks dead last among provinces. The typical single parent family is headed by a woman, who has been deprived of spousal income and support by either marital breakdown or the death of a spouse. What kind of upbringing, what kind of future, can these single mothers provide for their children on \$11,600 a year?

I ask the Minister of Human Resources and Employment to please ensure that these people have an increase in their benefits in the next budget year. Thank you.

head: 2:40

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 1, 4, 5, 15, and 33.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 21 and 43.

Thank you.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two quick tablings. One of them highlights the international spotlight that is going to be shone on Alberta's artists, specifically the music community. Today we released the first ever compilation CD featuring Alberta musicians, which will go world-wide to trade offices, government offices, consulates, and so on, around the world. So I'm tabling that news release for everyone's information.

Secondly, very quickly, the Alberta Magazine Publishers Association first ever Read Alberta Magazines Month, which will officially be launched tomorrow, is of great significance, and I'd like to table a letter of congratulations to Ruth Kelly of that association for that Alberta first.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice, and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today in question period the Premier referred to a media release from Alberta Beef Industry Council, and I think you requested that the release be tabled. So I'm happy to table for the benefit of the Assembly the Alberta Beef Industry Council's media release for immediate release March 4, which essentially says that the beef industry is

deeply concerned that their recent draft report is being used by provincial opposition parties to pressure the Alberta government into conducting an investigation . . . Our council is thankful for the support that the provincial government has previously provided . . .

The Speaker: I just asked for tabling, not a reading of it.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, did you have one?

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure today to rise and table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from the Glenora Elementary School Council. They have outlined their

support and priorities relating to the Every Child Learns; Every Child Succeeds report of the Commission on Learning.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the benefit of all hon. members of this Assembly an article from the business section of the *San Francisco Chronicle* dated Friday, February 27, 2004, that I received from Lucien Duigou of St. Albert, and this indicates that whenever deregulation is unplugged, the power prices in California decrease by 8 per cent.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the requisite number of copies of a technology review article titled Recharging the Power Grid regarding new pilot projects on flow cell batteries and other new technologies enabling storage of vast amounts of electricity, thereby reducing the need for new transmission lines and boosting the usefulness of windmills for generating electricity.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Under Standing Order 7(5) I would ask the government to share the projected government business for the week of March 8 to 11, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, March 8, in the afternoon, which normally would be private members' business all afternoon, at 5:15 pursuant to Standing Order 19(1)(c) the question on the throne speech will be put. That would be Government Motion 10 called to engross the throne speech. At 9 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of the Whole we would anticipate speaking to bills 12 and 13; time permitting, second reading on bills 15 and 10 and as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday, March 9, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders for second reading Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act, 2004; Bill 15, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004; and Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. Time permitting, Committee of the Whole on bills 12 and 13 and as per the Order Paper. At 8 p.m. in Committee of the Whole, bills 12, 13, 16, 10, 15, and as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, March 10, under Government Bills and Orders for second reading Bill 17, the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004, which we anticipate being introduced on Monday – it's on notice now – and Bill 18, the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004, which is also on notice and would be introduced for first reading on Monday; Committee of the Whole or third reading on bills 15, 13, 16, 10 and as per the Order Paper. There are also, just for the advice of the House, three additional bills which we anticipate will be introduced for first reading on Tuesday, and we may move them for second reading in the afternoon on Wednesday so that they're on the table. That would be Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act. Bill 20, which is on notice, is the Minor's Property Act, and Bill 21 won't be available at that time, so

I won't mention it. On Wednesday at 8 p.m. for second reading bills 17, 18, 19, and 20 and then in Committee of the Whole on bills 15, 12, 13, 16, and 10.

On Thursday, March 11, under Government Bills and Orders we anticipate Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor might attend to provide royal assent for those bills at that time awaiting royal assent, and we would proceed with second reading and Committee of the Whole as per the Order Paper.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before calling Orders of the Day, I just want to clarify a few things and tidy up a little bit of business as we leave this week.

Speaker's Ruling Members' Statements

The Speaker: First of all, three of the members who participated in Members' Statements went well beyond the two-minute time level which is in Standing Orders. Now, look; I know the way the game is played. You put on a boundary, and everybody then lives with the boundaries for a while. Then, all of the sudden they put one little toe over to see how far they can go, and then it's three feet. Well, we've got to stay within the time limit; okay? Please. It's your rule.

Speaker's Ruling Exhibits

The Speaker: Secondly, there was an exhibit used in the House today. That's a no-no, Government House Leader. I just want to say it by way of this example. We once had in this House a former Minister of Finance who used an exhibit. He was advised by the chair that that wasn't very good. He then left this House, and once he was involved in a national television debate, and he used an exhibit. And boy, oh boy, the people of this country thought that wasn't very good. So let's just remember what happens to people who use exhibits in the House so that nobody gets carried away with using exhibits.

Speaker's Ruling Intemperate Language

The Speaker: Some intemperate language was used periodically this week; there was such a thing. Yesterday we had a situation where the Speaker on page 298 of *Hansard* of March 3, 2004, said the following: "I'm not sure if *Hansard* caught the words, but there were some words echoed at about the same time as this question was being raised, something to the effect of: what an idiot." I heard that. *Hansard* did not, so it's not recorded in *Hansard*.

However, in going back to my office and doing my own personal research, it became clear to me that such a phrase was said in this House. At the time, I wasn't sure where it came from or who it was, what the intent was. But in the last 24 hours in the province of Alberta virtually every radio station and a whole bunch of others basically used this same play as well.

I know who said it, and I'm asking that person to rise and to withdraw such a comment in the House. Oh. The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, as you know, that would be myself. I used the phrase "what an idiot" during debate on a question as it pertained to the BSE issue.

I guess frustrations sometimes prevail as we hear questions come across and you know how terribly hard and diligently our Premier and our Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development have worked with the industry to get them through this devastation, an emotional – emotional – battle that rural Alberta has gone through

in disasters in the last two years. When there are questions about things, it becomes difficult.

So I would like to remove the words, withdraw "what an idiot," and apologize to the House.

2:50

The Speaker: Hon. members, there was another phrase that was used today. I've been an elected person since 1979, and should anybody ever say these words to me, I would immediately stop and there would be a real challenge. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry used a phrase several times to an elected person, basically: you're running away. Should anybody ever have used a phrase like that to me, it would have prompted a response and a reaction.

Words have meanings to various people at certain times, and for anybody to say: well, you shouldn't use "running away" – it's the context in which it's used that can prompt the response. So I'm not saying that you can't use "running away." I'm just saying that there's got to be temperance at the time that it's used because it will evoke a response and a reaction in the same way that the previous phrase, "what an idiot," was used. I have no idea to whom it was used. It could have been the hon. minister's neighbour, seatmate, anybody in this House. That was never identified and doesn't have to be. It's just that it's an intemperate thing to say.

head: **Orders of the Day**
head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 4 Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise on this wonderful day to conclude this debate on Bill 4, that being the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004, and I want to say that it's been an honour for me to pilot this bill along. In that regard also, I want to thank other members of the House who have spoken to it and/or have supported it and in particular the representatives from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind who helped us develop it and have attended at this House often and with whom I have met on numerous occasions.

This is a very good bill that has been brought before the House after considerable public consultation, after considerable review, and after much discussion and debate with persons whom we are actually trying to serve through and with this particular legislative piece.

In that respect, Mr. Speaker, the Department of Community Development has been very pleased and proud to have received responsibility over the act as well as responsibility for visually impaired and/or blind and/or deaf-blind individuals in this province. That responsibility was transferred from the Alberta Department of Health and Wellness a few years ago, and we have done our very level best to work with that community to bring in this set of amendments to effect the changes that we need.

In sort of wrapping up here, Mr. Speaker, I just want to highlight once again that this has been truly a journey of change to affect thousands of Albertans whom we are trying to serve. It helps to close a gap in our legislation that will result in better protection for individuals who are blind and also for those who require a guide dog or a white cane. In doing so, the act will also resolve a difficulty that has been around for some time, and that is the definition of blindness. We know from the community we're trying to serve that the current definition does not serve the needs as well as it ought, and they would prefer to have a definition as determined by the medical profession come forward, and we will be doing that.

We are also well aware that in some cases there are abuses of law in all jurisdictions, and in this particular case in order to stem the flow of any further abuses, we are significantly increasing the fines in the various areas for various violations of the act.

A couple of other critical areas, Mr. Speaker, are with respect to the protection that we know needs to be provided to the persons who are training these dogs for use and employment in the community. So this particular act will provide that additional protection for certified dog trainers as well as for the dogs that are actually in training. They will be allowed to go where they need to go in order to experience what their new employment as dogs will be, and that's a very good improvement for everyone concerned.

The issue of identification cards I have commented on before, Mr. Speaker, and this particular act and the accompanying regulations will allow us to issue an identification card for the blind person/guide dog team. That, too, will be deemed very beneficial.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the minister in this case – I'm honoured to be so – will have the responsibility for making regulations regarding the qualifications required for guide dogs. I'm particularly excited that we might see the addition, in fact I think we will see the addition of other training facilities being added to the existing list of accredited facilities. I've indicated before that since there is only one official training and licensing school in Canada – and I believe it's in Ottawa – I think we should seriously consider how we might in fact have a similar facility right here in Alberta. We have many things that we as Albertans have done that have been of a first-ever nature, and this could well be another one of those.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me to make those concluding comments. If there's anything else that needs attention or addressing, I'd be happy to follow up with individual members or for that matter with members of the community as we see this bill move forward and become law in the very near future.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and on behalf of the Official Opposition give our support in third reading to Bill 4, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004. We've been pleased to support this bill with rapid passage, which I think is no small indication of our esteem for the persons involved here and our willingness and eagerness, in fact, to have this legislation swiftly passed and implemented.

We're pleased with those that it's able to help and the definitions that the minister mentioned, going to a medical model definition. The penalties and the fines that are increased in the act to show a seriousness of how offences are to be taken are excellent and of course the inclusion of trainers under protection along with those that are actually using the dogs: all excellent.

I continue to put on the record my disappointment that the minister has been unable or unwilling to give us some indication of when we could expect a companion bill; that is, a bill that will extend protection and rights to other kinds of service animals. I pressed for that answer while we were in second reading, in committee, and now I'm in third asking the same question of the minister: when can we expect to see the companion bill brought before the Assembly? It's my only hesitation about this bill at all. As I said, we've been very happy to give it swift passage, but we really were looking to see when we would get the second half of this.

So with those words of support I'm happy to recommend passage of third reading. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like to thank the minister for bringing this bill forward. I have received a number of phone calls and letters from people that are very, very pleased that this is finally before this Assembly. As my colleague from across the way just mentioned, I think that we have moved through this bill very swiftly.

I, too, would ask that you consider a companion bill that would see the use of service dogs by others. I recently talked to some people that said that the hearing impaired can very often use a service dog to help them in their day-to-day life. I think that any time that we as legislators can make someone's life a little easier, then let us look at doing so.

3:00

I cannot imagine the happiness and the encouragement that an animal can give these people. Many of us have pets in our own home, and we know how much they mean to us. Think how much these dogs mean to these people, that not only would be a pet but also provide them with many, many things that they haven't been provided with before. So if we can do anything at all, would you please, Mr. Minister, look at something in the future to help others where this could really make a difference.

I also am very encouraged by your words, that you would look at a training facility for these animals in the province. I think that would be marvellous, and I encourage you to do so.

Thank you to the members of the Assembly for supporting the bill thus far, and I know the people in the gallery will be very pleased when it is finally passed. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development to close the debate.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just with reference quickly to the previous two speakers I want to thank them, first of all, for their support for this bill.

With respect to the other issue of other assistive animals for other purposes I did indicate – I believe maybe it was during Committee of the Whole stage – that I will be looking at that issue, but let's not forget that individuals who are using other animals, including dogs, for other purposes than what Bill 4 is all about are already provided a fairly high degree of protection under the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act. It doesn't mean that we can't do more, but I'm saying that there is some protection there already.

Nonetheless, we are reviewing the issues that have been raised in that regard, and I will communicate further with all members of the House as that process moves along. We're just not ready to move with it right now, and I didn't want to complicate the bill before us, Mr. Speaker, nor the important issue of what the bill serves. I didn't want anything else sort of interfering at this time. So I'm happy that we're able to move this forward.

With that, I'll conclude debate. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development has moved third reading of Bill 4, the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill 4 read a third time]

Bill 14

Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move

third reading of Bill 14, the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Finance.

I think, as previous speakers have already indicated on this matter and on this important bill, the record is clear as to why it is necessary to see it through to its conclusion, so with that I'll cede the floor to other speakers and other comments should there be any.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I don't think I have words to describe how much I disagree with the previous speaker, but let me try.

The Speaker: Well, actually, we're dealing with the debate on the bill.

Ms Blakeman: Absolutely. With the bill, which is the Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004, Bill 14.

When I look at the reason that we would get such a bill before us, it's additional money that's being asked, in some cases asked for forgiveness rather than permission to spend additional money beyond what was in the budget. In some cases, many cases, the money has already been spent; thus, we're being approached as the Legislative Assembly to give permission after the fact for the spending of the money.

I think that most Albertans would agree that there's a reason to go beyond your budget to request additional funds under a few very narrow categories, that there was a sudden and unexpected occurrence that would require the injection of money. In other words, if it could have possibly been foreseen that the money needed to be expended, then it should have been in the budget in the first place or it should go into the next year's budget, but to just kind of fling it about when you knew darn well that you needed to spend this money is not an acceptable reason to be putting it into a supplementary supply.

I think Albertans would also agree that in the case of an emergency there's good reason to be coming back before the Legislative Assembly and asking for supplemental supply. Fighting fires comes to mind. Emergency assistance for drought comes to mind. The issues around the plight of the farmers and the cattle producers come to mind. All of those we've actually looked at, I think, in the last year. In fact, this is the second supplemental supply that's been requested inside of this fiscal year.

So two reasons: it should not be expected that you would be spending this money, so if it's unexpected for some reason, it could be considered a request for emergency funds, and I think that's particularly true. You could have a subcategory under that that's around life and limb in some cases. I'm thinking of the homeless, for example. If we had an increased number of homeless people, we had no reason to expect that that was going to happen to us, so it was unexpected, but it's also life and limb. Then there is a responsibility of the government to in fact come forward and request the additional funds to make sure that we don't have people dying in the streets. All of those would be reasonable requests for additional sums.

So let us just go through the departments that are requesting additional monies here. Under the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development we have a request for \$1,750,000 "requested to provide for the Province's costs in implementing the Fort McKay First Nation land claim settlement." Well, this settlement has been in negotiation in the courts for some time. I don't think we could claim that this was unexpected, so this would not fall under my list of a reasonable request. It's clearly expected expenditures. Why is

it coming forward as a supplementary? It either should have been in the budget in the first place or it will have to wait until the next one.

We're next looking at Health and Wellness in which we have a supplementary estimate of \$6,167,000 requested. Out of that we've got two million and change, \$2.1 million, "for the increased costs of the Non-Group Health Benefits program" and \$4 million "to respond to the West Nile virus threat."

Well, I appreciate that the government is looking at doing the research and the work that needs to be done behind the West Nile virus threat, but I would question whether this was of such unexpected immediacy that it has to come through as a supplementary supply. We've been dealing with West Nile well outside of this fiscal year, so either it should have been in the budget coming into this year or it should wait, but this looks to me like: we've got extra money; let's chuck it in here now. That's not a good budgeting process, and I don't think it's particularly supported by people in Alberta when we see this sort of serendipitous taking advantage of additional funds.

There's also an additional \$6.3 million "requested to provide for the enhancement and deployment of the Pharmaceutical Information Network. The spending in 2003-04 will be offset by funding provided by [the] Canada Health Infoway." Again, I question: was this expected spending? This looks again like there was extra money: let's throw it in here; it's something we always wanted to do.

Well, it raises a number of additional questions, then. Is there enough money to continue? Once you've started this program, will there be enough money to continue to pay for the program? This government likes to get into one-off projects, but the world does not operate on one-off. Things need to be continued, so will we now see this come partly to fruition and then be cut because we don't have the funds to continue to do it? Or if there are the funds to continue to do it, again, why do we have this under a supplementary supply?

3:10

Under Human Resources and Employment there's a request for \$28,680,000. Out of that we've got \$14.68 million "for Supports for Independence to address caseload and cost-per-case increases." Now, this is an interesting one. Could we have foreseen that there was going to be a requirement for additional monies?

I suspect that a good deal of the additional monies that are being requested here are to help offset higher electrical utility bills, which certainly could have been foreseen. But perhaps I am mistaken in it and, in fact, we have more people that are requiring government assistance. Well, larger question: why? Why do we have more people? What has happened in society that we have more people requesting this? This government is very fond of saying that they have decreased these welfare rolls, so what's gone wrong that there's an increase? I suspect that's not what the problem is here. I think this is about paying for the increased electricity.

There's also \$14 million for skills investment, and under that there's "an increase in career and employment assistance services . . . an increase in enrolment in basic skills and academic upgrading, and . . . an increase in enrolment in apprenticeship and short-term skills training programs." Some of those I think could be argued under our increasing problems with a shortage of skilled labour. Although at this point next year is a matter of weeks, to say, "We've got to wait until next year before we start programs that will produce skilled workers for the labour force" – there may well be a good argument that could be made there as to why this needed to happen inside of this fiscal year with an additional request of funds for it, but I'm not sure that in fact is the case.

Then we have under Infrastructure a supplementary estimate request of \$35 million "to provide for energy rebates pursuant to the

Natural Gas Price Protection Act,” and “pursuant to . . . the Fiscal Responsibility Act, energy rebates are being funded from the Sustainability Fund.” Well, that one we certainly could see coming, but it’s an interesting way . . .

See, part of what’s happening here is that the Minister of Finance, in her third-quarter update, announced that we had a \$3.5 billion surplus. In fact, I would argue that it was significantly higher than that, probably closer to a \$5 billion surplus, but that’s really going to make the government look odd in that they didn’t budget for and spend that money as they came to it. That kind of thing, where we’ve got \$35 million put into this particular fund, should have been added to the amount of the surplus. They’ve now managed to nip it off and account for it under a different place. They’re not going to have to count it in as part of their surplus money.

Then we’ve got Innovation and Science, which is requesting a supplementary estimate of one and a half million dollars “to provide for increases in operating and upgrading expenses for the Alberta Government Integrated Management Information System.” Imagis is what we call it. I would hardly think this is unexpected. I clearly remember reading about this in the Auditor General’s report several years ago. Seeing as I don’t read those Auditor General reports until almost a year after we’re examining, this is far from unexpected, nor would I see it as an emergency or threatening life and limb.

Under the Department of Learning we have \$14,600,000 to fund a number of different pressures. In fact, their pressures total \$15,700,000, but they’re asking for an additional amount of money of \$14.6 million. So they’re looking for money for separate and public school support, for “increasing numbers of grade 12 students returning to high school for upgrading,” for “providing learning programs to students in provincial institutions.” There’s quite a bit of money in here in a couple of different ways for early childhood support, particularly around children with severe disabilities.

I made the argument at a teachers’ forum last week that a child is only going to get one February in grade 2. You know, they only get one period of time. They don’t get to do grade 1 again with that teacher and that class, and they shouldn’t be penalized because the government is being tight-fisted with the money. So in most cases I would support what’s being put through here.

Finally, we’re looking at Revenue, which is requesting \$875,000 “to provide funding for the acquisition of an investment risk management system.” Total cost of the system is estimated at \$1.26 million. Half of the cost is recovered through charge-backs. Again I would argue that this was not unexpected. It is not an emergency, and it certainly is not solving any threat to life and limb.

Finally, under the seniors’ programs a supplementary estimate is requested of \$10,900,000. This is \$4.5 million for an increased number of low-income seniors with the costs of long-term care. Well, the timing of the long-term care increase was 100 per cent within the control of the government, and I’ve already raised this argument yesterday. And \$900,000 supports “additional year-round and seasonal beds in homeless shelters,” which certainly falls under our life and limb category here, and \$5.5 million for “increased provincial funding under the Canada/Alberta Affordable Housing Agreement.” Again I think that the protection of life and limb is an argument that could be used under this.

So we have a number of examples here. All of the money that’s being requested, which is \$114 million in operating and an additional \$6.3 million in capital investment, I would argue is a rather glaring example of a government’s inability to manage properly, to cast forward and manage projects that they know are coming, that are obvious. This is just a way of hiding the extra money so that they’re not too embarrassed at how far off they were in their predictions in their budget.

You’ve got to remember that the point of budgeting is not so that you can stand up at the end and go: see how much I have left over. The point is to actually spend the money, to go “How much is required in all of these areas?” and spend the money because those are the programs and the services that the government has agreed to provide and the people need. So you’re not to be congratulated because you are able to stand up and go: look how much we didn’t spend. That’s money that wasn’t spent on health, it wasn’t spent on education, it wasn’t spent on infrastructure, it wasn’t spent in a lot of places, and to come three weeks before the end of the fiscal year and chuck money at it is not an efficient way to manage. This government would be very critical of any company, of any nonprofit, indeed of any individual that managed their finances like this.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

So I continue to raise these issues every time I see one of them, and the government continues to give me ample opportunity to do that, seeing as we’re now looking at supplementary estimates, No. 2, for this year. I’m sure there will soon be interim supply requests coming because the government couldn’t manage its finances well enough to get the budget introduced and through before the fiscal year-end. Obviously, that’s not going to happen. We’re three weeks from the fiscal year-end and there’s no sign of a budget. So this government that has all the control in the world, that has all of those employees, that has all of that money cannot manage itself well enough to get a budget introduced and passed before the fiscal year-end. For shame.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 14 read a third time]

Bill 1

Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It’s my pleasure on behalf of the hon. Premier to move Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act.

That having been said, Mr. Speaker, I would like to just comment briefly on my support for this particular bill. When rumours of similar plans surfaced a year or perhaps two years ago – I can’t recall now – I can remember a few people phoning me and indicating that they had some concerns about how a program like this might work. But I have to say that now that people have the bill in front of them and now that there has been considerable debate, persons who have been getting in touch with me are in favour of this long-term investment in education by the government of Alberta.

I also say as the father of two children and, hopefully, one day perhaps a grandfather as well that it’s a good thing. As with all good things they need a start. So while I respect some of the comments that I’ve read, I don’t want those negative comments that we’ve heard to be used as any reason to stop this particular bill from going forward to fruition. You have to begin a good program somewhere, so a beginning point has been arrived at, and I think the legacy that it will create will well be worth the investment and the decisions that we are making today.

3:20

The Learning Commission report, that has been the subject of some great discussion in this House, a report that I have looked through and for the most part support almost all of the recommenda-

tions in it personally, has brought into sharper and sharper focus the need for us to do whatever we can to support the education system in this province in a much larger way, and we will I'm sure be doing that.

There are other ways that we can help with education and provide postsecondary education on a larger basis, and that is specifically what this act will do by encouraging families with children who are born or adopted beginning January 1, 2005, to start setting money aside. We are helping to kick-start that program for the children involved.

Mr. Speaker, I'll take my seat so that others can perhaps speak to this. I would hope that the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, introduced by our hon. Premier, will receive the support it requires, particularly given that this government has indicated that education in all its forms is a number one priority for us.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to make a few remarks at third reading of Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act. Third reading is a chance for us to again reflect on the principles that underlie a bill after having examined it first at second reading and looked at the details of the bill in Committee of the Whole.

I think that it is important to again visit the principles that seem to set the framework for this bill. They're important principles, Mr. Speaker. I think that we have to encourage more high school graduates to pursue higher education. Whether that be a program at one of our postsecondary institutions, continuing education programs, or apprenticeship, there are a variety of ways that they can continue that education. It's a principle that I think should be acted upon as frequently as possible in terms of making high school students aware of the implications of not continuing their high school.

I noticed in a report from the New York City schools that that school board has actually moved to having dropouts or potential dropouts sign a sheet that indicates that by dropping out, they are going to face a future of unemployment and low wages, detailing rather graphically what happens if you drop out of high school and don't continue your education. It's been controversial, some parents indicating that it goes too far, but I think it does underline how important it is that we encourage young people to continue their education. That's one of the principles that I think Bill 1 has tried to support. Now, how well it's supported I think is another question.

Another principle, though not part of the bill, is one that we would expect to be part of the bill, and that is that it needs to be fair to all Alberta students. I don't think Albertans would expect any less from legislation that appears before this Assembly than that it would be legislation that is fair to all Alberta students. Again, I think it's a principle that the bill fails to support. This is going to be for many Albertans the bill that left them out, and I think that that's unfortunate.

It could have easily been otherwise, Mr. Speaker. There are a number of things that the bill could have done to make sure that it was fair to all Alberta students. There have been all kinds of suggestions with respect to that in terms of making sure that tuitions at postsecondary institutions were affordable, making sure that there was support in place not just for those students who are honours students but for those students who just make passing grades yet manage to go on and better themselves. So I think there are a number of ways and mechanisms that could have been used to make

sure that it's fair to all Alberta students, and unfortunately the bill hasn't done that.

I think that the notion that it needs to be open to all Albertans is closely related to that principle. The studies that we've looked at I think are fairly conclusive that registered education savings plans are not participated in by people who have limited incomes, that they are accessed primarily by people who have middle and upper socioeconomic circumstances. They're the ones that are able to take advantage of this. So it's not really, truly open to all Albertans, just to a certain economic class.

Another principle that we looked at in second reading was that anything that is proposed not be used as a substitute for properly funding postsecondary schools. That's one of the fears that I've had about the bill right from the beginning, that somehow or other it may take the pressure off the government to properly fund postsecondary education.

I have to say with respect to this that I was disappointed earlier today at the press conference that the Minister of Learning didn't see fit to act on the recommendation from the Learning Commission that would have required a review of the postsecondary education system in the province, that that recommendation has been rejected by the government. Again, I think that that's unfortunate, because it's related to this notion of adequacy, of affordability, of providing adequate resources for those postsecondary institutions. It's a little convoluted, but I think that this has the potential to give the impression that the government has done its job by offering this and that there's a lesser obligation to actually look after those institutions.

We talked about the preamble before. I think the words are good. I like the notion that the government "recognizes the benefits of post-secondary education." My concern is that the kind of actions that one might expect to support that statement do not always follow. I'm again reminded of how badly devastated our institutions were in the 1990s, taking some of the biggest hits in terms of budget cuts. Those institutions haven't recovered fully from those cuts.

3:30

I think that those are the main principles. I think we've heard the objections to the bill not just from opposition benches but from government benches, the concerns about the bill. Again, the basic question, I guess, that arises is: is this the appropriate bill to mark the centennial of the province's beginning? I'm not convinced, Mr. Speaker, that it's fair and is as all inclusive as one would hope that a bill that was going to mark the 100th birthday of our province might be, so unfortunately I find myself not able to support Bill 1.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont, followed by the hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Herard: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very proud to speak to the third reading stage of Bill 1, the Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, an act that we hope will change the paradigm with respect to the culture of saving that Albertans do for the postsecondary education of their children and for their grandchildren. We hope that this will mean that more Albertans will graduate from our postsecondary institutions and be able to transition directly into postsecondary from high school, be able to perhaps better afford to go on to postsecondary with respect to having saved from the beginning of their life and perhaps also graduate from their postsecondary education with considerably less debt than they would have otherwise had.

I just want to say a few words of thanks to the Deputy Minister and Minister of Learning for their support and good counsel on the details of this bill and in particular to Mr. Steve MacDonald from learning transitions at Alberta Learning, who co-ordinated a number of departments both here and in Ottawa, and I thank them all as well.

But most of all I want to thank our Premier for allowing me to work on this idea and for the honour of making it his bill, Bill 1, in the Fourth Session of the spring sittings of the 25th Legislature. The Premier has made it possible for each private member to make a difference at every stage on every issue, and I think that's one of the hallmarks of this Premier, that as a private member you can make a difference in every stage of policy development. You can walk into his office with an idea and he says: go ahead, run with it; see if you can get it through. So I want to thank the Premier for allowing everyone to be able to take an idea and run with it and hopefully one day stand in this Chamber and see it come to reality.

I want to thank everyone who is in support of the bill and hope that everybody votes for it. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise and speak to Bill 1, Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, in its third and final reading. This bill is the flagship bill of the session. The bill also comes, of course, during the fourth and critical year of the election cycle. That's the sort of immediate context of the bill.

I want to go over some of the recent developments, Mr. Speaker, with respect to postsecondary education culminating in the passage of Bill 43 in the last session, which drew lots of attention from postsecondary students – the Council of Alberta University Students, called CAUS; ACTISEC, Alberta College and Technical Institute Students' Executive Council – academics, parents, and others. The campaign that was run on Bill 43 by postsecondary students interestingly was named, sort of to catch attention, I guess, *Deregulation Nation*.

From the point of our postsecondary students the provisions of Bill 43 not only lifted the cap for postsecondary tuition from where it was and promised to stay by the government in previous years; the government sort of went back on its promise to keep that cap. Bill 43 was the mechanism through which that cap, therefore, was disposed of and lifted, thus opening the doors for unlimited, continuing yearly tuition rate increases which go far beyond either the rate of inflation or some other measure that would suggest that they are just meant to keep up with the costs. What the government's policy on tuition fee increases reflects and changes in their policy, as I said, you know, from a cap of 30 per cent to go beyond it as allowed by Bill 43, reflects the government's preference . . .

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont on a point of order.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Herard: Yes. Relevance, Mr. Speaker. We're in third reading on Bill 1, and I think the hon. member wants to talk about Bill 43, which has already been passed in this House, which is another point of order that I sort of forget the number of, but once you pass a bill in this House, you don't bring it back into debate, especially on another bill. So I would hope that you could ask the hon. member to speak to the bill that we're currently working on.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the point of order.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is no point of order. I'm speaking to Bill 1, and in order to speak to Bill 1, I'm referring to the context in which we discuss Bill 1. The discussion on Bill 1 I hope doesn't take place in a vacuum. As legislators I think it's important for us to refer to the important elements of the context in order to make sense of what the bill is about and to make sensible comments about the bill.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Well, there are two points that one must first deal with, and that's perhaps to review for all of us debate on third reading. Procedures on third reading are very much like second reading except that reflections on third reading are the bill as it currently stands, not on what it might have been, what it could be, what it should be. That's all for second reading and to a certain extent in committee, when you make amendments. But when we're in third reading, *Erskine May* quite clearly says on page 544 that "debate on third reading, however, is more restricted than at the earlier stage, being limited to the contents of the bill." To that extent, the hon. member is quite right.

If we're talking about some other bill that should or should not have been passed, then we come into a whole new point of order which prohibits us from debating a bill for a second time in the same session. Anyway, I would think that if that's what the point of order is, then the hon. member would just guide himself accordingly.

Edmonton-Strathcona, continue.

3:40

Debate Continued

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My comments on Bill 1 are not at all intended to seek any changes in the bill. They are to in fact reflect on the principles of the bill and what's, strictly speaking, the substance of the bill and how it will affect the concerns that prevail. That's why I just want to draw attention to those concerns and not just speak to another bill, you know, that had been previously debated and passed.

The bill that I referred to before is now government policy, so I'm referring to government policy rather than Bill 43. This bill, therefore, speaks to that policy, and that policy is based on the principle of user pay. This bill is very much driven by this principle that those who go to postsecondary education should be able to pay for most of the costs, and that's why, I guess, registered educational savings plans are a preferred option by some, by this government and by many of the members on the government side who have spoken to the bill.

There are problems with this bill because this very principle I think puts into question the significance of not only individuals and families investing in postsecondary education but communities, societies, provincial bodies such as the Alberta government seeing postsecondary education as a most important arena in which to make a social investment for their future. This bill is about investing in the future, as I understand it, and therefore I think it's quite germane to draw attention to the flaw in the bill, in that it really does not address the question of equity. It does not address the question of the significance of social investment and how investing in human creativity should be perhaps a guiding principle in how we spend our money on postsecondary education. Bill 1 fails to embrace that principle.

Earlier in the debate on the bill one of the hon. members from the government backbenches drew attention to its inequity, its exclusionary nature. Any bill that deals with educational savings and educational investments must necessarily address the question of equity, and this bill, Mr. Speaker, fails to do that. It leaves out

children already born and not yet in school and certainly all of those children who are born and have started school, even though they're in kindergarten and beyond.

The other difficulty, Mr. Speaker, in terms of the principles of this bill is not just its exclusionary nature but its failure to in fact take note of the fact that educational savings plans have proved not an effective instrument of generating savings for children born in families, in particular where there aren't means readily available for those families to support those children as they move through the educational system and reach a stage where they have to make decisions and then pay for postsecondary education.

The experience with RESPs and the studies done on that experience clearly demonstrate that only about 42 per cent of families take part in those plans. So although we have Bill 1 before us, Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act, it doesn't seem to factor in the serious limitations of registered education savings plans and how they leave out a majority of families which are unable to have sufficient income to save some to invest.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont did talk to a need for a paradigm shift, as he called it. I was quite intrigued by a reference to shifting paradigms here. He talked about a culture of saving as something that this bill will encourage. I don't think, Mr. Speaker, the problem is with respect to the absence of such a culture among the 58 per cent of Canadian families who don't have RESPs. I'm not entirely sure exactly what percentage of Alberta families have RESPs for their children. I think the problem is not the absence of a culture of saving; the problem is the impossibility for many Albertans to save for the postsecondary education of their children. I want to just make sure that this point is clear.

What's really needed is a culture of social investment that we as members of this House need to inculcate and nourish. If we looked at investment in postsecondary education from that perspective, from a culture of social investment, we would find that Bill 1 is therefore deficient. It doesn't really pay attention to that very important principle, an important guiding sort of notion that any money that we spend on education in general is driven by this belief in the significance and importance of social investment.

Mr. Speaker, it's difficult to not pay attention to some of the flaws of this bill when speaking to it, because it will require a decision either to vote for it or not support it.

A TD Bank report done very recently about the Edmonton/Calgary corridor draws attention again to the problem that Bill 1 presumably is designed to address, which is, first of all, that not enough Alberta students graduate at a level in order to be able to take advantage of postsecondary education and, secondly, even if they have the qualifications for postsecondary education, make decisions not to go there. The TD Bank report underlines the fact that it's a perception of unaffordability, not the absence of a culture of saving but the perception of unaffordability of postsecondary education in this province that's the problem.

So Bill 1, Mr. Speaker, falls short in that sense, is flawed because it doesn't really construct the legal, legislative arrangements that are embodied in it based on available, reliable knowledge and information about how to tackle the problem of not enough Alberta high school graduates wanting to go beyond high school.

3:50

Bill 1, I think, is clearly a sincere attempt to grapple with the situation, but I submit to you, Mr. Speaker, submit to the House that it's not an appropriate solution for the problem that it's trying to address. [The beeper sounded indicating that Dr. Pannu's speaking time had expired]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: It would appear that somehow there is a misconnect here, so you apparently have two more minutes.

Dr. Pannu: Yes. I will take advantage of it. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

So to conclude, Mr. Speaker, I want to submit respectfully that this bill fails to put in place systems that will really cultivate either a culture of postsecondary educational participation which will encourage more Albertans to take advantage of postsecondary education or a culture of social investment. For several reasons I won't be able to support Bill 1.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Comments?

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak on Bill 1. I want to congratulate our Premier for introducing it and the hon. Minister of Learning and his staff for working on all the details and especially the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont for bringing forward the concept of the centennial scholarship.

I'm not in debate strictly about the bill now, but I just want to restate some facts here. Indeed, the facts in the long history of human existence have proven that education and skill training is vital to the progress of a society. The lack of education and knowledge brings misery to the lives of individuals, society, and nations. It is also a fact that our government's focus on education is the right thing. Our government has shown leadership in education, learning, and training of our fellow Albertans. Now our government has the right investment in developing our Albertan human resources for today and for the future.

So the focus is right; the target is right. The debate is circling around how to get to the target. There are people who say or even accuse us – if we do not follow their way, that means we destroy the target; we do not believe in the target. That kind of argument is false.

To get back to the bill, there are a few people who have told me that they don't want to pay school taxes because they have no children. Their children have grown up or are not in school any more. There are a few people who have expressed to me, I hope truthfully, that they don't want to spend their tax money on postsecondary education because they have no children or their children are not in postsecondary education. Now, these are some expressions.

But the fact is that this Bill 1 is proposing a registered educational savings plan of \$500 for babies born in Alberta's centennial year and thereon. I agree with this concept because this is not a baby bonus like in other jurisdictions where the governments give out thousands of dollars in cash to parents for every baby born to encourage population growth. Now, in Alberta \$500 is all they put aside if the parents register the infant in a registered educational savings plan, and if not registered in an RESP, no money is put in. Also, I notice that when the child turns 8, 11 and 14, another \$100 is added to his or her RESP, which is great.

The money is not accessible to the parents to spend and can only be spent on post grade 12 education and training by the registered child. So the money cannot be available and used after 18 years. Now, after 18 years, graduating from high school, if the child does not go further with his study or training, the money is not given out.

An Alberta registered education savings plan encourages Alberta parents to think about their children's future, about Alberta's future. They also can capitalize on the federal matching dollars on the

education savings. Even if they do not have their own money to put in at the beginning, in total the money doesn't go anywhere except spending on the education of Albertans, on paying the universities, colleges, in the construction of buildings, and teaching staff.

There is a question that people brought forward: why not every child, or why only starting in 2005? Well, I would say that it has to start at some milestone. The centennial year, 2005, is very appropriate. If given to all children 18 years and younger born before 2005, to me there is not enough funding, not enough money. Money is already earmarked for other expenditures, unless we cut back from those.

Also, there is a notion that there is no assistance to the children or students of today. I would say: yes, there is. All the children born before 2005 still have their own existing financial assistance which is available to them. Our universities, colleges, trade apprenticeships continue to grow, as usual.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to share with you a personal perspective. My wife and I put our three children through university through our own RESPs a long time ago. They all graduated. We would feel it unfair to fund other people's children's RESPs, but we live in and share the common Alberta society. Besides, I'm thinking about our grandchildren yet to come and our great-great-grandchildren, too, so the question here is: think big; think to the future.

I also have advice to those who have the feeling or the concept that: if I cannot have it, you cannot have it either. That is a terrible attitude. So I would say: we'll just look to the future, and I support this bill a hundred per cent.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Questions? Comments?

Seeing none, the hon. Deputy Government House Leader to close debate on Bill 1?

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a third time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 16
Residential Tenancies Act

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to move second reading of Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act.

The Ministry of Government Services is responsible for this legislation. Government Services consulted a wide range of stakeholders on the proposed amendments incorporated into this legislation, and they support the changes that are being brought forward. The stakeholders consulted included landlords, tenants, consumer groups, associations, municipal landlord and tenancy advisory boards, and tenancy experts.

The proposed amendments are of several types. There are amendments to create an alternative dispute resolution process for landlords and tenants, amendments to improve rights for landlords, amendments to improve rights for tenants, amendments to clarify existing wording, and a few housekeeping amendments as well.

4:00

The key amendments: I'll go into those in a little more detail. First, the alternative dispute resolution process. We are proposing to add regulation-making power to establish an alternative dispute resolution process through which landlords and tenants can settle disputes outside of court voluntarily. Government Services will be

working with Alberta Justice and other stakeholders to develop an efficient and cost-effective dispute resolution system.

The RTA, the Residential Tenancies Act, code of practice. Mr. Speaker, some disputes arise because landlords and tenants do not understand their responsibilities or they do not understand the legislation. Government Services plans to develop, separate from the Residential Tenancies Act, a voluntary code of practice for use by landlords and tenants. This voluntary code will not be legislated in the Residential Tenancies Act, but the code of practice will serve as a plain-language resource for landlords and tenants in interpreting the act.

Section 11, notice to terminate tenancy of employee. The tourism industry has approached government with a concern in the area of staff housing. The Employment Standards Code permits employers to terminate the employment of a probationary employee for just cause without requiring a notice period. The Residential Tenancies Act as it now reads requires employers to give these probationary employees a week's notice of eviction from their staff housing. The tourism industry is concerned with the prevalence of vandalism and abuse by these employees during the week after they've been fired and before they've been evicted from the staff housing that they're living in. Employees who live with these fired employees for that week also share the employers' concern.

The ministry of Government Services will take the proper time to consult with all stakeholders affected by this provision before making a change. Consequently, it is proposed that any new notice period for termination of tenancy for employees would go into regulation after this act has passed. It is proposed that these provisions mirror the Employment Standards Code.

Dealing with minimum housing standards, or the landlord's covenants. Currently the act requires landlords to ensure that the rental premises are habitable. That is a term that is open to interpretation. To be clear, that provision is amended to require landlords to ensure that their rental premises meet the minimum housing standards set out in the Public Health Act. These standards already apply to landlords and the rental housing.

Putting this provision in the act makes it clear now that this act and the Public Health Act interrelate. Since it is an offence under the Public Health Act if these housing standards are not met, there is no need for a duplicate offence under the Residential Tenancies Act.

Regarding the termination of periodic tenancy by a landlord, Mr. Speaker, there are two types of tenancy: fixed-term and periodic. Fixed-term tenancies end on a day specified in the agreement. A periodic tenancy they can renew or continue without notice. The proposed amendments will ensure that landlords cannot terminate a fixed-term or periodic tenancy when a tenant issues a complaint under the Residential Tenancies Act or the Public Health Act. The act is currently silent on this issue for fixed-term tenancies. So filing a complaint won't result in you getting turfed out.

Regarding the prohibition re the termination of tenancy. Mr. Speaker, the proposed amendment to the act will also prevent landlords from punishing tenants, either financially or by other retaliatory means, when a tenant issues a complaint against the landlord under the Residential Tenancies Act or the Public Health Act.

Concerning the termination of tenancy for substantial breach by the landlord. If there is a substantial breach of the tenancy agreement, a landlord is able to terminate a tenancy by serving 14 days' notice to the tenant or by successfully applying to court for a termination order. The proposed new section in the act would give a similar recourse to the tenant if the landlord has committed a substantial breach by failing to meet the minimum housing standards under the Public Health Act.

Termination of tenancy for damage or assault. Currently if a tenant causes significant damage to the premises or assaults a landlord or tenant, they can be given 48 hours to move out. We are proposing that this time period be reduced to 24 hours because of damage to the premises or threat of assault to the landlord or a tenant.

Section 40, frustrated tenancies agreement. Provisions dealing with frustrated tenancies agreements are being clarified. An agreement is frustrated if the premises are destroyed or severely damaged. The amendment would provide for frustration of the agreement if the rental premises are dangerous to public health or safety.

Regarding the direction of residential tenancies legislation, one proposed amendment creates the role of a director of residential tenancies to oversee the management of the Residential Tenancies Act. The director will be assigned responsibility for inspection and investigations of potential breaches of the act.

Regarding offences and penalties, Mr. Speaker, this bill contains amendments setting out the department's authority to inspect the landlord's records, perform security deposit audits, and investigate potential offences. These provisions reiterate the department's current authority to inspect and investigate through the Government Organization Act. Department investigators have and use discretion in determining if an infraction warrants a full investigation.

The proper amendments will make it an offence if a landlord fails to keep proper records and if landlords fail to show these records to investigators if requested to do so. Currently if a landlord is successfully prosecuted for violating the act, the tenant needs to launch a civil action to recover any prepaid rent. It is proposed that if a tenant prosecutes successfully, the courts be allowed to award refunds of prepaid rent to the tenant. This will save time for both the tenant and the courts.

Limitation period. An additional proposal would increase the limitation period for prosecution under the act from the current one year to three years. This will result in consistency with other Government Services' acts, such as the Real Estate Act, which we amended last year, and the Fair Trading Act.

Regarding the ministerial regulation-making powers, the final amendment we are proposing to Bill 16 will provide the minister powers to make regulations for the fees a landlord can charge for late rent and NSF rent cheques. This is apart from adding regulation-making powers that would address notice of termination for employee tenants and the alternative dispute resolution process, which we talked about earlier.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has good legislation for landlords and tenants. With these few changes, which are supported by the stakeholders and have been checked out by them, it will be the very best landlord and tenant act in Canada.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with interest that I rise to participate in the debate on the Residential Tenancies Act this afternoon, as proposed by the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti. Certainly, I would like to express my gratitude to some of the individuals in the Ministry of Government Services, who provided a brief explanation of this legislation a couple of weeks ago and who have responded with some information regarding the questions that we had initially asked. This legislation, if passed, is going to, of course, come into force, and the Residential Tenancies Act from 2000 will be repealed.

Now, there certainly are some initiatives in here that are worth

highlighting and I think are worthy of support from this side of the Assembly. Whenever we are considering giving tenants the same rights as landlords to terminate tenancy within 14 days' notice in the case of a substantial breach by the other party, that is certainly worthy of support. Allowing landlords to evict tenants with 24 hours' notice instead of 48 hours' notice if the tenant assaults or threatens to assault landlords or another tenant or causes substantial property damage, well then, that is certainly in line.

4:10

There is certainly a need here – and hopefully it's going to be addressed – to ensure that landlords cannot punish tenants if they make a complaint under this act or the Public Health Act. Perhaps in the course of the debate we can find out how many complaints are lodged now. How much of a problem is this? Certainly, another interesting proposal through this legislation, Mr. Speaker, is the provision for the alternative dispute resolution mechanism for tenant landlord disputes so that they don't have to go to court.

Now, I asked, and I appreciate the information that I received on this from a Mr. Jim Kiss from the Government Services department. I was curious about the volume of residential tenancy cases that presently go to the court in this province and how much of a volume that was. I have received information back from Mr. Kiss, and I would like to share this with the Assembly, Mr. Speaker, that there are approximately 6,000 cases per year that go through the court system involving landlord and tenant issues.

If this legislation, this proposal for an ADR, the alternate dispute resolution mechanism, is to go forward, we could reduce that by half. We could reduce that even by one-third, by 2,000 cases. I think that would be significant. I think it is certainly worthy, and let's try it. Let's see what happens. Perhaps it'll even be more successful than reducing court appearances by one-third. It would free up the courts for other matters.

This legislation is going to affect a lot of people. I'm going to be anxious to hear the comments from the hon. Member for Calgary-East and the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie. I understand that they have a committee, and they are discussing basement rental suites with citizens from Medicine Hat and Lethbridge, Fort McMurray, Red Deer, Canmore, certainly the city of Calgary, the city of Edmonton. It is also, I think, an endeavour that is worth noting that is, as I understand it, trying to improve safety and provide for more affordable housing across the province, to study this whole idea of what is a legal and what is an illegal basement suite. How will they be affected by this bill, Bill 16? I would be interested to hear what those hon. members have to say.

Also, there are some concerns that I have, and, certainly, I'm going to hopefully get an opportunity in the next couple of days to discuss any reservations that some Albertans may have towards this legislation, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti talked about the extensive consultation process, and we have not heard back on this side of the Assembly from anyone with any reservations about that legislation. Hopefully, now that we're having a discussion here, if there is anyone with reservations or concerns, they will bring them forward before this bill possibly could become law.

Now, when you're talking about striking a balance between the rights and the responsibilities of landlords and tenants, quite a few people will have an opinion. The Ministry of Government Services has stated that it did three years of consultations before drafting this bill, and I know that Alberta Justice is working very hard to put in place a framework for this alternative dispute resolution process that will be outlined in the regulations of this bill. I don't know if it should be in the legislation, but every work of legislation is a work-

in-progress. Any changes that we make here that are aimed at making the process more fair seem to be favourable.

I would like, and hopefully I will get the opportunity, as I said, to discuss this with a few groups. We've had some consultations, and the Edmonton Social Planning Council has indicated that they're in favour of these changes. The Edmonton Apartment Association indicates to date that they are also in favour of these changes. So we're going to have to wait and see.

There certainly are some questions that I have – and hopefully we can get to these in committee – in regard to how this legislation would affect boarding houses, where the landlord actually resides in those quarters. How are those tenants protected in this province?

Also, a social care facility licensed under the Social Care Facilities Licensing Act. What is the difference between what's being proposed in Bill 16 and what is currently in the Social Care Facilities Licensing Act?

Mr. Speaker, I also have some concerns – and we discussed these with the officials from the Ministry of Government Services. I understand that there has been a consultation process that went to Jasper and Banff to discuss with the tourist industry how this legislation would or would not affect them. Many of the operators at the ski resorts and many of the hotels in Banff and Jasper and Lake Louise hire large numbers of young people, some of whom are housed in residences owned by the respective enterprise. How are they affected by this?

Also, the oil field industry. Was the oil field industry consulted? Were the drilling contractors consulted? There are large construction projects occurring as we speak in Alberta's north and some, in fact, all across the province. There are a large number of Albertans who live in permanent construction camps. The city of Fort McMurray, for instance, would quickly come to mind.

4:20

How are those individuals affected by this legislation? There are thousands and thousands of Albertans who could be innocently caught up in this bill, and their employers could innocently be caught up in this. I would like to know who was consulted in the construction industry, what was said, and who was consulted in the oil and gas industry? A rig probably moves on a weekly basis in the southeast corner of the province. Up in the Peace country it could move on a monthly basis. It's hard to say. It depends on how deep you're drilling. Are those people affected by this legislation?

Now, I understand that there is additional consultation underway that will include the oil field industry and the construction industry as well as the tourist industry. I would like to know if this consultation process is going to be finished and if we're going to be able to have a report on this before we possibly make this bill into law.

I'm also told that the proposed legislation does not specifically deal with this issue that I have discussed at this time because consultation with all the stakeholders, as I said, has not yet been completed. Once this is done, I'm told, the resulting direction will be the accommodation as required. Before we go on, particularly beyond committee, with this bill, I would like to get some clarification on these issues. I think that in light of the number of Albertans who are housed temporarily under these situations who could be adversely affected by these legislative initiatives and also their employers, who are footing the bill for these camps – what rights do they have? We need to get this straightened out before we pass this bill.

Other than that, Mr. Speaker, at this time I would like to say that overall this looks like it's going to be fair to both the landlord and the tenant. I'm looking forward to hearing from any interested Albertan, whether they own rental property or whether they're

renting. Contact us at the Official Opposition if they have any reservations or any observations to point out in regard to this prospective legislation.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make a few comments at second reading of Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act. There seem to be three major principles that the act is built around. The first is fairness, the second is flexibility, and I think the third is obligations. I think they are three sound principles on which to build an act like this because the violation of those principles is the very area that results in grief both for tenants and for landlords. So I think they're sound principles to build the act upon.

I think the fairness principle is really one that is extremely important, and the act devotes a great deal of attention to fairness, centring on concerns such as terminations. How will the agreements be terminated, both by tenants and by landlords, trying to set out a process that makes it fair to both and to prevent some difficulties before they arise. I think fairness with respect to rent increases and how they're to be handled and the obligations that the landlord and the tenants have with respect to rent increases but, most importantly, the obligations of the landlord.

I think an area that hasn't been much touched on in the past is the conversion of rental units to condominiums, and I think people will welcome the provisions in the act that again set out the ground rules for landlords should they want to convert their properties to condominiums and also provide fair notice to tenants who maybe find themselves in the situation where the units that they occupy are going to be converted into condominiums.

It addresses security deposits and again attempts to set out a set of fair rules for how these deposits are to be treated by the landlord and sets out the provisions that must be followed with respect to that money while it's being held by the landlord and what the tenants may expect with respect to the deposits that they make.

An important area with respect to fairness – and anyone that's been involved with rental property will welcome the sections that do deal with the recovery of damages. It's often a very emotional area, where people become very excited in terms of how damages to property are to be handled. Again the thrust of the bill is to try to set out provisions that are fair to the landlord and to the tenant. Most importantly, I guess, in terms of fairness it sets out some remedies, the way that the disputes can be settled. I think the provision of a dispute resolution provision, even though it's voluntary, is new ground and a good way to proceed.

The obligations are rather extensive as they're set out for landlords. It makes it very clear how they are to act, how they are to involve their tenants, and what's expected of them in terms of their behaviour, as it does for tenants. What are the obligations of tenants? If you're going to rent a piece of property, how should you behave, and what is expected of you in terms of payments and in terms of treatment of property and in terms of working with the landlord to make it a good experience for both parties involved?

So I think that with those brief comments and, as I said, the focus on fairness and flexibility and the obligations of those involved, I'll listen with interest as the bill proceeds through committee stage. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Comments? Questions?

If there is no one further, the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti to close debate on second reading.

Mr. Graydon: Since there is no more debate, we will call the question on second reading then. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 16 read a second time]

4:30

Bill 10

Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate March 3: Mr. Hancock]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the Official Opposition critic for Justice I'm pleased to have an opportunity to respond to this bill. I have to say right off that I'm pleased to see this coming forward as an amending bill rather than trying to put stuff through miscellaneous statutes, which is an ongoing complaint from me. So I commend the minister for having collected all of these smaller amendments. We are amending several acts here: the Jury Act, Judicature Act, Court of Queen's Bench Act, Court of Appeal Act, Provincial Offences Procedure Act, and, finally, the Queen's Counsel Act. So this becomes an omnibus bill, in fact.

I would object to this bill but for one thing, and that is that the request for the changes have come through the Rules of Court Committee, which is the group that generally does recommend these kinds of changes. Then they come forward and are validated in legislation exactly through this kind of Justice Statutes Amendment Act. What's being allowed here is that there's a shift allowing that the *Rules of Court* will be validated through a process that involves coming through the Lieutenant Governor in Council, which is, in effect, the cabinet, but they are still being generated and requested through that Rules of Court Committee.

I have great problems, as the Speaker well knows, having heard me speak so often on this, with having any new permissions moved under the Lieutenant Governor in Council rather than coming forward as changes through legislation. However, in this case you've got a highly qualified group of people who are the generators of these sorts of requests to begin with, and any future requests for changes in how the courts operate would continue to be generated by this group, but now the less substantive changes will in fact be made by cabinet without having to come before the Assembly.

Since the people that are likely to be most affected by these changes work in a fairly close community, their access to the changes in the new information is not a concern to me. I'm sure that they will share the information with each other and that the lawyers and the court clerks and the members of the judiciary, of course, will be very familiar with what's possible here. Of course, the laypersons, the Albertans out there, are not likely to be aware of what those rules were in the first place, never mind what the changes are. There will be some people that are interested in this kind of thing and follow it, but in that case they'll have to be following the changes coming through an order in council.

The minister in *Hansard*, March 3, 2004, pages 315 and 316, has laid out fairly clearly what's being changed, but he is a lawyer and does use that lawyer language, so maybe I'll try it again in a bit more flat-footed approach to this.

Essentially, there's a very minor change in the Jury Act. What we have here is a trial involving an amount of money in a certain range. It wasn't clear whether a judge could restrict it to a judge-only trial, and there appeared to be an option that it could go to a jury or a judge. In a lot of cases in this day and age – sorry; I'm just going to stop here. We don't understand, because we watch so much American television, how few jury trials we actually have in this country. Usually, most of our trials are in fact decided by a judge

alone, and that in some ways saves us a lot of money, because really what we're arguing are points of law, which is why, in fact, it's heard by a judge. It's really only when you get into the sort of bigger, sensational trials that you have a jury involved.

What this is going to do is allow for the most cost-effective and the most appropriate process to be used by the parties. This is providing that jury trials are not available in situations where the court has decided or determined that an expedited process as set out in the *Rules of Court* can be applied. Basically, because it's unclear right now, it's the ability to use an expedited process where one of the parties wants a jury trial. So that's the argument. Somebody wants a jury trial, and really it's not appropriate to have a jury trial. This will now allow the judge to say: no; it's just going to be by judge alone. There. That was the layperson's version of that.

The Judicature Act has two sections in it that are being changed here. There's quite a long section about periodic payment of damages. What's happened is that often where damages are awarded – for example, in a catastrophic accident where someone is permanently disabled – there will be a very large settlement that's awarded, and it tends to be given in a lump sum, which is not always the best idea. But it's given in a lump sum because you need agreement between the parties at every stage if you're going to break it into what they call periodic payments or we could call an instalment plan. But you had to go back to court and get agreement every time you did this, so people tended not to do it, and you ended up with a lump sum.

Part of the concern there is – and I don't know if this is just inclination from people. The idea of getting the big chunk of money up front was that you were supposed to take it and use it to, you know, make changes to your home, sort of those high-end expenses that you get into that are costly at the beginning, and then put the rest of it away and manage the money yourself. Unfortunately, what's happened is that people tend to spend the whole lump sum, and then they're coming back going: well, I still need more to live on. So what this is going to allow – and it lays out a lot of rules around how it will happen – is that you can negotiate for periodic payments up front instead of being stuck with just having no option, having to deal with the lump sum.

The second part of what's being altered under the Judicature Act is the Judicial Compensation Commission. This is about setting pay for judges. We, of course, in Canada have two levels of judges, the Provincial Court judges and the Federal Court judges. This is going to allow for a co-ordination. It's actually setting out the specific dates that the group that sets these amounts meets, and in the end it will all co-ordinate.

Essentially, for the year 2009 and subsequent years the provincial commissions will occur one year after the federal commissions. So the feds are going to set their rates; the province is going to follow along a year later. But it takes a bit of juggling to make that happen, so what we've got is commissions meeting every three years from now until 2009, and then they're held every four years, essentially. But it's just the juggling that you need to make that time all line up.

We've got the Court of Queen's Bench Act. This is another one where the Lieutenant Governor in Council, the cabinet, in other words Executive Council, will get the power to make rules of a substantive nature in order to avoid validating the rules periodically. So that's exactly what I was describing in the beginning.

4:40

We've got the Court of Appeal Act. The same thing. This is giving cabinet the ability to change the rules, which validates the rules, rather than having to come back before the Legislative Assembly.

Provincial Offences Procedure Act. This is the one around electronic documents. As we've moved more and more into the use of electronic documents, we've had to kind of update our rules because we had some very clear rules, you know, the ones about the parking tickets and the speeding tickets: the paper copy has got to be signed by the person that does it. Well, how do you do that with an electronic copy? Not possible. So that's stalled our ability to move into more electronic government, electronic business. This will allow electronic documents to come into more common usage through provincial offences, which I think is an excellent idea. That will save a few trees, I'm sure.

The last issue is the Queen's Counsel Act. There's an ability to appoint people as Queen's Counsel. Up to now there's been no ability to remove people as Queen's Counsel, and every now and then we have a respected member of the bar who is not really a very respectable person for their actions and needs to be removed, and that's allowing that to happen.

That's a very brief overview of what we're looking at with Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

At this point on behalf of the Official Opposition I'm willing to support what's being proposed here in principle in second reading.

Of course, we have sent the bill out and asked for comment, and I'm sure that we'll hear back from anyone that has any serious questions, but this has come forward from the legal community, which tends to consult with itself a fair bit. If there are any concerns, then I'll look at bringing them forward under Committee of the Whole and making amendments then. So at this point I'm willing to support Bill 10 at second reading.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 10 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very productive week, as all members in the Assembly would undoubtedly agree, and on that basis I would move that we now call it 5:30 and adjourn until Monday at 1:30.

[Motion carried; at 4:45 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 8, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/03/08

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. At the beginning of this week we ask for renewed strength in the awareness of our duty and privilege as members of the Legislature. We ask for the protection of this Assembly and also the province we are elected to serve. Amen.

Now, hon. members, would you please participate in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau. Please feel free to participate in the language of your choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Tannas: Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly three guests that are seated in your gallery. From Capital City Savings: Mr. Harry Buddle, chief executive officer; Ms Jacqueline Broverman, community investment adviser. Joining them is Tim Downey, president of Priority Printing Ltd.

Capital City Savings and Priority Printing are community sponsors of the School at the Legislature program. This program gives grade 6 teachers from all over our province an opportunity to relocate their classroom to the Alberta Legislature for an entire week. In the fiscal year 2002-2003 over 600 students from 22 classes attended the School at the Legislature.

They are standing in your gallery and would like to receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise on this glorious Alberta day to introduce to you and through you to the House two young ladies who are doing a tour of our Assembly today, Tracie and Darcie Matthiessen. Both young ladies are active in politics, and they are also heavily involved in the disabilities movement working with people for Alberta Disabilities Forum. They are seated in the gallery with Sasha Angus, who is no stranger to any of us. I'd ask that they all rise and please receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to members of the Assembly it's my pleasure to introduce Mrs. Pat McCurdy, a resident of Edmonton-Rutherford, and she is accompanied by Mrs. Chris Tannas, a resident of Highwood and the spouse

of our own Deputy Speaker. We'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to introduce three classes from a marvellous school in Edmonton-Castle Downs, the Caernarvon elementary school, run by a dynamite of a principal, Ms Julia Elaszchuk. With the three classes today are teachers Mrs. Wendy Porteous, Mr. Jei Yin, and Mrs. Nadine Holden as well as a student teacher, Miss Jessica Lee, and a couple of parents, Anna Sawaryn and Kai Choy. I would ask all three classes to rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Mrs. Jacquie Hansen, who is the chairperson of Greater St. Albert Catholic school division No. 29. She is seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask her to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two terrific groups here to introduce to the Assembly today. The first is a group of people visiting from Canterbury Court, and I would like to read their names into the record. Canterbury Court is a terrific facility in my constituency serving older Albertans. I would ask them to rise, if possible, as I call their names. Their names are Margaret Dewart, Connie Marsh, Betty Wilson, Ed Parker, Iris Newman, Hilda Williams, Peggy Salze, Vera Shuckburgh, Aileen Ledrew, Dorothy Fenske, Alice Fraser, Roy Zipse, Rhoda Cohen, Zena Frankel, Fanny Hersch, Maria Morin, and they are accompanied by two staff, Fred Czopek and Terry Kellington. Please, all MLAs, give them a warm welcome. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, the second group I have is from one of my very favourite schools in the whole province, Our Lady of Victories school. They are a class who are here for the week for the School at the Legislature. They are in the public gallery. I would ask them to rise. There are 18 of them altogether, and they are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Lorraine Williamson and Mrs. Margaret Petruk, and the parent helper is Mrs. Jeanne Bartosh. Please rise and receive our warm welcome.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Cattle Industry

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The federal agriculture committee is calling on executives from Canada's largest packing plants to come forward and testify about allegations that they may have unfairly profited from the BSE crisis. My first question is to the Premier. What does it say about this government's commitment to openness and transparency when the federal government demands answers from the packing plants but your government won't?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the federal government is doing precisely what the federal government should do under the Competition Act

and all of the hearings and procedures associated with that act. It is not the purview of the provincial government to review such matters.

There is, however, a review – and I would like to underline: there is a review – underway now by the Auditor General. As I understand it, he indicated to a meeting of deputy ministers in February of this year that he was going to undertake a review relative to food safety and financial assistance programs for BSE, or mad cow disease. So this government is doing what this government should do. The federal government is doing what the federal government should do.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: why did the hon. Premier refer Albertans to the Competition Bureau last week given that the bureau has no power to investigate the \$400 million BSE aid package?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I know that it is hard to get through to dense people, but I will repeat once again, and I would ask the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to listen carefully. The federal government investigates price-fixing and matters of gouging or alleged matters of gouging and alleged matters of price-fixing. The federal government does that, and that's what they are investigating as it relates to the packing plants.

Our responsibility is to make sure that money we spent on behalf of the people of this province was wisely spent. The Auditor General, as I said, indicated to a meeting of deputies on February 25 that he was going to investigate such matters. The hon. Deputy Premier has written a letter to Mr. Dunn, the Auditor General, asking him to fast-track that investigation or that probe or that review, call it what you want, in order that we may clear the air in this Legislature.

1:40

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the Premier has stated that on March 22 and 23 there is going to be a delegation from Alberta going to Washington, D.C., and talking about how this BSE crisis has affected Alberta, will the Premier commit now to bring along some of the small producers from across this province so that they can tell their story directly to the American government as to how they have been affected by this crisis and how little they have received of the \$400 million aid package?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, it's not a bad idea if the producers want to come along and augment what we have to say. But what is not true and what is offensive is the statement relative to this government not helping producers.

Mr. Speaker, I have a letter here, and this is one of numerous letters I have received. While the Liberals sit back here in Edmonton and whine and complain and carp and spread misinformation, we're out and about in the country finding out from farmers and ranchers and beef producers and others associated with the cattle industry exactly what they think of this government's action. This letter from the Western Barley Growers Association, signed by Douglas McBain, says:

Dear Ralph,

Quick and decisive action by the Government of Alberta to deliver financial assistance to the beef industry, was and continues to be very much appreciated. Support by you and the Caucus of the programs put forward by Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Shirley McClellan, that were developed with consultation and endorsement of the beef industry, maintained the industry when it needed it the most.

That, to me, means more than all the carping we hear from over on that side.

The Speaker: That document will be tabled, and we'll try and remember that we're not supposed to use members' names in the House.

Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Critics of the government's botched electricity deregulation scheme refuse to remain silent. The Consumers' Association of Canada in Alberta would not sign off on the Bolger report because it painted too rosy a picture of electricity deregulation. In response Alberta Energy posted a version of the Bolger report on its web site that conveniently omitted this objection, then tried to correct it when challenged. My first question is again to the Premier. Given the unparliamentary language used last week in this Assembly by certain members in response to tough opposition questions, is it government policy now to silence all its critics?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, no one is trying to silence any critics, including the Liberal opposition, who, by the way, do not pose intelligent questions.

I will have the hon. Minister of Energy respond.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, that report was the property of that committee, and the report that we received was the report that we tabled. So the question would be accurately posed to the chairman or any members of the committee.

Mr. MacDonald: To the Minister of Energy: given that there were so many consumer complaints around electricity deregulation, why did the minister not read the early draft reports of the Bolger commission?

Mr. Smith: Boy, you're right; they don't ask intelligent questions.

When the report is the property of that committee, Mr. Speaker, they don't send draft reports to the minister and say: "How do you like this one? How do you like that one? Would you like us to change this? Would you like us to change that?"

I mean, surely this member knows that all you have to do is go back to the committee and ask Mr. Bolger: "What are the details of the report? What happened?" Mr. Wachowich is but one member of 20, and in fact Mr. Wachowich has been around this business a long time. He was, in fact, the member from the Consumers' Association who signed off the negotiated settlement for EPCOR in the year 2000-2001, so he's, you know, very current with the file. Perhaps the member would seek clarity and information from that particular source.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that the Bolger report calls for an independent, government-funded consumer advocate, why is this government ignoring that recommendation from the Bolger report?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're not ignoring anything from the Bolger commission just as, as the member continues to talk about skyrocketing bills, we wouldn't ignore examination of his bill, should he choose to table it, to determine if in fact prices have gone up these last three months. Table your bill.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Sour Gas Well Emissions

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Currently there's a proposal before the Energy and Utilities Board to drill six new sour gas wells on Calgary's doorstep. Last Friday the Calgary health region called on the Energy and Utilities Board to reject the project application because, in the words of the chief medical officer, it in no way adequately addresses the potential health hazards that could result from this well if an accidental release were to occur. My question is to the minister of health. Will the minister join the Calgary health region in asking for the Calgary sour gas project to be rejected?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, as the minister of health I'm not competent to make an evaluation of the evidence that was put before the Energy and Utilities Board. It is the appropriate role, of course, of the Calgary health region to make its submission to the EUB. We trust that the EUB will take into account all of the evidence that is put before it and will properly make a decision, but it wouldn't be appropriate for the minister of health to intervene in such a quasi-judicial type of venue. Accordingly, it is properly the role of the regional health authority and properly the role of the EUB to make a decision but not for the minister of health.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, then, does the minister have concerns about a new hospital in south Calgary being built so close to potentially lethal sour gas wells?

Mr. Mar: Well, again, there were a number of submissions that were made before the EUB. My understanding and my briefing, although not my first-hand knowledge, is that one of the submissions was that there was the possibility of withdrawing all of the sour gas from this field before the hospital would even be built. Mr. Speaker, I don't know whether that, in fact, is realistic or is part of the proponent's submission before the EUB.

This is a hypothetical question, Mr. Speaker, because there is no hospital there at this time, but hypothetically if there were a hospital within a certain range of a sour gas well, I would presume that the Calgary regional health authority would make that point known to the EUB. I don't know if they have made that submission to the EUB, but I would presume that they would have.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. My second supplemental is to the Minister of Infrastructure. How has this minister addressed the dangers of sour gas in his negotiations with investors who might finance a P3 hospital in south Calgary?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated on Thursday to a similar question, if in fact this whole project should go ahead as a P3 – and that will be determined through a long process – I have no idea who the investors might be. Nor would the Calgary regional health authority at this time have any idea who the investors might be. So it's pretty hard to address imaginary investors when you have no idea who they might be.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will be brief. I think it's important, as the member continues to spread suspicion and distrust, under the structures that we have for the appropriate

and safe drilling and extraction of sour gas. This has occurred in Alberta since the mid-60s. We have a world-best record, we have world-best processes, and we have a practice of having complete and total transparency. Whether this hearing is in the city of Calgary or it's in the town of Rocky Mountain House or the town of Barrhead, it's all the same.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Cattle Industry

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week Albertans witnessed the spectacle of Conservative MLAs refusing to support a motion to investigate just where \$400 million of BSE compensation ended up and who benefited by it. By contrast, the all-party federal parliamentary committee on agriculture has decided that there are more questions than answers, and they've summoned three packers to Ottawa so they can get some answers. While Ottawa puts the matter to an all-party committee to deal with in full public view, this Premier asks his agriculture minister to investigate herself and her own programs. My question is to the Premier. Why is it that this government can't even meet the minimal accountability and transparency standards of the federal Liberal government?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I answered this question. The federal government is doing precisely what the federal government ought to do, and that is to investigate allegations of improprieties, I guess, and unfair competition as it relates to the packing industry.

That is not the role of the government. The role of the government is to determine whether the \$400 million we spent on beef or BSE assistance programs was properly spent. I indicated to this Assembly that the Auditor General is or has committed – I don't know if he's undertaking the review right now – on February 25 of this year to undertake a review, an investigation, an examination, a probe, call it what you want, of the BSE funding program. So why would he depend on the Public Accounts Committee to do what he had decided to do anyway? That's what I can't figure out.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that provincial governments from Saskatchewan to Prince Edward Island have called for an investigation into the packers' operations in this country, why is this government just sitting on its duff and holding up 1-800 numbers for the Competition Bureau instead of standing up for the public of this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we are standing up for the public of this province, but there are two agencies. We have our provincial Auditor General. This hon. member has been sitting in this Legislature daydreaming, obviously, for the last four and a half years or five years, however long he's been here – too long, obviously – because he doesn't know the procedures and hasn't taken time to learn the procedures. We investigate things that are of concern to the taxpayers of this province; i.e., was the \$400 million we spent on BSE assistance programs properly spent? The Auditor General is investigating that or has indicated that he will investigate that. That's done.

The federal government investigates issues of alleged price-fixing, gouging, unfair competition. That is their responsibility. That is their responsibility, the federal government's responsibility, and they are doing precisely what they are supposed to do.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, if the taxpayers of this province, the citizens of this province, are being gouged, why isn't it the govern-

ment's responsibility to make sure that not only is government money spent properly but that we're paying the right price at the supermarket?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is a matter for the federal government to investigate. My God, how many times do you have to repeat that there is an agency in place? Why would we spend taxpayers' dollars to investigate something that the federal government is already investigating? Why would we do that? The Competition Bureau and the process now going on in Parliament is the right process, and I would suggest that if the hon. member has any problems – any problems – or any allegations or any proof of the kinds of things he's been spouting off here, go down and testify before the committee.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Mental Health Services

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The stabbing death that occurred in Edmonton-Castle Downs over the weekend and the recent shooting of a police officer have many people concerned whether the province is doing enough for individuals with mental health illnesses. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Can the minister tell Albertans what the government is doing at this time for individuals with mental health illness?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't want to comment specifically on this particular case except to offer my condolences to the families involved, but what I do want to outline is what treatments are available for Albertans who are suffering from mental illness.

A patient in immediate need of help can go to an emergency department to be seen by a physician, and if the physician believes that hospitalization may be required, then that individual will get a psychiatric assessment. When a patient is discharged from the hospital, Mr. Speaker, there are contacts made with community mental health clinics to provide the follow-up care that such an individual might need.

Also, in major centres throughout the province there are available 24 hours a day seven days a week mental health crisis teams. Mobile mental health teams also work closely with the police in the event that an individual may be a danger to either themselves or to others.

Patients with less urgent need can seek help through their own physicians. They may get a prescription for medication. The physician may also recommend specific community mental health programs such as group counselling.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the province of Alberta does offer extensive coverage for prescription drug costs, including psychiatric drugs, under the Blue Cross benefit plan. Low-income Albertans, of course, also get full or partial subsidies for their drugs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental for the same minister: would the minister consider following the lead of B.C., Saskatchewan, or even Ontario by introducing community treatment orders in this province?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, mental health legislation is a complex and sometimes very controversial area of discussion. The purpose of

such legislation is to try to balance the needs of an individual against the needs and rights and protection of society as a whole.

There are wide opinions, Mr. Speaker, as to whether community treatment orders are appropriate. There is a large gulf that exists between advocates for mental health. Even within the mental health community there is not a clear consensus. There are differing opinions from people: the individuals themselves who do have mental illness, their family members, physicians, and lawyers as well.

Our current mental health legislation took 11 years to develop, and that was because of these wide sets of opinions from various stakeholders. Our act does allow for the apprehension, admission, detention, and control of a person who is suffering from a mental disorder and who may present a threat to themselves or to others. But I have, Mr. Speaker, asked our Mental Health Board to look at the other jurisdictions, that the hon. member referred to, to see if community treatment options have in fact had an effect on reducing the number of these types of incidents.

I should say, finally, Mr. Speaker, that we are of course focused on integrating our mental health services into the community as recommended by the Premier's Advisory Council on Health and that regional health authorities are redoubling their efforts to ensure that this plan will be used as a framework to make improvements to mental health services in this province and their communities.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last supplemental, to the Solicitor General: are our police officers in this province afforded appropriate training rendering them competent to deal with mental health case issues?

The Speaker: We're asking for an opinion here. Solicitor General, proceed.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. When it comes to policing, dealing with mental health problems is part of officer training. The police in this province are well trained in all aspects of criminal behaviour. They come across people high on drugs; they come across people who are mentally ill; they come across incidents where people are extremely agitated. I have to say that the police in this province do a wonderful job in dealing with all these situations not knowing what's around the corner for them.

In cases of critical incidents the large municipal police services have emergency response teams with specifically trained negotiators with expertise in dealing with mentally ill or agitated people. There are four on Calgary's ERT team, five on Edmonton's ERT team, and four on Red Deer's ERT team. In the case of the RCMP, extensive training is provided to negotiators on their ERT teams for dealing with mentally ill patients.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Mental Health Strategy

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week when I raised a question about mental health, the Solicitor General said that she was appalled at the questions and said that I should "drop the crap." Well, this weekend another tragic fatality involving a mental health patient brings home the message that this government cannot wait any longer to implement a new mental health strategy. My question

is to the Premier. When will this government release the new mental health strategy, that is sitting on the health minister's desk?

Mr. Klein: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I don't know if the mental health strategy is sitting on the minister's desk, but I will have the minister respond.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I think it's critical that we get this right as opposed to get it right away. The issue of mental health is one which is of great interest to Albertans. The consultations on this have been extensive. Right now it's in a draft stage, and it's out for discussion among stakeholders. The early response to it has been quite positive. There may be some changes that we may need to make to it, but the final of this plan has not yet been put before me or, in the words of the hon. member, on my desk.

It is not sitting on my desk, but it is part of an ongoing process by which we will develop a strong plan consistent with the efforts and the submissions of stakeholder groups ranging from psychiatric nurses here in the province of Alberta to the regional health authorities themselves; the Alberta Mental Health Board; the Alberta alliance on mental health; the Canadian Mental Health Association, their Alberta branch. These are all stakeholders that we've worked with extensively. I thank them publicly for the work and the time and the effort that they've put into it.

As I indicated in my response to the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, Mr. Speaker, the issue of mental health, while important, is a very complex and difficult and challenging one. That's the reason why it's important to get it right rather than get it right away. It will come forward in the spring, and if the hon. member wants more specificity on when in the spring, it'll be the spring of 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, then, given that this government has been downsizing mental health institutions for years, indeed decades, why haven't they got it right? Why haven't they got mental health services right yet?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have in fact been moving in the trend from institutional care for such individuals to community treatment. But we have protected the budget. We have increased our commitment to this area. The hon. member will recall from my response to him late last week in this Assembly that we currently put almost a quarter of a billion dollars, \$240 million approximately, into mental health this year. That's an increase of about 5 per cent from the previous year.

So, Mr. Speaker, again, while we have been making the move away from institutional care into community treatment, I think that this is a step in the right direction and one that has been lauded by the mental health community. We understand that there will be a continued need for some institutional capacity at, for example, Alberta Hospital Ponoka – they do provide world-class treatment at that facility – but the overall trend is to go to treatment in the community. We're doing that, and we're providing the resources so that we can make this transition from institutional care to community care.

Dr. Taft: It's not good enough.

To the Premier: given the long delays on other government reports like the corrections review and the Graydon report, how can we know that there won't be another long delay in releasing the mental health strategy report?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I can't speak to the length of time it will

take to complete the report. Perhaps the hon. minister can shed some light on that.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we have been working on this a long time. I confess that it is a very challenging and complex area. To ensure that we have the full support of as many stakeholders as possible – these are the stakeholders who will actually make this work. That's the reason why we need to continue to work with them, so that we reflect the input that they've had in terms of how this program should be delivered.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I have said on a number of occasions – and I repeat it for his benefit and for the benefit of Albertans – that when we look at our health care system, there are two things that loom large on our health care horizon in the next 10 to 15 years. We often look at a shorter time horizon, but in the next 10 to 15 years two areas loom large. One is the area of diabetes, which we are working on with the provincial diabetes strategy, and secondly, mental health. Both of these are critical to helping ensure that our health care system is sustainable not just for the next two years but well into the future of this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Crystal Methamphetamine

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recent TV news reports have highlighted the growing problem of methamphetamine manufacturing, trafficking, and addiction in Drayton Valley and along the Yellowhead highway. People in my constituency have been working hard to control the spread of this highly addictive drug. To the Solicitor General: what steps are being taken to control the substances used to make crystal meth?

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do appreciate that question, and I want to assure everyone in this House that the Alberta government is well aware of the problem and that we're well ahead, we feel, on what we're trying to do.

Alberta is a leader across this country in dealing with meth, and in fact the hon. member's own mayor is part of our working group that we have established. We're attacking the problem, if I may say, in three different areas. First of all, I have established a cross-government initiative that has been very, very effective and working very hard on it.

Second, Mr. Speaker, I think that what is really important is that we've engaged the College of Pharmacists, and I have to really provide a lot of kudos to what the College of Pharmacists is doing to help us deal with this very serious situation.

Thirdly and, I think, most importantly, Mr. Speaker, is that we are pressing the federal government to tighten its laws controlling the materials used to make meth and would encourage the opposition to maybe get on the phone or write a letter to their federal relatives supporting our recommendations on making amendments to the Controlled Drug and Substances Act.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. What treatment options and facilities are available for individuals addicted to crystal meth?

2:10

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, methamphetamine poses a serious threat to

the well-being of individuals who use it, it poses a serious threat to their families, and it poses a serious threat to the communities in which it is being used.

AADAC, the Alberta alcohol and drug agency, is participating in the cross-governmental initiative that was referred to by my colleague the Solicitor General. AADAC does provide treatment to methamphetamine users as part of its comprehensive treatment of a whole range of different types of substances in 49 communities throughout the province of Alberta.

Specific to methamphetamine, Mr. Speaker, services include counselling, parent consultations, and referral to intensive or residential treatments. I think it's important to note that crystal meth, or methamphetamine, is often a drug that's used with other drugs, so sometimes varying types of treatment are required.

AADAC is also working very closely with the hon. member's community of Drayton Valley and also in places like Hinton, Edson, the Yellowhead corridor, and Camrose, among others, where methamphetamine has particularly been identified as being a significant problem.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is also to the same minister. Given that these seem to be the highly concentrated problem areas, are there any plans to build more treatment facilities for this growing problem?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we have no such plans at this time except to make the commitment that we will continue to monitor this particular situation and be prepared to take any additional action that's required. We are addressing the problem of methamphetamine use by offering treatment and support to those who need it and by working with communities to let them know about the dangers of this particular drug, which are significant.

AADAC data shows that amphetamine and stimulant use, which includes methamphetamine, is a concern to about 8 per cent of all the clients receiving addiction treatment by AADAC. Clients who access AADAC services for methamphetamine, again, as I said, Mr. Speaker, often experience problems with multiple use of drugs. Outpatient counselling services are available in 25 AADAC offices located throughout the province. Adults can be referred to AADAC detoxification residential treatment services in the cities of Grande Prairie, Edmonton, Calgary, and Claresholm.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane. [applause]

The hon. member has the floor.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank all members from all sides of this Assembly who helped me and supported me in this nomination bid, and for those who didn't, what can I say? Thank you.

Sour Gas Well Emissions (continued)

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, speaking of – and I quote the Minister of Energy from March 3 – “spreading confusion and misinformation and talking about something that they really don't know the effects of,” last week the Minister of Energy said, “Since the 1982 Lodgepole blowout . . . there has never been a civilian fatality from sour gas management in this province.” My first question is to the Minister of Energy. Why isn't the minister aware that in January of

this year a 35-year-old male worker employed as a contract operator was overcome by H₂S gas resulting in fatal injuries and of the death of a Caroline man who was able to penetrate a sour gas facility in April 2002 and caused a high-pressure release of hydrogen sulphide?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member talks about people from or who are employed in the industry, and that's, in fact, who are at most risk. I admire all Albertans who work with sour gas and are able to make it the safe type of product that it is.

Mr. Speaker, I would direct the member to a very good article in the *Calgary Herald* this weekend by a gentleman by the name of David Yager, who is a veteran oil patch writer and safety analyst, who starts the article off with, “You can drill these wells in my backyard for all I care.”

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, both of those deaths were civilian.

To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: since the Minister of Energy speaks of Caroline as having “some of the world's best handling equipment,” how could it have taken six and a half hours to discover and contain a sour gas leak that occurred there as recently as March 2003?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that with the preamble relative to the information, the situation, it's important to note that every municipality in this province has an emergency operation plan that they execute. They work with the Ministry of Environment as well as with Energy and first responders, or local emergency officials. I want to say without any fear of contradiction that these first responders do an excellent job in representing and protecting Albertans at large.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. To the same minister: if the proposed wells in the Calgary region are approved, how can this ministry assure residents in the emergency planning zone that they won't be exposed to sour gas for hours on end, as occurred in Caroline?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As was indicated earlier this afternoon, this is in front of the board. The board is hearing stakeholders' input from all walks, every particular stakeholder who has expressed an interest. I'm not in a position to evaluate the decision they will make, but I can assure all Albertans that every single effort in terms of protecting Albertans will be taken, is taken during these hearings that are a quasi-judicial body.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Mr. Smith: Well, you know, it's always good to do a little research on the application, Mr. Speaker, and actually do a little research on the past. The Sundre gas leak, the one that I believe the member is referring to, was known almost instantaneously, I believe. Secondly, there's a process called ignition. They make a decision to ignite sour gas fumes that start to escape, and that immediately ensures that no sour gas emissions are then spread to the individuals in the emergency planning area. Really, I think it's important to encourage the member to get up to date with the handling of sour gas in this world-best jurisdiction.

National Avalanche Centre

Mrs. Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, during the winter of 2002-2003 29 people died in avalanches across Canada. Twenty-four of these occurred in British Columbia with nearly one-half of the fatalities Albertans and one-third foreign tourists. In the wake of these fatalities the Canadian Avalanche Association is recommending the creation of a national avalanche centre. My question is for the Minister of Community Development. Could the minister tell us what he is doing in response to this recommendation?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, I have received the proposal, and I am reviewing that. It arose, essentially, as a result of a review of avalanche safety programs in the province of British Columbia, and it was conducted by the British Columbia government itself. Unfortunately, no input was sought from the province of Alberta with respect to this particular development proposal. Nonetheless, avalanche safety is a very serious matter here for our government and for Albertans, and as soon as I complete that review of the recommendations, we'll see what possible further steps might be taken.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Tarchuk: Thank you. To the same minister: given that this centre would be located in British Columbia, will you be considering funding it?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would of course prefer to consider this from the standpoint of possibly seeing a commitment of funds made to some kind of a satellite office at least in the province of Alberta; in other words, funds of the Alberta taxpayer being used to fund something in our province for individuals. I should say, however, that I don't know yet what the extent of our involvement will be or if we will be making that commitment, because there are a number of ministries that this particular issue references and affects. We do spend approximately \$90,000 already through Community Development monitoring avalanche safety programs in our province at this time.

Mrs. Tarchuk: Lastly, to the same minister, I'd ask if there's anything further that the government of Alberta can do to help increase avalanche awareness and safety.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, Community Development is actively involved in the Kananaskis area, which is provincially managed, and we have one of the very best provincial avalanche monitoring systems anywhere in the country. We're already doing a lot from the monitoring point of view, from the information and communications point of view, and also from our involvement with search and rescue missions. We're also involved, where circumstances warrant, with the safe discharge of explosives to trigger avalanches when there's no one around, obviously, and certainly more can and perhaps should be done. But we do have a partnership already with the Canadian Avalanche Association and with Parks Canada.

So as this proposal moves through the process here, we will continue to keep the member and all members and Albertans updated in that regard.

2:20 Reviews by Solicitor General's Department

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, the Solicitor General seems fond of the water torture method of releasing information, one drop at a time, but taxpayers, provincial corrections staff, police, and others would like to see the full corrections review, the complete victims of crime

consultation report, and the standards for provincial policing with its implementation plan. Albertans have paid for all three reports, and we cannot monitor the government's progress without them. My questions are to the Solicitor General. When are taxpayers going to see the complete corrections review that they paid for?

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've had that question before, and I would refer the hon. member to *Hansard*. The Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs asked me the same question.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to make excuses for the delay for my department or for the minister responsible. When you have people who have gone out and worked very hard collecting evidence and providing you with recommendations like the corrections committee did, there are budget implications to it. I will be proceeding after the budget is released later on this month.

Ms Blakeman: Again to the Solicitor General: given that the Auditor General stated in his report that "public safety could be at risk" until the Solicitor General implements the plan for provincial policing standards, when can we expect that plan?

Mrs. Forsyth: As I've indicated before, Mr. Speaker, the standards that the hon. member is referring to in regard to policing standards will be done at the end of the year. Our fiscal year-end is the 31st of March, and it will be done.

Ms Blakeman: In two weeks. Really?

The final question, again to the Solicitor General: why have we seen nothing at all about the victims of crime consultation headed by the Member for Calgary-Shaw?

Mrs. Forsyth: Again, Mr. Speaker, when you have a committee going out and doing a bunch of work for you, they come back with recommendations. In regard to the recommendations that they bring forward, there are usually budget implications. I felt that it was best to be able to deal with those when we could provide the recommendations with the dollars to follow them.

If the hon. member will be patient, we have got very good news for the people in this province in regard to the reviews that I've undertaken, and I ask her to be patient like the people who have worked on the committee and like Albertans have.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Cattle Exports

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, last week's decision by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to reopen a comment period for resuming Canadian live cattle exports is a welcome development. However, for this government to put all its bets on a quick reopening of the border is a high-risk strategy, especially when it gets caught in the middle of American presidential election politics. That is why the Premier's recent admission that there is no contingency plan should the border remain closed is bad news. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Given that political posturing could keep the border closed until after the U.S. election in November, why does the government have no contingency plan should the border remain closed to live cattle exports for an extended period?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it's possibly a matter of semantics. As I've explained in this House, the round-table that covers all

aspects of the beef industry, including trucking, packing, processing, primary, backgrounding, feeding, and so on, has indeed been working for some time on what is termed a beef recovery plan. This is maybe somewhat different than what might be called a contingency plan or a backup plan.

I'm pleased that the hon. member is aware that there are some uncertainties out there and that we have to look at those uncertainties. I'm not sure I concur with the full reasons for the uncertainties, but there are uncertainties out there. We're very pleased that the comment period has been reopened. We're very pleased that rule making includes all ages of animals, and we will be working with the federal government and, obviously, making a comment on our industry's behalf.

So, Mr. Speaker, the plans that we've had in place, which, in fact, have worked – we still have an industry, which means a great deal to every community in this province, not just the rural communities – I think state very clearly that the work that the industry has done with us in meeting this issue head-on for the last 10 months and some is continuing. The beef recovery plan that the industry has worked on involves the short term, which is the immediate, and it involves what they would want the industry to look like in five years or expect it to look like in five years, and I'm sure that's what the hon. member would want to see happen.

Dr. Pannu: Should the border not open until after the presidential election, does the minister have a contingency plan, and what is it and will she table it in the House?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are, as I said, a lot of ifs and there are uncertainties. I am, I guess, dealing from a more positive note. I have, I think, great reason to be optimistic. We have made significant progress in dealing with this issue. No other country that I know of in the world that has experienced BSE has had a border opening in seven months. That's what has been accomplished here, and that's what has been accomplished by working with what is our largest trading partner, particularly in the beef area but in others.

The work on the recovery plan, Mr. Speaker, is not at a stage that it could be presented. It is a plan that's being worked on by the whole industry, but I would be pleased to do that at the time that it's completed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Is the minister, then, admitting that she has no contingency plan at this time?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know how I could make it any more clear. Since the first week of January we've been meeting with the industry, since the second BSE incident, which happened to be in the U.S., and with the industry have been developing a number of scenarios to deal with these issues. It is in a developmental stage. The industry is committing to do this.

There is a difference philosophically, I know, between the hon. member and this government and this minister. This is what the difference is. I would gather from the hon. member's comments that he would believe that government is the right vehicle to make decisions for the cattle industry. Well, you know what, Mr. Speaker? We don't agree with that. We agree with partnerships. We agree with working with the industry, and the success of that work is before us today. We have an industry, albeit under stress and duress, because the plans that we put in place to carry this industry through were made with the wisdom of the industry, not dictated by government.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds I'll call upon the first member.

Hon. members, before I call upon the first of six hon. members to participate in Recognitions, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:30

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Speaker: Well, I'm just delighted to see that he's okay after his exploits on the weekend. The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure for me to be able to stand here. I'd like to thank the House for the unanimous consent on this introduction. We have some people in our gallery that I'm intimately familiar with, and so are most of the MLAs in this Legislature as well as every single Albertan that exists out there today, if not now, into the future. Unfortunately, I had occasion to use them last night, and they were fabulous, not these particular officers, but I would like to introduce them.

The first is Gord Colwell, the president of the Alberta Fire Fighters Association. I'd ask him to rise. The second is Dale McLean, first vice-president of the Edmonton firefighters association, as well as Greg Holubowich, who is also a first vice-president with the Edmonton fire association. The last person – we've met in the past – is a very nice lady who is the prevention and public educator. She's an EMT and a paramedic, and her name is Brenda Hardy-Reader. I'd ask that this Assembly give them a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly the always curious and most welcome guests that we have with us today in the public gallery from NorQuest College. This group is always very curious about parliamentary process, and I know that they enjoy their tours through here. They're accompanied today by their teachers and group leaders Brenda Chwyl, Judy Dobbs, and Gordon Heffel. I would ask them all to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

International Women's Day

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am a woman. [interjections] I know you don't believe it. I rise today to recognize International Women's Day as we celebrate the many achievements of women in Alberta and elsewhere. This year's theme, She's on a Role, recognizes the momentum behind women's issues and reminds us of the progress being made.

Last September our Minister of Community Development hosted his counterparts from across the country. As ministers responsible for women's issues, they released a document called Workplaces That Work.

Since 1977, when the United Nations established March 8 as International Women's Day, we have dedicated this day to address the challenges facing women and to consider future steps to enhance the status of women and to celebrate the gains made. I ask all

Albertans to join me and our minister in acknowledging the achievements of women in Alberta and around the globe.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

International Women's Day

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As a feminist and an elected member of this Assembly, it is my pleasure to rise and recognize today as International Women's Day. We recognize women divided by ethnic, linguistic, political, and economic differences but united by decades of struggle for representation, equality, justice, and peace.

Sadly, women are not even halfway to equal when it comes to political representation. Today women make up only 20 per cent of elected officials. Seven years ago it was 27 per cent. In the next year Albertans will be called to the polls to elect representatives to three levels of government. A woman's place is at the table, in the boardroom, on the factory floor, in the Assembly, wherever she wants to be. Political parties, media pundits, politicians must work to create an atmosphere where women can visualize and then actualize their participation in politics and stand for political office. In 2004 decreasing representation for women in this Assembly, municipally, or federally is simply not acceptable.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Movie Filming in Wetaskiwin

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to congratulate the city of Wetaskiwin for being chosen as the site of a Hollywood movie filmed recently. Wetaskiwin was selected because of its historic downtown with its impressive old buildings. Film crews were particularly taken with the grandeur of the old courthouse with its amazing architecture and preserved courtroom. It was especially exciting for the citizens to see the filming crew use these old historic buildings in Wetaskiwin, especially the old courthouse. The city of Wetaskiwin is well known for valuing our Alberta heritage and working hard to retain it for future generations.

The movie *Santa's Slay*, directed by David Steiman and starring wrestling superstar Bill Goldberg, will be released sometime before Christmas 2004 in theatres across North America. My constituents and I salute Wetaskiwin for this latest exciting event of movie magic that took place on their historic main street in February.

Arctic Winter Games

Mr. Broda: Mr. Speaker, this week the 18th Arctic Winter Games in Fort McMurray came to an end. Held biannually, this international sport festival attracted 2,000 athletes, coaches, and officials from communities north of the 55th parallel. It was a grand celebration of participation in sports for northern athletes and a chance for them to interact with people from different cultures.

Today I want to recognize Team Alberta North and its 351 athletes, coaches, managers, and mission staff who participated. Team Alberta North had its best showing ever and finished first overall with a total of 137 ulus, or medals: 50 gold, 50 silver, and 37 bronze.

Our athletes impressed everyone, and in doing so, they continue a rich legacy of hard-working and determined young Albertans. I'd invite everyone to join me and the Minister of Community Development in congratulating the athletes, coaches, volunteers, staff,

parents, and family members who took part in these games.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

University Volleyball Teams

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize two outstanding women's and one outstanding men's volleyball teams from Alberta. The University of Calgary Dinos women's volleyball team captured the 2004 Canadian Interuniversity Sport national championship, defeating the University of Alberta Pandas in the final in Saskatoon on Saturday afternoon three games to one.

Calgary's Amanda Moppett was named most valuable player of the tournament, and Calgary's Joanna Niemczewska was named CIS player of the year in women's volleyball. Moppett was the player of the game in both the CIS semifinal and championship final match. Moppett had a kill percentage of 32 per cent in the three matches during the tournament. Calgary was ranked number one the entire season except for one week and finished the season with an overall record of 32 wins and five losses. The team is coached by native Calgarian Kevin Boyles, who has committed himself over the last several years to building a championship team and organization.

Mr. Speaker, I would also congratulate both U of A volleyball teams that represented Alberta extremely well, bringing two silver medals back to the U of A. Congratulations to all three Alberta teams, the players, the coaches, and training staff on representing their schools and province so well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Canterbury Foundation

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, Canterbury Foundation is a not-for-profit organization that in September of this year will be celebrating 30 years of providing supportive housing and care services to Edmonton seniors. Since 1974 Canterbury Court has been one of the city's leading seniors' facilities, providing a high level of service and care to its residents.

Canterbury Manor, a self-contained seniors' residence opened in September 1992, continues through this day to be one of Edmonton's most highly regarded and popular seniors' residences. In 1997 the foundation, in a bold and visionary initiative, opened Canterbury Lane, a 20-unit special care program for residents with Alzheimer's and similar dementia, the first of its kind in the city. Today over 300 Edmontonians call Canterbury their home.

This is a caring and visionary organization. Canterbury Foundation has a proud history, and its vision for the future continues to evolve as it strives to meet the changing needs of Edmonton's seniors.

Thank you.

head: 2:40

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Standing Committee on Private Bills I beg leave to present the following petitions that have been received for private bills under Standing Order 93(2): number one, the petition of St. Mary's College for the St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004; number two, the petition of Sister Ann Murtagh and Sister Mary Anne Mulvihill for the Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Act Repeal Act; number three, the petition of Paul Reich, Randy Holt, William Dyck,

Gordon Setterlund, Verdon Kerr, James Blair, Kathryn Wall, and Dennis Traverse for the Living Faith Bible College Act; number four, the petition of Northwest Bible College for the Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004; number five, the petition of Brooklynn Rewega, an infant, by her legal guardian and father, Doug Rewega, for a private act that will grant an exception to the law that provides for maternal tort immunity for prenatal wrongful conduct.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Bill 17 Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 17, the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004, for first reading.

This bill and new amendments will add clarity to technical changes on how the Natural Resources Conservation Board administers the act, on the role of municipalities, and for confined feeding operations who are looking at changes to their operation.

[Motion carried; Bill 17 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 17 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Order.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 18 Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move first reading of Bill 18, the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004.

This new legislation will provide the Alberta maintenance enforcement program with additional tools to encourage compliance with court-ordered maintenance payments. The program, as all members know, provides an essential service to single-parent and low-income families by working to collect all of their court-ordered support payments. Many of the new provisions in the bill address debtors who continually fail to pay their court-ordered support, and we hope that with changes to the legislation the program will be even more effective.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Bill 207 Traffic Safety (Emergency Vehicle) Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Magnus: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 207, the Traffic Safety (Emergency Vehicle) Amendment Act, 2004.

The purpose of Bill 207 is to reduce the number of injuries and deaths of police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical professionals on Alberta's roadways. The regulations set forth in

this legislation will help to ensure that individuals operating a motor vehicle do not collide with a stopped emergency vehicle or endanger any person outside the emergency vehicle.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 207 read a first time]

Bill 208 Emblems of Alberta (Official Gemstone) Amendment Act, 2004

Mrs. O'Neill: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 208, the Emblems of Alberta (Official Gemstone) Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill seeks to adopt ammolite as the official gemstone of Alberta.

[Motion carried; Bill 208 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Bill 209 Insurance (Demerit Offences) Amendment Act, 2004

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 209, the Insurance (Demerit Offences) Amendment Act, 2004.

Bill 209 would protect drivers from paying higher insurance premiums for having committed a demerit offence more than two years prior to the date, making it illegal for insurance companies to penalize drivers for demerit offences or demerit points which occur more than two years prior to an application for or renewal of insurance coverage. In other words, Mr. Speaker, it brings the Insurance Act in line with the Traffic Safety Act.

[Motion carried; Bill 209 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Bill 210 Matrimonial Property (Division of Property on Death) Amendment Act, 2004

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 210, the Matrimonial Property (Division of Property on Death) Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill would allow the surviving spouse of a marriage terminated by death the ability to bring forward a legal action challenging the terms of the deceased spouse's will if it does not provide the surviving spouse with at least a share of the matrimonial property that would be available to him or her if the parties had separated or divorced.

[Motion carried; Bill 210 read a first time]

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to file with the Assembly a letter sent today to the Auditor General of Alberta asking that his audit of BSE-related programs be fast-tracked as discussed previously with AAFRD department staff.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today

on behalf of the Minister of Community Development to table an information bulletin dated today's date in reference to the accomplishments of women honoured on International Women's Day. The hon. Minister of Community Development had wanted this document to be provided to the House in order to further people's understanding of the nature of and extent of the accomplishments of women and in honour of International Women's Day.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Linda Telgarsky with her permission; in fact, at her request. She attended a sitting of the Legislature last week and was unimpressed with our behaviour.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of a policy resolution adopted at the December 2003 annual general meeting of the Alberta Beef Producers asking that the provincial and federal governments "investigate pricing practices of the packing and retail sectors."

The Speaker: Are there others, hon. members? Then I have the pleasure of making two tablings. First of all is a copy of a message from one of the most remarkable women in the world, Her Majesty the Queen, and it's her Commonwealth Day 2004 message. The theme of Commonwealth Day 2004 is Building a Commonwealth of Freedom.

Second, it is my pleasure to table the appropriate copies of the third School at the Legislature report card, 2002-2003. This is an educational program that we have here at the Legislative Assembly for grade 6 students sponsored by two community partners, Capital City Savings and Priority Printing from here in the city of Edmonton.

head: **Orders of the Day**
head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 4, I move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 1, 4, 5, 15, and 33.

[Motion carried]

2:50 **Provincial Veterinary Pathologists**

Q1. Dr. Taft moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.
What increase in remuneration or salary and benefits is required for the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development to attract and maintain sufficient numbers of veterinary pathologists to meet requirements for timely testing of animals since the discovery of bovine spongiform encephalopathy in Alberta?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. minister of agriculture we're prepared to accept Written Question 1.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to close the debate.

Dr. Taft: I appreciate the gesture, and we look forward to the information, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

[Written Question 1 carried]

Assistance for Elk Ranchers

Q4. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What programs are being developed to aid elk ranchers who have suffered economic losses due to shrinking markets as well as the recent case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy?

Mr. Stelmach: On behalf of the minister of agriculture we're indicating that we're prepared to accept Written Question 4.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for providing that information.

[Written Question 4 carried]

Elk Ranching Consultations

Q5. Dr. Taft moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What consultations are presently taking place between the government and game farm operators regarding the future of the elk ranching industry in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again on behalf of the hon. minister of agriculture we're prepared to accept Written Question 5.

[Written Question 5 carried]

Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development Restructuring

Q15. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.

How much was spent on division and branch restructuring initiatives within the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development broken down by initiative for the fiscal year 2002-2003?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you. Once again, on behalf of the minister of agriculture we're prepared to accept Written Question 15.

[Written Question 15 carried]

Grandparents' Access Rights

Q33. Dr. Taft moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the Department of Justice taken to establish statistical measures to determine the number of grandparents who apply to the courts for access rights to their

grandchildren, the number who are successful when applying for access, and the number who are unsuccessful when applying for access?

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Regretfully, I would indicate on behalf of the government that we'll reject Written Question 33. In doing so, I would just indicate that the question asks what measures we've taken, and the short answer to that might be none. That might confuse some people.

Some statistical information is available, historical information from January to December 2002. There were a total of 79 applications brought in Calgary, 60 applications brought in Edmonton, and 136 in the rest of the province, for a total of 275. However, information is not available on the number of successful versus the number of unsuccessful, and indeed it might be difficult to actually quantify which ones were successful and which ones were not successful because there are a number of variations in the middle and really it's in the eye of the beholder what success is in each of these cases.

It may also not be particularly useful, because each application for grandparents' access that is brought represents a unique set of strange family circumstances, and success or failure on any one application does not necessarily have a relationship to the success or failure of any other application. So a number count really is a questionable use of resources.

We're rejecting the question, just so that there's no lack of clarity around it, but the short answer is that we're not taking any steps relative to measurement, because measurement of this nature would not be cost-effective nor provide useful information.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview to close the debate.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can say that we'll be disappointed with that response from the government. We brought this written question forward in response to inquiries and requests from grandparents who want more information about how the system is working, and it didn't seem like it was that much to ask.

The minister has provided some information, and I appreciate that. We'll review *Hansard* to see what it entails, but I would have thought that for the purposes of evaluating how the program is working, evaluating the effect of legislation, evaluating how we're meeting the needs of grandparents and families and children, this would have been information that was worth collecting, and it would have been well worth establishing statistical measures to determine these outcomes.

I would urge the minister to reconsider his position in the future. I can't imagine that there are so many variables that they can't be at least generally categorized so that we have some sense of how this is playing out.

I'm sorry to hear the response from the minister, and we may bring this issue back through other means.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 33 lost]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 4, I move that motions for returns

appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 21 and 43.

[Motion carried]

3:00

Kneehill Animal Control and Rehabilitation Centre Ltd.

M21. Dr. Taft moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing any report received by the government from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in calendar years 2003, 2002, 2001, and 2000 regarding the well-being of animals at the Kneehill Animal Control and Rehabilitation Centre Ltd., GuZoo.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the minister of agriculture we are pleased to accept Motion for a Return 21.

Dr. Taft: I appreciate the gesture from the government and look forward to the information. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 21 carried]

Applied Research and Forage Associations

M43. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount allocated by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development to applied research and forage associations, broken down by the amount given to each association, for the fiscal year 2002-2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you. On behalf of the minister of agriculture we'll accept Motion for a Return 43.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Minister, for that information, and we look forward to getting it. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 43 carried]

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 201

Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to be able to rise today and speak to the Committee of the Whole regarding Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004.

Two weeks ago I was very pleased with the kinds of and the levels of support for Bill 201. It was and is very gratifying to know that the

issues that the bill seeks to address have found a receptive audience in this Assembly and one that's also prepared to take action by passing the bill. In conversations I've had in the past couple of weeks, I've come to understand that there are a few concerns, a few questions about Bill 201 and what its impact would be. With this in mind, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to open my remarks by making clear a couple of things.

First of all, the amendments proposed by Bill 201 do not change the manner in which the Alberta building code applies to existing buildings and/or renovations. Existing buildings are only required to be compliant with the code that was in effect at the time that they were built unless they undergo some significant change or renovation. In such situations, then, only the actual renovations would be required to comply with the current edition of the Alberta building code, and that's the legislation today, and it would remain so after Bill 201. Then, as well, the compliance would only be to the extent determined by the nature of those renovations. Moreover, Bill 201 has never sought to effect any changes to the Alberta building code as it applies to private homes.

As stated in section 2 of the bill, Bill 201 amends section 2 of the Safety Codes Act by adding subsection (2.1) to the act as follows:

(2.1) This Act is to be applied in a manner consistent with the principles of barrier-free design and access to allow persons with physical and sensory disabilities to access and use buildings and facilities to which this Act applies.

Which buildings are affected, then, is spelled out in section 3.8.1.1 of the Alberta building code. There it's written that the requirements of the barrier-free design section apply to all buildings except houses and that the Alberta building code exempts all private residences, including free-standing houses, semidetached houses, duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, row houses, and boarding houses not used in social programs such as group homes or halfway houses or shelters.

Also exempt, Mr. Chairman, from the barrier-free design and access requirements are relocatable industrial accommodations such as high-hazard industrial occupancies. These would include but aren't limited to the following: bulk plants for flammable liquids, dry cleaning plants, feed mills, grain elevators, paint factories, and spray painting operations. Only requirements dealing with hearing sensory provisions would apply there.

Finally, buildings that do not need to be in compliance with barrier-free design and access regulations also include those not intended to be occupied on a daily or full-time basis. Some examples would be things like automatic telephone exchanges, pumphouses, and substations, where only the requirements of a person with hearing sensory disabilities would apply.

I hope that this lengthy list of buildings that are not required now nor will be required under Bill 201 to comply with the barrier-free design and access requirements helps to clarify the barrier-free requirements as they currently exist and will continue to exist after Bill 201. Put differently, Mr. Chairman, the common-sense exemptions already specified in the Alberta building code for such things as private homes or relocatable industrial buildings and other industrial-type operations, where the risks to persons with sensory and/or physical disabilities would preclude their working or being present in the building, will remain unchanged by Bill 201.

What's more, Mr. Chairman, section 4 of Bill 201 augments the Safety Codes Council by adding to the existing body of experts an entity with expertise in barrier-free design and access. Not only does it make good sense from the standpoint of equality, the importance of which was stressed by several members during second reading; of no less significance is the fact that by enabling representatives of persons with disabilities on the Safety Codes Council, we're setting the stage for recommendations being brought forward by persons

with expertise in barrier-free design and access. That's why adding a 10th body of expertise to the Safety Codes Council not only makes good sense; it's also the right thing to do. It's right for the disabled community in Alberta, and it's right for Alberta's citizens in general.

Two weeks ago, you may recall, I mentioned the wheelchair ramp by the east wing entrance to this building. It's a good thing to have it there. If nothing else, the decision to put it there was really well intentioned. It certainly serves many other purposes besides just being a wheelchair ramp. If anyone's pushing a cart, perhaps with mail or one of those big blue garbage tubs or something like that filled with paper destined to the shredder, they are helped immensely by the presence of that ramp. Instead of manoeuvring the cart or the tub down the stairs, both of which could be quite difficult, quite heavy and awkward to handle at the best of times, they simply push them up or down the ramp, depending on their situation.

3:10

It took a wheelchair-bound person, however, to point out to me and to, perhaps, the rest of you, who are fortunate enough to be able-bodied, something that we have failed to observe all these years. Because the ramp is not properly aligned with the door, getting off the ramp and out the door or getting on the ramp once you're inside presents its own set of difficulties. The turning radius of wheelchairs is such that it's difficult to manoeuvre at the top of the landing and get down the ramp. In the same way, it may be difficult to bring some large object straight in the door and down the ramp because the ramp isn't aligned directly. A small change in that may make quite a difference for people with wheelchairs as well as for people using the ramp for bringing something in or out of the building.

Thanks to section 4 of Bill 201, which amends section 16(4) of the Safety Codes Act, this is the kind of practical knowledge and expertise I know the future recommendations and decisions made by the Safety Codes Council will benefit from, and as a result so will our province and so will all Albertans.

On February 28 I was at a gathering in the Legion in Fort Saskatchewan where a group of people had gathered together to honour one of their good friends, John Fisher, who was the next day, on February 29, celebrating his 20th birthday. This 80-year-old gentleman was having friends over, and conversations were going around, and some people in discussions were asking me what we're involved with in the Legislature currently. I got talking to them about Bill 201 that I was bringing forward and the challenges of access that some people are experiencing and some of the things that we hope to accomplish with Bill 201.

It was interesting that several of these contemporaries of John Fisher commented to me that mobility problems as you get a little bit older are something that is very important to them. The challenges of barrier-free access are important to them because those mobility challenges become very significant in their lives and impact them as they try to get around the community.

So certainly, Mr. Chairman, the community at large supports the ideas that are going to be brought forward by design experts that can help clarify the kinds of designs that will make barrier-free access more practical and more prevalent to the whole community.

Mr. Chairman, I'm looking forward to hearing comments from the rest of the members assembled. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I am very pleased to be able to join this stage of the debate on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004.

I'd like to begin my remarks by expressing my sincere gratitude to my friend and colleague the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. From his work as chairman of the Premier's Council on the Status of Albertans with Disabilities I know we can all take great comfort in the fact that this bill has come before us as a result of wide-ranging consultation, careful deliberation of the issues, and, certainly also, a great deal of knowledge of the issues upon which the bill would have an impact, whether directly or indirectly. It is, therefore, what I would call a truly sound piece of legislation. The phrase "common sense" comes to mind when I consider what impact this bill will have both in the short term and in the course of a longer period of time.

This bill, Mr. Chairman, is that rare breed of legislation that offers a set of solutions that are both reactive and proactive. Bill 201 is reactive in the sense that it addresses a variety of issues to which the hon. member has been alerted. On the other hand, the bill is proactive because having identified certain issues of concern to a particular segment of Albertans, once we take appropriate action, we will also initiate what otherwise is likely to be a major opportunity for the Alberta government over the next 15 to 20 years.

If we look at section 3 of Bill 201, we see that the bill states very clearly that "the Minister shall, in accordance with this Act" – and that would be the Safety Codes Act – "co-ordinate and encourage the principles of barrier-free design and access for any thing, process or activity to which this Act applies." Why is this important? Well, there are several reasons why it is so. As has been made amply clear, this bill does not seek to take action retroactively. Only new construction will be affected. Furthermore, in accordance with the Alberta building code with regard to renovations only when a refurbishment project is extensive and when it significantly alters an existing structure would the renovations have to be made in compliance with the requirements of the Alberta building code.

What we may refer to as practical or logistical aspects aside, Mr. Chairman, there's a seniors boom looming in the future that's a great deal less distant than we may want it to be. Yes, after the baby boom of the 1940s, '50s, and, I could say, early '60s must inevitably come a seniors boom. It may not have gained that official term, yet it makes sense. A person born in 1945 will turn 60 next year. We can therefore expect to see large numbers of people coming off the payrolls and retiring beginning in 2010. That's a mere six years away.

If we look at demographic numbers for the last six decades, we see that there were a lot of children born in the years following World War II, and although the baby boom generation was succeeded by Generation X, it wasn't really until the 1990s that the birth rate began to decline.

In fact, the number of Albertans who are to be considered seniors has grown at a steady rate throughout the last 30-plus years. According to Statistics Canada, since 1971 there's been a 171 per cent increase in the number of Albertans over the age of 65, and between 1971 and 2003 the number of seniors in Alberta rose from 120,500 to more than 327,000. During the same period Alberta's population as a whole increased by 84 per cent.

So as a result of the higher rate of increase among Alberta seniors, the population is aging, thereby placing a greater strain on resources. It's therefore imperative that we take action to address the impact that we can expect a rapidly aging population to have on our resources, and the sooner we do it, the better off I believe we will be.

Bill 201, by recognizing the need to remove barriers which hamper or prevent an individual's full participation in society, responds sensitively and sensibly to the problems being experienced by Alberta's disabled community. At the same time, the bill anticipates what lies ahead and prepares us as a society for a

collective need to decrease and eliminate barriers where possible. To be both responsive and forward looking is no small feat, and this is further manifested in section 4 of Bill 201, which is poised to amend section 16 of the Safety Codes Act. This is accomplished by augmenting the Safety Codes Council to be inclusive of persons with expertise in the area of barrier-free access and design.

Mr. Chairman, I do not believe that those of us who are able bodied and who have the full use of all of our senses can really fully and completely understand what being disabled means.

3:20

True, we may see a person in a wheelchair as he or she struggles up a ramp, and we may feel a certain amount or degree of sympathy, but do we really know what hurdles mean to them? Likewise, when I see someone accompanied by a seeing eye dog, I wonder if we, once we've taken note of the dog, also tend to focus on the dog rather than considering the reason the dog is there in the first place.

We've heard accounts that showcase all too well that our society is riddled with barriers and how those barriers are ingrained in our attitudes not about how things should be but about how things are. For those of us to whom these barriers are little more than a nuisance, we are often blissfully unaware and unable to fully appreciate that for as many as 1 in 6 Albertans they are anything but nuisances. For 1 in 6 Albertans they are truly barriers.

I think it's wise not to underestimate just how instructive and enlightening any participatory experience can be, such as the experiences that a number of the members of this Assembly indicated they had experienced in order to fully appreciate what it means to be disabled. It can offer a glimpse of what a disabled person faces each day. For this reason expanding the Safety Codes Council to include persons with experience and expertise in barrier-free design and access and what they mean will be a tremendous asset to Albertans both today and in years to come.

So with this in mind I will close my remarks here. Once again I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for having the vision and sensibility to introduce a bill of such merit as Bill 201. I will of course continue to offer my full support, and I ask that all members do so as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to rise once again to speak to Bill 201, Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, in the Committee of the Whole, and I certainly do also want to congratulate the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for bringing this much-needed legislation forward. It is legislation that will assist and aid those members of our community that do require barrier-free design and access. So from that standpoint I think this is an excellent bill.

I also was looking at part 4, which refers to section 16, which presently reads:

Among the persons appointed to the Council the Minister and the Committee shall include persons who are experts in fire protection, buildings, electrical systems, elevating devices, gas systems, plumbing systems, private sewage disposal systems or pressure equipment,

and also adding "barrier-free building design" after "buildings."

I am very happy to see the inclusion of these people, but as well what I would have liked to see in the bill is something that would address what has happened in recent fires in Edmonton. One in particular occurred in Clareview at the Pointe North complex. There was some concern that we have to revise our building codes relative to light construction. Again, one of the reasons for that was that this

particular fire spread very quickly and certainly consumed the whole building. I think we have to look, when we're looking at the construction of condominiums with lumber, that even with firewalls and sprinkler systems we do not get enough protection, particularly when we compare that construction with concrete.

The article in the *Edmonton Journal* which reported on this particular condo blaze – and this article was from Thursday, February 5, 2004 – went on to say that “there is a need in our building codes for structures larger than a 16-suite apartment to be constructed of a core material that will give fire protection similar to concrete.”

As well, I think that we do have to have some clarification, Mr. Chairman, in our building codes for the safety of the consumer. One of the issues that came up in this particular fire – and this was a larger condominium unit; it was a 63-suite wood frame condominium – and in an article from the *Journal* on February 8, 2004 – there was confusion.

But its lowest floor was considered a basement under the Alberta Building Code because the next level up was less than two metres above ground level. That means it was rated as a three-storey building, so sprinklers weren't required. At four storeys it would have needed sprinklers.

So I think that as we look at amendments to this bill down the road, these are certainly some areas of concern and areas, again, where we can strengthen this bill to the same effect as this current Bill 201. So I would urge all members of the Assembly to support this bill and certainly that we continue to review the legislation on safety codes to see how we can strengthen it.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I will take my seat and listen to further debate. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to rise in the Assembly this afternoon to offer my comments to the discussion and debate surrounding Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. As we've heard previously, Bill 201 would serve to provide a voice representing the disabled community in an effort to promote the principles of barrier-free design in the building environment.

Mr. Chairman, before I begin my remarks, I would like to take a moment to address a concern that was raised during the debate in second reading regarding the types of buildings that passage of this bill would affect. I would like to assure all members that this legislation does not apply to any private home in the province. Bill 201 states under section 2(2.1) that “this Act is to be applied in a manner consistent with the principles of barrier-free design and access to allow persons with physical and sensory disabilities to access and use buildings and facilities to which this Act applies.”

The Alberta building code specifies under section 3.8 that the code applies to all buildings with the exception of the following four categories. The first applies to all houses, including semidetached houses, duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, row houses and boarding houses which are not used in social programs such as group homes, halfway houses, and shelters. The second category exempts relocatable industrial accommodation. The third excludes high-hazard industrial occupancies; examples of these include grain elevators, dry cleaning plants, feed mills, and paint factories. The fourth category applies to buildings which are not intended to be occupied on a daily or full-time basis. Therefore, I reiterate that Bill 201 would not apply to any private home or dwelling occupied on a full-time basis.

Mr. Chairman, the Safety Codes Council includes experts from a variety of fields. These experts have been entrusted to recommend

action and pass informed judgment on proposed code changes. By including another voice to this council, we are only adding to the knowledge base from which we can draw. This does not change the building code, but rather it brings another expert to the table and another realm of expertise to utilize.

Currently there are provisions in the Alberta building code which permit exemptions to be made under very specific and limited circumstances to barrier-free design requirements for buildings in the province. The current exemption process needs to be modified a little in order to better accommodate the views of a growing disabled community.

3:30

When reviewing exemptions, especially those relating to barrier-free design specification, it would be beneficial to have representation from the disabled community. The disabled community is in a position to provide a wealth of practical knowledge which cannot be offered through other sources. As a result, it would seem likely that common ground can be found more quickly in times of dispute seeing as how the presence of a disabled community on the Safety Codes Council may also have the capacity as a facilitator or mediator, finding solutions that are acceptable to all parties. By creating a seat at the table, so to speak, for the disabled community, we are providing essential design expertise in the development or renovation efforts on public buildings.

Mr. Chairman, I am beginning to notice on a more regular basis the international symbol of accessibility, and I'm sure all members are aware of the symbol that I refer to, the white wheelchair figure on a blue background. We see this sign or symbol in parking lots, on washroom doors, on the fronts of buildings, and in other public settings on a daily basis. However, what I'd like to stress is that just because there's an increased presence of the signs or awareness among the general public, this has not necessarily resulted in increased accessibility.

These signs and symbols do not directly relate to the ease of mobility. It has been brought to my attention, in fact, that the signs can be misleading. Many of the facilities and services identified with the accessible symbol are on the contrary. For instance, some handicapped parking spaces are inaccessible. Granted, they're reserved for persons with disabilities, but their size or location can work to hinder rather than assist an individual's ability to get in or out of a vehicle.

Access ramps are another area which causes accessibility concerns. Not all ramps meet practical requirements and, therefore, are not accessible. In some circumstances when the ramp slope is too steep, it can be potentially dangerous.

Another example to illustrate my point would be the perceived access to washroom facilities. Washrooms often provide larger stalls for mobility and accessibility concerns, and logically we'd assume that this would address the issue. However, there are other things to take into consideration such as the appropriate height of grab bars and seats. Washrooms need to be equipped with hand-operated controls that are easily accessible to a wheelchair user or can be automatically operable. The height of the sink and faucet handles need to be easily reachable. These are all important specifics that need to be considered but may be overlooked by someone who doesn't deal with these situations on a daily basis.

Mr. Chairman, as accessibility may appear to be increasing to the general public, these changes may not provide mobility solutions to those living with a disability. Furthermore, just because steps are taken to account for disabilities, it doesn't mean that the actions are the most beneficial to the disabled. This is why it becomes crucial to have a voice representing the disabled community on the council.

It appears to be beneficial to have the capacity to call on someone who can review designs in practical terms and provide valuable input. The process by which an engineer designs plans may seem logical from a building sense or from his or her expertise but may not make practical sense for someone with a disability.

One in six people in the province lives with a disability, and we are talking about a significant number of Albertans with a valid concern. This legislation promotes an initiative that takes a positive step toward addressing this concern. Bill 201 would help ensure that disabled persons have access to public facilities.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I just want to emphasize that Bill 201 is not about creating unnecessary regulation and additional cost for business owners. Rather, the legislation takes a proactive approach to increasing accessibility while promoting fairness and moving us towards becoming a more inclusive society.

Mr. Chairman, I commend the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for bringing forward this bill. I feel it's a very important initiative, and I encourage all members of the Assembly to consider the merits of the legislation and strongly support Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my privilege to rise to address Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. Like so many speakers here today I would congratulate the sponsoring member, the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, for bringing forward this bill. I think it's long overdue in fact, and I think it's an excellent idea that will have all kinds of spinoff benefits for everybody.

Twelve or 14 years ago I remember doing some research into the concept of universal design when I was doing work as a consultant. The idea of universal design is very much like barrier-free design: trying to make houses, appliances, automobiles, whatever universally accessible for people, whether they are able bodied or disabled.

One of the effects of that design is that everybody benefits. Whether it's a doorknob that's easier to open for somebody with arthritis or whether it's the ramp on the sidewalk that's intended for wheelchairs, everybody can benefit from those improvements. Whether or not you have arthritis, if your hands are wet, if your arms are full, having a doorknob that's easy to open is a good thing. Whether you're in a wheelchair or whether you're riding a bicycle or pushing around a baby stroller, the ramps on the corners of sidewalks are a good thing. So we all benefit from improvements to design.

As people with disabilities are often prepared to remind those of us who don't have disabilities, we easily could become disabled. In fact, those of us without disabilities are referred to as TABs sometimes by those who have disabilities, TABs standing for temporarily able bodied. It is often only a matter of time or circumstance before those of us who are able bodied develop disabilities, and to the extent that this legislation will facilitate easier living and facilitate independence for people who are disabled, it will also benefit those of us who are temporarily able bodied but may in the future need these benefits.

This is going to become more and more of an issue given the aging of our population. All of us in this Assembly are aware that the average age of Alberta's population and Canada's population is increasing, and if our houses, if our condominiums, if our buildings are designed to be barrier free, then that will allow us to age in place more easily. We will not have to move because the bathroom in our house is unusable. Properly designed, it will be usable for each of

us as long as we want to live there. We won't have to move because the kitchen is inaccessible or because there are too many steps through the house. All of these issues can be addressed through proper design, and this piece of legislation should facilitate an improvement in building design and in appliance design and so on.

I think this is a good piece of legislation. The intent is good, and it is, as the previous speaker said, something that can achieve its goals without bringing in a whole load of bureaucracy and red tape. In fact, I think we'll find that builders and people working under the safety codes will by and large welcome this legislation.

So I for one will be endorsing it, and I congratulate the member for bringing it forward. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Like other members of this Assembly I am pleased that Bill 201 passed second reading, and I've enjoyed listening to the debate here in Committee of the Whole. It's clear to me that this is an issue that we have thought about a great deal since the sponsor brought it forward, and the thoughts of each of the members reflect that quite well.

3:40

I'd also argue that this government has over the years been instrumental in bringing forward and seeking out all sorts of legislation and regulations that would benefit disabled Albertans. Yet every new piece of legislation reminds us of the extra steps we need to take to ensure that the disabled are afforded equal consideration in our society, and that's what I'd like to centre my comments on around this legislation, Mr. Chairman, equal consideration.

I don't see this bill, by and large, as one regarding equal rights, as many members suggested in second reading. The bill does not take a rights-based perspective. It does not issue commands, nor does it push through suppositions of what rights we should or should not grant to others. What it does do, however, is make provisions for the consideration of different perspectives as they relate to the building and design of certain structures in our province, and that's quite a bit different than equal rights. This bill, to my mind, simply asks for a bit more in the way of courtesy and regard so that we may fully understand and accept the considerations of disabled individuals.

Today I'd like to discuss some of the particular amendments to the Safety Codes Act so that we can get a greater sense of what Bill 201 is trying to accomplish. I think most Albertans and most members will agree that what we're talking about here is a small change in legislation that will actually mean a great change in the way buildings are constructed in Alberta. The change is simple. As section 4 of Bill 201 indicates, an expert in the field of barrier-free design will be part of the Safety Codes Council. This expert will sit as an equal with experts in the fields of fire protection, buildings, electrical systems, elevating devices, gas systems, plumbing systems, private sewage disposal systems, and pressure equipment.

For some the difference between an expert in barrier-free design and experts in each of the other fields is that these experts are interested in safety whereas the expert in barrier-free design is an expert in providing access to those with disabilities. This is a division of safety and access with which I would disagree, Mr. Chairman. While some may suggest that this is solely a comfort and ease issue directed at disabled Albertans, I do not see how that is the case. After all, as the Member for St. Albert mentioned during second reading debate, providing barrier-free access and designing buildings in such a way that barriers are minimized is a safety issue. It may not be a safety issue for every Albertan, but it is a safety issue for some Albertans, and that needs to be recognized by this Assembly.

For instance, I can only think of a situation in which a blind man was trying to make his way around a building possibly with tighter corners and narrow halls and aisles. I'd imagine that the wider the aisles are or the smaller the steps are, the easier it would be for a blind person to get around without accidentally bumping into things or possibly running into other people. This is definitely a safety issue. When somebody is disadvantaged like this, it doesn't just affect whether or not the individual can see or cannot see; it affects every aspect of his life from things that the person is able to do with ease right over to the things that cause a great deal of difficulty.

If there is a greater degree of difficulty for a handicapped individual to get around, then that person risks injury. If these injuries occur repeatedly, we could be talking about serious damage to a person's body, not to mention the frustration that must accompany these sorts of occurrences. These are the sorts of things that most Albertans are hardly aware of without having their thoughts directed that way.

That actually gets me to another aspect of Bill 201 that ought to be mentioned. Many Albertans would not think about some of the issues that have been raised in relation to Bill 201 were Bill 201 not raised. Life is such that people cannot help but use their own experiences as a reference point. It takes a small shift in thinking in order to see things from a different angle, and often the best shift in thinking is caused by people who must see the world in that different way because that's how they live every single day. Accordingly, I'll bet many builders and the Safety Codes Council itself will be further enlightened by the inclusion of a barrier-free access and design expert on the council. Just as our discussion opens eyes, the future discussions around the council will open eyes as well. So I agree with section 4 of Bill 201.

Mr. Chairman, many of the sections of Bill 201 which follow section 4 stem from section 4. Section 5, I would argue, acts as an offshoot insofar as it gives the council the ability to take the recommendations of barrier-free design experts and use them in the service of making buildings more accessible to disabled Albertans. Section 5, in my mind, gives weight to the recommendations of the barrier-free design and access expert.

Section 6 of the bill allows the Lieutenant Governor in Council to take these recommendations and use them towards making regulations which would have greater sensitivity towards the concerns of disabled individuals as they relate to issues surrounding access to buildings. Section 6 also allows for the relaxation of rules in cases where an exemption is deemed to be permissible. This is the section that allows for an appropriate balance between the needs of disabled Albertans and the needs of other members of the community, be they business owners, officers with community organizations, or other sorts of building owners.

This part is important. Not every building can be made accessible as easily as others. Oftentimes cost considerations are also important. It is important that we allow for some leeway so that the bill does not lead towards onerous situations in which the ability of Albertans to either serve the community or run successful businesses is overly restricted. Mr. Chairman, I believe this qualification is met in Bill 201. This bill passed second reading unanimously and with good reason. It takes that difference in outlook and finds a way to apply it judiciously to our legislation.

There is very little within the bill that needs to be tinkered with as I know that the sponsor and the associated departments worked together to make sure that it was in the best shape possible. It is a sound piece of legislation that underscores the difficulties of handicapped individuals as well as the ways that we can make their access to public buildings easier. The bill does not have any bearing on private structures, only on public ones, thus it strikes an appropri-

ate balance between respecting the private rights of Albertans in their homes and respecting the equality of all Albertans in public.

Mr. Chairman, in 1952 Dr. Albert Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel peace prize for his selfless commitment to humanity. Dr. Schweitzer spoke to us when he said, "Whosoever is spared personal pain must feel himself called to help in diminishing the pain of others." Today we are called to diminish the pain of the disabled by passing Bill 201 into third reading and then into law. I therefore urge every member of this Assembly to support Bill 201.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I join a whole long list of members of this Assembly who have spoken very favourably about this bill at the various stages that it has been debated, and because of all of the debate, I have taken an interest in it. I know how hard my colleague the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan has worked in bringing this forward and ensuring that any problems with it have been overcome, and I have a great deal of respect for him and want to support him in his endeavour.

My interest in the subject matter of this bill was piqued, and I had occasion to read from the press release of the Canadian Paraplegic Association (Alberta) dated February 23, 2004. I would like to quote fairly liberally from that, Mr. Chairman, and I undertake to file this with the Assembly at the completion of my remarks.

It is my understanding, Mr. Chairman, that Bill 201 is presented in recognition of the Alberta Disability Strategy, a document published by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, chaired by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. This paper contained eight major recommendations, one of which is:

A commitment should be made to embrace the principles of universal accessibility and a process put in place to remove physical barriers from public spaces so that all Albertans can fully participate in all community, employment and business activities.

Mr. Chairman, in summary, it's my understanding that Bill 201 would amend the Safety Codes Act to achieve these ends: to clarify the applicability of the act to matters of barrier-free design and access, to also provide a proper voice for persons with disabilities by specifically enabling representation by persons with disabilities on the Safety Codes Council, and specifically enabling the making of regulations with regard to barrier-free design and accessibility, all of which are very laudable aims and have been spoken to at great length in this Assembly today and in the last two weeks.

3:50

In effect, Mr. Chairman, Bill 201 would, when passed, enable the creation of a new barrier-free design and access council as part of the Safety Codes Council. It would also allow for the consultative development of a new regulation regarding a participative barrier-free design and access requirements relaxation process, allow for the potential development of a barrier-free design code, and provide for an overall substantial improvement in the voice of persons with disabilities with regard to safety code issues that directly impact them.

So, Mr. Chairman, the results of Bill 201, when it eventually passes, hopefully, will be that people with disabilities will have a voice in a position to effect positive change with regard to physical accessibility, any confusion over what is barrier-free design will be clarified, and barrier-free design and accessibility will no longer be just suggestions that can be easily dismissed.

It is important to remember, Mr. Chairman, that the amendments proposed by Bill 201 do not change the manner in which the Alberta building code applies to existing buildings and/or renovations.

Existing buildings are only required to be compliant with the code in effect at the time they were built unless undergoing a significant change or renovation. So only the actual renovations are required to comply with the current building code and then only to an extent determined by the specific nature of the renovations.

Mr. Chairman, as I mentioned, I was impressed by the fact that the Canadian Paraplegic Association was very supportive of this bill, and I would like to quote a little further from their press release.

Bill 201, which deals with barrier free access to buildings for persons with disabilities, was introduced by . . . MLA for Cloverbar/Ft Saskatchewan and Chairman of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Our Association believes this bill is crucial to ensure that persons with disabilities finally have a voice in determining solutions aimed at making our province's buildings and public facilities more universally barrier free.

"Bill 201 will make Alberta a better place to live, work and visit for people with disabilities," says Marlin Styner, Public Relations Coordinator for the Canadian Paraplegic Association (Alberta). "Improvements have been made in recent years, but there's still a long way to go."

The Canadian Paraplegic Association (Alberta) believes that one of the biggest barriers wheelchair users face is a lack of accessibility awareness by architects, contractors, building inspectors, and the public at large. One or two steps, a narrow door, a tight corner in a hallway or an inaccessible washroom mean very little to an able-bodied person, but any one of these obstacles can be insurmountable to wheelchair users. Often, it's simply a matter of lack of education, and the Canadian Paraplegic Association (Alberta) believes that is what Bill 201 will change.

"Bill 201 will mean that all Albertans, regardless of their physical ability, will be able to enjoy the Alberta Advantage," says Styner, who will be among Canadian Paraplegic Association (Alberta) staff on hand to answer media questions.

Of course, that was back on February 23.

Quoting further from Mr. Styner, the press release goes on to say:

"When I came home from the hospital in 1982 after my spinal cord injury, I was determined that my wheelchair wouldn't stop me from doing whatever I set my mind to. I soon realized that, in fact, my wheelchair gave me freedom and independence, but that lack of accessibility in the community could stop me in my tracks. Bill 201 will allow people with disabilities, and experts in barrier free design, to clearly demonstrate how a few minor, often inexpensive changes will make an incredible quality-of-life difference for a rapidly growing segment of our society."

Mr. Chairman, I don't think I could have expressed that any better than Mr. Styner from the Canadian Paraplegic Association (Alberta) on behalf of himself and all those represented by that association.

So as I mentioned at the outset, I too echo the support of other members of this Assembly who have given unqualified support for the passage of this bill.

With that, I take my seat.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Good afternoon, and thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to also rise and join the Committee of the Whole debate on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Aristotle once said: "If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost." This was true in the fourth century BC, and it is also true now. I find these words quite appropriate for the discussions taking place concerning Bill 201. After all, the main theme within this legislation is, in fact, equality, the equality of one in every six Albertans who is affected

by a disability. This equates to over half a million Albertans whose lives are affected by a disability and who should be full partners in our society.

Mr. Chairman, the purpose of Bill 201 is to amend the Safety Codes Act in order to provide the proper voice in the appropriate forum for the disabled community to effect positive change in the built environment. Currently, section 16(3) of the Safety Codes Act states that

among the persons appointed to the Council the Minister and the Committee shall include persons who are experts in fire protection, buildings, electrical systems, elevating devices, gas systems, plumbing systems, private sewage disposal systems or pressure equipment.

The amendments proposed to the Safety Code Act through Bill 201 include the term "barrier-free building design" added to the list of those persons appointed to the council.

Mr. Chairman, section 16(4) currently reads: "The Minister and the Committee shall ensure that representatives of municipalities, business and labour are appointed to the Council from among the persons described in subsection (3)." Bill 201 proposes that this section be amended to include persons with disabilities as representatives appointed to the council.

Mr. Chairman, it is these two proposed amendments that I wish to further discuss this afternoon. I find the inclusion of persons with disabilities on the council to comment on barrier-free design and access of Alberta building regulations is critical to the equality of all Albertans. As Aristotle alluded to during the fourth century BC, equality will be best achieved when all persons share in the process to the utmost. I use this quote because I believe that it describes exactly what Bill 201 is attempting to do.

The proposed amendments to the Safety Codes Act, specifically the amendments proposed for section 16, ask that provisions be added to require the Safety Codes Council to include representation from the disabled community. Also, Mr. Chairman, the promotion of the principles of barrier-free design and access would be designated as one of the Safety Codes Council's specific duties. In accepting the proposed amendments, members of this Assembly would be accepting an equal voice in the proper forum for the disabled community, ensuring that future changes to Alberta's built environment include the consideration of over half a million Albertans.

Mr. Chairman, not only are these amendments necessary on the fundamental basis of equality, but they also follow the principles of universal accessibility and full citizenship put forth by the Alberta Disability Strategy, which was released in December of 2002 by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. It is the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan who chairs this council. I know that it was brought up during the second reading debate of Bill 201, but I wish to refer to it again as it is directly related to the proposed 16 amendments. The strategy was devised in anticipation that its recommendations, if adopted in legislation, would enable persons with disabilities to participate more fully in all aspects of Alberta society. Mr. Chairman, the time has come to move on the goals and aspirations of the strategy to ensure universal accessibility and full citizenship.

4:00

The first recommendation deals with awareness and states that "Albertans should be made more aware of the rights, needs and aspirations of persons with disabilities." Mr. Chairman, the amendments proposed for section 16 are in line with this recommendation. By providing the appropriate stage within the Safety Codes Council for persons with disabilities, we would allow their voice to be heard. The same point can be made for the majority of the recommendations in the Alberta Disability Strategy.

The third recommendation deals with physical access and states that

a commitment should be made to embrace the principles of universal accessibility and a process put in place to remove physical barriers from public spaces so that all Albertans can fully participate in all community, employment and business activities.

Again, Mr. Chairman, providing over half a million Albertans with a voice that directly effects change in Alberta's building environment would ensure that these needs are met.

Mr. Chairman, by supporting Bill 201 we are making part of the commitment recommended by the Alberta Disability Strategy. We would be embracing the principles of universal accessibility, and by giving Alberta's disabled community a voice on the Safety Codes Council, we would also be putting a proper process in place to help remove physical barriers for 1 in every 6 Albertans.

As a result of Bill 201 I am certain that many public spaces will have physical barriers removed should there be any in place, and in accepting the amendments to section 16 of the Safety Codes Act, we are vastly reducing the possibility for any future barriers to exist.

Mr. Chairman, as I had mentioned earlier and many other members have also stressed, Bill 201 deals with equality. By ensuring this equality, we would be providing Alberta's disabled community with the opportunity of full citizenship and universal accessibility. I ask that all members voice their support to ensure that Alberta's disabled community has the opportunity of full citizenship and a universally acceptable province.

I again thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to join in the debate on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, in Committee of the Whole. It is without a doubt that one of the major trends affecting the population of our country and our province is a steady increase in the number of Canadians and Albertans who are approaching the age of 65. While this is a perfectly natural development, considering the fact that our birth rates have been on a steady decline, it does, however, present a number of issues that will have to be addressed sooner rather than later.

In anticipation of this development, I believe that we as a government need to take all the steps necessary to ensure that the growing number of disabled and mobility-impaired members of our society are extended the same or similar opportunities and advantages that are available to able-bodied Albertans. This, Mr. Chairman, is not only a fair and just approach but also a fiscally prudent method to deal with the fact that more and more Albertans may suffer from some form of disability.

Consequently, Bill 201 provides a prudent way of dealing with physical barriers faced by disabled and handicapped Albertans at the present time and in the future. By amending the Safety Codes Act, Bill 201 would not only allow us to modernize the provisions of universal access outlined in the Alberta building code, but it would also permit us to accomplish this task well in advance of the fiscal costs becoming too high.

In my view, Bill 201 first and foremost reinforces the ideas of fairness and inclusion. It aims to accomplish this by amending section 16(4) of the Safety Codes Act and adding a new clause that would provide members of the disabled community with a permanent seat and voice on the Safety Codes Council, the agency that reviews the Alberta building code's rules and regulations. By creating a new entity, the barrier-free council, the expertise and experience of the disabled community would be brought to bear on

the work and mandate of the Safety Codes Council. Furthermore, by being members of the council, it is quite conceivable that the barrier-free council would be able to offer new and innovative ideas of how to improve these codes in order that they better reflect the needs and aspirations of the disabled community as well as all Albertans.

I firmly believe, Mr. Chairman, that this is truly an enlightened approach to dealing with this matter. Who else but members of the handicapped community themselves could provide the Safety Codes Council with the most relevant, first-hand accounts of everyday physical challenges faced by those who cannot move around as easily as others? Their input and participation will not only provide solutions to the problems associated with barrier-free design, but it will also send a clear message that our province is serious about ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to participate in all walks of life. Furthermore, their input will help ensure that they remain active contributors to and beneficiaries of the Alberta advantage.

It is important to clarify that Bill 201 does not look to update existing or establish new barrier-free standards in the Alberta building code. This would remain the responsibility of the Safety Codes Council. However, it is my hope that by being represented on the council, its recommendations and changes will reflect the needs and concerns of all Albertans both today and in the coming years. I also hope that at the same time any updated barrier-free regulations will remain realistic and flexible to circumstances when relaxation grants are deemed appropriate.

As I already mentioned, Mr. Chairman, Bill 201 is consistent with the principles of fairness and inclusion. Furthermore, Bill 201 is consistent with a number of government goals, objectives, and legislation already in place. By this I am referring to such initiatives as the Alberta Disability Strategy. The Alberta Disability Strategy report released in late 2002 represents a genuine effort by the government to create an environment where disabled individuals would be able to participate more fully in all facets of life within our province and enjoy a greater sense of independence, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance.

The strategy recognizes and justly points out the fact that disabled and handicapped Albertans still face a number of hurdles including not having ready access to buildings, offices, or public facilities. In order to rectify these inequities, Mr. Chairman, the strategy developed eight major recommendations, four of which are directly related to the objectives outlined in Bill 201.

The report's third major recommendation is particularly relevant to Bill 201 as it recognizes the fact that for many disabled individuals it is very hard and in some cases impossible to gain access to certain buildings or move inside them because they are not designed to accommodate such specific requirements as wider doors and hallways. Furthermore, the report cites that the current building codes and regulations are not always adequate to guard against those seeking unwarranted building exclusions and exemptions.

While the report recognizes the fact that not all environments can be made barrier-free, it does not recommend that the Alberta government could easily recommend some of the existing accessibility problems by ensuring that principles of barrier-free design are clearly defined and implemented. One of the ways this could be accomplished is by amending the Safety Codes Act and promoting greater representation on the Safety Codes Council, something that Bill 201 is suggesting. Such a measure would give disabled Albertans far greater input into how our society chooses to approach the problems and issues of universal accessibility.

If you read the remaining three major recommendations presented by the Alberta Disability Strategy, Mr. Chairman, you would find that the common theme covered in all of them is access. The idea of

accessibility maintains that free and unrestricted physical access in buildings, offices, and other structures is absolutely necessary if we are serious about maintaining the strategy of universal access for all.

While Bill 201 does not aim to introduce new barrier-free rules and regulations to the Alberta building code, it does however aim to create an environment where existing regulations, especially those concerning exemptions and relaxations, can be amended and made more rigorous. This, Mr. Chairman, will undoubtedly cause concern among some Albertans, especially those working in the hospitality and construction industries, because stricter building codes usually result in increased building costs. However, I would like to point out that sooner or later we will be compelled to modernize our building codes as the greater portion of Albertans reach the age of 65. If we wait until a later date, the costs associated with incorporating barrier-free design into existing and new buildings are bound to be far greater than they would be at the present time.

4:10

I say this for two reasons, Mr. Chairman. First, if we wait to modernize our building codes until a later date, the future retrofitting costs will be much greater because of the sheer volume of buildings that would have to be constructed by that time and which would require design improvements. Second, as more and more Albertans reach the age of 65, there will be less time to modernize the existing buildings because the demand for barrier-free design will be high. Consequently, it would be much cheaper to address the issue now rather than wait and pay more in the long run.

There's no doubt that addressing this issue of barrier-free design is going to have its fiscal costs. However, I would also like to highlight the fact that providing disabled people with barrier-free access and presenting them with opportunities to realize their full dreams and goals will produce great benefits to our society and will outweigh any initial financial costs.

It has always been said, Mr. Chairman, that the secret behind Alberta's success story is not embedded in our abundant natural resources or vast geography but, rather, our spirit, our ingenuity, independence, entrepreneurship, and people. I firmly believe that having a disability should not preclude one from utilizing his or her resourcefulness, ambition, and hard work no matter what the cost may be. Furthermore, it should never prevent one from contributing to Alberta's future prosperity and success.

Bill 201, Mr. Chairman, is definitely a step in the right direction and provides us with a solid foundation to build on. I therefore invite all my colleagues present today to vote in favour. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is my great pleasure to rise today in support of Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. I believe that the changes contained in this bill are significant and necessary, and I believe that this is an important and appropriate step that will help create a more inclusive society in Alberta.

Mr. Chairman, I actually have a few personal experiences to relate in this regard that I'd like to just mention as to why I'm interested in this bill. Some years ago when I was still a teenager, my older brother, who was a University of Alberta law student at the time, was out riding horses at my dad's farm one weekend, and he was thrown from the horse into a corner post. If you know how large corner posts usually are, you can imagine the force he had to hit with in order to break it in half, which is what happened. Unfortunately, he also broke his back at the same time. It was a terrible ordeal for the family. In fact, he finished his last year of law school in a wheelchair.

I remembered all of that, and when I first became an alderman on Calgary city council, I received an invitation from the Calgary disabled community to spend a day in a wheelchair. Mindful of my brother's experiences I accepted that invitation to spend an entire day in a chair. Needless to say, it was quite an experience. It was a long, difficult, and challenging day for me, and I certainly learned a lot about the difficulties that disabled people often face in navigating around in a wheelchair and trying to actually keep up a job. So that's why I have a personal interest in this bill.

I'd like focus my comments on two of the main objectives of Bill 201. First, I'd like to explain how amending section 16(4) would provide the important representation the disabled community should be afforded on the Safety Codes Council and why that representation will become increasingly important, I believe, in the future. Second, I'd like to also address how designating the responsibility of barrier-free design to the Safety Codes Council's specific duties will improve the number of buildings in the province which are accessible to all Albertans.

I'd like to start my first point by addressing the changes that would occur in section 16(4) of the Safety Codes Act. Now, it is difficult to speak on behalf of a certain group of people, a demographic, when one is not really affiliated or involved a lot with the community in question. Even though I did spend a day in a chair myself and I do think I learned a great deal from that, the fact is that I only spent one day in a chair, and that doesn't even begin to start to teach you the full challenges of such a situation. Therefore, I believe that an able-bodied person simply cannot accurately represent the wishes, needs, and directions of Alberta's disability community despite his or her best efforts.

So in order to provide the disabled a proper voice, I believe we must allow disabled Albertans to have a place at the table where decisions are made. It is not enough to simply ask for an opinion or take actions that able-bodied people might think or might assume would be appropriate. Bill 201 will allow the disabled community an opportunity to have direct input on decisions made that affect them on a day-to-day basis. Members representing the disabled community will be able to put forward ideas relating to solving the problems of barriers attached to Alberta's public buildings.

It will also give the disabled community an opportunity to debate the merits of legislation and procedures and to be able to comment directly as to how these procedures would be applied to the disabled community. Establishing a voice for the disabled at a level where decisions are made has a lot of potential to do a lot of good. I truly believe that if this bill is passed and proclaimed, the disabled community will be able to take this opportunity and make great strides forward in creating a more inclusive society. In my mind, the potential of the good that can be achieved is enormous. For example, who would know more about the problems associated with wheelchair ramps in the wintertime than an individual who is confined to such a chair?

I did find it interesting to hear Members of the Legislative Assembly, colleagues, talk during second reading of this bill about getting into a wheelchair to learn about the barriers that disabled people face. As I mentioned, I did it myself and gained a whole new perspective of how difficult it actually is to do simple things that all of us take for granted. For example, just crossing a street becomes a challenge if you don't have the proper curbs and everything else formed there. So I believe that this truly points to the need to ensure that the disabled have a voice when dealing with issues involving the disabled population.

Now, in coming years it will become even more apparent why it is important to get a head start towards removing barriers in our current built environment and infrastructure because as our popula-

tion ages, more Albertans will have trouble tackling staircases, more trouble accessing poorly designed bathroom stalls, more trouble reading traffic signs, and so on. Obviously, this means more people will be affected when trying to navigate a building that was designed with only the able-bodied person in mind.

Just some statistics here. As of April 2003 there were about 323,000 seniors in Alberta. By the year 2016 it is expected that that number will have risen to 493,000 people, and by 2026 Alberta will be home to more than 700,000 seniors. Now, that's more than double our current seniors population. So while these increases are not alarming per se, it does behoove us to start preparing for that future now. If we don't, we will be doing a large segment of the population a huge disservice, and we should remember that that segment will include many of us, in fact. So as the old adage goes, if we fail to plan, we plan to fail.

With that in mind, the monies will be spent on upgrading Alberta's buildings. It won't be so much a burden on our business owners, but rather we should look at it as an investment for the future. This trend may also speak to a need to have seniors represented in these types of issues either through the means that will be established by passing Bill 201 or through representation of their own.

Now, on my second point, Mr. Chairman, bestowing upon the Safety Codes Council the responsibility of promoting the importance of barrier-free design is an important step in ensuring that progress continues to be made in regard to removing barriers from our buildings. Currently the Alberta building code contains provisions for barrier-free design and accessibility. Section 3.8 of the code addresses matters of barrier-free design. Under this provision it is mandated that when a building to which the general public has access is renovated significantly, then changes must be made to remove existing barriers to the building. An example of that is if a storefront is renovated and there is not wheelchair access, necessary changes under 3.8 must be made at the time when that renovation is being made, and that only makes sense.

The code does not provide direction as to how buildings are to be made accessible to those who face mobility challenges, though. This leaves it open to interpretation. It also allows for flexibility. There can be and often is more than one solution to a problem. Giving the Safety Codes Council the opportunity to put forward solutions to problems like these may lead to solutions that work better for all parties involved. The council could help establish how, where, and in what manner section 3.8 is to be applied during upgrades or even during new construction.

4:20

This process is further strengthened by the disabled community's representation on the Safety Codes Council. Their voice would be critical in bringing clarity as to how the Alberta building code should be applied to Alberta's public buildings.

This is especially true when we look at the issue of relaxations. It was pointed out during second reading of this bill that relaxations are granted in special circumstances. That exempts a builder from having to conform to section 3.8 of the Alberta building code. But disabled representation should be part of that process when it comes to the issue of relaxations because they are the best people to speak to whether or not a relaxation is warranted. They are the ones in the best position to decide whether or not they would be significantly and adversely affected by a relaxation in the requirements.

Mr. Chairman, we could convey stories of the disabled's plight and the importance of removing barriers they face on a day-to-day basis. Dwelling on these stories, however, paints an unbalanced picture of this community. These people are full of ability. Stephen

Hawking, Terry Fox, Rick Hansen, Christopher Reeve, Stevie Wonder, Helen Keller, and many others have proven on a world stage that a certain disability does not and will not limit them or define them as people.

I personally know of many people with varying degrees of disabilities who hold down jobs. They still provide for their families and for themselves, they are self-reliant, and they've put the skills they have to work for them. These people have ability, and our focus on an inclusive society should allow us to recognize this. I believe Bill 201 is a good first step toward making this so.

Mr. Chairman, I am supporting this initiative fully. Putting decision-making power regarding barriers faced by the disabled into the hands of the disabled will go a long way towards creating meaningful solutions and progress. I am urging all Members of this Legislative Assembly to vote for this progressive initiative.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I'd like to commend and thank the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for bringing such a valuable bill before this Legislature. It's difficult for us to speak on a bill when actually we can't personally relate to some of the difficulties that people with disabilities, particularly with physical disabilities, must face on a daily basis. Nonetheless, it is our responsibility as legislators to create an environment in which those individuals can flourish best to their maximum potential.

Mr. Chairman, the bill is drafted in such a manner that not only will it require any new construction to take into consideration any and all engineering amendments that would make the new building accessible to an individual with disabilities, but what it also does is breathe life into the legislation whereas it allows for ongoing consultation with the disabled community on further and ongoing improvements. As our understanding of disabilities, our adaptive attitudes towards disabilities, and our technology improve, the bill will allow for changes in regulations to reflect that and enhance the construction of the building, making Alberta's buildings more accessible to those individuals.

Mr. Chairman, very often when we talk about legislation that requires modifications to buildings or new building code adjustments, we think about the cost. What will the actual cost be to the proprietor that may be building the building or perhaps to our government if we're building schools or offices? But what we very often neglect to mention is how much actual economic benefit there is from doing that.

Imagine, Mr. Chairman, how many people simply a decade or two decades ago were not able to be productive members of our economy, of our society simply because of the fact that they couldn't leave their home, board a bus, or perhaps enter an office building and work. We had very well educated individuals with skills incapable of contributing to our economy simply because they were not mobile. They couldn't do that. They couldn't live their life to their maximum potential. Now, keeping those barriers in mind as we construct our new buildings, we will be able to allow more and more individuals in our society to contribute to our economy and to further evolve in their lives and have much more fulfilling personal lives.

Another aspect, Mr. Chairman, is education. I'm sure that still out there in this province and definitely in the world there are school facilities that are not fully accessible to individuals with disabilities. We don't have to go far. Let's enter some of our older schools here in Edmonton, and we'll notice that even though adaptive measures have been taken and ramps of some sort or perhaps an elevator has

been installed, still those schools are not as accessible to individuals with disabilities as they perhaps could be. Now, it only stands to reason that if we're going to build new buildings, from now on we should be able to implement our newest, most recent understanding of disabilities into the design of the building and then adapt the legislation as time goes on.

Now, who is the best person to consult with us on what needs there really are, physical needs, if you're a disabled person? Mr. Chairman, you and I probably can discuss that at some level. However, we don't have the personal understanding, the actual experience of what it is like to experience the world with disabilities, and it is impossible to acquire that understanding unless you actually live in the body of a disabled person. So it only stands to reason that the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan would advocate that the people with disabilities be the ones actually consulted on future amendments and future development of the legislation governing our building codes.

Mr. Chairman, another realm of life that very often is hindering to individuals with disabilities is simply their participation in our social life. Again, as government and municipal governments and other societies and associations who manage public facilities try to be adaptive, very often we fail, and very often we don't do everything that possibly is in our power to make our buildings more accessible. Buildings like community halls and swimming pools are very often not accessible to individuals with disabilities. Now, this type of legislation would definitely encourage and require new proprietors to take those issues into consideration when they're developing these new buildings.

On the cost side it's important to note that this bill only addresses new construction and nonresidential construction. So it won't affect an average Albertan building his own home, obviously, unless he or she does have disabilities, but it addresses buildings that are nonresidential, nonprivate residential, and buildings which are being retrofitted to a large degree. It will not affect small renovations of a building that doesn't perhaps meet the new standards when there are minor renovations being made, but it does address buildings when a large-scale retrofit takes place.

That plays a very important role here in Edmonton, Mr. Chairman, and in Calgary as well as we're going through a phase right now of retrofitting old structures in the core of the city and trying to revitalize our downtown and encouraging seniors particularly and others to move into the core of the city. It doesn't take much to drive through our downtown and take a look around where old warehouses are being turned into condominiums. Well, those warehouses, as they stand right now, definitely would not meet any requirements for access for individuals with disabilities, but with the advent of this legislation, when those buildings are being gutted and now turned into residential complexes, definitely a developer would have to take into consideration the needs of their potential residents or visitors who may have disabilities.

Mr. Chairman, it would be difficult not to endorse this bill. Obviously, it's a good bill. Obviously, it promotes full participation of individuals with disabilities in the economic, educational, and social life of the province. It's obviously very futuristic. As our technology develops and as we are able to deal positively with more and more medical conditions which right now render individuals home- or hospital-ridden and allow them to be mobile, the more there will be a need for buildings and modes of transportation and all other public facilities to be conducive to those individuals' ability to participate in our province's life.

So, again, I'd like to commend the member for bringing forward such a fabulous piece of legislation. I'm sure that all members of this House will support this bill in passage into law. Thank you.

4:30

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee today and join discussion in committee stage on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. I believe the merits of this bill speak for themselves. I believe that the importance of this legislation and section 4 is fundamental to addressing the needs of those persons with physical and sensory disabilities in Alberta.

Therefore, I would like to address this committee on section 4 of the recommended Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. Section 4 states that "the Minister shall, in accordance with this Act, co-ordinate and encourage the principles of barrier-free design and access for any thing, process or activity to which this Act applies." Mr. Chairman, Bill 201 offers the opportunity to the minister responsible for barrier-free design and access principles for physically and sensory disabled Albertans to ensure their full access to all buildings in Alberta. The structural barrier-free design principles recommended in Bill 201 will afford persons with physical and sensory disabilities the capacity of accessing and excelling in their respective fields and communities.

Doing so would in turn result in further enhancement of disabled individuals with a greater sense of esteem and independence, ultimately strengthening their pride as being an active and contributing member of Alberta's society. Together with the physical self-sufficiency that physically and sensory disabled individuals will gain from Bill 201, the potential of creating a barrier-free mentality among Albertans of the predisposed limits of physically and sensory disabled persons is also heightened.

For decades, Mr. Chairman, people with physical and sensory disabilities have too often been pitied for their differences and categorized as a fringe of society rather than simply being seen as contributing to society and seeking inclusion on a level playing field. The potential for including these so-called fringe groups would increase dramatically given the opportunities that would be within their realm by way of the barrier-free design and access principles stipulated in Bill 201. The probability of breaking down disabled barriers would eventually be inevitable either in our schools, our workplace, or common social gathering places. This social commonality would offer disabled Albertans the opportunity of inclusion rather than the fear of exclusion in their respective communities.

Mr. Chairman, the community employment equity positive measures program offers workshops called Improving the Effectiveness of your Workplace: Universal Accessibility to effective employment co-ordinators and all managers and employees. This workshop is designed to raise awareness in the Canadian marketplace and to offer practical how-to suggestions on accommodating persons with disabilities in the workplace.

The community employment equity program has focused on the correlation between barrier-free design workplaces and the beneficial rewards of a productive employment environment where persons with physical and sensory disabilities can flourish and succeed. The study has also shown that if a workplace is designed to include people with physical and sensory limitations and makes them feel comfortable and part of a team, that's a significant competitive edge. This gives employers access to a larger pool of potential employees and embraces the principles of universal accessibility for all Albertans.

The benefits, Mr. Chairman, of ensuring that the structure of Alberta work areas and facilities is accessible for all Albertans will further limit the societal prejudice associated with persons with physical and sensory disabilities. Bill 201 will optimistically result

in Alberta being a place of tolerance, inclusion, and forward thinking regarding those with disabilities.

The long-term effects of the implementation of barrier-free design will resonate to all facets of Alberta society and instill in our society that all individuals in Alberta shall be afforded the opportunity to succeed. Barrier-free designs and concepts, if taken as the norm in construction in Alberta, will offer those with disabilities greater opportunities to participate actively in community and cultural affairs in Alberta as full participants.

Mr. Chairman, from my own personal experience of suffering a stroke some months ago, coupled with my chair position with the Health Facilities Review Committee, I have witnessed and have come to understand and empathize with Albertans who feel that their loss of dignity is a double-edged sword when having to rely on the charity of others. For example, minor things require help. I need to use a handrail to go up or down a staircase now. I used to take them two at a time. I can no longer leap over a curbside snowbank. An individual's self-esteem and dignity can be quickly crushed with the inability for self-sufficiency.

From personal experience I can assure this committee that an individual loss of independence can be humiliating and emotionally unsettling. Having to cope with mobility issues myself, I have a newfound understanding with regard to persons who have lost their independence coupled with their dignity, having once been an able-bodied individual. I believe that Bill 201 will give those who have relied on assistance for a shorter or longer period to become more self-sufficient and improve their sense of self. With my own affliction I have now become increasingly aware of the plight of disabled individuals and what they have to gain, psychologically and physically, from regaining their independence and self-esteem.

Bill 201 offers a new lease on life for many of those who are disabled. I believe those with short- or long-term disabilities, regardless of age, will be afforded the opportunity of a level playing field because of the amendments brought forth in Bill 201 in amending the Alberta Safety Codes Act. Through the removal of barriers that may hinder the educational, social, and financial advancement of Albertans with physical and sensory abilities, Bill 201 would have a dramatic impact on the potential for opportunities available to Albertans with disabilities.

Opportunities afforded to disabled persons in a barrier-free workplace would encompass the ability to return to work more quickly after injuries or ill health resulting in disability. It would address accessibility needs that may be associated with an aging workforce and allow employers to retain the services of employees with disabilities over the long term, thereby potentially eliminating the societal stigma associated with disabled persons' limits in contributing to society.

Mr. Chairman, with barrier-free design implemented in the current construction of public buildings, those with disabilities would be given the opportunity to contribute as equals among nondisabled Albertans. I strongly believe that the intent and purpose of Bill 201 is consistent with the Alberta government's strategy to protect and nurture human rights and equal citizenship, to ensure accessibility and awareness for all Albertans.

For example, the Alberta Ministry of Children Services' strategy is to develop legislation and policies to refocus resources for children with disabilities on abilities rather than disabilities as this approach advocates a proactive rather than a reactive approach to issues of mobility and disability, as brought forth in Bill 201. Section 4 of Bill 201 will enable the minister responsible, in accordance with this act, the ability to co-ordinate and encourage the principles of barrier-free design and access for the greater good of all Albertans.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, Bill 201 is a step forward for safety code regulation in Alberta. I wholeheartedly believe that Bill 201 would instill a sense of confidence and self-esteem in those physically and sensory challenged individuals, ensuring all Albertans the opportunity to succeed and belong to the Albertan mosaic as contributing, independent, dignified individuals.

I would like to urge all the hon. members in attendance to vote in favour of Bill 201 at this committee stage. Thank you.

4:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-West, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's an honour to join debate in Committee of the Whole on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. Speakers in second reading talked about the importance of barrier-free design for Alberta's growing aging and disabled population. One of the biggest reasons to pass Bill 201 is the idea that the input and insight provided by the disabled community today will save time and money for Albertans in the future.

Mr. Chairman, everyone agrees with the idea of improving the quality of life of the disabled. Developing this idea into a workable plan is the hard part. I believe that the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan has designed an excellent piece of legislation that will provide the proper voice for addressing some of the physical challenges facing the disabled community. Bill 201 is a relatively inexpensive but very sensible and effective way to remove some of the physical barriers that stand in the way of thousands of Albertans. It's easy to say: let's help the disabled lead normal lives. The real challenge is finding solutions that work for everyone involved.

I would like to talk about three specific sections in Bill 201 that will help connect the needs of the disabled with other aspects of building design. In second reading the Member for Highwood described a situation where input from the disabled could have improved the location and layout of barrier-free bathrooms. We all agree that the needs of people living with disabilities related to day-to-day living must be improved. One way to increase accessibility is changing the way we look at safety codes. We should also consider the possibility of a small number of contractors looking for a way around barrier-free designs in an attempt to save time and money.

Currently, section 2(2) of the Safety Codes Act states: "The Minister may, by order, exempt any person or municipality or any thing, process or activity from any or all provisions of this Act and attach terms and conditions to the exemption." This section helps builders avoid certain safety codes that do not apply to their construction project. These exemptions also help municipalities when a project simply runs over budget. The point to remember regarding exemptions is that they are only granted after the applicant has been turned down at every other stage of the process.

However, section 2 of Bill 201 reminds builders that the Safety Codes Act must be applied "with the principles of barrier-free design and access." Exemptions will still be granted under the right conditions, but exemptions will not be granted for projects if people with sensory and physical disabilities are unable to access buildings to which the act applies. It's important to keep the exemption in the Safety Codes Act for unforeseen circumstances. The exemption cannot be used as a loophole for a small number of builders who may try to avoid barrier-free designs.

As I mentioned before, Bill 201 creates a voice for the disabled without damaging the purpose and mandate of the Safety Codes

Council. For example, section 4 sets the rules for membership in the Safety Codes Council. I think that this is one of the most important parts of Bill 201. Adding the term barrier-free design to section 16(3) of the act expressly creates the seat at the table for the disabled.

The people sitting on the Safety Codes Council have extensive knowledge in specific areas, including fire protection, buildings, electrical systems, elevating devices, and plumbing systems. Each of these technical experts contributes important elements of building design. Section 4(a) of Bill 201 includes experts in barrier-free building design. I cannot think of a better group to devise practical, common-sense changes to the safety codes than the disabled community. In other words, empower them to be a key part of the solution. As the bill states in section 4, there is already a list of experts who use their specific skills and knowledge to improve building designs. The disabled representation on the council will add another important element to the construction of safe and accessible public buildings.

Previous speakers have talked about the social advantages of barrier-free access. I think one point that needs to be repeated is the valuable technical expertise that disabled Albertans can offer the council.

Section 5 of Bill 201 also discusses the Safety Codes Council. This part of the bill legislates the mandate to include barrier-free design in all relevant building construction projects. Section 5 provides direction for the council to always consider barrier-free designs in addition to other areas defined in the act.

I believe that the process created through section 4 and section 5 will add value to public buildings. Some would argue that retrofitting buildings to accommodate disabilities will become a major industry in the next two decades. Barrier-free design ideas provided by the disabled community will certainly improve the accessibility for more people. As Alberta's population ages, there will have to be significant changes made to accommodate their decreasing mobility. Making the changes to the Safety Codes Council in sections 4 and 5 will save this government money in the future.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would like to talk about the concerns from people who believe that Bill 201 also applies to their homes. Although I encourage people to consider barrier-free designs when building or renovating, section 3.8.1.1 of the Alberta building code clearly states what kinds of buildings are exempt. At the top of the list are houses, including semidetached houses, duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, and row houses. Boarding houses are also exempt unless they are used for social programs such as group homes, halfway houses, and shelters. The owner of a private dwelling is not compelled to follow barrier-free designs. If someone wants to renovate their home, they do not need to comply with any barrier-free designs unless they want to.

Other people may think of hypothetical situations of buildings that would have to needlessly follow barrier-free designs if Bill 201 were to pass. However, there are three other categories of buildings that are not forced to comply with barrier-free access. Relocatable industrial accommodations or mobile trailers, high-hazard buildings such as chemical plants, and buildings not intended to be used on a daily or full-time basis are also exempt. The structures listed in 3.8.1.1 should address the what-if scenarios on the minds of homeowners and the industrial sector.

Mr. Chairman, Bill 201 will help us achieve the goal of guaranteeing full access by all Albertans to all public buildings. Clarifying the exemption clause in section 2 reduces the chances of unethical builders looking for a way to skip barrier-free designs. Adding another set of experts to the Safety Codes Council in section 4 will add value for the owners of buildings and improve accessibility for

the disabled using these buildings. Promoting the principles of barrier-free design as stated in section 5(a)(e.1) recognizes the importance to improve access for the growing number of seniors as well as disabled Albertans.

Mr. Chairman, these sections in Bill 201 will help create an important position for the disabled, allowing them to provide their insight and improve their quality of life. I commend the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for bringing this very important legislation forward, and I strongly encourage all members to vote in favour of Bill 201.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to be very brief. I again would like to thank the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for bringing this piece of legislation forward. I think it was time that we talked about this issue, and I'm very pleased that through the committee that he chairs, they had the initiative to bring it forward so that we could have a full discussion.

I have listened with great interest this afternoon to the discussion and the debate, and I'm very, very encouraged by what I hear. I'm not going to get into the logistics or the detail, how much needs to be changed in this bill at committee stage, but I just wanted to say that since we last spoke on this, I have talked to a number of people that are very pleased that it is coming forward. The disabled community want a hand up, not a handout, and they want to be part and parcel of the decision-making. What better way than to have another voice at the table with a full understanding of what is needed and how it can be achieved?

In January of this year I got a phone call from the executive director for the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, the national chapter, and they asked me whether I would consider sitting on the Alberta provincial board, and I have agreed to do so. Though we have not had a meeting where I can discuss this particular piece of legislation, I'm sure that they would very much want me to support it and tell you that they are in favour of it.

Again, thank you very much hon. member, and thank you to all the members of this Assembly that have been talking about the good things involved in this bill. It sounds like it will pass committee, and I look forward to discussing it again at the next reading. Thank you.

4:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane.

Mrs. Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. I feel that this is a piece of legislation that coincides with not only the goals and intentions of the government but also Albertans.

The safety codes amendment act, sponsored by the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, is a bill that supports a very simple theory. This theory is that those persons most affected by a decision should have input into that decision. After all, changes to the regulations governing medical practices would not be made without consulting doctors or nurses, nor should decisions regarding issues of accessibility be made without input from persons living with restricted mobility.

This idea is simple, well thought out, and, in my opinion, long overdue. However, as in many other cases while the idea itself is without complications, the legislation and the regulations surrounding the idea are fraught with complexity. In the midst of technical jargon, lengthy discourses on the exact width of doorways, and

regulations regarding the thickness of floor beams it is easy to lose sight of exactly what Bill 201 will achieve. There has been some confusion surrounding the issue. I know that I didn't understand exactly what was intended the very first time I read it, but now that I have reread it, I would like to try to clear up some of the areas that have proven somewhat complex.

Mr. Chairman, one misconception surrounding the bill is that universal accessibility will be applicable to all buildings including private residences. This is simply not true. Section 5(a) amends section 18 of the Safety Codes Act. There another subsection is added that promotes "the principles of barrier-free design to any thing, process or activity to which this Act applies." It does not expand the processes, activities, or things to which the current act applies. Universal accessibility is not required for all buildings in the current situation, and this will not be modified.

Section 3.8.1.1 of the code outlines the types of buildings that are not affected by universal accessibility standards. This list is very long, and there are some building types in there that I've never heard of. In the interest of brevity I will not attempt a reading of every building type; instead, I will merely list the four major types of buildings that will not be affected. These buildings are housing, relocatable industrial accommodations, high-hazard industrial occupancies, and buildings not intended to be occupied on a daily basis. These groupings are somewhat vague so a little explaining might be helpful.

The first type, housing, is fairly self-explanatory. Personal residences are not affected under the current version of the Safety Codes Act, nor will they be affected under the amended version. If a private-home owner wishes to make their home universally accessible, this is entirely their choice. They're under no obligation to do so.

The second type of buildings is relocatable industrial accommodations. An example of these are the trailers used as offices on construction sites that can be seen at any number of locations throughout the city.

The third type of buildings is classified as high-hazard industrial occupancies. They are heavy industrial plants such as chemical and fertilizer plants or a steel mill.

The final group of buildings that are not required to be universally accessible is buildings that are not intended to be occupied on a daily basis. Telephone exchanges, pumphouses, and electrical transformer stations would fall under this category.

The types of buildings that do not fall under the umbrella of universal accessibility are really just common sense. No one expects every private home to be accessible universally, and many of the other building types require the employees in the building to be fully mobile to be able to carry out the duties of their job.

Mr. Chairman, the second point that has attracted a good deal of attention is the granting of exemptions for buildings from the principles of barrier-free design. Section 2(2) of the current Safety Codes Act outlines the powers of the minister with regard to exemptions. In essence, the minister is empowered to grant an exemption to "any person or municipality or any thing, process or activity" from any of the provisions of the act. In the amended version of the act sponsored by the hon. member, this section reads exactly the same. The ultimate responsibility for this act lies with the minister, including the power to grant exemptions.

In addition, the procedure for contractors wishing to apply for an exemption remains the same. A builder can speak to the local safety codes officer regarding an exemption. The officer can recommend that the contractor make a formal application to the head office for consideration. It is during this phase that the amended act could be of added assistance. While the procedure remains the same, the

expansion of the Safety Codes Council to include an expert in barrier-free design would allow for a new insight into the situation. In these instances the expert would be able to offer input that could lead to a compromise regarding the granting of an exemption.

Using real-world experience, the newest member of the council would be able to offer various solutions to difficulties encountered by contractors in fulfilling the requirement to ensure that a building is universally accessible. There can often be multiple solutions to a problem, and having a person with a wealth of experience in dealing with issues of accessibility would open the door to multiple possible solutions.

Mr. Chairman, those are two main areas of confusion that I experienced and witnessed some of my colleagues experience when considering the pros and cons of Bill 201.

I would like to turn my attention to other issues that the bill raises. Section 2(2.1) of the amended bill draws attention to the expanded goals of the act. The Safety Codes Council and through them the Alberta building code will no longer be responsible solely for safety issues with regard to construction. While safety will remain the highest priority, they will now incorporate the ideals of universal access into their duties.

This joining of safety and accessibility embodies the best ideals of the government. The government of Alberta is committed to protecting the safety of Albertans, all Albertans, and also ensuring that all Albertans are able to have meaningful participation in their communities.

Goal 10 of the 2003-2004 government business plan states that "Alberta will be a fair and safe place to work, live and raise families." The passing of Bill 201 will do much toward securing fairness and equality for all Albertans, including those who live with physical or sensory disability.

This bill will help to ensure that those members of our community requiring assistance in getting around are not excluded from places of work or recreation. This same logic can be applied to fulfilling goal 12 of the 2003-2004 government business plan: "Albertans will have the opportunity to participate in community and cultural activities and enjoy the province's historical resources and parks and protected areas."

Mr. Chairman, Alberta has a long and proud history of being an inclusive society, not an exclusive one. The safety codes amendment act will help ensure that all Albertans feel included in their communities and recognized for the valuable contributions that they make.

As was mentioned during the previous debate, this bill will affect a great number of people as many seniors find their mobility becoming limited as they age. The fact is that the seniors' population is growing at a rate that is outstripping other age groups. People are living longer, but their bodies are not holding up to the rigours of daily living, and they are finding themselves needing assistance to get around. By acting now, this Assembly will be preparing society for the not-too-distant future when 20 per cent of Albertans are age 65 or older.

There are already studies completed on the effect that the aging population will have on the health system and pensions, but the concept of universal accessibility cannot be overlooked. By acting now, plans will be laid for the future that will serve Albertans well as we look into the future.

Mr. Chairman, the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan has brought forward a piece of legislation that will better equip Alberta for the challenges that lie ahead. The safety codes amendment act will ensure that Alberta will be open and accessible for all of those who live in this province regardless of any physical or sensory disability that a person may live with. Passing this bill will

make Alberta a leader in rights for those persons with a disability and help to secure the Alberta advantage for everyone in the province.

I would ask all of my colleagues to stand with me and support Bill 201. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to rise today to speak to Bill 201 in committee. I want to focus my comments today on the reasonableness of this bill and how it fits into the government's overall approach to these sorts of issues.

First, as other members have mentioned during this afternoon's discussion, Bill 201 does not affect the status of private residences throughout this province. We should all be clear by now on that point. Through section 3.8.1.1 of the building code Bill 201 cannot impose itself on private homes. When we are discussing the impact of this bill, we are talking primarily about public buildings and facilities that the public access on a regular basis. Albertans need not fear that the status of their homes is somehow changed by this legislation. Every section of this bill speaks to that fact.

The purpose of this act is quite clear. It is an attempt to change the way we think about public access, Mr. Chairman. Many Albertans have difficulties accessing public buildings, and we must ensure that their voice is heard in the development of these facilities. Up to this point I don't believe that this community has been ignored. In many regards those that build public buildings make a great effort to accommodate a wide variety and range of needs to facilitate access to as many Albertans as possible. But it is a unique voice and perspective that only the disabled community and those Albertans who cope with these difficulties on a daily basis can bring to a discussion on development of our public facilities.

All members heard the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan discuss the wheelchair ramp here at the Legislature. That unique perspective of a person who uses a wheelchair could have further helped solve some of the difficulties of that ramp. Bill 201 would formalize that viewpoint for the entire province through section 4 of this bill. It is a subtle change, where an expert on barrier-free design would be appointed to the Safety Codes Council.

5:00

That is the really good thing about this bill, Mr. Chairman. It is a bill that is practical in its application. Albertans won't see a dramatic shift or change if this bill were to pass third reading and come into force on June 1 of this year, as outlined in section 7. No. What will happen is that the Safety Codes Council, when debating and developing new standards for our public buildings, will have to consider a new perspective and ensure that the principles of barrier-free design are considered. Over time these principles will become the new standard, and in many regards the changes that we hope to enact today will constitute a quiet shift in how we build buildings. They will become the norm and just in time too.

As many of my hon. colleagues have pointed out, Alberta's population is aging, and the difficulties that some seniors face with regard to mobility will continue to present themselves well into the future. They will become more and more prevalent as a greater proportion of our population ages. These issues will not go away, and it is important that we put ourselves in the position to respond to these sorts of issues now instead of being forced to do so when it's critical and expensive to do so in the future. With the gradual and common-sense application of this bill potential concerns regarding this bill should be alleviated.

Albertans who own or construct buildings will not have to fear massive new expenditures because of Bill 201. Quite simply, there

is nothing in this bill to fear. When designing a new building from scratch or undertaking a renovation, architects and engineers will simply have to accommodate the principles of barrier-free design that will be incorporated practically into the standards of the code itself.

These new standards will be developed in time, and they will not be developed in isolation of other voices, Mr. Chairman. Under section 16 of the act experts in fire protection, buildings, barrier-free design, electrical systems, elevating devices, gas systems, plumbing systems, private sewage disposal systems, and pressure equipment will evolve the code together. All voices will equally discuss and develop new standards together. No one voice will be more prominent than another, but the key will be to ensure that all voices and all perspectives are heard.

We should be clear, Mr. Chairman, that the government retains the power to provide specific exemptions to the application of the code. So in instances where it would be detrimental to apply portions of the code to new construction, exemptions can be applied for, and if they are reasonable and they make sense, they will continue to be granted in a judicious and fair manner. In many regards Bill 201 can be seen in the broader scope of where the government and Albertans are moving.

For many years now the government through the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities has encouraged individuals in different aspects of our society to consider the needs and aspirations of the disabled community. For instance, it is part of the vision of the council and the government as a whole that all persons with disabilities are valued as full citizens in all aspects of society, with full participation in the social, economic, and political life of communities. Bill 201 will further this vision by removing barriers to buildings and facilities where the social, economic, and political life of our communities takes place. Furthermore, the principles of Bill 201 can be seen in this year's throne speech in the announcement of a new office for disability issues.

Mr. Chairman, I sincerely believe that Bill 201 is a step in the right direction for this province. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. The time for consideration of this item of business has now been completed.

[The clauses of Bill 201 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report Bill 201.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 201.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, in light of the hour I would move, I believe with the concurrence of the members of the opposition, that we call it 5:15 in order to deal with Government Motion 10.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Deputy Speaker: Accordingly, it being 5:15, under Standing Order 19(1)(c) I now must put the question on the motion for consideration of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor's speech.

head: **Consideration of Her Honour
the Lieutenant Governor's Speech**

Mr. Griffiths moved that an humble address be presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To Her Honour the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank you, Your Honour, for

the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

[Adjourned debate February 24: Mr. Hancock]

[Motion carried]

head:

Government Motions

Address in Reply to Speech from the Throne

10. Mr. Hancock moved on behalf of Mr. Klein:

Be it resolved that the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne be engrossed and presented to Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor by such members of the Assembly as are members of Executive Council.

[Government Motion 10 carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we call it 5:30 and adjourn until 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; at 5:10 p.m. the Assembly adjourned]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 8, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/08

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Hon. members, prior to commencing tonight, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House another group of parents and volunteers who are very interested in the education system in our province and are part of the Education Watch initiative. Tonight the guests from my constituency of Edmonton-Mill Creek are parents with children at Julia Kiniski school and at Ottewell school. I'm going to ask each of them to rise as I introduce them, and then perhaps we can greet them all together: Megan Land, Andrea Ell, Colleen Albus, Linda Bosch, Terryl Brosda, Lori Reid, Andrew Reid. They are joined by Preet Sara, co-ordinator of the action for education initiative. They are all standing. Please greet them. Thank you very much for coming.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Health Care Premiums

502. Mr. Mason moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate seniors' health care premiums immediately and phase out premiums for all Albertans within three years.

[Debate adjourned March 1: Dr. Pannu speaking]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I understand I have about five minutes left of my time, so I will try to make the best use of those five minutes. I wish to make a few brief arguments as to why Motion 502, which urges the government to abolish seniors' health care premiums immediately and phase them out for all Albertans within three years, is deserving of the support of all members in this Assembly.

Health care premiums are one of the most flawed taxes levied by this government. They are regressive, create red tape for individuals and businesses, and are a make-work project for collection agencies. Worst of all, health care premiums are, plain and simple, unfair to middle-income earners. A two-adult family making \$35,000 per year pays exactly the same, \$1,056, in health care premiums as a family making \$350,000 per year. Everyone who now pays health care premiums would benefit from scrapping this tax, but middle-income families, including middle-income seniors, would experience the most relief.

The Premier had the gall to call the regressive health tax nominal. The Premier said last week, and I briefly quote: I don't know. Is it hurting you? A thousand bucks for what? For your whole family? That's not too bad, considering. I would say that it's nominal. Unquote. Perhaps for the Premier, who has a pay package in excess of \$130,000 this year, \$1,056 in health care premium tax would be

nominal, but what about a family making \$35,000 per year? This modest-income family would see their total tax load cut by one-third should health care premiums be fully eliminated. Why are my colleagues on the government side not in favour of tax cuts for the middle-income families? That's what I ask. That's a significant tax relief to hard-pressed families. It is definitely not nominal, Mr. Speaker.

So far the corporate tax rate for larger companies was reduced from 15.5 per cent to 12.5 per cent permanently, reducing provincial revenues by \$400 million per year. The eventual goal is to go all the way to an 8 per cent rate, thereby forgoing yet another \$600 million in corporate tax revenues. Cancelling the corporate tax cuts while retaining the small business tax reductions can more than make up for the revenue loss that will result from scrapping the health care premiums. The question must be asked: what should have the greater priority? Further corporate tax reductions or phasing out of health care premiums? I challenge the government to put such a choice before Albertans and let them decide what should have higher priority.

It is time for the government to change course and cancel the reductions in corporate taxes and, instead, phase out health care premiums along the lines of Motion 502. Businesses large and small, along with other employers, would also directly save the hundreds of millions of dollars that they directly contribute to paying health care premiums on behalf of their employees. This would offset in large measure any increases in corporate taxes that would result from cancelling them.

Collecting and remitting premiums on behalf of the government is an administrative nightmare for employers, an added cost of doing business in Alberta. The phased elimination of premiums would save additional millions in business costs that are wasted in designing systems to collect and remit this troublesome health care premium tax.

Albertans are already paying out-of-control power bills, unnecessary school user fees, and sky-high insurance rates. We deserve a break for hard-working, regular, middle-income earning Albertans. This plan to eliminate premiums as set out in this motion is a good start toward a better deal for middle-class families, seniors, and working Albertans.

The tax cuts to corporations benefit the few, but the money that is returned to corporations doesn't necessarily stay in Alberta. Tax cuts that we are proposing by way of Motion 502 will be a break for Albertans who will spend that money in Alberta buying homes, putting money in for supporting their families and kids in postsecondary education.

So I urge all members of the Assembly to support Motion 502, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to very briefly get some comments on record. I am, actually, on record as supporting the removal of health care premiums. However, this motion is very simple, and it's not very surprising that it is simple. If we're going to look at removal of Alberta health care premiums, we also need to look at how we're going to replace them, and the system that we're going to replace them with needs to have accountability from both the provider and the client sides. So to have a motion which simply says that we'll do away with it and not retain accountability in the system on either the provider or the client side is not, I think, a good direction for this government to go.

I think we need to look very, very carefully at how we're going to

fund the system in the future, and we need to make some changes. On that basis, Mr. Speaker, I will not be able to vote in favour of this motion. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise this evening to speak to Motion 502, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. I would like to begin by saying that I think this is a good and noble motion which attempts to alleviate some of the hardships that Albertans face while paying for health care premiums.

Mr. Speaker, I campaigned on this issue, and I handed out door-to-door information that said that I would sponsor a bill to eliminate health care premiums for all Albertans, and in 2001 I presented such a bill to this Legislature. This motion provides us with an important opportunity, and that is to debate this issue openly here. At least we can hear both sides of the argument, and we can hopefully understand how this issue is affecting each of our own constituents.

I think that the elimination of premiums is something that this government should very seriously consider. I think there are benefits from eliminating premiums that go far beyond the emotional arguments; that is, the unfair tax that people pay when they make over a certain amount of money and that if their income level is \$50,000 or if it's \$500,000, they pay the same in a tax.

Another point is the economic benefits that this would have for the province of Alberta. First of all, we must look at what we bring into our general revenue fund in the form of premiums. Premiums account for \$913 million of our health care funding. This is quite substantial. However, even though we bring in \$913 million, we must ask ourselves: how much does this government pay out as the employer? For instance, the government has a lot of civil servants employed, which means that as the employer the government pays a portion of their premium amount. So if we eliminate premiums, we would be cutting some of our costs back as well, which could be used to offset a bit of the amount that we would forgo by eliminating premiums outright.

We can delve further into this in that we give out money that goes to pay for a portion of premium costs for teachers, police officers, judges, prosecutors, even MLAs – and the list goes on and on – approximately \$15 million a month. That's \$180 million a year. Couple that with \$20 million to administrate the premiums for collection of the money, add in collection agency fees for unpaid premiums, approximately \$50 million in costs to the Alberta government – and the list goes on and on. I've already accounted for \$250 million, and that's just at a glance.

8:10

What is important to remember is that we give these employees the money and then we collect it back, which I find a bit counterproductive and inefficient. For instance, there is an average of \$3 million a month collected from school boards in health care premiums. We give the school boards the money, and then we just take some of it right back. I think there is a better way of doing this.

What I think we should look at first is how this will benefit the employer, who pays a portion or sometimes all of the premium costs anyhow. I see this tax break the same way I see the federal government not charging municipalities GST. We give money to school boards, municipalities, et cetera, and then they pay us premiums back on behalf of their employees. In this era of tax breaks for corporations and businesses eliminating premiums would in essence give some businesses a saving because they would no longer be funding a portion of the premium costs. I think that eliminating

premiums would be a benefit on a larger scale, not just alleviating hardships for low-income Albertans.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, but under Standing Order 8(4), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion to close debate, I'd now invite the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands to close debate on Motion 502.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to conclude debate.

Mr. Speaker, this government, due to abundant oil and gas revenues, is flush with money. The most recent quarterly report says that the government is on track to record a surplus of \$3 billion. The government budget plan will reduce provincial revenues by \$161 million through a one-point cut in the corporate tax rate effective April 1, 2004, part of a multiyear plan to cut corporate taxes in half, permanently reducing provincial revenues by \$1 billion. If it chose to do so, the Tory government could eliminate health care premiums with a pen stroke without in any way jeopardizing the province's bottom line.

Until six weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, it looked like the elimination of health care premiums might be actively being considered as part of the government's agenda. During his year-end interview this year the Premier openly talked about reducing health care premiums. The Seniors minister has repeatedly promised seniors' groups that he is pushing for the elimination of health care premiums.

What seems to have changed in the past six weeks is not the affordability of scrapping health care premiums but, rather, the political agenda of the government. It seems to have taken a considerable turn to the right. The Conservative government seems bent on creating a crisis in public confidence about the sustainability of health care funding as part of an agenda to soften up Albertans to accept user-pay and, ultimately, two-tier health care. Reducing or eliminating health care premiums seems to run counter to this new agenda of stoking public fear about the affordability of health care.

So Alberta seniors, who just a few months ago had reason to believe that the government might eliminate their health care premiums, are suddenly sacrificed to a new, cynical government strategy. Alberta seniors have had to pay more for dental work, eye care, and copayments on prescription drugs. They have seen changes in long-term care centres go up by more than 50 per cent. Cutting seniors' health care premiums will cost a modest \$90 million per year. Cutting premiums represents immediate relief for seniors on fixed incomes coping with rising living costs and cuts to services.

Phasing out this regressive tax for everyone will put \$1,056 into the pocket of each Alberta family. While an extra \$1,056 may seem to be a nominal amount to the Premier, it's a lot of money for the average middle-class family. Middle-class families and working Albertans need a break. The Tory government has made them pay more for power, more for car insurance, more for tuition, more for long-term seniors' care, and more for a host of other public services. For less than the cost of the Tory corporate tax cut, which does nothing for middle-class families, we can scrap this unfair, dishonest, and regressive tax. It's time to end the tax breaks to corporations while middle-class families are being squeezed.

The plan set out in Motion 502 is good for families, and it's good for the economy. Albertans will spend the \$900 million in yearly savings in their communities, which will boost economic activity right here in Alberta. It's time for government members to vote for what they themselves have advocated. I urge all members on all sides of the House to vote for Motion 502.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion Other than Government Motion 502 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:17 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Carlson	Masyk	Taft
Mason	Pannu	Vandermeer

Against the motion:

Abbott	Horner	Pham
Broda	Lord	Rathgeber
Calahasen	Lougheed	Renner
Cenaiko	Lukaszyk	Snelgrove
Doerksen	Lund	Stelmach
Evans	Magnus	Stevens
Forsyth	McClelland	Strang
Friedel	McFarland	Tarchuk
Graham	Melchin	Taylor
Griffiths	O'Neill	VanderBurg
Herard	Ouellette	Zwozdesky

Totals:	For – 6	Against – 33
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[Motion Other than Government Motion 502 lost]

Special Constables

503. Rev. Abbott moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation which would make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and require special constables to take enhanced weapons training thereby creating the appropriate conditions under which the province could consider allowing the option of arming special constables with better defensive weapons such as Tasers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to open debate this evening on Motion 503, which asks the Assembly to consider making certain changes to the Police Act and the regulations surrounding the Police Act.

Mr. Speaker, for the purposes of debate it may be useful to separate this motion into its three distinct parts. The first asks that we make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, the second asks that we require our special constables to take more enhanced weapons training, and the third asks only that we consider the possibility of allowing special constables to carry other defensive weapons such as Tasers.

Before I go into each of those sections, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to provide some background as to why I've raised this motion. Everyone in this Assembly understands the increasing role that special constables are playing. In rural areas such as Drayton Valley-Calmar special constables are often the only police presence that some small towns ever see. As municipalities continue to take up a greater role in policing, especially as this role relates to enforcing municipal bylaws and some provincial traffic safety laws inside of municipalities, special constables are increasingly on the front lines of law enforcement.

When special constables are carrying out these duties, they do so with the protection of a can of pepper spray and a billy club, but that's basically about it.

8:30

During normal office hours at RCMP detachments special constables can call RCMP detachments to get a reading on a licence plate to find out if the vehicle that they've pulled over is stolen or if it raises any red flags, but after the RCMP office is closed for the evening, special constables have no backup aside from what everyone else has, a phone call to 911. Given the changing nature of policing in Alberta, I hardly think that this level of backup is appropriate. In my constituency there are several unpopulated areas where you wouldn't want to be left alone while enforcing traffic laws in the evenings.

So consider the situation of a special constable who pulls a guy over for speeding and then has to walk up to the car without having any clue about who is in it or without having any clue about whether or not the person is potentially dangerous or is potentially armed. These special constables often work alone, and when they do, they can be left in a lurch. It's not appropriate for any level of policing, Mr. Speaker, and this reality has sparked a wake-up call amongst many special constables. It's caused them to think: you know, I enforce the law, and there's a certain amount of danger in enforcing the law, and I should be able to adequately protect myself.

While special constables do understand that they are not full-fledged police officers or RCMP officers, many of them cannot understand why that should mean that it is acceptable that they have a lesser means of protecting themselves in dangerous situations. Creating the environment in which there would be an opportunity for special constables to greater protect themselves is therefore the thrust of Motion 503. But we do have to ask ourselves: what are the appropriate conditions under which this could happen?

This leads me to the first part of the motion, the Law Enforcement Review Board. As it stands, special constables are not accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. The Solicitor General's department has set out appropriate guidelines for employers of special constables to follow if a complaint is made, but those guidelines are not law. This is, in my mind, an area of our legislation that is due for a change. As special constables are doing more and more, it's entirely appropriate that they be subject to greater levels of accountability.

Once that level of accountability is in place, then it's necessary to make sure that we increase the weapons training of our special constables. We need to ensure that the weapons that our special constables are using are ones that they are capable of using and, more importantly, capable of not using. Special constables would need to be trained to ensure that they were able to diffuse dangerous situations through tried-and-true methods of verbal and psychological force and persuasion. Once these two requirements are satisfied, we will then find ourselves in a better position to provide special constables with better weapons with which to defend themselves.

As for the third part of this motion, Mr. Speaker, let's be perfectly precise. There's nothing in this motion that says special constables must carry Tasers if this motion is passed. My own personal belief, though, is that we do need to start looking at weapons such as the new high-tech Tasers that are available, especially given the difficult and increasingly dangerous situations that special constables are now finding themselves in.

One can agree to this motion without agreeing to allow special constables to carry Tasers. One can agree that special constables ought to be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and one can agree to the suggestion that special constables ought to take

more enhanced training than they do now. If you agree to these two things, then by the actual wording of the motion you should agree with the entire motion. Perhaps you might not want to see special constables carrying Tasers, but note that this part of the motion is only an after-the-fact consideration. It's really not the meat and bones of the motion.

My own personal belief is that we need to start looking forward, and in that look forward, especially given the increased role that special constables are playing these days, we ought to consider arming certain special constables with better weaponry. I chose the Taser as the next step for special constables because it is a less lethal weapon that is not actually a firearm. Its purpose is to subdue, not to maim, to injure, or to kill.

I'd also submit that Tasers are far more humane than a billy club. Mr. Speaker, billy clubs are designed for the purpose of clubbing somebody over the head as a means of forcing their submission. Tasers are kind of the modern-day billy club, and I believe that they should replace this ancient and barbaric weapon.

Pepper spray is designed to burn someone's eyes and cause the skin around the eyes to swell so that that person cannot keep his or her eyes open. Now, a Taser, on the other hand, sends a shock into the person, causing that person to black out immediately. There's no beating. There's no burning and swelling. There's simply one quick shock which causes the person to become temporarily immobile. Officers, or in this case special constables, then have the ability to neutralize any threat that may have been posed by the person.

Another advantage of a Taser versus a billy club or pepper spray is that a Taser gives the officer far greater reaction time and distance in the event of a threat. With a Taser an officer can secure a distance of roughly 15 feet between himself and a potential threat. With that much room to work with, the officer is that much farther out of harm's way in the event that a threat is imminent.

Mr. Speaker, nobody denies that the best way to reduce a threat is to nonviolently ease the tension of a situation and talk a possible threatening person into submitting to the will of an officer. Special constables understand this as much as any other person involved in law enforcement. Nobody relishes the opportunity to pull a weapon on a citizen, and if they do relish that opportunity, well, they ought not be involved in any aspect of law enforcement. Nor should a person who enjoys threatening others with a weapon be allowed to carry pepper spray or a billy club. If we are willing to trust people with a billy club and with pepper spray, then we should at least be able to ask why we wouldn't allow these very same people to carry a Taser.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, nobody can look forward to being asked to enforce the law without having the proper backup protection. It is my contention that a billy club and pepper spray do not provide that proper backup protection.

So, again, before I close, I'd like to recap. In order to agree with this motion, all one has to do is agree to the following: that special constables ought to be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and, secondly, that greater weapons training is something that we should consider providing for all of our special constables across Alberta. If you agree with these steps, then you ought to agree with Motion 503. I guarantee you that special constables would definitely appreciate not only the support that you give them but also the next step towards greater protection that you would give them as well.

I know also, Mr. Speaker, from some of the meetings that I've held with my municipalities that this is something that they are more than willing to fund on behalf of their special constables just to ensure that they feel safer when they're out there on the streets enforcing the laws.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, it sounds to me like what the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar wants is his own Taser.

Rev. Abbott: Right on.

Ms Carlson: That's what I thought. He'd be the last person I'd trust with that kind of a weapon, I have to tell you. [interjections]

The Speaker: Let's not start violating Standing Orders about accruing to certain members what their beliefs are or are not. Only the hon. member knows what he or she believes. Please.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to speak to this motion. I don't agree with what the member has put forward.

Certainly, we have a great deal of respect for the work that special constables perform in our communities every day. They provide a very necessary and important assisting function to existing police forces, and they do do some of the work for which the higher level training that police officers have isn't necessary, things like enforcing municipal bylaws and running photoradar and dealing with public education.

But they truly are really an assist function, Mr. Speaker, and I think it's a very slippery slope if we start to look at giving them more power and more ability. What we enter into then is a real deskilling process that we've seen occur in other areas like the trades and like the nursing profession.

We've seen over the years how a lot of the work has been taken away from registered nurses so that lower paying staff can be hired to perform those functions. Well, that's exactly what's happening here. What I see is that the municipalities, who are very crunched for funding to provide their policing and the other necessary services, are looking at reducing their police costs and are looking at being able to incorporate special constables in a more active function in the police work. Well, that's a very dangerous place for us to go.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

If the special constables receive more training than what they are getting now, as the member who introduced this motion would suggest, then they should be police officers. Police officer training is not years in nature; it's months in nature. With a little extra training then those special constables could be police officers. But that's not what this member is looking for. He is looking for a cheap answer to policing solutions, and this is not it.

8:40

To give them Tasers is a false sense of security in most cases. A Taser is a close-contact weapon. It does not protect special constables in situations that they may find themselves in if they've got this confidence of having a weapon with them. In my opinion and in my experience with policing, special constables, I don't believe, should be out in the cars by themselves. They are an assist function, and it's a dangerous precedent to start sending them out to do policing on their own. So I certainly don't believe that that's what we should be taking a look at when we take a look at how to solve the policing crisis in this province. What we need to do is adequately fund police services in this province.

The member talked about the special constables being accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. Well, that's definitely a duplication of services, particularly from this member who is always so concerned about the cost of things. I wish he would have costed out this particular proposal and put it forward because it really does

not make any sense at all to establish a whole different review process for special constables, which is what would be required here. They have a process in place now that seems to be working and an appeal process put in place, so that would be the way that we should continue to proceed with this, not duplicating any services.

So to give them enhanced weapons training when you don't give them the rest of the training that goes along with police officer training really puts them out on the street in an unsafe fashion for themselves and for the people that they might come into contact with.

Mr. Speaker, for all of those reasons I really do not believe that we can support this motion.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and join the debate for Motion 503, sponsored by the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar. When I look at Motion 503, I see in some respects an idea whose time has come as accountability is something that will be important as special constables play a greater role in policing in the future. The issue of police force numbers in Alberta is one that has been raised a number of times in this House and one that many of Alberta's communities are concerned with.

Presently in accordance with the Police Act of Alberta, special constables are peace officers appointed by the Solicitor General. Each individual special constable has an appointment form signed by the Department of the Solicitor General. This form, drawn up by the special constable's employer, indicates which provincial statutes they are authorized to enforce and the geographical area that they are authorized to provide enforcement within. Should the special constable's employer require that he or she have the ability to conduct traffic enforcement on primary highways, the appointment form would need to be granted by the Solicitor General.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has close to 3,000 special constables who enforce provincial statutes. Of those, about 4 per cent are employed by municipalities and municipal districts to enforce highway traffic safety. The province of Alberta employs the majority of Alberta's special constables as conservation officers, transportation inspectors, or provincial constables, and their appointments reflect their individual duties. These individuals, although not classified as police officers, still play a valuable role within a number of Alberta communities. From rural municipalities to large urban centres, their presence helps to ensure the safety and the security of Alberta municipalities.

Motion 503, as has been mentioned previously, would increase the accountability of Alberta's special constables by making them accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and this is a part of the motion that I do agree with. Mr. Speaker, as of today special constables are accountable only to their employer. This means that should a complaint be submitted concerning a special constable, there's a possibility for a conflict of interest to exist. The complaint is left in the hands of the employer, and it is therefore his or her individual decision which decides the outcome of the complaint as well as the punishment should the employer find wrongdoing by the special constable.

What Motion 503 proposes is that special constables be made accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. This would result in an independent, quasi-judicial body which was established under the Police Act, hearing appeals from citizens who filed the complaint regarding the actions of a special constable.

Increasing the accountability of special constables could improve public trust in these individuals. As of now they are only accountable to their employer. That can be perceived as a conflict of

interest, and thus the possibility of distrust in those individuals could exist. However, Mr. Speaker, by assuring Albertans that special constables are held accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, as police officers are, we would be relieving the current perception of conflict of interest, resulting in increased trust levels, and with trust comes respect.

Any peace officer that attempts to mediate a situation or confront an unruly citizen will tell you that if you do not have that individual's trust and respect, then the chance of a peaceful resolution declines sharply. Should the constable have the trust and respect of the individual they are in contact with, it is less likely that the situation could escalate into one that requires the use of self-defence.

However, Motion 503 also asks that special constables take advanced weapons training and that we begin to set the proper stage in which special constables, especially those enforcing municipal bylaws and traffic safety laws, could be granted Tasers. Mr. Speaker, I am not entirely comfortable with this suggestion, and put simply, my concern with this part of the motion is that it does not give this House the appropriate amount of time to truly consider the weapons aspect it suggests. After all, the motion suggests that we introduce legislation, and accordingly I think that we need more time to consider the idea.

That being said, the future of policing may demand that we look at these sorts of suggestions in greater detail. So while I am not entirely sure of granting Tasers to special constables, at the same time I don't want to say no to this motion. In speaking with some colleagues, I know that I share this indecision with many of them.

Accordingly, I'd like to introduce an amendment to the motion which allows us greater opportunities to consider the motion without being bound to introduce the legislation that the current motion suggests we do. I've brought the appropriate number of copies. I believe the House officers have them, and I'd ask that they be distributed now.

Let me know when you'd like me to proceed, Mr. Speaker, sir.

The Acting Speaker: If you're going to be reading the amendment for the record, you may proceed. Otherwise, wait for a few seconds.

You may proceed.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As all members can now see, the motion makes the following changes. Motion 503 is amended first by striking out "make special constables accountable" and substituting "provide the option of making special constables accountable"; second, by striking out "enhanced weapons training" and substituting "enhanced training"; and third, by striking out "thereby creating the appropriate conditions under which the Province could consider allowing the option of arming special constables with better defensive weapons such as Tasers."

The amended motion would then read:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation which would provide the option of making special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and require special constables to take enhanced training.

I think that most members will agree that this motion retains the main intent of Motion 503, preparing our special constables for their future role in Alberta. At the same time, members will see that this motion softens the language around weaponry, which I believe is important at this time.

As many members in this House are aware, smaller municipalities often face the problem of meagre police presence, and it's in these situations that special constables play greater roles. However, the province cannot send these individuals into these types of roles without adequately preparing them for the task at hand. Currently

they have billy clubs and pepper spray at their disposal. They're provided under the special constables regulations. What Motion 503 currently asks is that we expand that regulation to include Tasers.

Mr. Speaker, one argument against Tasers is that they have been known to cause death when used. It's a strong argument, and one that needs to be discussed in greater detail than this one hour of debate will afford. We cannot equip special constables with Tasers if we are not satisfied that they will be able to use them judiciously and properly given that they do have the ability to kill. Furthermore, we can't allow Albertans to carry with them the perception that the government will introduce legislation allowing special constables to carry Tasers without doing more homework and without consulting with Albertans to see if they're comfortable with this change in legislation and policy.

8:50

So, Mr. Speaker, I'd ask all members to see the good in this motion but join me in helping to change the parts that need more study. The amended wording of this motion calls for increased training and safety for special constables and increased accountability. They're both important aspects to consider when discussing roles and responsibilities to ensure that our communities are safe and secure. Special constables need to be accountable to more than their employer, especially with these increased roles.

Mr. Speaker, by ensuring that they are given the proper training, the ability to properly defend themselves, and are held accountable for their actions to an independent body, they are better prepared to help fill the void that is present within smaller municipalities across this province. They're also prepared to take on more of a role within larger municipalities and, in doing so, will help to ensure that Alberta remains a safe and secure place to raise a family.

I'd encourage all members to support Motion 503 as amended to support the security of Albertans. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to speak to the amendment to Motion 503. I believe that if this amendment were to be passed, Motion 503 might be something that I could consider supporting.

Clearly, the whole impetus behind the original motion was to arm special constables with Tasers, and the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar was in my view being disingenuous when he suggested that all you had to do to support the motion was agree to having special constables be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. That was clearly not where he was going with the motion, and voting for the motion would have done a lot more than just saying that special constables ought to be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board.

I think the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill has provided a thoughtful amendment that disarms the drive towards Tasers and disarms the motion. I think that it certainly brings the motion into something that's a little more sensible.

I appreciated the comments of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie with respect to the importance of having properly trained officers using weapons and not creating sort of a bargain basement version of police officers that have potentially lethal armament but not the appropriate level of training and skill to use it appropriately. I think that this amendment will short-circuit the drive for Tasers and pull the plug on what was potentially a dangerous idea, Mr. Speaker, which could potentially have had revolting consequences.

So I would be pleased to support the amendment to Motion 503,

and if it passes, Mr. Speaker, I'll be prepared to support the main motion as well.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to the amendments to Motion 503 from the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar. The amendments concern two issues concerning special constables. The first deals with whether or not special constables in this province should be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. The second deals with requiring special constables to take enhanced training to eventually allow special constables to carry defensive weapons. I would like to speak to the accountability of special constables.

The Law Enforcement Review Board is an independent body established under the Police Act. The principal activity of the board is to hear appeals from citizens who have filed a complaint against a police officer and who are not satisfied with the way the complaint was handled. Police officers who have been the subject of discipline arising out of a complaint must also appeal to the board. The board also conducts hearings from special constables regarding the cancellation of their appointment or from private investigators and security guards who have had their licences refused.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 503 suggests that the government may enact legislation that would allow complaints against special constables and appeals by special constables to be heard by the Law Enforcement Review Board. Here are some of the reasons why I support the accountability to the Law Enforcement Review Board.

Currently complaints against special constables are handled by the employer, mostly municipal and provincial governments. If the complainant is not satisfied with the way the issue has been handled, there is no other avenue to pursue this issue. The public needs a formal, independent, and transparent appeal process to handle these situations. Some employers and police services have already come to us and requested this change. The bottom line is that special constables are an important part of the law enforcement community and should accept the same level of accountability as others in the law enforcement community.

The second issue that the amendment to Motion 503 raises is to require special constables to take enhanced training that would allow them to be armed with defensive weapons. Mr. Speaker, first of all, I believe it is important for this House to understand what we mean by special constables. There are about 3,000 special constables in this province. They range from court clerical staff, inspections and regulatory officers, taxi inspectors, provincial protection officers who handle court security, a number of municipal bylaw enforcement officers, and many, many others.

While I said earlier that special constables are part of the law enforcement community, they are not police officers. They are responsible for bylaw and provincial statutes enforcement. They are not a second tier of policing in Alberta.

While I appreciate the amendments to the motion to make it more general in terms of the training and equipment that special constables have, special constables must work within the very clear borders that are defined. I believe it is essential to establish clearly defined boundaries on the limitation of their duties consistent with their training, their standards, and their authority. I support proper and standardized training for special constables that is appropriate to the duties set out in their appointments.

Mr. Speaker, a policy manual is being prepared by my department as we speak to assist employers in determining the role of a special constable. Some – and I will repeat “some” – special constables have the authority to carry pepper spray, a prohibited weapon. Many

others carry batons. Given the mandate, I believe these weapons are sufficient to provide a special constable the ability to tactically reposition and seek assistance from the police in this province, who are properly trained and who are equipped.

So, Mr. Speaker, I do appreciate the intent of this motion to improve the training and functioning of special constables in our province, and I appreciate all the work that the special constables in this province do to keep our community safe.

In closing, I'm open to the notion of making special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and I agree that enhanced training is a necessary thing. We will continue to work on this with the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, the Special Constables Association and their employers, and the law enforcement community.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to join debate on the amendment to Motion 503, sponsored by the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar. The concept proposed by the sponsor is of particular importance to me because of my work on the Police Act review completed last year. I'd like to talk about some of the changes to policing in Alberta considered by this committee and how these changes relate to the amendments proposed to Motion 503.

Two major themes arising from the MLA Policing Review Committee centred on levels of service and the cost of policing. Mr. Speaker, the amended motion has two important parts that could improve service and reduce funding pressure in some areas. Taken separately, these parts may be cause for concern for some Albertans. Taken together, both aspects of Motion 503 are consistent with the future of policing in Alberta.

Motion 503 addresses the need for common policing standards established and monitored by the province. This was also one of the key findings of the policing review committee. The first step is to pass legislation to make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. The board is a quasi-judicial, independent body legitimized by the Police Act. Having special constables answer to this board will help keep these officers accountable.

The next step is to provide special constables with enhanced training. This is an important consideration because the role of the special constable could dramatically change in the future.

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded.

head: 9:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
 Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 12 **Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004**

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. During the second

reading there were a number of questions and comments brought up, and I undertook to have answers provided to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, which I have done in written form. For the record I would just like to indicate that with respect to a number of the questions that came up, we do have a couple of brief answers.

The transition from paper to electronics and whether or not information would be backed up and if there would be any savings was question number one. How the amendments would actually improve the efficiency in administering the investment opportunities as well as whether or not there had been a cost-benefit analysis done was the second question, Mr. Chairman. The final one was to point out that this whole issue of changes to the legislation was merely a technical one to basically bring the reporting system into the new age along with the electronic reporting.

Bill 12, as I indicated in second reading, simply streamlines the legislation and clarifies much of the wording and definitions, along with many technical amendments. The investments and how they're managed has not changed. The manner in which payments are made is not changed. We are, as I had indicated, Mr. Chairman, in this electronic environment, and this is a commonly held industry practice where the investment world is utilizing these same procedures on an ongoing basis.

The cost-benefit portion of the question from Edmonton-Riverview simply put is this. With the changes that are being proposed in the amendments, it's really hard to come up with finite numbers of savings on a cost-benefit analysis basis; rather, it's keeping up with the industry practice that's becoming very commonplace.

The amendments will also authorize Treasury Board to establish alternate controls and limitations respecting the making of certain classes of disbursements, including electronic payments, and it will also allow Treasury Board to ensure government's controls remain up to date with emergent trends that happen in the industry.

The electronic transactions will be documented in a backup in the computer system, and a paper backup will also be kept, where it's appropriate. The electronic processes provide for a speedier payment and faster settling of the transactions, which has become a standard industry practice.

So with those few comments, Mr. Chairman, I hope that's satisfactory to the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and I look forward to any further comments. At the appropriate time I'd like to call the question.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I think the comments from the Member for Little Bow are very useful. He's been prompt and co-operative in answering all of our questions, and this is a bill that seems essentially to be an administrative bill, as he says, making some adjustments to ensure that procedures within the government are in line with industry. So we have no particular further comments on this bill.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 12 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. An interesting debate for an interesting bill. That having been said, I would now move that the committee rise and report Bill 12, the Financial Administration Amendment Act.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 12.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 15
Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004**

[Adjourned debate March 3: Mrs. Nelson]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unlike the previous bill we just dealt with, this one is considerably more substantive. It has the effect of raising the spending cap on nonrenewable resource revenues from 3 and a half billion dollars up to \$4 billion per year, so clearly a bill that has an impact of some \$500 million annually and well worth some significant debate here. As well as that change, which I think is the principal one and the most concerning one, the most worrisome one, there are some other adjustments in wording. But primarily this bill exists and is being brought to us because, frankly, the government wants to be able to spend more money from nonrenewable resource revenues, and I think we need to debate how that's being done and why it's being done.

I guess there is one particularly troubling aspect to this bill, and that concerns the government's inability to put in place a fiscal plan and to stick to it. I recall – I'm sure it was less than a year ago – sitting in this Assembly and debating Bill 2, which was an interesting bill, a reasonable bill. It was in line with some of the ideas of the Liberal opposition. It established the cap on how much nonrenewable resource revenue could be spent, and it helped set the stage for some other spending controls for the provincial government. It set that cap at 3 and a half billion dollars, and then when nonrenewable resource revenues went beyond that, anything above the 3 and a half billion dollars was either allocated to a particular government fund, the sustainability fund, or used to pay off debt or whatever. What we're seeing here now is that 3 and a half billion dollars being raised to \$4 billion so that the provincial government can take that extra \$500 million and use it for whatever pet projects it has.

The timing of this is troublesome for two reasons. First of all, the initial plan didn't even last a year, and I guess we have to really question and I hope the public really questions the government's commitment to any particular plan and its ability to plan in the long term when this bill changes last year's plan less than a year into its implementation. What sort of long-term plan is that? We need in

this province to take a much, much longer view of how we handle our nonrenewable resource revenues, and this bill just violates that completely.

The other concern about the timing of this bill is the coincidence that we're in the lead-up to an election.

9:10

Mr. Mason: Surprise, surprise.

Dr. Taft: Yes. The Member for Edmonton-Highlands is saying, "Surprise, surprise," and I'm sure we're all surprised that in a lead-up to an election the government is arranging things to set aside an extra half a billion dollars for election goodies.

Now, it's interesting to try to imagine what those goodies will be. We'll find out in two weeks when the budget comes, but I'm told, I think by the Premier himself, that the new hospitals for south Calgary will not be in the budget. So we'll see what the election goodies are.

But that really undermines the credibility of the justifications for this bill. It does make it look very much, to us and I think to the general public, like the government is simply playing politics with the long-term financial security and stability of this province, and, yes, I'm afraid that they would do that.

Now, there are some other ways that this could be handled, and I put this forward to the government in case they want to perhaps take this bill back and amend it or bring forward amendments or otherwise consider these options. We have long argued that budgeting in the province should use a five-year moving average for its predictions of nonrenewable resource revenues, and that would help us smooth out some of the peaks and valleys that we see in budgets that are consistently coming in billions of dollars off target. It's a remarkable failure of accurate budgeting, and as a result we're always billions of dollars off in our fiscal plans. That would have been something I'd like to have seen in this kind of legislation.

We're keen supporters of the fiscal stability fund, but it looks like it's grown into yet another slush fund. In fact, this government, as a reporter was saying the other day, has more money than it has pockets to put it into. So the fiscal stability fund, which probably doesn't need to be worth much more than \$1.2 billion, I believe now, from the third-quarter fiscal update, is over \$4 billion. That money can be drawn down and may well be drawn down in the lead-up to an election, which would be a shame, but it could happen.

How about bringing in an infrastructure enhancement fund? We have very significant infrastructure problems in this province, and we need some way to predictably finance those, whether they're roads or hospitals or schools or public buildings. We need to build those at standards that are going to serve us well into the future. That would have been something good to see in here, and of course some proper, actual, hard three-year business plans with a real commitment to meeting those targets would have been good as well.

None of that is in this bill. Instead, we simply see an adjustment of the cap on resource revenues. So there's not much to commend this bill. It feels like the result of broken-down controls on public spending. It feels like it's coming from a government that's got lazy with public money, and that's disappointing.

I would've loved to have seen a value-for-money audit, for example, on the health care system. Why is it that we're spending as much on health care as most other provinces in this country, but we're getting about 20 per cent fewer hospital grants? Well, why is that happening? That would have been something to address in a value-for-money audit, but instead of doing that, instead of taking some of the challenging and interesting issues of good management, we simply see the government reaching into our nonrenewable

resource revenues to spread more money around in the lead-up to the election.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'm disappointed in this bill. I think it reflects, as I say, a laziness with public money that's descended on this government, and unless there are very significant amendments to it, I expect we'll be voting against it. Thank you.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I was listening quite intently to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and I just have to make a comment here. You know, the intent of this bill is to increase the government's ability to fund some important programs, some of which exist and some of which might need to come into existence, and at the same time to address some of the pressures that we know have been referenced with respect to education, for example, by the Learning Commission.

That money has to come from somewhere, hon. members, and what this bill would do is enable another half a billion dollars to come into the system to address some of those kinds of pressures, not to mention what some of the other ministries are facing; for example, Transportation: roadways and bridges and so on across the province. [interjection] Well, of course Environment. I mean, that would be paramount in many people's books, I'm sure.

Similarly, with health care and this business of having a value-for-money audit, as laudable as the speaker's cause is in that regard, I'm sure some of that money will also make its way to some of the pressure points that exist, I'm sure you're fully aware, in the health care system. The primary concern, I'm sure, is going to be toward the government of Alberta's first priority, which is the education circle, and this simply allows that to happen.

So I'm not clear, Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member is complaining about the fact that we're putting more money into the system, which they and others have been asking for, or if it's just a question of them complaining about the timing of it all. Either way, I think it's a good move for us to make, because the time has come to address some of those pressure points. Infrastructure, Community Development, Justice: there are many departments in government that will put this money to very good use.

So I will be supporting the bill. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions for the hon. minister?

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, to the hon. Minister of Community Development. While I appreciated his defence of funding of these kinds of programs, I noticed that he was remarkably silent on the need to address these financial pressures, say, two years ago or even one year ago. What is different now with respect to those requirements?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, I'm not sure which meetings the hon. member might have been at where I was supposedly silent. I'm sure my colleagues here would disagree with that.

But I think there are some fundamental differences, to put all the kidding aside, and one of the most fundamental differences is the Learning Commission report, which in itself has been evaluated at a cost of almost half a billion dollars or perhaps even more than that. There is information provided in that particular commission report that simply wasn't available a year ago or two years ago in the form in which it now exists. I think there were certainly all kinds of comments being made from many different directions that sort of seeded the way for the Learning Commission and helped it through-out its debate and its presentations.

Secondly, there are things which I know the hon. member is very

familiar with that happened that are unpredictable, Mr. Speaker, such as the BSE crisis, such as forest fires, such as drought, which our farming communities and elsewhere are facing. So things happen and they need to be addressed, and this will provide that kind of necessary cushion, I hope, to address all of those points I've referenced and many, many more which I haven't got time to get into; for example, the provincial parks in my area. We know that we need to upgrade the water and sewage treatments in many of our provincial parks, and these monies will help to address that, and that's just one example. That condition, to the extent that we know it today, perhaps didn't exist two years ago, as referenced by the hon. member.

The Acting Speaker: Any further questions? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wonder if the hon. Minister of Community Development can assure the House that election timing has absolutely nothing to do with this.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, you know, if the Learning Commission had come out a year earlier, perhaps that comment wouldn't even be valid, but I haven't got any idea when an election would be coming. I'm aware of a federal election possibly coming this year. I'm aware of a municipal election that is coming in the fall, but I don't know when we might be having a provincial election, which I think is what you are commenting on. The mandate that was given to this government on or about March 12, 2001, gave it a five-year window. That would take us through to 2006, approximately March, by which time an election would be called. That, by my calculation, would be approximately five years from now, and I have the hon. Minister of Environment's concurrence with that.

9:20

Dr. Taylor: Two years from now.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Two years from now. Sorry. Thank you.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I listened very intently to the hon. Member for . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. minister, are you rising to ask a question or to speak to the bill?

Mr. Lund: To speak to the bill.

The Acting Speaker: Okay. Well, is there anybody else who wanted to ask a question?

There being none, I'll recognize the hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened intently to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and quite frankly I was quite shocked, because obviously he's not aware of what exactly has happened over the last year. So I thought perhaps it would be useful to just walk him quickly through it because he made some comments that obviously he's not aware of.

The idea of the sustainability fund came out of the Financial Review Commission, and all of the nonrenewable resource revenue goes into that fund. We started out and said that we would see for one year; we would have a review at \$3.5 billion that would come out and go into the operating side of the budget.

Because of events that have happened – and the hon. Minister of

Community Development clearly indicated that one of them was the Learning Commission and the costs that are associated with the recommendations of that commission plus the ever-increasing costs of health care – the fact is that we're finding that the other revenue that would be available for operating is not sufficient. So we have to have a vehicle where we can take more than the \$3.5 billion out of the sustainability fund and move it into the operating. That's what this is all about: increasing it from \$500 million so that we can cover the operating.

You know, I find it really interesting that the folks over there voted to remove the health care premiums. That's about \$900 million. That money is going into operating. I'd like to know how they figured they were going to backfill that money if you took it out without passing this bill that would at least see another \$500 million going in.

Now, he made a comment that we should have a fund that would deal with capital. Well, we've done that. We do have a capital fund. As a matter of fact, if the member had been watching what happened in the second-quarter report and the third-quarter report, there was money above the \$2.5 billion in the sustainability fund that went into paying down debt and went into the capital fund. So the capital fund has been growing through that very vehicle.

So those are the things that have been happening. Quite frankly, I'm very disappointed that they would even suggest that this had anything to do with an upcoming election because clearly when we set it up at \$3.5 billion, we indicated that we would see how that would work, and if it wasn't sufficient, then we could revisit the situation. That's exactly what we have done, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Under Standing Order 29, Mr. Speaker. I think we're frequently on the record as having said that we would prefer to look after the loss of revenue from eliminating health care premiums by installing a progressive tax system.

I would like to ask the minister a question. My concern is that we are in this province living off the capital of this land, the natural capital of the land, meaning the nonrenewable resource revenues, and if we increase the amount we take from that capital by half a billion dollars a year, it seems to me to be long-term folly. I'm wondering if the minister sees us as also living off the capital of the land, a nonrenewable capital, or if he has some other interpretation of it.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, of course, it's been a concern of all of us that with a nonrenewable resource you only get the revenue from that resource once, so you have to plan for the day that it's not there. That is part of the reason that we are adopting a 20-year plan that will see a number of other initiatives flow out so that, in fact, future generations have other sources of income that are stable and that will backfill the reduction in the royalties.

However, we also have a huge resource in the tar sands up in the Fort McMurray area. That will yield a fairly substantial royalty over a longer period of time, but it won't be sufficient. It won't be likely as much as we're receiving today, but we are planning in the event that the royalties decrease.

Now, the beauty of the sustainability fund, Mr. Speaker, is that if the royalties fall down below the \$4 billion, then you can take out of the sustainability fund so that there is that \$4 billion available annually for operating. It's a cushion in the sustainability fund, but it also allows us to transfer money into the capital fund and to pay down debt, depending on the number of dollars that are coming in.

The Acting Speaker: Any further questions?

Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Bill 15, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, which, as has been said, increases the amount of money which will flow from our nonrenewable resource revenues from 3 and a half billion dollars a year to \$4 billion a year.

Now, you know, the hon. members opposite are suddenly champions of education and health care. This is a little bit like seeing the light on the road to Damascus, I think, Mr. Speaker, and we will see. It's important that these things be funded – I want to make that perfectly clear – and funded at an adequate level, and they have not been. They have not been adequately funded by this government.

It's fine to talk about the Learning Commission report, but I would point out to hon. members opposite that parents, teachers, school boards, and the opposition have been criticizing the level of funding for education for a number of years. The government and particularly the current Minister of Learning have consistently responded that we have the highest level of per capita funding of any province and that everything is fine – this predates the Learning Commission – and he stuck to that message and ignored the real situation, which is that Alberta has a fairly low level of funding if you calculate it on a per student basis, because Alberta has a young population and many children that need to be schooled.

We heard repeatedly from the Minister of Learning on that question, and finally, as a result of the chaos that took place in our learning system with a teachers' strike and a disputed arbitration process and so on, there was an agreement which was obtained by the Alberta Teachers' Association to create the Learning Commission. Lo and behold, Mr. Speaker, the Learning Commission confirmed what parents and teachers, school boards, and the opposition had been saying for one or two years before. So now it becomes a road map to re-election for the government, and we are going to see more increases in spending, particularly in capital funding for health care in this budget, unless I miss my guess.

So now we have this bill. The problem with the bill is not that there's more money which would be made available for health care and education. That is important, and that needs to happen and should have happened two or three years ago. The question is where the money comes from.

9:30

When the New Democrat opposition launched its campaign about two years ago on electricity deregulation, we did a little bit of research in terms of the natural gas issue as well. One of the things that we found – and this was two years ago – was that according to – I'm trying to remember, Mr. Speaker, the exact body – statistics provided by the Energy and Utilities Board, I believe, Alberta had at that time nine years' proven reserves of natural gas left. Now, I know that we all talk about oil and gas revenues as being a major revenue, but primarily the main source of the revenue comes from natural gas rather than oil. The reserves that have been mandated by the government have consistently been reduced.

Mr. Speaker, since the advent of the Alliance Pipeline and the change in government policy which no longer requires those volatile chemicals that are useful for a chemical industry as a raw material to be extracted and kept in Alberta, we now export our natural gas much faster than we are finding new reserves. The result is that we are rapidly running out of natural gas and, therefore, rapidly running out of the main resource that feeds this government's funding of many things including this.

So what we have in that situation is a government that, on the one hand, is increasing the amount of spending from nonrenewable sources and reducing its income from the general taxation system. We've seen that partially offset by the dramatic increase in gambling that's taken place in this province, and the government revenues from gambling have now gone up to about a billion dollars. We are really running on empty as far as natural gas revenues and royalties in this province. Speaking in a bit of a longer term sense, we're running out.

To increase this now and at the same time to follow through on a program of massive tax cuts for corporations is irresponsible, in my view, Mr. Speaker. The government was committed by Dr. West when he was the Minister of Finance to cutting taxes for corporations by a billion dollars, essentially cutting them in half. The government has been in a stage basis implementing that, and this year is no exception: there's another reduction in the corporate tax rate. So here we have a renewable source of money for the government – that is, the normal tax base – which is becoming narrower and narrower and is shrinking at the same time as the government is increasing its dependence on revenue sources that are about to run out.

Mr. Speaker, it's not right. It's bad planning. It's not even planning at all. It's planning for the next election. It's not planning for future generations of this province, that's for sure. I know the suggestion has been made that we're going to get along. We're going to replace this loss of resource royalty revenue from the natural gas and conventional oil with the tar sands, but I believe and I've seen articles as well in the business press that indicate that the government is underestimating the difficulty of doing that. Certainly, so far they've had to give royalty rates for oil sands extraction that are considerably less than that for energy revenues from conventional sources.

So the direction that the government is going is not sustainable, to use their favourite catch phrase. It is not sustainable. They need to either do something about their natural gas policy, or they need to do something about their corporate taxation policy because they are basically standing on two horses, and they're going in different directions, and the result is predictable and inevitable, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Taylor: That hurts.

Mr. Mason: I know it's a bit of a stretch, even for you, hon. member.

I want to make the point here, Mr. Speaker, that the New Democrat opposition is the only party in this Legislature that stood up against this billion dollar corporate tax cut, and without that we would be unable to eliminate health care premiums. We've talked very specifically about what kind of tax cut we favour, and we favour cutting the premiums, which is a flat tax.

Mr. Speaker, just to conclude, I want to indicate that I will not be supporting this bill. I think that the financial direction of this

government is irresponsible, unsupportable, and unsustainable, and we should reject this bill. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, as the representative for the area which consumes a great deal of the natural gas liquids and turns them into higher value commodities, I'd like to inquire of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands what policy the government implemented that allowed the liquids to be shipped out of province. There was no policy.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, to the best of my knowledge under the Lougheed government – and I'm not referring to anyone here but the other guy – there was a policy that these volatiles had to be stripped so that only the pure ethane would be exported for heating purposes only, and that was the basis on which a lot of the industry in Alberta existed. That policy, to the best of my knowledge, has been rescinded some time ago, some years ago, and we just pump out the raw gas.

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can't leave that go on the record because it's absolutely false. We need to have on the record what is accurate. The member alluded to the Alliance gas pipeline, and I would love to know how shipping out an additional 30 per cent of the capacity of that line depletes our resource to the extent that the member talked about.

When it comes to the stripping of the liquids, the fact is that this government appealed the decision of the National Energy Board, which is a Liberal-run – you know, you're the left wing of that party. The National Energy Board ruled that we could not force them to strip the liquids out. That was not a policy of this government, and we actually intervened and tried to stop it.

Mr. Mason: I thank the hon. member for his correction, and I will withdraw it and go back and ask a few questions, but I take him at his word. I just want to indicate that it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between this government and the federal Liberals.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 15 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In view of the hour I would move that we now adjourn until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 9:40 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 9, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/03/09

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Grant us daily awareness of the precious gift of life which has been given to us. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we dedicate our lives anew to the service of our province and our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Dr. Glen Roberts, director of health programs of the Conference Board of Canada. Under Dr. Roberts' direction the Conference Board recently completed some very important new research on cost drivers and cost escalators in the Canadian health care system. The report documenting the board's findings was released this morning in Ottawa, and an overview was presented to the Standing Policy Committee on Health and Community Living earlier today. This project was sponsored by the Department of Health and Wellness, and the report will be made available to other provincial and territorial governments.

The report provides projections through to 2020 and looks at the impact of items such as home care and drug costs, which really puts health care sustainability as an issue in a new perspective and clearly makes the case that additional funding alone is insufficient to sustain our health care system in the long term. Major system reform including a close look at the best practices of other countries is needed if we are to ensure that health services of comparable quality are available to Albertans in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Dr. Roberts is accompanied by Mr. Fred Horne, director of sustainability for my ministry. They are in the members' gallery, and I would ask that they rise and please receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce 55 of Alberta's brightest and best. They come from the Calmar school in Calmar. They are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Sue Biddell, Gerry Gibbs, Kathy Timmons, by parents and helpers Mrs. Ine de Martines, Mrs. Tammy Vandenberghe, Mrs. Kathy Nielson, Mrs. Dawn Fryk, Mrs. Alice Hager, Mr. Rick Fitzowich, Mrs. Kathleen Sikliski, and the bus driver, Mrs. Jeanette Deakin. I'd ask them all to stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Assembly three classes from St. Gabriel school in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. There are 55 representatives from the school: 49 polite and thoughtful students, three teachers, and three helpers. The teachers are Ms Rita Sibbio, Mrs. Svetlana Sech, and Mrs. Joanne Friedt. The helpers are Mrs. Tammy Toronchuk, Mrs. Melanie Sinclair, and Mr. Ken Lettner. They are in both the

members' gallery and the public gallery, and with your permission I would now ask them to rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a gentleman who is trying my job on for size today, as I will be trying his on later in the week. He joined us this morning in developing our questions for today's question period and asked that we challenge the Premier with tough, pointed questions such as: what is the Premier's favourite colour? A supremely credentialed man in his capacity as a reporter, he has travelled all over North America, mixing and mingling with some of Hollywood's big names. He's interviewed Sylvester Stallone, Harrison Ford, Tom Cruise, and Jennifer Lopez and is today mingling with some much bigger names at the New Democrat opposition offices. He is Graham Neil from CFRN, and he and I are participating in the station's Trading Places feature. I would ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

Utilities Consumer Advocate

Mr. MacDonald: The Minister of Energy has again picked the pockets of Alberta energy consumers. Through secret orders ATCO Gas, AltaGas, and the electricity Balancing Pool were commanded to pay for the Utilities Consumer Advocate. This is a far cry from the independent utilities watchdog that the Bolger commission recommended and the Alberta government promised. My first question is to the Premier. Given that the Bolger report stresses that a consumer advocate should be independent and government funded, why did the minister secretly order the gas and electricity sector to fund the office of the utility commissioner?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know of any secrecy surrounding this decision relative to the Utilities Consumer Advocate. You know, there are undoubtedly questions to be raised, as they have been raised by the media and the opposition, relative to the costs and source of funding for the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate, but we think that it's entirely reasonable. The advocate's budget is paid for out of the fund that is contributed to by the utility companies, the Power Pool, and that fund is managed independently under government regulation. There's nothing wrong with that. Why would we pay for something when we can get the money elsewhere and make sure that there is an open, transparent, and independent adjudication of the situation?

Part of that fund is to pay for consumer advocacy information and awareness, which is exactly what the advocate's office does. It wasn't meant to stand alone. It was meant to create a voice for consumers within government. The funding is irrelevant.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that consumers will be made to pay an additional \$2.6 million on their bills without any say, why weren't these ministerial orders made public?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know if that, indeed, is true. I will have the hon. Minister of Energy respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The ability for us to put the cost of the consumer advocate in the hands of the Balancing Pool is an exact, appropriate position for this fund because it is focused directly on the consumer and on the utilities and on that particular market. Of course, as the Premier says, it's also responsible for a consumer awareness fund. In fact, if you go back to the gazillion press releases, well, the ones that aren't withdrawn, to the Liberal news release of October 4, 2002: "MacDonald says the government cannot pass the buck onto electricity retailers. It must act now to deliver a consumer education [plan]. . . . surely they can find the money."

Mr. MacDonald: This is not about a consumer education program.

Again to the Premier: since 80 per cent of the budget of the Utilities Consumer Advocate now comes from the electricity Balancing Pool, will the Premier finally admit that 80 per cent of consumers' energy complaints are a result of this government's failed electricity deregulation scheme?

Mr. Klein: The answer to that, sir, is: absolutely not.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Cattle Industry

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last night the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry and I attended along with 100 farmers a public meeting at the Rimbey Community Centre regarding BSE. An official from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development announced that the federal government is contributing an additional \$300 million in BSE support here in Alberta. My first question is to the Premier. Will the Premier now demand that the Auditor General, Mr. Fred Dunn, report on the \$400 million Alberta BSE aid package before this federal program is rolled out so that if there have been mistakes, they will not be repeated?

1:40

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, what the feds do is entirely up to the federal government. Our Auditor General, Mr. Dunn, as capable as he is, has nothing to do with the federal government programs and, as far as I know, has no authority to investigate programs entirely funded by the federal government.

Mr. Dunn on his own has launched an Auditor General's inquiry, I guess, or probe or investigation, whatever you want to call it, into the BSE issue and specifically into whether the \$400 million in Alberta government money was properly spent and went to the right places and for the right reasons.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: what efforts is this government making to ensure that the federal program goes to the small producers, the ones that need the most help?

Mr. Klein: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I must confess that I know nothing of the federal program and this additional \$300 million. Perhaps the Deputy Premier can shed some light on this, because I know absolutely nothing about any additional funding coming from the federal government.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure where the hon. member gets his information on this subject or any other, because I spoke to Minister Speller last evening, and to the best of my knowledge,

unless it came out very early this morning, there was no program announced. Three hundred million dollars is not a figure that I have heard anywhere. However, we do tend to deal more in fact than in fantasy on this side of the House. So if the hon. member would like to share his information, perhaps we can shed some more light on it.

Mr. MacDonald: I already have.

Now, again to the Premier: given that the official last night also admitted that strategic documents do exist regarding contingency plans if the border with the U.S. does not reopen, will the government table those contingency plans now?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as far as I know, contingency plans are being prepared in the event that the border does not reopen. As you know, the U.S. is going through a comment period right now, and hopefully we won't experience the same thing that we experienced the last time around where another case of BSE was discovered, a case of mad cow disease in Washington state, where apparently the cow came from Alberta.

I know of no document that's lying around the department of agriculture relative to a contingency plan. I do know that officials in that department are working on a contingency plan with the industry, as I understand it, and will file that plan by the end of April.

Calgary Emergency Health Services

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, a year ago now the inquiry into Vince Motta's death found Calgary's emergency services in crisis and under siege and recommended that unless there was dramatic improvement, a public inquiry should be held. Tragically, things are getting worse in Calgary's emergency wards with wait times growing and patients left on the floor for lack of beds. While this government has tens of millions of dollars for new health care information systems, it doesn't seem to have the money for the emergency services Albertans need. My questions are to the Premier. Can the Premier explain why his government allows emergency room wait times in his home city of Calgary to climb despite recommendations from the Motta inquiry for, quote, dramatic change?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we do recognize and understand completely the emergency situation in Calgary. What I would advise the hon. member to do is to stay tuned and work with us.

Dr. Taft: Will the Premier admit that a desperate bed shortage caused by his own government has forced the health region in Calgary to call more than twice as many code burgundies in the past six months as in all of last year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the assertion that any bed shortage in Calgary was caused by this government is absolute blarney. Baloney, blarney, as they say as St. Patrick's Day is coming up.

Mr. Speaker, as a result of the closure of some hospital beds . . .

An Hon. Member: Boom.

Mr. Klein: Well, an implosion, yes. Absolutely.

As a result of the closure of some hospital beds and the closure of the Holy Cross hospital, we were able to open up basically the equivalent of a brand new hospital, about 500 state-of-the-art beds that were otherwise being mothballed. So that is basically a new hospital.

What has contributed to the situation in Calgary is the phenomenal growth that has taken place in this city due in part to the economic policies of this government. You know, it's one of the downsides, I guess, of success, of political success, of economic success. One of the downsides of economic growth and prosperity is that you have to meet the challenges of that growth. In Calgary the growth has been phenomenal, but we are working with the Calgary regional health authority to address those needs.

Dr. Taft: Will the Premier respect the advice of the Motta inquiry and call a public inquiry into Calgary's beleaguered emergency service before someone else has to die unnecessarily?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I speak with and I'm sure the hon. minister of health speaks with officials from the Calgary health authority on a regular basis. They apprise us of the problems relative to growth and the pressures it's putting on the system, and we work diligently with the Department of Finance, with the health department, with the region to address those problems.

I'll have the hon. minister supplement if he wishes.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the region has made significant changes to improve access to emergency care. They're planning this; they're doing it carefully. They want to add additional beds in hospitals. They want to use new technology to track patients according to priority. They are posting quarterly emergency performance reports. I would say that overall it's gone very, very well.

Now, the hon. member wants things done right now; he doesn't want it done right. He would prefer to have it right away as opposed to right. But that focuses on the difference between this government and the opposition. Mr. Speaker, our planning is cautious; it's not reckless. Our responses are thoughtful; they're not knee-jerk. Our solutions are comprehensive; they're not piecemeal. Our strategy is visionary, not myopic.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Cattle Industry (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Premier was waving around the 1-800 number for the federal Competition Bureau in an attempt to divert attention from his government's failure to address concerns about monopolization and manipulation of cattle prices. The government has done nothing while giant U.S. meat packers lowered cattle prices and tripled their margins on each animal slaughtered. Later today I will table a letter from the federal Commissioner of Competition regarding her jurisdiction in this matter. My question is to the Premier. If the Premier is so sure that the Competition Bureau is able to deal with allegations of price manipulation and monopolization in the packing industry, can he tell Albertans under what circumstances the Competition Bureau can undertake such an investigation?

Speaker's Ruling **Questions outside Government Responsibility**

The Speaker: Hon. Premier, please. The purpose of question period is to deal with matters of administrative competence of the government of Alberta. The federal Competition Bureau is a federal agency. It's not incumbent upon any minister of the Crown in the province of Alberta to comment on federal jurisdiction. Now, if the Premier wants to proceed, he can.

The hon. member.

1:50

Cattle Industry (continued)

Mr. Mason: Very well, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier has been telling Albertans that his government does not have jurisdiction in this matter but the federal Competition Bureau does, is he aware that the federal Competition Bureau commissioner has indicated that it can only investigate if there is evidence of active collusion between packers to fix prices?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll tell you that that makes a lot of sense: if there is evidence. You know, this hon. member is shadowing a news reporter. I hope he learns in the course of his journalistic experience the concept of journalism, the fundamental, basic concept of journalism, that says that you need to be fair and objective. He is neither fair nor is he objective, so I hope he learns something.

Mr. Speaker, evidence. That is a very, very strong word. Evidence as opposed to innuendo, evidence as opposed to vague allegations. I have said to the hon. member that if he has evidence that there is any wrongdoing relative to the packers – price-fixing, gouging, anything that's inappropriate – then he should bring that to the Competition Bureau.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, while the Premier waves around the 1-800 number for the federal Competition Bureau, the question that most Albertans have is: why has this government failed to actually ask whether or not a degree of monopolization has resulted in high prices at the supermarket and low prices for beef producers? That's the question, Mr. Premier.

Mr. Klein: Interesting question, Mr. Speaker. Again, there is testimony now being taken by a committee of Parliament, as I understand, to ask precisely those questions in that this is a federal government jurisdiction.

Relative to the issue of the \$400 million program that was launched to assist farmers, beef producers in particular, as to whether that money was used properly, the Auditor General is rightfully doing an audit of that particular situation. So the bases, I would suggest, are being covered.

I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I think it's unfortunate that for 10 months this opposition bench was totally silent on the crisis that was facing the beef producers in this province and has not been out in the country attending meetings of 100 or 1,000 farmers or ranchers or feedlot owners to deal with those questions.

Mr. Speaker, absolutely, the Competition Bureau has asked that if anyone has evidence, bring it forward, and that number has been made available.

Mr. Speaker, it is not helpful when this beef industry, which contributes the majority of the agricultural cash receipts and manufacturing in this province, is being, I think, vilified by this discussion. The programs that were developed in this province were developed in consultation and together with the industry, and while in this House it may be quite appropriate to call on government only, I take great exception for the fine people that have given up time from their own operations to work towards a plan that would keep this very valuable industry in our province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Pollution Standards

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government recently announced that it would be imposing new pollution standards on electricity plants. My main question is to the Minister of Environment. Why are you forcing industry to bear the extra burden of meeting these new standards?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, I must take a bit of exception to the final statement in his question saying: why are we forcing industry? I want to point out very clearly that we are not forcing industry.

The Clean Air Strategic Alliance, which consists of industry, consists of nongovernmental environmental organizations, consists of the federal government, consists of the provincial government, consists of many other organizations, actually came up with the new standards. About two years ago I asked the Clean Air Strategic Alliance, or CASA, to develop new standards because they work on a consensus-based model. So I know that when I get something from that model, everybody has signed off on it. That means that industry has signed off, the nongovernmental environmental groups have signed off, the federal government has signed off, and the provincial government has signed off on these new standards.

So industry is in agreement with these standards. It's a good step forward, and it gives industry security for the next 20 years as they move forward in developing new electrical generation that this province will need. It's a very positive step and a good step for our province and industry.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary question is to the same minister. Given that electricity consumers are extremely price sensitive these days, can the minister tell us how much these new rules will increase the cost of electricity?

Dr. Taylor: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I can. But I think I should give some other information as well in terms of the reductions of the emissions from these various coal-fired and gas-fired plants.

There will be a 50 per cent reduction in mercury, Mr. Speaker. There will be a 46 per cent reduction in sulphur dioxide, a 32 per cent reduction in nitrogen dioxide, and a 51 per cent reduction in particulate matter. It's particulate matter that causes the yellow haze, and these are the things that cause the yellow haze over Edmonton and Calgary in the wintertime in particular and even now sometimes in the summertime.

Now, in terms of the cost, Mr. Speaker, there will be zero cost to the consumers until 2010, and after 2010 the cost will be about 2 cents a day, or \$7.50 a year, which, I believe, is a small price to pay for these kinds of reductions in emissions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary question is to the same minister. Greenhouse gases are conspicuously absent from these new standards. Is the province stalling on implementing controls on greenhouse gas emissions for coal-fired generation plants?

Dr. Taylor: No, Mr. Speaker, we are not stalling. As you know, Alberta very clearly has an action plan on greenhouse gas reduction. We will continue with our action plan. We've led the way as a government in this action plan. By 2005 90 per cent – 90 per cent – of the power that this government utilizes will be green power,

either wind generation or biomass, and it has created a whole biomass industry in this province. So, no, we haven't.

CASA continues to work within their framework on a consensus-based model on greenhouse gas reductions, and they will continue to work at that. Hopefully, in the future they will come up with a result and a solution to that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Seniors' Benefits Program

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Income thresholds for the Alberta seniors' benefits don't appear to be tied to LICO, the low-income cut-off, or the market-basket measures. My questions today are to the Minister of Seniors. Can the minister explain the basis for the income thresholds that are currently used by the Alberta seniors' benefits program?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, these thresholds come under constant review, and we try to ensure that the people who are getting assistance are looked after adequately. If you look at our thresholds, you will see that they are, in fact, as it pertains to support for health care premiums, much higher than any of the other thresholds.

Ms Blakeman: The question was: what's the basis?

Again to the Minister of Seniors: given that the government is moving to tie AISH and SFI rates to the market-basket measure, is the minister considering the same or a similar move for Alberta seniors' benefits?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, we do consult quite closely with the minister of human resources, and we would be looking at how the thresholds would best support the seniors.

I might point out that the hon. member should look at what has been done just very recently. For example, we've got a program that helps the seniors in long-term care whereby if they're on the seniors' benefits plan, they are guaranteed an income of \$260. The same happened in the lodges. We have recently increased the lodge tenants' ASB contributions so that they could in fact have money left over after rent, and at the same time the lodge operators were able to continue. So on an ongoing basis, Mr. Speaker, we currently review the needs of the seniors and try to meet them.

2:00

I might also point out that if you're going to look at the thresholds, please factor in the fact that if any senior on our seniors' benefits program can show that they have an extraordinary need, they can claim up to \$5,000 through the special-needs assistance program.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: has the ministry done any studies to counter arguments from COSA and others that government policies are impoverishing middle-income seniors?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, we currently meet with any advocacy group. I've met with the SUN people. I've met with COSA. As recently as yesterday I met with the whole board of the Alberta Council on Aging, and I certainly respect their opinions, their input, and where it's feasible within the programming, we would respond to it.

But, Mr. Speaker, I have to point out that this province has the best programs for low-income seniors in Canada and probably all of the United States. So when we do have groups come forward who have concerns, I certainly do pay attention to them and I want to work with them to see if we can in fact, in whatever way possible, improve the state of the seniors.

I would like to point out again that when we had the budget adjustments due to the September 11 activities of 2001, the Seniors budget remained intact, and we were able to maintain and, in fact, improve our payouts to the seniors over the intervening years.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Out-of-province Health Care Services

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was surprised to learn that last year Alberta Health provided 130,000 services to non-Albertans, primarily through the Capital and Calgary health authorities. We understand that approximately \$20 million in service costs has yet to be recovered. My question is to the minister of health. How many services were provided to Albertans by other jurisdictions over the same time frame?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm advised by the Department of Health and Wellness that over the past fiscal year other provinces and territories have provided approximately 72,000 hospital services to Albertans at a cost of roughly \$23 million. The top three jurisdictions in which Albertans received hospital services were, first, the province of British Columbia, 37,000 at a cost of \$10.8 million; Saskatchewan, 11,000 at a cost of \$4.5 million; and the province of Ontario, 9,500 at a cost of \$4 million.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you. My second question to the same minister: how many services in total were provided by Alberta Health over the same time frame?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I don't have that data in front of me, but my recollection – and I can correct myself at a later time if I am incorrect – is that over the same period of time there were 130,000 services delivered, but I can't say for how many Albertans that was.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister, then, undertake to ensure that the health authorities affected by the lack of payment by the users are fully compensated, if not by the province or the province concerned, then by the federal government?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I wish that I could do that, but the fact of the matter is that the amount of money involved is relatively small in the whole scheme of the delivery of health care. One has to keep in mind that the Capital health region and the Calgary health region collectively have a budget of roughly \$3 billion between those two health regions. I may stand corrected on the exact figures. But when we're trying to talk about the recovery of \$20 or \$30 million, it doesn't seem to be a particularly material amount in the overall scheme of how large those respective budgets are.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Education Funding

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister of health recently told University of Alberta students that the province won't be able to put more money into education until it gets a handle on rising health care costs. My first question is to the minister of health. Is the minister telling Albertans that even with recent billion-dollar surpluses there is no money for Learning budget increases?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I don't purport to speak on behalf of the Minister of Learning as it relates to the size of that budget.

Dr. Massey: That's exactly what you did.

My question now is to the Minister of Learning. Does the minister of health's statement mean that the Learning Commission recommendations will be mothballed?

Dr. Oberg: No.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Learning, Mr. Speaker: when will the government abandon this peekaboo funding game and finally provide schools with the dollars that they need to deliver the programs that this government mandates? Forget the peekaboo.

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, in this Legislative Assembly we've got a very wonderful process called the budget process, at which point every year the budget figures for the upcoming fiscal year are made public. For me to talk about the budget in any other fashion would be against the rules of this Legislative Assembly. I can clearly say to him, though, that the Learning Commission recommendations have been taken into consideration in the setting of my budget and that people, I believe, will be pleasantly surprised when my budget comes out.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Child Welfare Services Accreditation

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week we heard that Alberta Children's Services is taking steps to improve services to Alberta children, youth, and families by enhancing the accreditation process for contracted child welfare service providers. My question is to the Minister of Children's Services. What is the purpose of this accreditation?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, much like hospitals and postsecondary institutions accreditation gives a very thorough and comparable assessment so that the services delivered are of quality and are in fact delivered in the best way possible. We deliver accreditation services to foster homes, to group homes, to residential homes, and in total presently there are 8,411 children either in temporary or permanent care in such accommodation that deserve to know that they're in a place where they are safe and well looked after. Accreditation through a certified agency assures that we are building on that quality standard.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I understand that the accreditation for the welfare services already takes place, but also to the same minister: how is the advanced accreditation going to work, and which agencies are selected?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, in 1992 an Alberta Association of Services to Children and Families was formed to define an umbrella organization for certifying agencies. A hundred and forty-five agencies became part of that group. Last year in June we looked at the fact that one agency representing all of the agencies was not only doing the accreditation but was conducting member surveys and providing other training and learning expertise.

We believe that introducing the opportunity for other certifying agencies, people with organizational expertise, can not only improve the service but enhance the various agencies' ability to select services that will give them supports that they need, both for training staff, for helping them in their advocacy position, and most of all for providing us a wider selection of people to assess the scope of the service that's being provided to children.

Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is this. We want the very best possible service in giving quality standards and assurance to Albertans that their children are taken care of safely. We believe we'll get it with more agencies involved in the certification process.

2:10 Accessible Specialized Transportation Services

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, funding for accessible specialized transportation in rural Alberta is not addressing a minimal demand. Already in 2004 Innisfail has lost its handibus because it was so old that it failed a road inspection, and Lacombe has had to end its handibus program because of lack of funding, and it cannot find other organizations willing to take on the burden. Accessible transportation isn't so accessible for rural Albertans. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: given that rural Alberta has been expressing concerns around this issue since 1999, why has this ministry not addressed those concerns?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Municipal Government Act of Alberta discharges the responsibility to local authorities relative to the services they provide, and I'm very proud to say that transportation is one of them, dealing not only with just seniors but youth and others.

I would ask the Minister of Seniors also to supplement relative to many of the positive initiatives that have been launched in helping Alberta seniors.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: when will this ministry live up to its commitment made in 2001 to review the unconditional municipal grant program in order to address funding for accessible specialized transportation in rural Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. The member is quite correct in that we took together, in fact, a trail system, a special transportation system, but also I would say that as part of the unconditional grant system we have policing in there as well. Of course, the budget is coming out where we're going to be dealing with some of the specific issues relative to policing. I know that the Solicitor General as well as the Minister of Finance will be making comments.

Regarding the issue of seniors and special transportation, clearly

the local authority and the municipal councils are working closely with their government when it comes to unconditional grants, and I would like to be able to say that seniors are very important in terms of what we need and how we deliver service to them, which, I believe, we are doing very well here in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: will this minister work with rural specialized transportation organizations and their stakeholders so that all of their needs can be addressed?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, I want to compliment every municipal council in this province who worked very closely, as the hon. member mentioned, relative to special needs such as for seniors, but we want to compliment our local municipal authorities for the good work they do with stakeholders. Anywhere the province can be involved in working with our local authorities, we're certainly prepared to have done that in the past, the present, and in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mental Health Services

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Two recent tragedies bring into sharp relief gaps in Alberta's mental health care system. The executive director of the Alberta branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association said today that there are enough reports on what's failing in the mental health system that the reports, if piled up, would form a stack four feet high, and piled they are, he said, gathering dust on shelves. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Mr. LaJeunesse is asking what many Albertans are asking: why are mental health patients being deinstitutionalized and have been deinstitutionalized without adequate, timely, and appropriate supports being available for them in the community?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I have tried my very best to address this question to the House not only this week but in previous weeks and out in public venues as well. We do in fact devote significant resources to the area of mental health services.

We recognize that there is, frankly, a social stigma associated with mental health problems, but we ignore that. We believe that this is a very, very important area of health care to Albertans. We are well aware of what mental health advocates like the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Alberta alliance on mental health tell us about the rates of mental health issues among Canadians, and it is significant. It's the reason why we devote \$240 million this year to the delivery of mental health services. It's the reason why we increased our budget from the previous year by about 5 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to work on a mental health plan, but this is difficult work. There are many different stakeholders out there with many different interests. I think I referred earlier in the week to our current legislation for mental health, which took 11 years to develop because there were so many divergent issues that needed to be consolidated into something that made sense in terms of our legislation.

We'll continue to work with groups represented by people like Mr. LaJeunesse, who has had great input into our mental health plan. We acknowledge that there is a need for community supports for individuals with mental health problems when they are deinstitutionalized. We also recognize that there are some people

who will always need the services of good facilities like Alberta Hospital Edmonton and Alberta Hospital Ponoka.

So, Mr. Speaker, we're working on our plan. We want a consensus among stakeholders in the mental health community to move forward on this very, very important plan.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: why do gaps in prescription drug coverage continue to exist for Albertans with a diagnosed mental illness, and what action is the government going to take to close those gaps?

Mr. Mar: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, earlier this week in this Assembly I did attempt to address this question by talking about our support for drugs through our Blue Cross plan, through drugs that are covered in hospitals, for programs that cover drugs for people who are of lower income in this province. That includes psychiatric drugs.

Let me say this. We have a good system, but by no means is it perfect, Mr. Speaker, and if we can say that we are delivering the right service to people 99 per cent of the time, we would say that that's a pretty good system. But, frankly, if 3 million Albertans each accessed the health care system just once in a year and we got it right 99 per cent of the time, which people would laud, the 1 per cent of cases still yields tens of thousands of Albertans who might have fallen through the cracks. We are striving to improve our system for the health care system and for mental health as well.

Dr. Pannu: My second supplementary to the minister, Mr. Speaker: why are so many of those diagnosed with mental illness homeless on our streets, including Whyte Avenue in my own constituency of Edmonton-Strathcona, and what is the government planning to do to make sure they have secure and adequate housing?

The Speaker: Well, there are about half a dozen questions in there, so take the first one, hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is the first time I've had the opportunity to answer a multiple-choice question.

You know, there are significant things that are being done with respect to mental health and its connection with other areas, be it the minister responsible for homeless issues or whether it's with respect to work that's being done with the Minister of Justice and Attorney General for dealing with these issues, but we recognize that there are a disproportionate number of people who are homeless who do suffer from mental health problems.

We do have crisis teams that are mobile. We're able to get to where people are. We recognize that they may not come to a particular locale for treatment, but we do have mobile teams that go out and reach where these people actually are. So, Mr. Speaker, again, we have a good system. We have a very good system. We have difficulty reaching everybody because there are some who avoid, frankly, our help.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors to supplement.

Mr. Woloshyn: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very briefly, I might point out that we're fully aware that too many of our tenants in the homeless shelters are in fact suffering from some mental affliction, but we have to also appreciate that they have rights and they belong to the community.

In addition to that, we have through the Canada/Alberta affordable

housing program opened up a significant number of spaces in conjunction with people such as Horizon Housing in Calgary, with the city of Grande Prairie, and some also in Edmonton. So the problem is being addressed, and we're trying to do it in a sensitive fashion with the people who can most help the program, in this case very largely the Canadian Mental Health Association.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

2:20

Aboriginal Organizations

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development publishes a quarterly document entitled A Guide to Aboriginal Organizations in Alberta. The latest of these documents has been released this February, and it lists some 199 aboriginal community organizations. My question to the minister: are all of these groups funded by Alberta taxpayers?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the member is aware, this guide is a valuable resource, and we're very proud that we've been doing this since 1981. In fact, the lists of the organizations here are from Indian bands to tribal councils to national organizations and even private-sector organizations. We in the province of Alberta do fund some components of the various groups; as an example, the native friendship centres and the Métis Nation of Alberta and a few others. But most, if any, that we do fund are usually project to project.

Mr. Speaker, these are not government-run organizations, so our support varies. I think it's important to recognize that as we do whatever we can to build relationships, we do work with the organizations. The intent of this list is to ensure that people know which organizations exist in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Lukaszuk: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: what types of services do these 199 groups provide, and is there any duplication?

Ms Calahasen: Well, for your information the list on this is really a good list, and I'll table it later. There probably are some, but we don't know that because these are not government-run organizations. We do try to work with them in order for us to be able to determine what services they do serve to the aboriginal organizations and aboriginal Albertans. So what we're trying to do, Mr. Speaker, is to make sure that people do know what exists and who they can contact and to make sure that they can get the necessary projects or programs that they will get out of these organizations.

Mr. Lukaszuk: My last supplemental to the same minister: are these groups accessing any other funding, perhaps from the federal government as well?

The Speaker: Hon. member, there's no way a minister can deal with that. If she indicates that she doesn't know if these have any provincial funding, how would she know if they have anybody else's funding? It's a list.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Sour Gas Wells

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, thank you. Despite significant environmental and health risks, six new sour gas wells may go ahead near the proposed southeast Calgary hospital site. All the while Calgarians wait in desperate need for a new hospital. My first question is to the

Minister of Energy. Given that Alberta already has over 5,000 producing sour gas wells, can the minister explain why, despite the health and environmental risks, these particular six are so important?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's actually a good question. If one were to examine the application by Compton Petroleum, the purpose of the new gas wells – and they're horizontal gas wells, using made-in-Alberta technology, new technology that Albertans have invented and created – is to extract the sour gas at a faster rate than what is in place right now. This means that if the project is approved and the sour gas is extracted, it will be all done, completed, and abandoned by the time a new hospital is in fact constructed in this area.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister then: can he give the citizens of Calgary a sense of how many years they're going to have to wait for this to be accomplished?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we do know is that there are hearings for sour gas drilling and that they're being held by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, that has a record of being a world-class regulator, that has a process for hearings about sour gas wells and is in a position to be able to comment on the area of response, the ignition in case anything occurs, drilling practices, past experience, competency of the company. All of these factors are taken into account in an open, transcribed, fully transparent hearing process.

Mr. Speaker, all that one has to do is wait and watch the regulatory process unfold, and then at such time you'll be able to look at the record of production for each well, then look at the size of the reservoir, do a preliminary math calculation, that anybody could do, and then calculate the amount of time to extract all the gas that is left in that reservoir at a process much faster than what is in place now. That's the purpose of this application.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, my question was simple, and every Calgarian is interested in it. When you say that it's much faster, how long is this going to take: three, five, 10, 15 years? How long?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the question is simple because the member is not aware of what goes through the development of gas reservoirs in this province. At one time it was felt that Alberta was running out of gas, that we were down to the last nine years of gas reserves. Well, since that time we've been able to double our production. We now produce over 13 billion cubic feet a day. We produce it in Calgary. We produce it in Edmonton. We produce it in Grande Prairie, Manyberries, and Medicine Hat. The point is that the process is directed to be the same for every gas well that's licensed in this province.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first member.

Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege and

pleasure to introduce 66 visitors from the La Crete public school this afternoon. These would be very hardy students and, I would suggest, some very patient teachers, because they travelled more than 10 hours yesterday, almost 900 kilometres, in two yellow school buses for a visit to Edmonton and to the Legislature. The students are accompanied by their principal, Kathryn Kirby; teachers Morgan Coates and Steve Cole; and parents and helpers Kathy Reid, Tina Unruh, Mary Friesen, Liz Froese, Ruth Janzen, Henry Harder, and William Janzen. They're seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Well, hon. Member for Peace River, unfortunately I do not think we have an award awarded to students for coming the greatest distance, but we should have one. So, Mr. Clerk, you have another assignment this afternoon.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Capsule of Life Program

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to promote an innovative new idea occurring in Calgary which is helping ambulance paramedics save the lives of patients who are having an emergency in their home. It's called the Capsule of Life program. It is designed to help people organize their pertinent medical information and store it in an easily accessible location for emergency responders. To date 25,000 of these capsules have been distributed with great success free of charge to Calgarians.

Let's face it, Mr. Speaker. No one wakes up in the morning thinking that they might have to call 911 and ask for an ambulance that day. Most people have not memorized the names of all the medications they may be taking nor the details of their medical histories and conditions, but these pieces of information can be absolutely vital in an emergency. In an emergency it is often even more difficult to try and remember all of these things, or the patient may even be comatose or unconscious.

How it works is that you record your own pertinent medical information in a simple little plastic capsule, which is then stored in your refrigerator. Why the refrigerator? Well, because every home has one, it is easily located in an urgent medical emergency, and people remember where they put it.

2:30

The capsule of life program is funded through the Calgary EMS Foundation. The Calgary EMS Foundation is an independent charity that operates and funds innovative programs designed to help keep Calgarians healthy and safe.

This program is a success story from many angles. It is a success for the lottery funding in this province as well as the EMS Foundation since the foundation received their initial grant to start this program from lottery funds. Since then, they have been able to acquire a major corporate sponsorship, which allows them to continue distributing these capsules free of charge.

I would encourage more Alberta communities, individuals, and even all of us to take a look at this program and see if we can't help implement or improve a similar program in our ridings. It works, it helps save lives, and it only costs a buck or two per capsule.

Congratulations to the Calgary EMS Foundation for their success with this program.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Seniors' Week 2004

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta I'm very pleased to inform Albertans that the 18th edition of Seniors' Week in our province is rapidly approaching. Seniors' Week 2004 is from June 6 to 12, and Alberta communities and seniors-based organizations are already busy planning special events to pay tribute to Alberta's seniors.

The theme of Seniors' Week 2004 is Seniors in Alberta: Building and Contributing. This theme speaks to the ongoing contributions of seniors in helping to shape the Alberta that we enjoy today. In the coming weeks Albertans will be seeing this theme and a new beautiful image on two posters and a Seniors' Week 2004 planning events guide.

These promotional materials are designed to build awareness of Seniors' Week and to energize all Albertans into learning more about Seniors' Week activities in their area. That can include taking in a Seniors' Week event, volunteering their time to assist with an event in their community, or begin developing their own community-based gathering that honours seniors. Over 3,000 promotional packages are being distributed province-wide, and as a part of this package the Seniors' Week planning events guide provides a number of handy tips and resources to help Albertans plan and design Seniors' Week events for audiences from five to 500.

Last year Seniors' Week 2003 was one of our most successful as close to 50 communities, towns, and cities officially proclaimed the first full week in June as Seniors' Week. Two hundred and thirty events were registered with the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta, and we knew that there were many more that were not registered but were occurring.

Over the course of Alberta's 99-year history seniors have made and continue to make an indelible difference in our province. Seniors are our family, friends, neighbours, volunteers, and community leaders actively working and involved to enhance the quality of life of all Albertans and leaving a legacy for future generations to follow.

I encourage Albertans young and old to contact local seniors' organizations and get involved, and to everyone in this Assembly today please join me in giving your support for Seniors' Week 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

George Reitmeier

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Sunday, February 29, 2004, at the Red Deer community sports banquet the city of Red Deer presented its most prestigious sports award to George Reitmeier, a man who has dedicated much of his life to helping Alberta's special athletes achieve their highest goals. George Reitmeier, who is 71 years old, is a two-time winner of the Alberta Special Olympics coach of the year award and was named Canadian Special Olympics coach of the year in 2002.

Except for swimming and snowshoeing George has coached every sport in the Special Olympics and is still coaching floor hockey in the winter and slo-pitch in the summer. George says that he will keep coaching as long as his legs hold out.

George got involved with the Special Olympics in 1984 because of his son Mike, who has won numerous speed skating titles as well as North American and world championships. George believes that doing not saying is the key for coaching Special Olympic athletes. George knows that demonstrating a skill is worth a thousand words and that these athletes learn more from seeing things being done than by being told.

George is happiest when he's coaching the grassroots athletes in the Special Olympics, those who aren't expected to excel on the provincial, national, or world stage. He believes that if given the chance, these special athletes can develop their athletic abilities to the highest degree. George says that the three most important things in coaching at this level are patience, patience, patience.

I ask the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to join me in congratulating George Reitmeier for his outstanding gift of coaching to our Special Olympic athletes and for receiving the city of Red Deer's sportsman's award for 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Provincial Fiscal Policies

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. For the last two weeks my office has been flooded with phone calls, faxes, and e-mails not only from farmers and members of the cattle industry but from Albertans who are fed up with the disrespect this government shows toward taxpayers and their hard-earned dollars.

When the first case of mad cow was discovered in May of 2003, Albertans recognized the economic, cultural, and historic importance of our beef industry and rallied to show support for cattle producers and their families. Albertans supported the expenditure of 400 million taxpayer dollars to support the beef industry because they believed they were helping Alberta farmers.

Mr. Speaker, taxpayers had the right to believe that while the government was distributing short-term compensation, they would also be developing a contingency plan should the border remain closed or at least be fighting to get the borders reopened. Last week the Premier revealed that 10 months after the crisis began, there is still no contingency plan, and the government was too arrogant and self-assured to bother presenting arguments to open the borders during the American government's last comment period.

This isn't an isolated incidence of the abuse this government heaps upon Alberta taxpayers. Taxpayers willingly support postsecondary education only to discover that when their children are ready to attend university, the government has allowed ever-increasing tuition fees to put postsecondary education out of reach for many of their children.

This government continues to burden Albertans with high premiums for health care. Albertans are happy to pay taxes for their health care, Mr. Speaker, but they can't help but be frustrated at bearing a disproportionate amount of the burden while friends of the government in the oil and gas industry get royalty holidays and other giveaways.

Let me say this clearly and for the record: Albertans should not be forced to shoulder the burden created by the mismanagement of electricity deregulation, BSE compensation, auto insurance, health care, and the list goes on.

When it comes to the careless spending of taxpayers' dollars, this government is getting harder and harder to distinguish from the federal Liberals. In fact, the only difference is that the federal Liberals at least have the integrity to allow all-party standing committees to investigate program expenditures.

head:

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 94 the Standing Committee on Private Bills has reviewed the petitions that I presented Monday, March 8, 2004, and I can advise

the Assembly that all but two of these petitions comply with Standing Orders 85 to 89.

The committee has considered the remaining petitions and recommends to the Assembly that Standing Order 89(1)(b) be waived for the petitions of Northwest Bible College and Brooklyn Rewega, an infant, by her legal guardian and father, Doug Rewega, for a private act that will grant an exception to the law that provides for maternal tort immunity for prenatal wrongful conduct subject to the petitioners in these two petitions completing the necessary advertising before the committee hears the petitioners.

Mr. Speaker, this is my report.

The Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Speaker: Opposed, please say no. Carried.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 19 Public Trustee Act

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act.

This bill would replace the current act, which has been in force since 1949 with minor amendments. The Public Trustee, Mr. Speaker, provides essential services to protect the assets of vulnerable Albertans when no one else is willing or able to act on their behalf. This updated legislation is the result of a 2002 consultation with the legal and insurance industries, estate planners, administrators, and Albertans. The new act will allow the Public Trustee to serve clients in as effective and efficient a manner as possible.

2:40

This being a money bill, Mr. Speaker, I have a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor indicating that "it is my pleasure to recommend for your consideration the annexed Bill, being Public Trustee Act." Signed March 9, 2004, by Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor.

[Motion carried; Bill 19 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 20 Minors' Property Act

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also request leave to introduce Bill 20, the Minors' Property Act.

This is in some manner a companion act to the Public Trustee Act in that the Public Trustee also takes care of the financial interests of minors and vulnerable Albertans.

This bill replaces the existing act by deleting outdated provisions, updating provisions that are still important to protecting the financial interests of young Albertans. The underlying principle of the Minors' Property Act is that dealings with a minor's property, contractual claims, or legal claims should be made in the minor's best interests.

[Motion carried; Bill 20 read a first time]

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling today five copies of a December 3, 2003, letter from the federal Commissioner of Competition to the House of Commons agriculture committee saying that the Competition Bureau will not be launching an inquiry because high prices and profits by meat packers are not contrary to the federal act.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I rise to table on behalf of my colleague the hon. minister of health a report the Conference Board of Canada released today entitled Understanding Health Care Cost Drivers and Escalators. This report sounds an alarm to be heard by anyone truly dedicated to sustaining public health in Canada and whose ears and minds are open to resolutions and solutions that will make it happen, because it will not happen with the system that we have today.

The Speaker: Hon. members, a number of members today referred to simply the minister of health. Actually, the correct title is the Minister of Health and Wellness.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 17 Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to stand today and move second reading of Bill 17, Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004, the amendments to the Agricultural Operation Practices Act, known as AOPA.

As I said when I introduced this bill, it will provide more clarity for the Natural Resources Conservation Board, NRCB, who administers the act, provide more clarity to confined feeding operators who are looking at changes to their operation, and more clarity on the role of municipalities.

The Natural Resources Conservation Board became responsible for regulating confined feeding operations in Alberta on January 1, 2002. Since that time, it became apparent that there were several technical areas that needed clarification. This clarification has now been provided.

For example, existing municipal development permits and health authority permits for confined feeding operations are deemed approvals under AOPA. The Natural Resources Conservation Board has sole responsibility for enforcing and amending conditions on these permits.

With the exception of land-use provisions NRCB approval officers will not be bound by the provisions of municipal development plans. Ancillary structures other than residences will be considered part of a CFO, or confined feeding operation, and will not require a development permit from the municipality.

The AOPA will regulate the composting of agricultural materials at agricultural operations except for dead animals, which will continue to fall under the Livestock Diseases Act.

The NRCB will have the authority to take emergency corrective

action and recover costs if an emergency order is not complied with and the situation poses an immediate environmental risk, a common approach also used in other jurisdictions in protecting the environment.

The NRCB will have greater discretion to determine what the minimum distance separation, or MDS, should be for a residence that lies within an existing operation's MDS when the operation applies for an expansion. Any landowner can waive the MDS requirements. Previously, only other CFO operators had this ability.

Residents and landowners located adjacent to a smaller sized CFO for which a registration is required will now be able to provide the NRCB with information pertaining to how they feel that the operation meets or does not meet the technical standards within AOPA.

A buffer will be required between residences and other public buildings when manure is not incorporated. As well, persons who apply or transfer more than 500 tonnes of manure per year will be required to keep records. This has increased from 300 tonnes.

Passage of these amendments will provide greater clarity for all concerned. These changes are a result of a stakeholder consultation from May to November of 2003. It was my pleasure to be the chair of the steering committee.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of the Legislature to give these amendments their full support.

I move adjournment of debate on second reading consideration of Bill 17. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 18

Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce Bill 18 and move second reading.

The Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004, provides the maintenance enforcement program with some new and essential tools. The maintenance enforcement program provides essential services to Alberta children and families. Among the program's clients are single-parent and low-income families, and simply put, if child support is not paid, it is low-income families and particularly children that suffer the greatest financial impact.

Currently the program administers over 48,000 files on behalf of 63,000 children. In fiscal year 2002-2003, the last full year for which figures were compiled, the program collected more than 78 per cent of maintenance payments that were due. While this is an impressive compliance rate, it translates, Mr. Speaker, to nearly 14,000 children each month who do not receive the financial support to which they're entitled.

With Alberta having the fastest growing population in Canada and a divorce rate of about 40 per cent, the program's caseload is expected to reach 60,000 files by 2007-2008. One of the goals of the Department of Justice, with the help of the tools provided in this bill, is to improve the collection of maintenance payments so that we can increase financial security for Alberta's children and families.

Improving the program's ability to effectively collect on all files is essential to ensuring that future generations of Albertans will live up to their full potential to become productive members of our society. Collecting the support that is due to these families will ensure that Alberta's strong economic and social fabric remains intact for generations to come.

Too often child maintenance is not being collected despite the best

efforts of the program. I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that we have a very strong program, very strong staff, people who dedicate their time and energy to collecting on behalf of children, but notwithstanding the good efforts of the program too often child maintenance is not collected. Too often debtors find ways to avoid their responsibilities to their children. This bill contains several important collection tools designed to improve the program's enforcement authority.

Over the years the program has built strong partnerships with others, including employers and banks, to aid in the collection of maintenance. Now more want to come on board to help support Alberta's children and families. This legislation will require other government departments and private entities to notify the program when payments are being made to a defaulting debtor. Notification will allow for payment arrangements to be made with the debtor or for the program to intercept the payments.

Because the Western Canada Lottery Corporation is one group that wants to assist in the collection of maintenance, the regulations will allow the attachment of lottery ticket winnings in excess of \$1,000. This will ensure that lottery winnings go to the support of the family of a debtor who has maintenance obligations. Manitoba is already doing this very successfully.

2:50

As they can with registered retirement savings plans currently, the program will also be able to intercept locked-in retirement accounts, or LIRAs, so that these funds can be applied to arrears and benefit the debtor's family now, when they need it the most. More details on these new partnerships will be in the regulations.

The program will also be able to restrict recreational hunting and fishing licences when a debtor is in default, in line with current procedures during drivers' licences. Debtors who make payment arrangements with the program will not lose their ability to hunt and fish. I want to stress in this area, Mr. Speaker, that what we need to have with maintenance enforcement is the ability to get the attention of those people who are not fulfilling their obligations to their children, and I make no apology for using every appropriate tool to get that attention.

No one can claim that they are denied a privilege in this province by virtue of the restrictions under the Maintenance Enforcement Act or under this amendment because they always have the opportunity to reobtain those privileges by taking care of their obligations to their families.

When a defaulting debtor is a member of a self-governing profession, like a lawyer or a doctor, the program will have the ability to report noncompliance with the court order to the governing body of the profession for resolution or action as that body deems appropriate.

Again, Mr. Speaker, I'd stress that debtors can avoid all or any of these collection actions simply by making and keeping appropriate payment arrangements with the program. It's as simple as making a phone call, sitting down and saying: "I'm ready to live up to my obligations to my children. Can we work out an appropriate payment plan so that I can meet my current obligations and pay some appropriate sum towards any arrears that have been built up?" It's the program's job to encourage compliance with court orders so that children and families receive the support to which they are entitled.

Another goal of the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act is to promote compliance and more effective use of the program's resources by its clients. This bill will help to achieve that goal by establishing the potential for deterrent fees. Mr. Speaker, I would like to emphasize that this is the first time that the program will be charging deterrent fees since its inception in 1986, but we feel that

the deterrent fees have become necessary to encourage compliance with court orders and the efficient use of program resources.

In some cases it is difficult to get clients to comply with maintenance orders or to provide the program with information which it needs and which they are obliged to provide. This results in extra efforts expended by the program in terms of time and resources that could and should be devoted to providing better service to all of its clients. It's important to keep in mind that any charges will only be incurred by clients who refuse to comply with the court order or intentionally withhold information from the program. Again, these measures will be applied against those people who do not fulfill their obligations and who do not follow the requests of the maintenance enforcement program to provide information.

In June 1998 the MLA review committee released its report concerning maintenance and child access in Alberta after consulting with the public across the province. I might just reference again for the House that that committee was chaired by the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. The review committee initially proposed that debtors bear the costs that arise from the additional work caused by their default. Members of the review committee recommended this both as a tool to encourage compliance and to recoup enforcement costs for the Alberta taxpayer. Now under Bill 18 a default fee will be charged to defaulting debtors who are not complying with a payment plan. If debtors contact the program and make and keep payment arrangements, they will not be charged default fees. This will maximize the incentive for voluntary payment.

Fees will also be charged to debtors who bounce cheques to reduce the amount of valuable time spent by program staff dealing with following up on NSF payments. When debtors fail to complete a statement of finances, a tool for financial disclosure, the administration of the file is further delayed. A fee will be charged to debtors who do not comply with requests to file a statement of finances.

When a creditor fails to report payments received from the debtor, this could result in the program bringing unnecessary enforcement action against a debtor who is not in default. Consequently, creditors who do not report payments made directly to them by the debtor will be charged a fee. Parties requesting substitutional service of documents through the program will be charged a fee to help offset the program's cost in providing the service. Lastly, fees will be charged to clients who reregister their files after withdrawing them from the program. Closing and reopening files is a very time-consuming process.

I should point out, Mr. Speaker, that all the fees charged will be equal to or less than the program's actual cost of performing the required actions. Again, all charges are avoidable if clients keep their file information up to date, contact the program to make payment arrangements, and keep their payment obligations. Not only will clients avoid charges, but they will receive improved client service as the program can focus its time and resources on answering client inquiries and collecting on difficult files.

In terms of the collection of these charges creditor charges will be deducted from funds collected on their behalf only in those months when the program has been successful in collecting the full amount of ongoing maintenance due to them. Debtor charges will be collected in the same manner as maintenance.

Funds collected will be paid out first to the creditor in the full amount of the current month's support. If there are arrears, 90 per cent of the balance would then go to the creditor arrears and 10 per cent to the outstanding deterrent fees owed by the debtor. It's important to remember that the program does not collect maintenance from anyone that the courts decide cannot pay. These charges will be incentive for clients to decrease actions that tax program resources unnecessarily, resulting in increased service for all clients.

Again, I would like to emphasize, Mr. Speaker, that the goal, the objective of this act and the objective of charging these fees, is so that we can have the resources in the program to raise the compliance level from the currently high 78 per cent to a number in the 80s or the 90s so that Alberta's children can have the resources they need to maximize their potential.

Service improvements which can be effected if we can devote resources appropriately will include reduced wait time on the telephone, the acceptance of payments at 226 registry offices in Alberta, increased networking and referrals to resources in the clients' communities, and staffing a direct telephone line for employers.

Other amendments will help the program gather the information it needs to enforce a court order for support. This includes expanding the number of organizations and the type of information that the program can access to locate debtors and their assets. Access to justice will be improved in cases where the parties reside in different jurisdictions, as these amendments allow the program to advise their clients which reciprocating jurisdiction is handling their file where the other party lives outside of Alberta. Clients will then know where to send their court applications to vary maintenance orders, and program staff can explain the reciprocating program's practices and legislation.

The program will also be able to provide the courts in Alberta and other jurisdictions with contact information for serving court applications. This supports the commitment made by all provinces to streamline processes and increase co-operation among jurisdictions. As well, the program will be able to share file information with police to promote public and client safety.

So, Mr. Speaker, Bill 18 is an important piece of legislation which will allow Alberta's maintenance enforcement program to work more effectively for Alberta's children and their families while at the same time ensuring the program's viability into the future. It will provide children and families with better financial support, and that is our main goal. I urge all members of this Assembly to give Bill 18 their full support. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would move that we adjourn debate on Bill 18.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

head: 3:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 13 **Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004**

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Today I'm bringing forward amendments under the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004, on behalf of my colleague the hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. The amendments that we're proposing are part of a continuing process to update our legislation to be more effective, to make it consistent with other legislation, and to reflect present practices in Alberta.

This proposed adjustment will update the wording in the legislation to reflect changes that have occurred in the department in the

administration of the act. Previously, only forest officers could carry out duties in regard to the act. The proposed adjustment will broaden the scope of those who can administer the act.

In regard to acquisition of land, we're adjusting wording in the legislation so that it's consistent with the Public Lands Act. We've also deleted parts of the act that are duplicated in other legislation.

Mr. Chairman, we're proposing that the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development assume responsibility for future regulations under the act. Now the Lieutenant Governor has that role, and it must be done through legislative changes. This change would make it easier to amend and update the regulations in the future by allowing the minister to do so without going through a formal legislative process.

The issue of noxious weeds was also raised. This government is very concerned about controlling the spread of noxious and restricted weeds, and it's also an international issue that governments everywhere are dealing with. We're proposing an addition to the legislation to be able to address the need for control and destruction of restricted and noxious weeds on forest reserve lands. This positive and productive approach to the issue can have a positive impact on the environment, the land base, fish and wildlife, and other land users.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, we're suggesting a much-needed increase in financial penalties for violations of the act. These changes will further encourage compliance with the legislation and ensure sustainable use. The first change will increase the maximum amount that can be assessed for offences under the act. The fine for being charged with an offence under the act has been set at \$5,000 a day. This is consistent with assessments for offences under other acts such as the Public Lands Act.

Another change will allow the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development the authority to assess administrative penalties for minor violations under the act and regulations. A maximum of \$5,000 per day will be set for this purpose under the act as well. This change is being proposed to streamline the processing of minor violations. These changes will improve enforcement by ensuring uniformity when dealing with contraventions, act as a deterrent, and ensure consistency with other legislation such as the Public Lands Act.

Mr. Chairman, during second reading of this legislation a number of questions were brought up by members of the opposition, and I indicated at the time that I'd be pleased to respond in more detail during committee. Now I'd like to take the opportunity to do so. The first area that I want to address is the idea that this bill is giving sweeping powers to the minister with the suggested amendments. Another point that was raised by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie was that the minister could use these regulations to usurp the authority of both the Forests Act and the Public Lands Act. This is clearly not the case.

As I've mentioned before, the last review of this legislation occurred in 1980. As a government we are being responsible in ensuring the legislation that governs us is up-to-date and reflects the reality of what is occurring in the landscape. There's nothing sinister about this, and we're not giving sweeping powers to the minister as was suggested by a number of the hon. members.

Any changes to regulations must be in line with existing pieces of legislation, including the Forests Act and the Public Lands Act, Mr. Chairman. We need to have current legislation that will allow us to effectively manage our public lands and forest reserves, whether it's making changes to how we administer the act or what penalties are in place for those that contravene it. The government needs to have effective legislation in place to ensure good stewardship of our public lands. That's the real intent of this legislation.

Also, for the record, when it comes to working through regulations, we certainly don't do this in isolation. We work with stakeholder groups and interested members of the community on these regulations. This is clearly the way we reflect what really needs to be said in law to manage our resources. Especially in this particular ministry, staff are out in the field talking all the time to disposition holders, community members, and industry about issues. To think that we're doing things without any attempt to discuss it with Albertans is simply not the case.

Regarding the questions that were brought up about expropriation, which is mentioned in section 6, the current wording is also found in the bill opposite section 6, and the power of that expropriation already exists in the act. Currently the Lieutenant Governor can authorize the minister to expropriate land if necessary, and that's not changed. Under the new act the Lieutenant Governor would still provide authorization if expropriation were necessary.

Although expropriation would rarely be used, the legislation will still allow for this option if necessary. Expropriation would only be used as a last resort, failing negotiations for the sale or exchange of land. Furthermore, any expropriations would continue to be governed by the rules of procedure and practice of the Expropriation Act.

The hon. member also asked why personal property is included under this act. Well, this section is consistent with the wording in section 13 of the Public Lands Act, and we're talking about section 6(b) of the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004. Personal property could include improvements such as fencing or watering facilities or perhaps even portable corrals.

The hon. member also asked how the process of exchanging public land will be fair and whether the process would be made public. Under section 6(c) existing processes now used under the Public Lands Act would apply. Exchanges are done on a voluntary basis and normally done where there's a benefit to both parties. To ensure that the process is fair, private appraisals would be completed for both parcels to determine fair value of the land. I can say from my personal experience in my constituency where these types of things have taken place that other interested parties such as leaseholders or even trapline holders are consulted before that process takes place. Land exchanges are private business transactions, however, and are not normally made public.

Also, one of the hon. members asked about the establishment of fee for services. This is simply the enabling provision for establishing grazing fees under the act. Grazing fees are not new; they're currently allowed for in the regulations. The changes allow for the creation of new fees under the regulation, if necessary, to transfer grazing rights.

Right now there are no provisions for implementing fees for transferring grazing rights under this act. We've talked to permit holders about the issue, and they agree that there may be a need for such a fee in the future. The Public Lands Act currently has assignment fees for transferring grazing rights from one individual to the other, so this amendment would merely make it compatible with the Public Lands Act. No other fees are being contemplated.

New provisions have already been added to any provisions that already exist in the act today. We have in fact deleted one prohibition that restricted the use of firearms and air guns in forest reserves. This is already covered under other legislation such as the Wildlife Act, and there's also federal legislation covering the use of firearms. So that is amply covered.

Under section 8 the hon. member asked why the administrative penalties are the same as those given for an offence under section 10. This simply gives the department the option of enforcement actions for specific contraventions of the legislation. For minor violations

administrative penalties would be used. For more serious or repeat offenders a court-imposed fine could be used under section 10. We need to remember that the penalty amounts that are specified are maximums, and penalty assessments in most cases would be less than the maximum allowed. The maximums would be reserved for the more serious offences.

The member also asked about the posting of signs. Again, this is a carry-over of an existing provision in the act. We want to ensure that appropriate signs are used to mark trails to alert the public to livestock grazing. We also want to limit posting of signs by other people for other purposes. We have to remember that this is the wilderness area and we don't want it cluttered up with a lot of unauthorized signs.

3:10

Mr. Chairman, another issue brought up yesterday concerned who the minister will appoint to administer the act. It was suggested that the minister would be contracting out this administration, perhaps to private companies. This is certainly not the case. Existing staff within the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development who are professional agrologists will also administer this act.

An issue regarding needed attention being provided to watershed management issues on forest reserves was brought forward in debate. Certainly as a government we, too, are concerned with protecting lands that are a major source of water for the North and South Saskatchewan River systems. That is one of the reasons that we have legislation in place protecting the Rocky Mountain forest reserve. All planning and land management decisions within the reserve are made with attention to good watershed management.

Mr. Chairman, another question was brought up regarding the use of pesticides for weed control. Pesticides are only one form of weed control. Weeds can also be controlled by other methods such as mechanical, manual, or other biological means. Various weed control methods have been used on forest reserve land for years. We simply want to clarify in the legislation the responsibilities for this activity. In regard to weed control the faster you can find noxious or invasive species of weeds, the better and the more effective you can be to control them and prevent their spread throughout the area.

One of the last questions or comments that was raised last time we debated this was the idea that these amendments would make it easier for business or industry to gain unfair access to forest reserves. These amendments clearly do not give industry any easier access to forest reserves. However, that being said, at the same time we will be maintaining the existing rights of users. For instance, the use of an area for livestock raising will not limit or restrict the ability of other users such as recreational users and access by the public.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, as I've mentioned, these adjustments that I have outlined will update the legislation to reduce duplication, provide consistent wording within the legislation such as the Public Lands Act, and we have added important new pieces to the legislation that will ensure continued access to public rangeland in the Rocky Mountain forest reserves while ensuring environmental integrity of the land base.

We have held targeted consultations with stakeholders, and they have expressed no major concerns.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank the member for the responses he gave me to my questions that we had in second reading. However, I'm not completely satisfied with all the responses we got, particularly the one where you talked about

SRD as a normal course of their business having consultation with people in the community. Random or periodic consultation is quite different than when you're taking a look at adding amendments and redrafting a bill, going out and consulting all stakeholders who are directly affected, including environmental groups, which in this case wasn't done to my knowledge.

Then there's the overall concept of this tinkering with this legislation. It's true that the Forests Act hasn't been overhauled for a very long time period. For many years now we've been asking for a complete overhaul of this act because it's archaic in many ways, particularly in the management styles that it puts forward. So we were expecting sometime soon, this year or next year, a process starting that would be like the CASA-like boards, where you bring people from industry and environmentalists and directly affected people like landowners and municipalities into the decision-making to talk about what's working with the Forests Act and what isn't working with it because there are any number of concerns.

We thought that when that happened, the ministry would be taking a look at it from the perspective of cumulative impact for the whole province because everything you do in the forest directly affects every other aspect of our life and our geography and our flora and fauna in this province from water to land management to herd management to people management to recreation management. All of those issues are directly affected and need to be talked about. As we see more pressures in our forest reserves, we need to make sure that the decisions we're making today can be managed and are sustainable for decades to come, not just a short while. It doesn't seem like any of that's being addressed in this particular legislation.

Now, we've got a great deal of concern from the environmental groups that we went out to consult on this particular bill. One of those for sure was section 4, where the change is to "all forest reserves . . . are set apart . . . for the maintenance of conditions favourable to an optimum water supply," the new addition being "in those reserves." What this talks about then, as we see it, is that SRD is interested in water quality inside the forest reserves but isn't taking any responsibility for impact outside of those reserves. I would like the Minister of Environment to respond to this because definitely managing our water supplies has an enormous impact on water quality across not just Alberta but Saskatchewan and Manitoba, who are also directly affected provinces.

So here we see a time when municipalities are taking a much greater interest in the management of land and watersheds than the provincial government is. The first government that should be taking direct responsibility is the provincial government, and it doesn't seem to be happening here.

A particular concern of the Sierra Club was that the amendments speak to the issue of the government allowing the forest industry to control access to the forest reserves. If you go back in history and take a look at what those reserves were initially set up to do, it was to ensure conservation and protection of water.

You know, the forests are the key to us being able to recapture some of the water that we have lost over time, and they are particularly an integral part of managing our water strategy in the future. We don't see any of this being addressed in this act, and I'm wondering why that is. As we see these proposed amendments coming forward, they look like they're trying to guarantee access to forest reserves for other uses like industry, and we may see future public access denied or management styles denied. So if you could respond to that.

The biggest concern in this bill still is the degree of change there is from taking these forest reserves from a public responsibility over to the private sector, and that really makes it impossible to co-ordinate an effective forest management strategy. We've seen the impact of some of those recently.

We've seen the kerfuffle there was at the Bar C Ranch Resort on the company that was going to go in there and do some selective logging but also some clear-cutting. Bar C fought that, and the community fought that, and ultimately that logging was stopped at least for the time being and for good reasons, most particularly what happens when you log on riverbanks, the kind of soil erosion that happens there, and how you lose your ability to capture the water on the land base and it dries out. It's not good for the forests, it isn't good for any of the users, and it certainly isn't any good for the long-term water management strategy in this province.

This is just for me another indication that SRD has to take back the management of the forests, that we need an overall strategy that focuses on cumulative impact, and that we cannot allow private companies to decide how these forests are going to be managed.

We're also seeing a great deal more interest month by month and year by year in the international market action against companies who are not certified with the forestry standards council, and I've talked about that before in this House. What happens then is that companies cannot compete in the global marketplace, and Alberta is a particularly hard place for companies to get that particular certification. We've heard the minister repeatedly say that he's encouraging the companies to go there, but it's not possible because there are some actual structural impediments in this province to getting FSC certification.

The reason why it's important to get that certification is because forest managers who live up to those principles – there are 10 of them and 56 different criteria – have well-managed forests. When they are unable to do them, then it's a real problem for the long-term sustainability of the forest.

3:20

In Alberta there are two fundamental barriers that forest managers face in achieving FSC certification. One is the lack of a scientifically defensible protected areas network in Alberta. We've said for a long time: make the decisions based on science not based on politics. The second impediment is the inability of the Alberta forest industry to manage forests due to the tenure rights and activities of Alberta's oil and gas industry. So we're seeing these forest industries and oil and gas increasingly come into conflict.

It is the government's responsibility, particularly SRD's responsibility, to take on that role and find some solutions. This is a government that always talks about how pro business it is. Well, they are actually acting as an impediment to successful business in the long term in this province if these companies can't get FSC certification, because many individuals and many other companies are refusing to buy from them. Having protected areas is really important for the certification.

We know and this government knows that the long-term maintenance of biodiversity requires an approach that combines both protected areas and ecologically based management of the industrial land base. When these approaches are integrated, they form the basis of a strong ecological forest management, and that's what's required in this particular case in order for us to actually be able to move forward in a progressive manner.

It isn't just the environmentalists that are complaining about this any more. Now we're starting to see other kinds of reports coming out. There was a scientific report that came out in the spring of 2003 that talks about the disadvantages we're facing in this province when we see the rapid drilling for oil and natural gas along with logging inflicting major damage to our boreal forest and threatening to destroy old growth stands and eroding the watershed basis.

This report is particularly interesting because who funded it was a timber company, Al-Pac. Unlike many of the other more narrowly

focused scientific papers that we've seen, this one did what we were asking for, which was the cumulative impact, and it took a broad assessment of the combined impacts of human activity, including industrial activity there, on the boreal forest. The impact is severe and significant. It threatens the long-term ability of the forest to produce lumber and therefore jobs and therefore revenues for Canadians.

There's been a lot of controversy about this study since it came out in part because of the criticisms of the Alberta government policies that invite oil and gas drilling and logging on the same landscape but fail to co-ordinate them. That is the key piece. It isn't that you can't have oil and gas and logging; you have to co-ordinate those activities. For at least five years in here I've been asking for cumulative impact studies and for a complete comprehensive review of this Forests Act that would bring all parties who have a vested interest in this to the table to find some solutions, but this government is not prepared to do it.

Part of this report also talked about different industrial sectors continuing to be managed by different agencies using different policy instruments. Environmental protection is handled through piecemeal regulations. We truly expected this legislation to address that, but it doesn't. We hear more piecemeal regulation, and from those who are looking at this through an environmental protection filter, we see that it is negligent in many areas.

A final comment that I'll share from this study is that it stated: "The current system of forest management in Alberta is a relic of earlier times. Essentially unchanged from the 1950s, it was established to maximize economic returns from resource extraction in the north." So that's the key problem with this. It doesn't take a look at long-term sustainability.

As we see this unfolding, it certainly does predict some dire consequences for our forests. Certainly, old-growth softwood forests such as spruce and pine will disappear in 20 years, and we'll be totally reliant on tree farming. Old-growth stands of aspen will disappear in 65 years. Habitat, of course, is directly affected by this. Woodland cariboo, which is already a threatened species, will shrink from 43 per cent of the area to 6 per cent. A rapidly expanded network of roads will cause soil erosion, destruction of water and fish movements, and increased access by humans, which leads to more hunting and poaching. Certainly, within the next 50 years we can see timber shortages primarily because the annual harvest rates are currently based on the rate of tree growth without accounting for loss from fire and the activities of the petroleum sector.

So this government needs to wake up and smell the coffee in this regard because they are not taking care of business. [interjection] Well, it's true. They're not taking care of business in Alberta when it comes to managing our forests, and we want to see a complete review of the Forests Act.

I see the former Minister of Environment is just willing to hop to his feet and correct me on all issues, and I certainly hope he will. We've had this debate many times between the two of us over the years, and I'm certainly willing to continue it because out of that some good ideas were brought forward. I am hoping that he will lobby his colleagues in Environment and Sustainable Resource Development to ensure that we start to take a cumulative impact approach to managing the forests in this province and that we see that kind of legislation coming forward soon.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to take the opportunity to respond to some of the comments from the Member for

Edmonton-Ellerslie. I tried to listen to specific criticisms of what's in the bill. I did pick out a few, and I'd like to respond to them, but I think most of the criticisms were on what wasn't in the bill.

She is absolutely correct: this is not a major overhaul that is including everything that opposition members may want to see in the act. This Forest Reserves Amendment Act is merely updating the act to provide the livestock industry with access to long-term, secure, public rangeland grazing in the Rocky Mountain forest reserve and to reflect some restructuring in the SRD department. That's all. That's all we're dealing with.

The other thing, to suggest that no review was done except for what people hear out in the field – I'd just like to assure the member that we have completed a targeted review, as I mentioned before. I didn't mention the stakeholders that were involved in it. I will highlight them now. They were the grazing and livestock producers, the Alberta Outfitters Association, the Alberta Beef Producers, Alberta Fish and Game Association, Alberta Grazing Council, and the Western Stock Growers' Association, and all the grazing permit holders. Out of those consultations, as I said before, no major concerns were brought forward to us.

As I said before, we're not restricting or allowing more use or less use by other stakeholders through this act. So we're not affecting recreation users. We're not affecting the forestry with the permits or leases they have in the area or the oil and gas sector long-term commitments that have been made to them. This act is not dealing with that. It's not proposing to deal with that. It's merely proposing to deal with the changes in the department as well as long-term arrangements for grazing leaseholders.

With that I'll take my seat. I think we've addressed the situations that this act addresses, not other things.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

3:30

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. In listening to the sponsoring members, there are two areas that are concerning me. One is around the addition of the words "and . . . personal property" to section 6(b). The member has talked about it and explained that this was anticipating possibly the need to incorporate things like corrals or sheds or watering troughs, that kind of thing, but to me this is just too loose and too large and too easy, I think, to misunderstand what's being intended.

Generally, when you get something that needs to be narrowly defined, it is in fact found in the definitions. There is no attempt here to add a definition of what's anticipated by this bill to mean personal property. I might suggest that it probably needs to go into a definition section here because this is just too large and could be interpreted to mean a wide variety of other things beyond sort of stationary property. It's certainly not what I would have thought of when I originally read this. So I'll charge the sponsoring Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills to look at that.

The second issue that's giving me some concern is the removal of the prohibition relating to behaviour and traffic in the forest reserves and the use of firearms and air guns. Now, the member has said: well, no problem; this is actually covered under some other related acts. My concern is: can the member reassure the House that the discussion of the use of firearms and air guns in these other acts – one, which other acts? Two, is the prohibition as strong or stronger than what was in this act prior to the removal of the prohibition that's anticipated in Bill 13?

So those are the two quick issues that I wanted to raise with the member. My thanks to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona for allowing me to leap in on that one.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Marz: On the question of the compatibility – is the legislation as strong or stronger on firearms? The act that it's covered in I think I mentioned is the Wildlife Act. I don't have the answer right now whether it's as strong or stronger, but I would presume that certainly federal firearms legislation, according to what most Albertans feel, is amply strong enough to deal with firearms control in any part of the province, including public lands or forestry.

Section 6(b): I'll have to get that answer back to the member at a later date.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak to Bill 13, Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004, in the Committee of the Whole stage of debate. I've been listening with rapt attention to comments being made by hon. members of the House on Bill 13, and I think the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills is right. Although it amends the existing Forest Reserves Act, it's really minor in the scope of what it amends, which in itself perhaps should be deemed as a bit of a problem. This existing bill has not been updated for a long time, and I think it did deserve more extensive updating.

So the narrow scope of the amendments being proposed by way of Bill 13 itself raises questions about whether or not there should be more regularized periodic updating of the bill that's part of the amendments so that the government is obliged every five years or so to return to it to see whether or not the bill works and works well and then can proceed with updating the existing legislation.

That being said, yes, it restructures the authority within the Department of Sustainable Resource Development. In my view, it gives far too much authority to the minister, moves it away from the council of ministers into the hands of the minister, so the minister gets, in my view, an unduly large amount of authority through this restructuring.

The second concern that's been articulated here I guess by several members of the House has to do with the arrangements with respect to who will be responsible for management and the ability of the minister to appoint whomever he sees fit to provide those services. The sponsoring Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills has himself drawn to one of these concerns expressed earlier by another hon. member that the government might be thinking of contracting out, you know, such activities.

Although the member assures the House that that's not the intent, there is nowhere in the amendments that such assurance is contained. If that is, indeed, the case, then I think there's a need for clarification and a clear commitment on the part of the government that appropriately qualified members of the public service who do provide these functions will be the ones who'll be providing these functions.

It gives the minister, in my view, a free hand in the way he or she wants to deal with the question of who has that responsibility. Certainly, environmental groups have a great deal of concern about the downgrading of the protections that these reserve lands deserve if appropriately qualified personnel are not the ones who have that responsibility.

So that certainly remains a concern. The bill is rather ambiguous, to say the least, and silent on the issue of giving a clear undertaking or assurance as to who these people are who'll be providing those important services required for protection.

Another concern that's been expressed to us while we have been consulting with various groups has to do with the restricting of the penalties to administrative penalties. Regardless of the nature of the damage or the infraction, regardless of the seriousness of it, the administrative penalty doesn't leave concerned citizens or groups or

parties the opportunity to seek damages through the courts, you know, that could be assessed. So the administrative penalties foreclose that possibility for Albertans to seek reparations for the damage that may be caused through the noncompliance with the provisions which the forest reserves are provided in the amended legislation.

3:40

Another concern, Mr. Chairman, has to do with the reference to streamlining of the process. I guess more in these news releases the claim is made that this is supposed to streamline the process. I don't think streamlining means giving more authority and discretion to the minister. I don't see how that can streamline. It certainly strengthens the powers of the minister, but it doesn't necessarily provide the kind of streamlining that Albertans concerned about the future of forest reserves and the protection of watersheds contained in them are really interested in.

So the bill is really quite open to interpretation by the minister and doesn't really give enough assurance to concerned groups and citizens about what the bill's scope is and how it's likely to strengthen, as a matter of fact, the provisions for providing conservation of wilderness areas in Alberta.

The one positive feature of the bill that needs to be mentioned I think is in 1(a), where the words "for the time being" are struck out. I think that's good. It takes the notion of the temporariness of the legislation, the transience out of the way, so that certainly is, I think, a good feature whereas the forest reserves status part of the bill seems to be diluted and weakened by allowing the minister to appoint anyone employed by the Crown rather than just forest officers to administer the act.

The bill also, of course, restricts maintaining favourable conditions for optimum water supply to the confines of the reserve thereby weakening watershed management. This change means any impacts on the water supply downstream from the reserve now can be disregarded. I think that's a concern that's been expressed to us as we consulted with the various groups, and I want to certainly put on the record that that, indeed, seems to be one of the serious weaknesses of the amendment. As a matter of fact, the amendment seems to weaken that aspect of the existing legislation.

We have received other comments, one of them actually from someone who has worked with the World Bank on related matters and has some interesting comments which the hon. member who is sponsor of the bill may want to address. It has something to do with the maintenance of optimum water supply. The comment that we are getting is that while it is important to maintain optimum water supply in those reserves, the other concern is that the primary purpose of our forest reserves with regard to water supply would be the maintenance of an optimal water supply for the areas well beyond the reserves for the downstream user areas. There is little if any use of the water resource within the reserves, and the main users and beneficiaries would be the downstream regions. So that's a concern.

Unless I misread or misunderstand the amendments proposed in Bill 13, this bill seems to display a lack of understanding of the purpose and function of forest reserves with regard to water supply, and if it's not lack of understanding, then it seems that there is an intentional sort of element there to downgrade the importance of the forest reserves with regard to water supply. So one way or the other I think that matter needs to be addressed. Even the Alberta environmental network's own plans under the water for life strategy, under the goal of healthy aquatic ecosystems, one of the medium-term actions is to "update water quality programs to support watershed protection and planning."

Now, although the water for life strategy is not necessarily a perfect strategy, there's a clear intention in it to improve the watershed protection, and the forest reserves are the most important watersheds for the water supply in southern and central Alberta, where most of the population is concentrated. So that, I think, is a problem with this bill. It seems to focus attention on water conservation just within the reserve and not downstream. The proposed change is of special concern at a time when oil and gas exploration and production, clear-cut logging, and largely uncontrolled motorized recreation are an increasing threat to the forest reserves and particularly to the maintenance of an optimum water supply.

Another concern is that the upland areas usually do not benefit from the awareness, stewardship, and engaged actions of local watershed stewardship groups since there is no local population. Therefore, the government – i.e., Sustainable Resource Development – should be the steward of the reserves and the protection of water supply.

There is a concern, I guess, from communities such as the city of Calgary. I think the mayor of Calgary, if my information is correct, last year had written a letter expressing his great concern over the impact of motorized recreation use in the Ghost-Waiparous area, which is in the forest reserve.

One last point that I want to make, Mr. Chairman, has to do with user fees. There's quite a wide latitude given here to the minister to impose all kinds of user fees on people: loggers, ranchers, campers, grazing contractors, tourist facility operators, who knows what. That really opens wide the opportunity for the minister to impose new user fees or to increase the cost to the users by the excessive power that the minister has to change or introduce those user fees at will.

So those are some of the concerns that I have and some of the concerns that have been shared with us during our consultation process with various interested stakeholders and parties.

I look forward to further debate and, hopefully, debate on the amendments that might be proposed here to Bill 13. With that I close my remarks for the moment, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of comments to the member concerned about contracting out. I believe he was referring to the administrative work. Well, section 3 clearly states that

the Minister may appoint, from among employees of the Crown in right of Alberta, such individuals as the Minister considers necessary for the administration of this Act and the regulations, and may, in writing, specify their positions.

So it's clearly stating that it's employees of the Crown that he's talking about, not that I would see anything seriously wrong with contracting anything out if it's appropriate to do so. It's the end and not the means by which you do things.

The act doesn't refer to anything at all that would lead anyone to think that with this act the minister is looking to appoint someone from outside government or to contract out. Clearly, it seems like there's more being discussed about what's not in this act than what's actually in the act. It's pretty simple and straightforward.

Other than that and the administrative penalties, which I covered before, I'll go through *Hansard* and look at it very closely to see if there are any other questions that I've missed, and if there are, I'll address them in third reading.

3:50

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to participate in the debate this afternoon on the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004, Bill 13. Certainly, when one looks at this legislation and listens to the debate that has occurred with the previous speakers, the whole notion that we are proposing to give much broader sweeping powers to this particular government with regard to forestry reserves in this province, I think that we should proceed with caution.

There are many questions, and I think the first one is: what are the forest reserves now? One hears conflicting reports; it sort of depends on whom you talk to. There are those who think that the forest reserves we presently have are not large enough to sustain the capacity we have now in the wood fibre industry.

We are hearing over and over again from this government not about stability but about sustainability. I believe they changed their buzzword from stability to sustainability because of the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East's sound idea, prudent idea regarding the stability fund. So now we have this whole issue of sustainability, and whenever we look at Bill 13, we have to wonder: are forest reserves in this province sustainable? Can we rely year after year on the timber harvest? Is the timber harvest enough to meet the demand?

Now, we look at what has happened in other markets in other parts of the world. California certainly comes to mind. In California there was a heated battle in regard to certain wildlife, the spotted owl, and how it relied on old-growth forests to maintain its habitat. Now, the logging trucks in some cases in California have stopped. The chainsaws have been silenced, and in the last 15 years over 60 mills have closed.

So if the harvest of the timber was reduced – and in some places it was significant – who made up the shortfall? One of the places where suppliers came, of course, was to the eastern slopes of Alberta to what we fondly call the Subarctic boreal forest. This was a new area to harvest timber, wood fibre. Californians have changed their ways, and certainly there have been at least short-term significant economic benefits to Alberta along the eastern slopes and in the north.

When we're debating this bill, we're also debating the future of forest reserves and how much will be left. We can talk about having the heritage savings trust fund, but, in a way, having stands of harvestable timber is a trust fund too.

When we look closely at this act in committee, this act would now apply to all forest reserves in the province, not just those established after the year 2000. I said earlier that it gives sweeping powers. Well, it certainly does. It gives sweeping powers to anyone in government that the minister assigns to deal with forest reserves, not just to forest officers. This is in section 7, for those who are interested.

A question that I have again for the record is: why does section 6 reorganize the acquisition of land the way it does? Is it in order of preference: expropriation, purchasing or otherwise acquiring, or exchanging, being subsection (c)? We are also looking here at permitting the minister to "purchase or otherwise acquire any estate or interest in land and any personal property in conjunction with it" whenever it is of any interest to the administration of a reserve. That's pretty general, and if I could have some more details on that, Mr. Chairman, from the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, I would appreciate that.

Now, I have many other questions. Some of them have been addressed previously by the hon. member, and some of them have been asked by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. But in regard to the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, and his quest for information in regard to the minister

and user fees for services, well, I have to correct that hon. member. User fees are taxes, another form of tax. How will these tax increases be implemented?

Now, certainly there are questions surrounding the administrative penalties in section 8. They are as high as the penalties for offences in section 10. An explanation of this I think certainly would be in order at this time, Mr. Chairman. When we look at the concern that has been expressed by many people, whether it be on the editorial pages of our daily papers, whether it be in various reports, we have to consider and question whether this bill is right for Alberta forests and right for those who make their living from the wood fibre in those forests. There has been, as I said, various expressions of concern about the timber shortfall and our annual harvest rates.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I think we have to make sure that there's a little bit of spruce for the moose. The spruce and the moose are part of Alberta's heritage, and the moose would have no place to hide if some of the forest practices were to continue and we were to clear-cut. I don't know where they would hide. [interjection] No, there wouldn't be much cover for a moose in the Drumheller-Chinook constituency; that's for certain.

4:00

With those remarks, Mr. Chairman, I will cede the floor to any other hon. member of this Assembly who would like to participate in the debate, but I, too, would have to caution all members that we have to make sure that this amendment, Bill 13, will provide the sustainability not only for our forests but also for our environment. Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 13 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 16 Residential Tenancies Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to answer some of the questions that were posed at second reading by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. Just a couple of questions that were posed. I know he's been in contact with the staff and had some of his other questions answered, but I will answer the two that were on the record.

The first one dealt a lot with whether the Residential Tenancies Act applied to construction camps, camps that are sometimes set up out in the forest where people can stop in for a night or two nights if they're working on a seismic project or working on a drilling rig, that kind of thing, and other camps for bigger projects that might be located around Fort McMurray, for example.

Basically, the Residential Tenancies Act applies if the occupant is paying the bill himself. So if you check into one of these camps and you're paying on your own expense account or your own credit card, I guess, the cost of that accommodation and meals for the evening or two or three days, or whatever the case may be, then the Residential Tenancies Act would apply. If your accommodation costs are

being paid for by your employer, then the RTA does not apply. That kind of answers that question.

The other question that was asked was around whether landlords do evict tenants for filing complaints to the department, whether there's been a history of that. Accurate figures are probably hard to determine because all evictions are not necessarily reported. There have been some, only a very few, mind you, but probably a few because if you felt that you were going to get evicted, that might temper your desire to file a complaint. Certainly, over the past year there have been at least three cases where people have come forward and said that they felt that they were evicted because they had filed a complaint against the landlord.

Hopefully, the changes that are in this act will remove that fear, and people, if they have a legitimate complaint, will feel comfortable in filing that complaint knowing that that won't result in an eviction notice coming their way.

So those are really the questions that I noted in second reading, and with that we'll see if there are any more coming forward in committee this afternoon. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to be able to join in this debate in Committee of the Whole for Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act. Next to maintenance enforcement I think many of us serving in this House get a very high number of calls on renters and owners and the issues that come around this, so it's nice to see a revisit and an updating and a revamp of the Residential Tenancies Act.

This is an important act to a lot of people because it gives them a context for their homes and helps them gain some understanding and some stability knowing what the rules are about how everyone is supposed to conduct themselves, and that's critical. We're talking about where people live, where they need to feel safe, where they go after work. It's their sanctuary. So there needs to be an ability for people to feel that there's fairness in the system, that they can get a hearing, that the rules are such that they're there to protect them but that there are also some expectations, some responsibilities built into the process.

To be honest with you, I think both parties that tend to be involved in these, that being the landlord and the tenant, are equally capable of creating tremendous disruption in the other party's life. It can be very disruptive and certainly perceived as unfair, although it's perfectly legal, by a good tenant to get the three months' notice that they have to vacate. You know, they didn't want to vacate. They may have been perfectly happy to live in that location for an extended period of time, for years to come, but for whatever reason the landlord wants the space, and with the 90 days' notice on a monthly rental they're able to give notice to vacate and have the tenants get out.

On the other side of things are tenants that don't take care of the place. They vacate, and you go in and go: "Oh, my goodness. It's hard to believe anyone could make such a mess out of a place in such a short period of time." So each party can certainly create a great deal of disruption and heartache and financial difficulty for the other.

There are a couple of areas in particular that seem to come up for my tenants. One is the disposal of property. For many of them, often with mental health issues underlying whatever other issues are bubbling on the surface, it's very difficult for them to find another place to live. Disposal of their property, which, frankly, can be in a couple of black garbage bags – nonetheless, that's the only property they have. They need to know or want to believe that it's going to

be cared for until they can come and pick it up. So any ability to do that is appreciated.

I do see changes that are contemplated here, but that's mostly around making it easier for landlords to dispose of property. I often get heartbreaking calls in the constituency office from people who found their belongings in the alley. They'd been put in the garbage. I wish there was some way that we could deal with that in a way that was a bit more helpful to people.

Part of what I like in this updating of the Residential Tenancies Act is that it is contemplating not forcing people to end up in court to resolve their disputes. The truth of the matter is that many people don't bother going to court. They just give up. They walk away and they say: "Okay. Forget it. I lost money there. I learned a lesson. I'll never make that mistake again." And hopefully they don't. It seems to a large degree that it's not the individual landlords, the people that own one house with a main floor suite and an upper suite, that tend to go to court. It tends to be the larger companies that have large apartment buildings or the walk-ups, and they're in the business of this. They have lawyers on retainer, and off they go.

4:10

I think there's an inherent problem in what's been set up here, and it's partly to do with the work that's being contemplated by the Member for Calgary-Currie; that is, if we are looking to try and resolve some of the housing difficulties that we have, particularly in the larger metropolitan areas of Edmonton and Calgary but also, I think, in some centres like Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray, Red Deer possibly, Lethbridge, where we're trying to get more housing possibilities for people, part of that is around the secondary suites. A lot of them exist; very few of them are legal and are acknowledged as legal.

As we try and draw these people out and get these suites to be legal, to conform to building codes and fire codes and things like that so that people are safe where they live – again, part of what I started out talking about; we want people to feel safe in their own homes – those secondary suites tend to be in individual houses. We're talking about what I would call the small landlord, not that they're small in stature in any way but that they're dealing with a small number or limited number of rental accommodations. We're not talking large companies that have, you know, hundreds or thousands of rental units. It's these smaller landlords that we're trying to I think offer the option of not having to go to court but trying to set it up so that they can make use of the mediation/arbitration service that is the new addition to this act and is contemplated by what's in this act.

There is a problem that has been transferred and brought forward from the other act that I would like to have the sponsoring member look at. A couple of issues here. One, if we're going to be setting up an arbitration/mediation service through the landlord and tenant act – "an alternative dispute resolution mechanism" is how it's referred to in the act, and this is under section 70, I think – I'm making a plea here that we pay the mediators and arbitrators a reasonable amount of money so that we get professional people doing this job.

Mr. MacDonald: I can't do it?

Ms Blakeman: No.

Let's face it. If we're trying to move this into a legitimate process that is to be regarded as an alternative to court, we have to take this seriously. At this point, given that it takes literally thousands of dollars to become qualified as a mediator in particular, to expect somebody to work for several hours for \$50 is not reasonable.

Frankly, I think it shows that we're not taking this process seriously.

I know that in some of the other areas that have been set up and changed through amending legislation in this Assembly, recently coming through the Justice minister, there have been higher charges in small claims court, for example, hoping that people will shift over to a mediator. But, you know, it's two hours' worth of work for \$50. People are supposedly being charged \$100 for small claims court so that that'll pay for that service. Well, it's just not taking this seriously. So I'm putting in a plea that we pay these mediators what they're worth, and frankly at this point a going rate for a very reasonably priced mediator would be in the \$150 an hour range because there is an expectation that they're coming prepared, so there is prep time that's considered inside of that hourly rate.

I mean, let's put this in context. If we're talking about going to court and the cost of the courtroom and the CAPS officers and the judge and the lawyers and the lights on in the building, we're certainly talking significantly more than \$150 an hour. So let's balance this against what it could cost us if people end up in court, what it costs the taxpayers to support that system. If we're going to want people to use an alternative dispute mechanism, then we've got to be willing to invest at least a reasonable percentage of that amount of money into it.

What I see here is that there is a timing problem specifically. Where my concern arises is out of section 30 of Bill 16, and that's the carry-over. Specifically, it's section 30(3). It's talking:

If a landlord terminates a tenancy by serving a notice under subsection (1) and the tenant has not vacated the premises by the time and date set out in the notice, the landlord may within 5 days after the termination date apply to a court for an order confirming the termination of the tenancy and for any remedy that may be granted under section 26.

What happens here for most of these what I'm calling smaller landlords is let's say that they have a situation where somebody doesn't pay their rent. Okay; fine. By the time you get to them and say, "You haven't paid your rent," there's a good intention that people, in fact, want to stay there. Okay; fine. They're going to try and find the money, borrow it, get a second job, whatever. They'll try and come up with the money. Well, at a certain point it becomes clear that they're not, and you as the landlord go and serve the notice of the 14-day eviction notice on them.

This is where the timing problem starts to come in. At the end of the 14 days you go back to the individuals, and they go, "Yeah, sorry; we really wanted to stay, but we just can't come up with the money, and since we can't, we understand that we're under an eviction order, and we'll get out right away now." Okay; fine. Then you find out two or three or four or five days later that, in fact, they didn't leave. You may not necessarily live close enough or be able to go and visit to find out that the tenants did not vacate. You've now passed that five-day portion, and everything you've done up to now is null and void.

Well, you only make that mistake once. Henceforth you will always make sure that you get all the court documents in place and you enforce them rigorously right off the bat. That's where you create that animosity, that hostile environment that you didn't need to do.

I question why the five days is there. We've gone back and asked the department what the reasoning is behind it, and the reasoning we were given was: it was in the other bill. Well, that's not very helpful. But it had to do with the required three days' notice that the court requires plus the anticipation of over a weekend. That's giving you the five days.

My point is: why do you need the limitation of the five days at all? If the landlord has already gone to the work of getting the 14-day

notice and they've served it on the people, at any point that they discover that the people didn't leave, they should be able to then go to court and make use of the court to force the eviction of the people. But when you enforce that five days, it just means the landlord has to go to court right away. They can't take advantage of any option to wait to try and work it out with their tenants and use any kind of alternative dispute mechanism. Why bother? They just immediately go straight to the court because they're not going to lose that money.

I mean, part of the other thing that's coming into play here is that as soon as you're going to go and file in court, it's going to cost you more money. So as a smaller landlord you're out the rent money at this point. Who knows? You may be out the damage deposit if there was, you know, substantial cleaning to happen or any damage that happened, and now you're having to consider an additional \$100. So, of course, you're going to hesitate. Of course, you're going to work with the tenants and try and get them to leave or get them to come up with the money, which means they're going to continue their tenancy; right?

But as soon as you put that limitation of the five days on them, they have to act, and they have to act inside of that court system. It forces them into the court system rather than giving them the time to try and work it out with their tenant and take advantage of any kind of alternative dispute mechanism that can be made available to them.

4:20

I hope I've been able to lay this argument out. It does get complicated and tedious, and I apologize for that. But I think that if we are talking about a situation where we're trying to draw out people that have suites in their houses or own one or two single-family detached residences where there are some suites in there, we're trying to offer an alternative dispute mechanism to them, and we're trying to get these secondary suites legitimate, on the books so to speak.

We need to recognize the situations where we're forcing average Albertans into a hostile environment, where they will go to the courts first because they've learned their nasty lesson and they're not going to get ripped off that money again. Let's face it. For many smaller landlords that \$1,000 or \$1,500 is a significant amount of money, and they don't want to be out that money. But when you squish them in with that five-day requirement, they don't want to have to go back and start all over again, and if they don't act, then they lose the option of being able to have the courts help them. They're going to go for the courts. They're going to go for that more hostile environment.

I think that's not the attempt that's being considered here. It's giving those smaller landlords the option of being able to work with their tenant to give everybody the opportunity to take advantage of noncourt proceedings, using the courts as the last resort rather than as the first resort. But you only make those mistakes a couple of times before you start going, "I don't have any more options as a small business owner," if you want to call an individual landlord that, before they're going to be forced into that situation of using the courts first. Well, that totally takes away any possible option of using an alternative dispute mechanism because that's to come before they go into court.

So I'm asking the sponsor of the bill to have a look at the situation that's being created here because I don't think that's what, in fact, he was anticipating. I think the purpose of this bill is to try and promote an alternative dispute mechanism, not to reinforce a situation that's making it almost impossible to take advantage of it.

I think the government needs to understand that they're forcing people to be hard-hearted here. It's that situation I talked about where the landlord feels that they've been ripped off. They're not

going to get into that situation again. They don't see any other possibility, and then they're forced into this: if you don't act within five days, then everything you've done is wasted and you have to start over again. At that point, you're contemplating losing another month's rent. Most people don't want to be hard-hearted. Individuals tend to avoid that kind of conflict wherever they can, and I'm sure they would prefer to.

Of course, tied up with all of this is the whole idea of being able to draw out those people that have illegitimate secondary suites and try and get them on the books and legitimize those secondary suites so that we can bring them under the building code, the fire code, and make more public the housing alternatives that are possible, especially in the larger cities.

So that's the issue that I wanted to raise at this point in this bill. I will look forward to a response from the member, and if he's willing to work with me, maybe we can return another day with some kind of an amendment to the bill, because I would certainly like to see that done. It's possible, and I think that it's following with what's anticipated in the spirit of what's being brought forward by the amending bill. I think there are lots of golden opportunities here, and I don't want to see them missed for timing, so I'm more than willing to work with the sponsoring member on this. Thank you for the opportunity to bring the issue to light.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. In regard to Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act, this afternoon I would like to express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti for his answers to my earlier questions at second reading of this bill. Certainly, that clarified some of the questions I had in regard to this legislation, and I appreciate that.

At committee here I have a few more questions for the hon. member, Mr. Chairman. In regard to section 2(2)(c) what protection does a tenant of a boarding house have that's different than what's offered in this act, if any? I would be interested to get an answer to that. Certainly, those individuals have not been overlooked, but if the member could clarify that, I would be very grateful.

Now, Mr. Chairman, section 3(2):

If a residential tenancy agreement is in writing, the agreement must contain the following statement in print larger than the other print in the agreement:

The tenancy created by this agreement is governed by the Residential Tenancies Act and if there is a conflict between this agreement and the Act, the Act prevails.

That's in writing in the agreement if there is a written agreement. Surely that will not be overlooked or ignored by tenants or landlords.

But I think we would be better served – and I'm presenting this to the House and for the hon. member to consider. When we're discussing the appointment of a director in section 55, it reads currently: "In accordance with the Public Service Act there may be appointed a Director of Residential Tenancies and any other officers and employees required for the administration of this Act." Well, I would like to suggest, Mr. Chairman, that we strike out "may" and replace it with "shall."

Certainly, we're not creating a bureaucracy here, but I think this must be done if we are as concerned as I think every hon. member of this House is in reducing the number of individuals, whether they be landlords or tenants, that wind up in court. As we said earlier, there are about 6,000 cases annually that go through the court system involving landlord and tenant issues. We heard from the previous hon. member in regard to the alternate dispute mechanism that has been proposed. Well, I think this would strengthen that. If we had

this director and that director were listed, if it was mandatory in the written agreement that the office and the contact information of that director was available, both landlords and tenants would be better served. Questions from both parties could be directed to this individual.

I certainly think that we can afford to provide this service to both landlords and tenants. Whenever we look at some of the other consumer advocates that have been proposed, they're now being financed through other measures for Government Services. I'm not suggesting in any way that there be some sort of fee to pay for this office, a tax. I'm saying that we should have this because there are significant savings to be had if we can reduce the number of cases that may go through the court system. That's just one example. I put this forward for the hon. members in the Assembly at this time to consider, but it certainly would be two amendments, an amendment to section 55 and a careful wording to direct consumers, or tenants and landlords, to this office for questions they may have not only concerning this act but their lease. I think those are improvements to this bill, and we can work together to make it effective.

Thank you.

4:30

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to take this opportunity to enter debate on Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act, while it's in debate in the Committee of the Whole.

This is a fairly extensive and important bill. Looking at the government news release on it, I certainly agree with the intentions that are outlined in the news release. This replaces the existing act, and the new act, of course, includes lots of amendments to the act that it replaces. It says that the changes – they shouldn't be called amendments – from the previous act to the new act strike a stronger balance between the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants and create a framework for voluntary alternative methods for them to resolve disputes, that the bill also provides clearer language. That's the claim that's made.

Now, with respect to using alternative dispute resolution measures on a voluntary basis, I think it's a good thing. I think that the relations between landlords and renters can become difficult and can be problematic. Certainly, the option of the voluntary alternative dispute resolution mechanism is a good way to bring the parties together and have a third party through arbitration or mediation help them to resolve. This will, hopefully, reduce the costs for any conflicts that need resolution and may also expedite the settlement of the dispute.

But the devil is in the detail. Much of the detail with respect to how these alternative dispute resolution mechanisms will work will not become clear until such time as the regulations are available. Those regulations at present are not available. They will be developed by the minister after the bill is passed. It's difficult to pass judgment on the degree to which this option that this bill opens for tenants and landlords to exercise for the resolution of disputes will work, but it's probably an improvement over what we've had available in the past.

I'm curious about the statement that it strikes a stronger balance between the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants. I wonder what the word "stronger" stands for here. We certainly need to improve the balance, and I don't know in which direction the balance is tilted. The balance either goes one way or the other or comes towards the centre, where things are appropriately balanced. So I'm not entirely sure how the provisions of this bill will strike a new balance which will be stronger on both sides.

That raises the question of what kind of balance the legislation that is in existence until this proposed legislation passes and replaces it strikes between the rights and responsibilities of landlords. It's an open question. It begs the question, actually, of whether the bill that's currently in place either sort of struck a weaker balance or had an imbalance in terms of how it provided for the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants. It would be helpful if the Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti would address this question in his response to the comments that I'm making here.

I'm just curious as to what the problem was with the previous bill with respect to the balance in the relations between the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants as seen by the hon. minister responsible for the bill and its enforcement.

So those are sort of general questions.

The legislation that Bill 16 will replace is an act of this Legislature that has been in place since 1979, certainly a period of 25 years, more or less. It was amended in '92, but the amendment was never proclaimed for some reason, so the present bill will repeal the original act and replace it with Bill 16.

Many things have changed from the original act. First, it provides the framework for alternative dispute resolution, and, as I said, the details are not available at this stage. We'll have to await those details until the time when the regulations are made public.

The second element of it is that the landlord's right to terminate under breach of contract has a parallel for tenants – so that may be the reference to the balance – that both tenants and landlords now can give notice of termination under breach of contract provisions.

The third element in the bill is in terms of when a substantial breach happens. The definition of habitable is replaced with the minimum housing standards as per the Public Health Act. I think that's an improvement. It doesn't leave the whole question of the definition of what's habitable up in the air, and it ties it to the minimum housing standards as per the Public Health Act.

The fourth element, according to the government's own version of what this bill tries to do, is that it gives the landlord the power to evict within 48 hours in case of assault. Here the provisions of the bill, I guess, include not only the incidence of the assault itself but the threats of assault. It can be quite problematic whose word prevails. How does one prove the threat of assault or not and whether or not the threat of assault as legal grounds to seek eviction can work as and when the relations between a tenant and a landlord are themselves plagued by a history of difficulties?

So the bill, I think, has certainly some positive features to it. It will provide some improvements over what's been the case in the past. The difficulty is that some other provisions of the bill such as the terms under which a landlord can end the tenancy, which were problematic for tenants under the old act, are still problematic under this act. I by no means want to underestimate the difficulty that the landlords may have in some cases and, on the other hand, tenants may have with respect to the reasons that either side may want to use for dissolving the contract for purposes of eviction or for walking away from the contract.

4:40

There is a problem in the case of threat of assault. The difficulty with documentation – how does one ascertain whether or not a threat of assault was, in fact, real and can be determined to be real? – makes this area of tenant/landlord relationships problematic.

The alternative dispute resolution mechanism of this bill I think is a step in the right direction, but I wish the minister had provided some draft regulations for the House to be able to assess this provision. Unfortunately, that isn't there, so it's very difficult to continue to talk about it in the abstract, not being able to really sort

of put one's finger on what may or may not work as part of the proposal to introduce these alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

Some other observations, Mr. Chairman, have to do with some of the sections of the act. Section 28(2)(b) would provide that landlords can be noncompliant with the Public Health Act if they give notice in writing to tenants as to why they cannot do the necessary repairs to the suite. Perhaps now this could carry on indefinitely, and that's a concern.

Section 30. Damage, physical assault, and threats are criminal actions which should have to be documented by police at all times. This has never been the case, and now the threat of assault has been added to this. So this makes it a your word against mine kind of situation, and this bill doesn't change that very much.

So those are a few of the observations that I at the moment want to make, Mr. Chairman. I think the bill has some positive points to it but leaves unaddressed some other matters which have been contentious and difficult in the past. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the opportunity to add a few comments on the record in regard to Bill 16, Residential Tenancies Act. Let me premise my remarks by saying that I totally support this legislation and congratulate the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti for sponsoring it.

Mr. Chairman, early in my legal career I had the opportunity to practise in the area of landlord and tenant law, and I've represented both landlords and tenants. When it comes to disputes that revolve around these matters, let me say that it is quite a difficult area to practise in. There is an old adage that a man's home is his castle, and if you've ever attempted to disentitle a person of his residential premises, you know how difficult these matters can be.

So I applaud Bill 16 specifically when it comes to the alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. As a former practising lawyer I say unequivocally that the court system is not the right place for residential tenancy disputes to be aired. Mr. Chairman, the court system is time consuming, it's expensive, and it often results in little satisfaction to the parties to the dispute. Parties can spend thousands of dollars in legal fees arguing over a rental property when the subject matter might be a rental payment of as little as \$500 to \$700 per month. When you add on to that a \$200 filing fee to file an originating notice of motion, it becomes very cost prohibitive to attempt to resolve these matters in a court of law.

I think the big highlight of Bill 16 is the alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. Mr. Chairman, I'm aware that extensive consultation took place with both landlords and tenants on how exactly residential tenancy disputes are currently resolved. I think both parties were quite unanimous that the courts can be intimidating and, as I indicated, costly and also very time consuming. Neither landlords nor tenants viewed the courts as an appropriate mechanism for these types of disputes that typically arise between them.

The reason was, as I indicated, the small sums of money that are often being fought over. Pursuing the cost of these in terms of legal fees, where you have lawyers charging in excess of \$200 per hour, will easily exceed the amount of arrears that are owing when a tenant is in default of his obligations pursuant to a tenancy act.

This will leave the disputes unresolved and participants dissatisfied with their present dispute, and as a result alternatives must be offered to the court-based system to solving these disputes. Mr. Chairman, even when a judge rules, it not always clear how that decision was reached. Participants will have a more direct process if the process involves mediation than by the decision of a judge,

which the participants will view as being arbitrary and often unfair.

Mr. Chairman, the residential tenancy disputes that go to court often make inefficient use of valuable court resources. They would be better used for other matters of disputes that are more amenable to the court process. I'm advised by Government Services that approximately 6,000 residential tenancy disputes appear before our courts in any given year. Clearly, I think we all agree that if we can divert many if not most of those disputes away from the court system, it will be for everybody's benefit.

It's important to note that alternative dispute resolution as proposed in Bill 16 is optional; it is not mandatory. The efficacy or the value of any alternative dispute resolution depends upon the willingness of its participants to participate fully and to go into the mediation process with a co-operative attitude, that they're going in there for the purpose of resolving their dispute, not just for the purpose of putting in face time. Often the mediation process in any alternative dispute resolution process will break down, Mr. Chairman, and on those occasions it is important that litigants or potential litigants still have access to the courts and still have access to court remedies.

Bill 16 allows both landlords and tenants the opportunity to pursue the courts for orders for possession or to get out of their tenancy obligations should mediation processes not work or for whatever reason not be appropriate. But based on research, Mr. Chairman, ADR, or alternative dispute resolution, mechanisms are typically cheaper, faster, and less formal than a court-based process. Alternative dispute resolutions as being discussed would be voluntary. Nothing would prohibit either party from choosing the court if they feel that is their best option. In fact, both parties must agree to opt for ADR.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that the Ministry of Government Services is working with landlords, tenants, and the court services division of Alberta Justice to determine the ideal ADR process for Alberta for residential tenancy disputes. Residential tenancy disputes are being addressed in other provinces and jurisdictions, including New Zealand, and the Ministry of Government Services intends to adopt a system of ADR that will best work both for Alberta and, specifically, for residential tenancy disputes. So I wholeheartedly endorse the ADR model for resolving disputes between landlords and tenants.

I think that a number of other items in Bill 16 warrant mention. The voluntary code of practice, I believe, Mr. Chairman, is a great idea. Most landlords and tenants are not familiar with legalese. They often find the act to be somewhat overwhelming in terms of technology and in the terms that are familiar to lawyers and judges. To have the voluntary code of practice written in plain language will be a benefit to both residential tenants and to residential landlords.

4:50

The term "habitable," which was under the old act, is a vague concept, and much legal dispute and argument has been written and argued about exactly when a premises is, in fact, habitable. The new definition that a premises meet minimum housing standards is necessarily a progressive and needed step. I think that more certainty of what is a minimum housing standard specifically as it relates to the Public Health Act is more predictable, and landlords will be able to determine what their obligations are with more specificity than the more vague concept of making a premises habitable.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I think the mirror provisions that allow a tenant to terminate on 14 days' notice for a substantial breach is also a positive step. Typically and historically landlords were able to breach for a substantial breach by a tenant, but now tenants are

offered mirror provisions, and I think that puts landlords and tenants on a more equal and level playing field and provides more fairness and more certainty to the system of landlord/tenant relations.

So with that, I will take my seat, and I encourage members on all sides of the House to support Bill 16.

Mr. Graydon: Mr. Chairman, I'm going to answer some of the questions, and then I would be adjourning debate to deal with another question that came up that we need clarification on.

Regarding boarding houses, maybe you might have to be a senior citizen like myself to even know what a boarding house is, but my definition of a boarding house would be no different than any other tenancy except that traditionally you're getting room and board or getting meals with your tenancy in a boarding house, I think. So I think that a boarding house is no different than any other residential tenancy, and the rules would apply, as far as I'm concerned.

The paragraph or the clause that deals with the act prevailing I think is self-explanatory and quite clear in that if you sign an agreement where the landlord says, "Well, just sign this; it says that I can raise your rent once a week if I want to," no, I'm sorry. The act prevails, and the act lays out very clearly the notification that you require to raise the rent and how often you can do that in a year, et cetera, et cetera.

The code of practice that will be developed will, as mentioned, be extremely useful to both landlords and tenants. In that code of practice I am sure that there will be much reference to the new director's position with web sites, phone numbers, 1-800 numbers, whatever, that will clearly explain to both landlords and tenants that if there's an issue that they need clarification on, the director will be available to give those answers, and there will be clear direction on how to get hold of the director.

The question on section 30(3), (4), and (5), dealing with court orders and five days' notice, et cetera, if someone hasn't moved out, is the question we want to deal with some more. I would ask for more time to answer that question.

With that, I would adjourn debate for today. Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Chairman: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report Bill 13 and report progress on Bill 16.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports Bill 13. The committee reports progress on Bill 16.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we adjourn until 8 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:56 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 9, 2004**

Date: 2004/03/09

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

8:00 p.m.

The Deputy Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to order. For the benefit of those who are in the gallery, this is the informal part of the Legislative Assembly. It's Committee of the Whole, where you're allowed to go through a bill item by item and members are allowed to move around quietly to other places and converse. So if you've got a map of where everybody is, they may or may not be in the place that they appear to be.

Before we begin, I wonder if we might have the committee's approval to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm very lucky tonight. I have two introductions to make, two different groups. First of all, I would like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mr. Jay Ball, who is the president of Junior Achievement of Northern Alberta and Northwest Territories. He's here in the public gallery with nine visitors. They are the staff, volunteers, and students of Junior Achievement. I would ask them all to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

My second set of introductions – I'm always very excited when we have parents of students in our school systems come to see us. I have a number of parents to introduce. These are all parents from Lendrum elementary. First of all, there's Kathleen Marta, who's the parent of two children attending Lendrum elementary and the co-chair of the Lendrum parents school council. Greg Falkenstein is a parent of two children also at Lendrum; Sherri-Lyn Lane, also with two children at Lendrum; Kathy Okamura, with a child in Avalon junior high and a child in Victoria composite high school in my riding of Edmonton-Centre; and finally, Susan O'Neil, who's the parent of two children at Lendrum and also the editor of *Commission Watch* and an active member of Action for Education. All of these parents are present in the gallery as part of the Education Watch initiative. They're concerned about the quality of education their children are currently receiving and about funding for public education. Thank you very much. Please join me in welcoming them to the Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. On behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all hon. members here in the Legislature the Connors Hill Boy Scouts. They are accompanied this evening by their group leader, Lee Loewen. They are seated in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask that they all stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Bill 10

Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. At this point I'm happy to support the government in the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, that's been brought forward. The minister and I went through it in a fair amount of detail during second reading, and I had put forward some questions which I'm hoping the minister will answer during Committee of the Whole. I'm fairly certain that he'll be able to answer those questions, and if all appears in order at the end of that, I'm happy to support this bill passing through Committee of the Whole. I'm pleased to see it, and I look forward to the comments from the minister.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would be delighted to answer the questions. I had actually gone through *Hansard* with respect to the speech made by the hon. member on Thursday at second reading to determine whether in fact there were things that needed to be answered. As I interpreted the comments, it was an interpretation of my legal language to her lay language, and I didn't find any questions to answer. So I'd be happy to answer them if she would put them again in clear language for me.

Ms Blakeman: It's not necessary. I'm now remembering. No, that's exactly what I did, attempted to unlegalize the language. I think that according to the feedback loop that we've had in the community, everything that's being proposed appears to be acceptable, and I'm happy to support the bill that the minister has brought forward.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to rise and add a few comments on the record as they relate to Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill, as sponsored by the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, amends a number of justice statute amendments including the Court of Queen's Bench Act, the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act, and the Judicature Act. I fully support all of the amendments that are being proposed to these respective acts, but I would like to focus on the latter, the Judicature Act, and make a few comments regarding what I think are some very much-needed and valuable improvements to that act.

As many of my colleagues are aware, prior to becoming a member of this Assembly, I practised as a lawyer and spent a lot of time doing insurance and automobile-type cases. So I have some experience with the issue of settlements and would like to make a few comments on the proposed structured settlements as they are proposed in Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

The Attorney General in his comments on second reading quite accurately pointed out that large lump-sum settlements which are awarded following litigation can prove to be problematic in that occasionally an individual for a variety of reasons is unable to manage that large settlement of funds, and they find themselves after a not-too-long period of time to be completely without funds because the funds have been extinguished through poor financial planning or through poor investment choices or for a variety of other reasons. It

is for these reasons, Mr. Chairman, that I submit, as the Attorney General said at second reading, that structured settlements can be very beneficial to the plaintiff following a successful court application.

But I submit to this House that structured settlements can also be favourable to the other side of the equation, that being the defendant or the person actually paying the settlement. When a large lump-sum payment is made pursuant to a judgment, that settlement or that award will ultimately be subject to taxation in terms of the income-earning portion of the large settlement, and it will also be subject to inflation. Now, in order to make these large lump-sum payments inflation proof and to index them for future taxation consequences, it's necessary to build in what we call a tax gross up as part of the ultimate settlement. This tax gross up is a cash payment that's paid by the defendant or, in most cases, the insurer for the defendant and actually increases the cost of the actual payment.

So by spreading out the payment over a period of years, the periodic payment or, as they're referred to colloquially, the structured settlement actually reduces the financial obligation of the defendant or, in most cases, his insurer.

Members will recall last summer and fall when amendments were being proposed to the Insurance Act that many options were being bandied about to try to bring down insurance premiums and costs to the insurers. Structured settlements, or periodic payments over time, was one consideration that was put forward. This is one of the considerations that actually received the endorsement of both the plaintiff bar and the Insurance Bureau of Canada. The reason for that is quite simple. By allowing defendants or in most cases their insurers to pay structured settlements or periodic payments over time, it ultimately reduces the costs that they will have to pay.

8:10

So with those comments, Mr. Chairman, I certainly endorse Bill 16. I think the structured settlement addition to the Judicature Act will help plaintiffs who receive lump-sum settlements manage their funds in a responsible manner and will allow defendants and their insurers to plan for making periodic payments over time and, ultimately, at less cost to them.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 10 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 15

Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise this evening to make some comments about some of the clauses in Bill 15.

It's interesting in the sense that the original bill, the Fiscal Responsibility Act, has been in place for about one year, and already we're seeing changes in the level of transferability of dollars in and out of the sustainability fund. I guess the question that comes up

there is: are we going to be doing this on a regular basis? You know, when we discussed the idea of a stability fund, a sustainability fund, over the last two or three years, there was always this projection and this idea that the act itself should be almost self-modifying in the sense that it would not be subject to being changed one session and then go back the next session and go back the next session to meet the needs.

We had proposed that instead of having a particular dollar amount for that transfer, it should be based on a moving average so that it trended with the changes over time in our natural resource royalties, so that as they trended up, the amount we transferred into the general revenue fund would trend up. If it started to trend down over two or three years, the average would move it down so that we would end up reducing the amount that was transferred in and out of that sustainability fund.

The idea there is that it doesn't become a political issue, that you deal with changing it up one year and down the next either to suit expenditure needs or to suit expectations of change in the natural resource revenue. By using that average, you know, when it's going up, you've got more to put into because you're putting the residual into the sustainability fund. When you're going down, you're taking a little bit out of the sustainability fund so that the actual expenditures that you have on a year-to-year basis don't change quite as much.

So I guess what this really does is just say that the fears we had or the concerns we had about the bill last year when it was brought in – we said that we need to have a mechanism in there. Rather than just putting a dollar value in, you know, the 3 and a half billion dollars that was put into it, we need to have a formula built into it so that it does not become subject to political whims on a given year.

I have no problem with the idea that we're actually going to be moving more money out of the natural resource revenues into general revenue so that we can use it for programs, because we're seeing our natural resource revenues going up. So the fact that you're putting more money into the general revenue fund I think is a good idea. The concern I've got is that, you know, this leaves it open again to year-by-year-by-year guesses about what it's going to be rather than building it off a trend or a historic level of natural resource revenues.

So I think that it's probably too much to ask the government to approve something so complicated as that in an amendment, but they should be thinking about it so that we end up in other years not having to deal with those kinds of annual changes in the transferred amount. You know, we did suggest an amendment last year that would put in a formula. It was rejected, so there's no real reason to put it in again this year just to have it rejected again.

If we look at the next set of amendments, I guess I have some real questions for the minister on what is section 4(a), the amendment there. They're changing the wording of that section of the act to deal only with nonrenewable resource revenues; in other words, only our oil and gas revenues, coal, revenues from all of the natural resource that are nonrenewable. But in the act last year they had actual revenues.

Now, I guess what this does is lead me to question why they're allowing for variability only in our natural resource revenues. The way I read the act now is if, let's say, from one year to the next we have exactly the same natural resource revenue, there would be no change in the operation, flow in or flow out, of the sustainability fund. But if we're in a particular economic cycle – Mr. Chairman, I think we probably will see that this year because our agriculture income in this province is probably going to be down this year, whereas our oil industry is still sustainable.

So what we're saying is that that variability in the potential

revenues of the province from changes in income tax or business tax or any of the other taxes that are associated with the non natural resource industries – if they go up and down, we can't adjust the sustainability fund to deal with those changes in revenues. Why not? To me, that's one of the critical things that was so good about the way the act was worded before, when we dealt with all of our revenues. What it did was allow for some counterbalance so that if natural resource revenues were up and the non natural resource revenues went down, they'd average each other out. That would help, you know, to mitigate the variability we have in our incomes and our revenues from one year to the next.

But here now we're only allowing the change in dollars going into the sustainability fund or coming out of the sustainability fund to be triggered by the change in the natural resource royalties. So, you know, with our downturn in the ag industry this year because of the BSE crisis, if we had revenue shortfalls this year, we couldn't take money out of the sustainability fund to support education, to support health care, to support our social programs. I find that unconscionable, Mr. Chairman.

We need to make sure that this act serves to sustain our expenditures in all of our programs, all of the commitments that the government makes in a budget at the beginning of the year through that whole year so that we end up with manageable, predictable, reliable commitments to our communities.

Here we're saying that if natural resource revenues don't change, it doesn't matter what happens to any other revenue; we can't take money out of the sustainability fund. That limits the flexibility that we need as a government to sustain our programs. What are we going to tell children out there in our schoolrooms when we have to cut the Learning budget? What are we going to tell individuals needing health care, waiting on a waiting list for an operation, waiting to get into emergency? These people will say: with all that natural resource revenue, why can we not sustain expenditures in our social programs?

So I guess I would suggest that amendment 4(a)(i) really puts a limit on the flexibility that was the whole purpose behind the sustainability fund. If we look at that section, we need to really think about it and figure out whether that's really what the Legislature wants in terms of the operation of the sustainability fund.

8:20

Clause 4(b) I think is a good amendment. I think everybody would support this one. Basically, what it says is that if there are increased revenues that come in targeted to a specific program, then we have the right to take those dollars and put them into the program rather than putting them into the residual that then goes into either debt paydown or to the heritage fund. The example we're going to see here probably this year is if there are federal dollars. A number of federal dollars came to support the BSE programs. They were not in the original budget, so if they didn't get included in an amendment like 4(b), we wouldn't be able to spend them. So I think 4(b) is a good amendment. Let's support that one so that when these dollars do come in, they can be used for the purpose for which they were directed.

Section 4(c). I think the way I read that and look at the operation of the fund, I don't really see a lot of problems with it.

Section 4(d) again, I think, is just setting a change in tone of the act, you know, because in effect it's changing "funds required to pay" to "amounts paid or payable". It's kind of saying that governments don't have to pay; they choose to pay. That's, I think, just a tone change in it.

I've got some other concerns that I'd like to raise about section 4(e). I like the intent of this amendment. This amendment basically

says that if there's a settlement agreement to be reached with a First Nation community over a claim, whether it's a land claim, whatever it is, then we can take the dollars out of the sustainability fund for that claim. I think that's great because that's an unplanned contingency. We need to have dollars to do it.

But let me ask a question then, and we'll know this in a couple of weeks when we see next year's budget. Does that mean that the normal line item that's in the budget every year for land claim settlements will be removed? If we're going to have a line item in the budget under the ministry of aboriginal affairs, then why have this clause in the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act to deal with land claim settlements that are unplanned? So I think that this is something that we need to look at, because what we're in effect going to say is that we've got the option to pay them out of two different places in the budget.

Remembering back to our Financial Administration Act that a minister has the prerogative to move items from one line to another line within their ministry, in effect the Legislature passes a budget saying that so many dollars will be in the minister's budget for the cost of claim settlements with First Nation communities, and then if we get a claim and the minister wants to take that money and use it in a different program, that can be done. Then they can go to the sustainability fund and bring money out for the claim. So in effect there are two sources of money to settle that one demand. I think that we need to make sure that when the budget comes down – I think it's scheduled for the 23rd now.

An Hon. Member: The 24th.

Dr. Nicol: The 24th? Thank you.

We make sure that that line item is not in the budget so that we have those options clarified. We're either going to use the sustainability fund for these unplanned contingencies like land claim settlements or any other First Nation settlement agreement or we're going to use line items in the budget the way we have in the past. We shouldn't be allowing for either/or options to spend money as a government.

I guess the other thing that I just want to do kind of in conclusion is give an overall tone to how I see these fitting now with the Financial Administration Act and some of the other legislation that's on the books for our province. As I look through and read this new formatting for the sustainability fund, the separation of natural resource revenues from all revenues, and go back to our tax increase legislation where we have in the laws of this province that no tax increase will be enacted without a referendum, what I'm seeing here is a very limited amount of expenditure that we can make out of our natural resources royalties. We have fixed income coming from our non natural resources – in other words, our tax base – yet we have changes in our programs in terms of demand, in terms of budget allocations. Where are we going to get the revenues for those programs if we don't allow for that interplay between the non natural resource revenues and the nonrenewable resource revenues that are limited now by this new amendment 4(a)(i)?

I guess as I work through this and I try to figure out where we're going to get those additional revenues, it becomes quite obvious that the only source of revenue for health or learning or social programs or other expenditures that we have to have because of growth in the demand for those services that is not consistent with the growth of the economy – so if we have a 4 per cent growth in GDP but a 5 per cent growth in Learning, where do we get that extra 1 per cent? User fees? That's basically the only option available to us if we pass this act the way it's worded.

I think it's really critical that we review 4(a)(i) because that's the

one that puts the limit on the use of these nonrenewable resources for support of programs. We need to look at that and make sure that it does have an option to move those dollars, because I don't think that we want to end up being a province where the only way we can support growth in our programs is through user fees, growth over and above the normal growth of the economy. Our tax revenues grow in proportion to the growth of the economy, but if any one of our programs grows faster than that, where do we get the money? I'll leave that for the House to decide.

I hope we get a chance to pursue this. I ask for clarification of it. We still have lots of time in this session to fix it up if we want to make a change in it, and I would hope that the minister would look at that as we go through and move forward in trying to make sure that this act really does provide fiscal stability yet allows for the sustainability of our critical programs like health, education, and our social programs for the people of this province.

I will have trouble supporting one of the amendments out of the five that are here. If we could separate them out, to four I'd say yes, but one leaves too many questions to support at this point. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just an opportunity perhaps to speak to some of these issues just raised by the hon. member. I didn't make note of all of them, but he started, I believe, by talking about the increase from \$3.5 billion to \$4 billion being allowed from resource revenue and the indication that there had been a couple of changes to this act. [interjection] This is the first increase, but it's the second change to the act, I believe.

That's an important note to make, because this Fiscal Responsibility Act, in fact, was brought in a year ago. It was brought in an attempt to provide some stability to fluctuating revenues and provide for the ability to flatten out that revenue stream on the volatile renewable resource side. As the hon. Minister of Finance pointed out in speaking to the bill in second reading, the number wasn't fixed in stone. It essentially was a target that was started, and it was meant to be adjusted over time depending on performance.

8:30

One of the things we found is that the sustainability fund has been fully funded more quickly than was anticipated, yet we do have some issues that need to be dealt with with respect to education funding and health funding. In the belief that we can maintain the sustainability over the long term with a \$4 billion expenditure as opposed to the \$3.5 billion expenditure and still have the sustainability fund in place, it was felt prudent at this time to increase that number.

So far from being a weakness of the bill that we've moved to make that change, it's actually one of the things that might have been contemplated in the Fiscal Responsibility Act when it was first brought in, that this has to be an act and a concept that can be worked with until we find where the appropriate levels are and, of course, working with the fiscal realities of the province over time.

With respect to the amendment that he more particularly referred to with respect to how you calculate nonrenewable resource revenue versus other revenues, this, I believe, is an amendment to actually more accurately reflect the original intention of the policy and the Financial Management Commission, which was embodied in the act before. That is to say that there is an expectation that as the province grows and as income levels grow, income from tax levels that is related to that growth should be available to help support that growth and help support the programs.

So the definition very clearly needs to isolate out the nonrenew-

able resource revenue as that being the revenue that one is trying to flatten out, not the revenue from other tax sources such as personal income tax or corporate tax. Those tax sources already lag behind growth in the province. It's very difficult already to meet, as the hon. member pointed out, the needs caused by the growth in the economy from the revenue that's derived from that growth. There is a lag time, so we need obviously to have the flexibility, not be constrained by a Fiscal Responsibility Act in tying up those revenues but really making sure that it just ties up the nonrenewable resource revenues that were originally anticipated and contemplated by the act.

I don't believe I heard the hon. member speak to the other provision with respect to First Nations settlements being paid from the sustainability fund, but again I would just briefly speak to that because it is an important section of this act. We already have the flexibility to pay for disasters as declared by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. We have the ability to use funds for capital plan purposes once the limit has been achieved, but one of the areas of difficulty in budgeting – and I know this from my previous existence as minister of intergovernmental and aboriginal affairs – is that you cannot actually budget for land claim settlements, and if you do, you may actually interfere with the negotiation of those settlements. So it is more prudent to have a fund of some sort.

Now, that fund could have been set up by paying monies into the fund over time, but a number of years ago, about 10 years ago, this government moved away from having specific funds for specific purposes. So this is one way of actually having a fund that you can use for that specific purpose, that can be allocated for that specific purpose, and that works better in terms of the accountability process and in the negotiation process. So I would say that that's a very good amendment, and I would ask members to look at it in that light.

The final comment that I'd make is that, really, by having the Fiscal Responsibility Act in this form, in forcing the government to come back to the Legislature if it wants to change the amount, is a good accountability framework in terms of: as this growth in government and, as I said earlier, the demands on government for infrastructure, for the growth that we've seen, whether its roads or hospitals or schools, exceed the supply of funds that is driven by the growth in the economy, there's always going to be that pressure to dip into the resource revenues. Putting in the accountability of having it come back to the Legislature if you ever want to change that number I think is a very, very good accountability structure to have.

So I hope that addresses some of the concerns the hon. member has raised.

Dr. Nicol: The points made with respect to 4(a)(i) in terms of the separation of total revenues from the nonrenewable resource revenues – in listening to the minister, I just realized that the philosophy behind his interpretation of the act and the reason that I assume that we have the act are too different.

He's using the act solely to stabilize revenue. I'm using the act to stabilize a revenue stream in order to sustain expenditures in programs. So I guess that until we come to an agreement over why we have the act, whether it's to sustain our programs as opposed to just smooth out our revenue by separating them out the way we're doing now in 4(a)(i), we in effect say that the only purpose behind this act is to stabilize renewable resource royalties and revenues and not to stabilize all revenues so that we can have stability to sustain expenditures which are locked in by budget.

So I guess that until we realize that there's a broader purpose for the act, we're going to be looking at two different interpretations of it, and we won't come to an agreement.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I'd have to fundamentally disagree with the hon. member. Of course, the purpose of having a sustainability fund is so that you can have the revenue in the future that you need to sustain the programs. That's exactly the purpose of the fund. You take the peaks in resource revenue, and you apply them to future valleys in resource revenue, and in doing so, you sustain the ability to pay for programs that Albertans have come to rely on.

So it's not just a matter of flattening out the revenue. That's easy to do: you just put a number and say that's all you're going to spend, and you put the rest in the account. But the natural consequence of that is either to build assets, which you do by spending those funds on capital, which is necessary to help build growth, or save it so that in the future when you get into the inevitable debt in resource revenue, you have the money to bring back in to sustain the program spending.

Obviously, we agree on the purposes of the bill. I don't understand why we disagree on the amendment.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Chairman, simply because if we truly wanted to do what the member just said, we would try to stabilize all revenues through the stability fund rather than just one component of the revenues. That's the simple interpretation of what the purpose is.

I gave an example in my previous discussion. We are going to see a downturn in income through taxation, especially in the agriculture sector this year, based on the history that we've had. So we're going to be short of revenue in our projections from tax revenue sources. Why not use the stability fund to stabilize that so we can sustain our programs as well?

We're not using the fund to the full extent that we can to create the stability that we want. We're relying only on one component, and right now because we've got an increase in that component from last year to this year, it's going to be easy for us to change from \$3 and a half billion to \$4 billion in our transfer. What happens if we would not have had the increase in renewable resource revenues that we could do that with? We need to look at all of our revenues as we try for stability, not just one component of them. The act would be much better if we looked at stability over all of our revenues.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, it becomes even more obvious as we listen that we agree more than we disagree, and it's simply a matter of interpretation now. Obviously, nonresource revenues are going to fluctuate as resource revenues do. The significant volatility has always been on the resource revenue side, not on the other side, but there is volatility on the other side as well, and that has to be managed.

Of course, it is the drop in revenue, not just from resources. It's not just a factor of looking at resource revenue in the future to pay for programs. It's looking at all revenue. To the extent that we at some point in time dip below in a three-year business plan in the third year out or as you roll it forward and your projections would show that you go down below the necessary income to sustain the programs, you then have to look at the sustainability of those programs. Instead of taking dramatic drops, you can measure that with the proceeds from the sustainability fund.

But as revenues start to go down, you have to start lowering your expectations and lowering your program spending, not dramatically as we've had in the past but in a measured and sustainable way, and that's what the whole benefit of the sustainability fund is.

So we'll have to agree to disagree on whether this particular section accomplishes that purpose, but it seems obvious to me that we're striving for the same purpose.

8:40

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Chairman, just on what he said, I agree fully with it, but what's written here won't accomplish that, because it says that we can only trigger movements in and out. It says:

Within the General Revenue Fund amounts may be allocated to and from the . . . Sustainability Fund as follows:

(d) subject to subsection (3), if for a fiscal year.

Now, the amendment says:

(i) actual non-renewable resource revenue exceeds non-renewable resource revenue for fiscal policy purposes.

So the only time we can move money in and out of the stability fund is if there's a change in the renewable resource revenues, not if there's a change in the other revenues, and that's my issue. Why can't we bring money out of the sustainability fund if there's a change in the revenues from the other sources?

The Chair: Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm not quite sure yet whether the two hon. members agree that they disagree or disagree that they agree, but I'm sure that somewhere down the line they disagree about something.

Mr. Chairman, I have some questions for the government. I spoke to this bill at second reading last night and laid out a number of concerns. One of them was that the province's gas revenues were headed for a significant decline as we were faced with declining proven natural gas reserves. While I was contradicted by the Minister of Infrastructure on one point I made, I wasn't contradicted on that point. However, today in question period in dealing with a question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, the Energy minister said, "At one time it was felt that Alberta was running out of gas, that we were down to the last nine years of gas reserves." Then he goes on to say: "Well, since that time we've been able to double our production. We now produce over 13 billion cubic feet a day."

The question I have is whether or not, in fact, the proven gas reserves in this province are declining. Perhaps somebody can say what the government's best estimate is and at the current rates of production how long they expect gas revenues to hold stable.

Gas revenues provide the lion's share of the natural resource revenue with which the Alberta government has been blessed, but it should be obvious to anyone that by simply doubling production without changing the rate of discovery, you will increase the depletion of your gas reserves rather than the other way around. So the minister's comments today were quite confusing.

The reason I ask this is because it's apparent to me that this bill, which will increase the amount of nonrenewable resource revenue the government can use for programs by half a billion dollars, from 3 and a half billion dollars to \$4 billion, will increase the government's reliance for year-to-year program spending on, essentially, natural gas royalties.

So at a time when we appear to be running out of gas reserves and they provide the lion's share of the nonrenewable resource revenue, the government has instituted two financial policies. One is to decrease the ongoing tax base of the province by over a billion dollars through staged cuts to the corporate income tax, which I believe goes from 15 to 8 per cent, and we are about halfway through that process. As I've mentioned earlier in the House, we were the only party in this Assembly to oppose that direction. At the same time, the government then increases its expenditures by half a billion dollars from resource revenues, from nonrenewable sources. That might be a reasonable approach if, in fact, natural gas revenues were going to be around for the foreseeable future.

So the question is relevant to this bill, and I would really like to know what the government is projecting with respect to its gas reserves and the revenues that they expect to get from them over, say, the next 10 years or so.

The question of land claims came up in the earlier discussion, and I want to ask about the potential liabilities to the fund which might arise out of significant land claims settlements. Is the government expecting to have to dip into this fund in a very substantial way over the next period of time? What's the risk to the fund from land claims settlements? I think we should know that before we vote to use this fund as something that they can dip into to settle those.

With respect to infrastructure has the government considered various options, I guess, apart from P3s to finance infrastructure? Is nonrenewable resource revenue the best place to go for these needs? Has the government considered capital borrowing for that?

That brings me to my last question, which is: what long-term projection does the government actually have for this fund, taking into account all those different aspects? So given the various sources of revenue for the fund, the dependence upon natural gas revenue, the reserves, and then looking at things that will draw on the fund such as land claims, infrastructure, and so on, has the government produced a long-term plan for the fund? Can they predict in a general sense how the fund is going to grow based on what gets put into it and what gets taken out of it? I'm thinking of a five- to 10-year projection.

So I wonder if the hon. Justice minister and Government House Leader could share some responses to those questions.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, with respect to capital and land claims settlements it should be clear that by making it possible to allocate funds from the sustainability fund to pay for capital in the capital plan or to pay for land claims settlements, it doesn't either put an obligation on the fund to do so nor does it make it necessary for government to do so. In other words, if there were a land claims settlement that could be accommodated out of the normal budgeting process or the general revenue fund, it's still open to government to do that. So, presumably, one could do that in the manner that it has been done in the past, which is to normally bring it through as a supplementary estimate in the House.

By settling land claims, one has to look at the ability to pay, and by voting this amendment, one isn't making the fund automatically liable for all future land claims settlements. One still has to go through the affordability process, and one still has to understand what's available to pay the land claims settlement before the land claims settlement is negotiated.

I think I can perhaps say, though, on behalf of the minister of aboriginal affairs that Alberta has had an exemplary record in land claims settlements, so a good number of the claims that needed to be settled have in fact already been settled. There are a modest number of future claims available to be resolved, but there are some. It's not possible, I would submit, to know what obligation may have to be paid.

Remembering that the province's obligation on land claims settlements is the transference of land and the monetary portion that accompanies that is usually a question of clearing up title to land, clearing up leases relative to land, we're not normally talking about huge sums of money in the context that most people would associate with land claims settlements. Hopefully, that clears that particular issue for you.

8:50

In terms of the capital borrowing issue the Minister of Infrastructure may wish to speak to this. We have, in fact, three different

processes relative to capital now in the province. First of all, we'll have a balance sheet, which we'll be able to put capital assets on, and we have a capital plan, which is a three-year plan, with respect to capital projects, a five-year plan, actually, but three years for business planning purposes. The capital projects in that three-year capital plan can be funded by directed voted capital spending, voted through the budget process, or by allocation of funds that are in the capital fund portion of the sustainability fund or through capital borrowing either in the traditional sense of direct borrowing or through some other alternative financing process such as a P3 or a lease process or others.

So there's the capital plan, there's the capital fund, and there's the capital vote. I think one has to look at them all in context and look at the balance sheet of government to understand that this is a very significant step forward in terms of the capital planning process to make sure that the infrastructure of this province keeps up with the demand of both the economy and the necessity to develop human capital.

Mr. Mason: Thank you for those answers, Mr. Chairman.

I would wonder if the minister did want to tackle the question of declining gas reserves and the impact on nonrenewable revenues flowing into the fund.

Mr. Hancock: Well, that one is actually out of my purview in terms of knowledge about the actual detailed number of gas reserves and gas supply. I am here responding to questions on behalf of the Minister of Finance with respect to this act, so I wasn't anticipating talking about gas supply.

However, I think it is common knowledge that conventional sources of gas and oil are at or near their peak capacity, so we're moving into an innovation age both in our traditional economy and the new economy. In the traditional economy that means that we're looking for gas embedded in coal. It means that we're looking at tertiary recovery. We're looking at a lot of different ways to enhance recovery in the province.

I think we're in good shape for the long term to come with respect to gas production, with respect to oil, whether it's conventional or synthetic or bitumen, and with respect to other ways to extract the natural resources in the commodity basin and enhance them in this province. We can expect to receive a royalty stream from that for a good time to come.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you. I wonder if the minister would undertake to ask his colleague to provide some sort of answer, a little more specific, like one that had numbers in it, for example, perhaps in writing. I think it would be most helpful.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Chairman, I will certainly undertake to approach the Minister of Energy with respect to a publication that I've seen and that I think is in the public domain and ask him if he would send it over to the opposition.

[The clauses of Bill 15 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that we rise and report bills 10 and 15.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 10 and Bill 15.

The Deputy Speaker: All those who concur in this report, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Those opposed, please say no. The motion is carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 8:56 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 10, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/10

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. From our forests and parkland to our prairies and mountains comes the call of our land. From our farmsteads, towns, and cities comes the call of our people that as legislators of this province we act with responsibility and sensitivity. Grant us the wisdom to meet such challenges. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly nine individuals from Ontario participating in the Ontario Legislature internship program. They will be in Edmonton from March 10 to March 13 to meet with government officials, opposition members, and the business community. With us today are eight interns: Michael Acedo, Sarah Baker, Holly Bondy, Melanie Francis, Amanda Mayer, Kate Mulligan, David Myles, Chris Shantz-Smiley. They are accompanied by the director of the program, Dr. Greg Inwood. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them now to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it's an honour to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly four Albertans that I had the pleasure of having lunch with today. The lunch was an auction item at the Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation's Night of Laughs charity event. The Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation does incredible work to benefit Albertans. It has raised, as I understand it, over \$14 million for hospital programs since 1991 and is truly a worthwhile organization.

I'd like to thank each of these gentlemen for their generosity in purchasing this lunch and for the pleasure of their company this afternoon: Barry Stewart, president and owner of Igloo Building Supplies Group; Ravi Kumar, vice-president of finance, Igloo Building Supplies Group; Burke Perry, an owner and partner of Burke Perry Homes; and Bill Davidson, also an owner and partner of Burke Perry Homes. I would like to ask these gentlemen to rise – I see they're already standing – and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly 21 students from the NorQuest College Westmount campus who are studying English as a Second Language. They're here today along with their teacher, Ms Barbara Penner. They're seated in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly David

Cournoyer. David is a staff member in the Alberta Liberal Party office. He's a Young Liberal, and he's an enthusiastic student of politics. David is accompanied today by Amanda Caddy. They're in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask them to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a group of students. Can you tell me if they're up there in the visitors' gallery? No kids up there? [interjection] Okay. Well, then, that must be my group of kids from the River Glen school in Red Deer.

You know, a lot of MLAs have said: the brightest and the best. Well, we have the brightest and the best in Red Deer as well, and of course that's also known as paradise. So with us here to visit today are eight adults and a class from River Glen school, and I would like to introduce their group leaders Mrs. Janice Dempsey, Mr. Bob Irwin, Mr. Kenton Biffert, Mrs. Gwen Pozzolo, Mrs. Barb Vold-Bowd, Mr. Bill Bowd, Mrs. Derilee Zeibart, Mrs. Monica Janzen, Mrs. Lorraine Irwin, Mrs. Karen Ritchie, and Mrs. Sherry Brock. I'd like to have you join me in welcoming them here today.

The Speaker: Hon. member, I do not believe that they have attended yet.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me today to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Legislature a constituent of mine, Mr. Allan Jobson. Allan has worked hard to help injured workers, and he's up in Edmonton to take a course on evidence-based judgment or arbitration or whatever. He told me that that's really a good course. He suggests that probably all MLAs should take evidence-based courses before we say anything. I'd ask him to stand and receive a warm welcome.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I think the honour of having the brightest and best students is mine. We're joined today by 29 students from Ellerslie elementary and junior high school. They are accompanied by teachers Bill Hetherington and parent helpers Mrs. Juanita Bain and Mrs. Gloria Spooner. I would please ask that they all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Mr. Dave Colburn. Mr. Colburn is part of the group People for Education, which supports the Education Watch initiative. He has a daughter who attends Delwood elementary in my constituency, and he is concerned about our public education system. I would ask that he rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

Calgary Emergency Health Services

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, in response to concerns I raised yesterday concerning Calgary's emergency services, all the Premier could say was, "Stay tuned," and all the minister could say was: things take

time. Well, according to the Motta inquiry, which is already almost a year old, there is no more time. While this government continues to dither, Calgarians have seen wait times increase and services deteriorate. My first question is to the Premier. Given that Calgarians have seen five years of deteriorating emergency services, can the Premier tell us how much longer they will have to stay tuned before the situation improves?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I can tell the hon. member first of all that we're not dithering, secondly, that we're in constant contact with officials from the Calgary regional health authority and that we take their concerns very seriously.

Mr. Speaker, I have met with the chair, David Tuer. I've met with the CEO, Jack Davis. I've discussed their needs with them. This has been passed on to Treasury Board, certainly to the department of health. We are dealing with the situation as best we possibly can. As the hon. minister of health put it yesterday, these people – and I'm talking about the Liberals – want things done right away; they don't want things done right.

As I explained yesterday, this is a manifestation of economic growth and prosperity. There's no doubt about it. The phenomenal growth that has taken place in Calgary due to the economic policies of this government has put pressure on roads and schools and hospitals. We're dealing with the situation as best we possibly can, but you don't snap your fingers and produce a new hospital or a new emergency ward. These things have to be planned, they have to be financed, and they have to be done properly in the right places and for the right reasons.

So instead of listening to the Liberal carping, we will listen to the officials of the Calgary regional health authority. We will continue to work with them, and we will continue to do things right and for the right reasons.

1:40

Dr. Taft: To the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that the Motta inquiry indicated a year ago that there was no time to waste, that the alternative to immediate and dramatic improvements was to wait for another death, why has the minister allowed the situation in Calgary to worsen?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has left the impression with this House and in the minds of those who may be listening to this that no action was taken as a result of the Motta inquiry, and that's simply not correct. The Motta inquiry resulted in a number of recommendations made both to the provincial government but also to the regional health authority specifically. There were also recommendations made that would find general application in regional health authorities throughout the province. Recommendations were made with respect to the operation of STARS, the air ambulance service.

I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that the regional health authority has continued to add beds to their facilities in the city of Calgary. They've placed more doctors who are now working in emergency rooms during peak times. The region recently approved a plan to continue to increase the number of beds in the facility. The code burgundies are an internal management tool used by the regional health authority for ensuring that the people who most need a bed in fact get a bed. I think that when people go to emergency, they acknowledge and they recognize that it's not on a first-come, first-served basis. It's based on one's medical need for care. There is, of course, a growing need for these types of services because Calgary is growing at a rather dramatic rate.

Mr. Speaker, the province, regional health authorities throughout

the province, STARS, and the regional health authority in Calgary have all responded very positively to the recommendations in the Motta inquiry, and it's because we are concerned about making sure that we have the best health care system that we can have for Albertans. If the hon. member were concerned about the same thing, then he would be addressing his mind to, frankly, matters of less political nature rather than relying on the anecdotal evidence of a letter that he happens to have.

Dr. Taft: Shameful.

Again I ask the same minister: will he do the right thing and call an independent public inquiry into Calgary's emergency services?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we've had an inquiry into the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Mr. Motta's death. One of the recommendations that came out in that inquiry was that when an individual decides to leave an emergency room, they ought to be informing somebody so that they know that they've in fact left.

I don't wish to politicize the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Mr. Motta's death. They were unfortunate. But again to assure the hon. member and all members of this Assembly and Albertans, we are taking every reasonable step necessary to ensure that our emergency services are, in fact, there when Albertans need them.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Mental Health Services

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The draft plan of the government's mental health strategy has been leaked to reporters, and to no one's surprise it reveals serious problems with mental health services in this province. The people of Alberta and especially those with mental illnesses and their families need action from this government. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: given the serious problems identified in this draft, is this minister still claiming, as he was earlier this week, that mental health services in Alberta are adequate?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't wish to comment on a draft report, and let me say this: it wasn't leaked. This report was released to the stakeholders who had input into it. We've asked those stakeholders to provide their input to ensure that the comments they have made on a provincial mental health plan, in fact, are reflected in this report. I believe that was about three weeks ago.

So, Mr. Speaker, again, our interest is not in politicizing this issue. We recognize the importance of mental health delivery in this province. We've taken the right steps, and groups like the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Alberta alliance on mental health, regional health authorities have all agreed that our plan to move mental health services into the regions has been a positive step in the right direction. We want to make sure that individuals don't fall through cracks. We're concerned about issues like medications for people who suffer from mental illness and need help.

So, Mr. Speaker, we're moving forward on this plan, but again this is a draft report. I'm not going to comment on the contents of it until it's a final report as established by the stakeholders who had input into it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. To the same minister: given that this government has been transferring patients out of mental health institutions for years and indeed decades, how much longer must Albertans wait for this government to implement its mental health strategy?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what the hon. member is referring to when he says that for decades we've been transferring patients. I'm not sure from where to where.

The point is that we are moving forward on a significant mental health plan. We recognize the importance of this to Albertans and particularly those who have mental illness. We don't wish to politicize it yet one more time.

I mentioned earlier this week in answering the hon. member's question, that we devoted some \$240 million to the operations of the Alberta Mental Health Board, which was a 5 per cent increase from the previous year. But that, in fact, is only a part of what we devote in terms of dollars to the services for people with mental health concerns. Over and above that \$240 million, Mr. Speaker, the regional health authorities have identified that they spend an additional \$100 million. Over and above that, from our medical services budget, out of which physicians are paid, there are some 100 million dollars plus paid for the services of psychiatrists. We pay for drugs. These are all significant contributions to dealing with this very, very important issue.

Let me finally say, Mr. Speaker, that because we did have services that were provided through our regional health authorities and our Alberta Mental Health Board, that's exactly the reason why we wanted to consolidate our programs, not to spend less on them but to spend better on them, in a way that's more co-ordinated. That's the whole purpose of providing a mental health plan that works province-wide.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can this minister tell us what investigations his department is undertaking to ensure that the two recent tragedies in Edmonton involving the mentally ill are not the result of failings in the mental health system?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, those matters are currently before respective inquiries. I'm reluctant to speak specifically to them as a result of that. I understand that to be the rules of this House.

However, I can say that we are interested in the whole area of mental health. It's, again, exactly the reason why we are moving forward on preparing a provincial mental health plan, Mr. Speaker. We think that this is important. As I've said in this House and on many other occasions, when you look at the burden of illness that will be the responsibility of the Department of Health and Wellness in this province 10 and 15 years out, I've identified that diabetes and mental health issues are the two most important ones. I would challenge the hon. member to find another province anywhere in this country that is taking the kind of bold steps that we are in this province for the delivery of mental health services.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

1:50 Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I never thought I would see a former member of the Deep Six Progressive Conservative committee, that used to advocate less taxes and less government waste, secretly raise taxes once he became a member of the Crown. The Minister of Energy has passed secret orders commanding energy consumers to pay for the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate and now, we find out, also pay for parts of a \$3 million pro-electricity deregulation propaganda campaign. These secret orders are taxation without representation. My first question is to the Minister

of Energy. What authority does the minister have to levy this tax on energy consumers without approval of this Legislative Assembly?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I'd encourage the hon. member to read the Electric Utilities Act, one that he's talked about for the last four years. It's always good to read them. They are tabled in the House. They're also subject to an amendment. Last year it was Bill 3. I would encourage the member to examine that information.

Now, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the specific charges through to the Balancing Pool and subsequently to the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board for the collection of funds to sponsor the utilities advocate, in fact this is the most transparent method that can be found in the government today. The charges are absolutely levied at the area where the source is, and through fully transparent and transcribed hearings those charges are made known to the public in advance, and that's where this member gets his information. So he's getting secret information from public documents.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that these secret orders are not appropriate uses of this legislation, specifically section 148 of the EUA, why is the minister levying extra taxes on utilities to be paid by their customers when he does not have the legislative authority to do so?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the policy is clearly a matter of the record.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, to the same minister: how many more times will this minister force customers to pay for a significant error in this government's judgment, which is electricity deregulation?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the most important thing is how much Albertans will save from having a competitive electricity system and not being subject to blackouts that we've seen in other jurisdictions across the world today, whether it be in Ohio or Ontario or Italy. In fact, the ability for this competitive market generation to function puts us in a position that's far ahead economically of any other jurisdiction in Canada. We have provided the electricity, record loads, record economic growth, the fastest growing economic jurisdiction in North America. It's a good system, it's a competitive system, and it's an open system.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Cattle Industry

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Information tabled at the House of Commons agriculture committee shows that in the last four months a whopping \$227 million in extra profits have been made by the meat-packing industry. In October of last year this surged to \$82 million in just one month on extra profits for processing beef, which corresponds to the period when most of the payments were being made under the BSE assistance plan. While the representatives are being grilled in Ottawa, this morning Tory members of the Public Accounts Committee outdid themselves as the Keystone Kops of cover-up.

Speaker's Ruling Committee Proceedings

The Speaker: Hon. members, there was some anticipation by the chair with respect to this. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is the third party House leader, and he has been provided with all of the rules associated with question period. Might the chair just

read from *Marleau*, the Canadian House of Commons, the following: "Questions to the Ministry or a committee chair concerning the proceedings or work of a committee may not be raised." Further, "When a question has been asked about a committee's proceedings, Speakers have encouraged Members to rephrase their questions." The business of a committee is the business of a committee. It's not the business of the House until a report has come to the House from the committee.

So would the hon. member proceed on a different basis.

Cattle Industry (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much for that, Mr. Speaker. My question, indeed, is: how does the government explain the \$82 million in extra profits made by meat packers last October on beef sales during the same time that BSE compensation monies were being paid out by this government in large amounts? That is to the Premier.

Thank you.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. Deputy Premier supplement. But what is happening in the House of Commons is, in my mind, what should happen in the House of Commons, and these questions should be asked.

Mr. Speaker, there is no cover-up whatsoever involved in this situation. As a matter of fact, I can't think of an issue that has been more investigated and more scrutinized than this issue of BSE. No. BSE has not been. That's the issue that should be scrutinized: the stupidity of BSE and the international overreaction to this affliction and the absolute minimal . . .

Dr. Massey: Is that what you're going to say to the Americans?

Mr. Klein: I will say to the Americans that there is minimal risk relative to BSE and that our beef is safe and it is of the highest quality. That's what everyone should be saying. It seems that in the whole issue of whether the \$400 million that we provided to help beef producers was being spent properly, the issue of BSE seems to have been lost completely and how we get the international community, along with the Americans, to gain confidence in the quality and the safety of our beef.

That's why I've suggested that a strike force be established, so that we can tell the international market first of all that American and Canadian beef is safe and it's of the highest quality and, secondly, that the international protocols need to be changed. This is not 1985. This is the year 2004, and the protocols relative to BSE have changed dramatically.

I mean, I've eaten more beef in the last year – I may be mad from time to time, but I'm not a mad cow. The risk of getting this is 1 in 10-billion meals, and that's if you eat eyeballs and brains and spines and ganglia and the other things.

The Speaker: Before my lunch is moved, the hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When the Premier talks about BSE, he tends to drop the E.

How can the government remain silent when, according to information prepared for the House of Commons agriculture committee, beef packers have generated \$227 million in extra profits since last October at the expense of consumers and cattle producers? Doesn't the government care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, perhaps I should drop the E because I've been listening to a lot of it from that side, I'll tell you.

First of all, you have the House of Commons committee undertaking its review of the situation as it pertains to packing houses and packing house profits and whether there was any gouging or any misrepresentation by the packing plants of the money that was being used or whether they were making excessive profits.

2:00

First of all, tomorrow the minister of agriculture will release a full accounting of where every dollar of assistance went. Then we have the Auditor General, our Auditor General, doing what he is entitled to do, and that is to conduct a full audit of the programs. There are no restrictions, no restrictions whatsoever, placed on the Auditor General on how he chooses to conduct that audit. The only thing that he has received from this government is a letter from the hon. Deputy Premier asking him to fast-track it so that it doesn't linger and give more grist for the ND mill.

You know, the opposition, in my mind, are attempting to sow distrust and discord amongst the agricultural community. They meet with one small segment of the agricultural community, but they are trying to create discontent and discord among the agricultural community in regard to the effectiveness of the BSE assistance programs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I would ask the Premier if he will accept a challenge to come with me to Vegreville tonight and meet with about 200 beef producers, who would be no doubt thrilled to hear his arguments there.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I wouldn't go across the street with this member.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I travel the province, and the hon. Deputy Premier travels the province, and we don't need contrived and set up meetings to hear from the beef industry. We hear from the beef industry each and every day from all segments of the community. We don't pick and choose one segment of the beef industry.

I was in Vulcan just last week, and there were cow-calf operators, there were feedlot operators, and there were people from all components of the industry and not one complaint. Nothing but praise for this government and the way it has handled the BSE issue, particularly the assistance program, Mr. Speaker. Nothing but praise.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Registration of Real Estate Documents

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the real estate business plays a vital part in Alberta's economy, contributing billions of dollars and tens of thousands of jobs, and given that there are millions of transactions taking place each day, a day of delay costs a lot. I have brought to the minister responsible the issue of too long a turnaround time in document processing: 11 days of waiting, as one of my constituents told me. My question today is to the Minister of Government Services. What has the minister been doing to address this matter?

Mr. Coutts: This is a very good question. The hon. member is

acting on behalf of his constituents, people coming to this province, moving here, building houses, folks renegotiating their mortgages, Mr. Speaker, through the economic activity in this province.

We've had record volumes of land titles and mortgage registrations in this province over the last six to eight months, and, yes, we were as high as 18 days' turnaround. But the hon. member has brought it to my attention, as well as other members of this House, and we embarked immediately to get our staff in both Calgary and Edmonton to work some overtime, and they worked Tuesdays, Thursdays, and all day Saturdays. As well, we hired extra staff to get the turnaround times down to three days in Calgary and two days in Edmonton. The turnaround time has been improved.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, in order to communicate that to the real estate industry and to lawyers, we post the turnaround times through the Internet. They can get a hold of us through Service Alberta, the home page, at gov.ab.ca to make them fully aware of the situation so that the realtors and lawyers can control their times and take them into account when they're doing their transactions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last supplemental question is to the same minister. Why are the turnaround times longer in rural Alberta than in Edmonton and Calgary?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, this is a really good question. For those lawyers and realtors that do not have the opportunity to go directly to an office downtown in Edmonton or Calgary, where they have to rely on mail, where they have to rely on courier services, there will be a couple of days extra to look after transportation of the documents.

However, once they get into the Calgary office, once that documentation gets into the Edmonton office, they are put in the same order as every other registration that comes in. The turnaround times for the rural people are exactly the same, once it gets into our Calgary office and Edmonton office, as for all other registrations. The documents are done precisely in order so that everyone gets treated the same way.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Victims of Crime Fund

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. People convicted of an offence and sentenced to a fine pay an additional surcharge which goes to the victims of crime fund. In addition to compensation and funding the Criminal Injuries Review Board, the fund also allocates dollars to victims' programs, but in Alberta the victims of crime fund continues to have millions of dollars in surplus every year. My questions are to the Solicitor General. Given that there remain such large surpluses every year, why aren't all the groups that are eligible to receive funding getting the full amount that they've asked for?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have made significant progress on supporting victims in this province. I was pleased to announce two years ago that the MLA for Calgary-Shaw would do an in-depth report in regard to a consultation with victims and organizations across this province. I have received her report and have spent a lot of time reviewing it, and I don't make excuses for that. There are some financial implications to that, and we're working through the process and will be announcing something shortly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Did the consultation on the victims of crime fund done by the Member for Calgary-Shaw contain any recommendations for what to do with the surplus that's in the fund?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, that's a good question. The report done by the Member for Calgary-Shaw made many, many recommendations, and it made very, very good recommendations. There are several recommendations that are well done that are going to benefit all of the victims in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My final question to the Solicitor General: why is the Solicitor General allowing the victims of crime fund to hoard money that could be going to benefit victims' programs in this province, like funding for sexual assault centres?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not true.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, it is. You've got a surplus; you're hoarding that money. Answer it.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, you're yelling across the hall. You're so rude.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Hog Producers

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Today I would like to reference another good meat source, Alberta pork. Lacombe county raises more hogs per acre than any other area in this province. Many of my producers have concerns, having experienced drought, increased input costs plus prolonged low market prices, and now the talk of tariffs. Thus, their questions, hon. minister: will the Canadian agricultural income stabilization program, CAIS, help both the small operator as well as the large operator; for example, those who manage up to 5,000 sows farrow to finish?

2:10

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I firmly believe that the CAIS program, the Canada agricultural income stabilization program, will assist our hog producers, our grain producers, our cattle producers, in fact all aspects of production in this province. To make sure of that, we've spent a lot of time with the industry, and of course I've outlined in the House some changes that we've negotiated in that program to deal with some of the issues that the hog industry are dealing with, and one is negative margins.

It also affects the grain industry if you have prolonged periods of drought, and it has affected the cattle industry with the significance of the BSE. This program is designed to respond to perhaps small changes in income, but with the additional changes dealing with negative margins, payment caps, and accrual or inventory, it will deal with the others.

To make sure that it would work for the industry, Mr. Speaker, what we have done is bring in a group of hog producers who have very kindly brought their records from their operation in, and we have worked that program with their actual on-farm records to ensure that we haven't missed anything else in the program. So I'm firmly convinced that this will be responsive to them.

Mrs. Gordon: Will the recently announced deadline changes to this program affect my producers, possibly to the point that you have given serious consideration to deferring the deposits for CAIS for 2003?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the deadline extensions that the federal government have announced don't apply to Alberta because we are going to administer the program in our own province. We have found that our producers prefer the ability to contact a person to have a hands-on opportunity rather than going through a telephone system that is difficult at best. One of the reasons that we don't have to worry about one deadline is that the federal government have changed their deadline to December 31; ours always was.

Now, the deadline for actually selecting your level of income protection is March 31. We have asked Ag Financial Services to review that deadline and ensure that with all of these other things that our industry is facing, they can meet that deadline.

Mrs. Gordon: Hon. minister, what is the reality of this situation if the U.S. indeed does add a tariff to Alberta's live hog exports?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, as far as I understand the latest information I have, the U.S. government has not at this point made any motions to impose a tariff. However, we do know that the U.S. pork producers have filed a petition demanding that a tariff is instituted. We're very disappointed that this petition has been filed.

Alberta does not in any way unfairly subsidize its hog producers, and in fact the CAIS program, that we just discussed, was designed very carefully to ensure that it would not cause countervailing actions. I can tell our hog industry that we'll be working with them and our federal government very hard to ensure that the interests of our hog producers are protected.

Mr. Speaker, finally, I think this does again point to the weakness of antidumping laws as they apply to agriculture in particular, and I hope we can rectify that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Alberta SuperNet

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are many private companies working with the government on the development of the SuperNet. Nearly \$200 million have been committed to this venture. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. When companies buy computer parts for the SuperNet, is it mandatory that the full discount that they receive be passed on to the government?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the construction of the SuperNet is a contract with, primarily, our major contractor, Bell West, to construct and roll out construction throughout not only the base network, in which they've committed money, but also into the extended network that will connect every school, hospital, government building, library across this province.

The specific question is something that I will take under advisement and provide the member with a more complete answer after review of the question.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: what role does the department play in inspecting work that is currently being performed?

Mr. Doerksen: To deliver the kind of broadband capability that we have put into the contract requires certain electronic components to be installed in locations right across the province. The department ensures through the inspection of those electronic systems and the characteristics that they meet the standards that are set out in the contract so that we can deliver the kind of service to the schools and the hospitals and the libraries that is set out in that contract.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: what checks does the department perform to ensure that the amounts charged to the government for the hours worked are correct?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, again that's a very important question. As you roll out any kind of contract in government, you want to make sure that you are getting value for the money that you have spent, and we do undergo a rigorous process to make sure that the standards as were set out in the contract are in fact met and that the money is accounted for. But, again, I will look at the specific question there and provide the member with a more detailed explanation upon that consideration.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Beef Slaughter Facilities

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As many in this Assembly know, provincially inspected cow slaughter facilities have waiting lists, some as long as two to three months. Many of my cattle ranching constituents have been calling me about using mobile butchers, or mobilers, to kill their cattle and then send them to a provincially inspected slaughterhouse for cutting and wrapping. My constituents tell me that provincial inspectors are being too hard on producers who attempt this. My questions are all for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Why in a time when our cattle industry is dealing with unprecedented challenges are provincial inspectors being so hard on small slaughter facilities trying to use mobile butchers to help relieve the backlog?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, quite simply put, we're not prepared to reduce our standards and call into question our procedures in the safe handling of meat. Let me make it very clear. Mobile butchers are allowed to slaughter cattle on the farm for the immediate use of the family or persons that would be on that farm. They can have an animal slaughtered on the farm. There is a way to do that and then take it to a slaughterhouse. However, I'm having a hard time understanding, if the backlog is two to three months, how killing the animal and then getting it to the abattoir is going to help that a lot, but I'm willing to accept that that may be the case.

There is a way to do it on a farm. First, you bring in a veterinarian, and you inspect that animal. Then the animal would be tagged by that veterinarian, and that veterinarian would identify if there were any preslaughter signs of illness. This would be on a form that would be presented to the provincial inspector at the provincial abattoir or the slaughter facility they're taking it to, and then a postmortem investigation would occur there. The producer has to assume those costs of having that veterinarian come in and fill out those forms and send them on, but you can do it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why are mobilers required to skin the carcass prior to sending them to a slaughter facility even though this is potentially harder and more dangerous to do on the farm than in a slaughter facility?

2:20

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, you can leave the hide on before you take it, or you can kill the animal and take it in with the hide on, but the place that you take it to has to have a separate room for skinning, and not all do or not all will provide that. So the slaughter facility would have to apply to Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. They'd have to have their dedicated room inspected, and barring any complications, this will allow mobile butchers to leave the skinning to the slaughter facility. Again, you could do it, but there are rules around it.

Mr. Speaker, we have examined this extensively at a policy level over and over and over again, and food safety and the quality and safety of our product have to remain paramount.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there are many Albertans who would buy beef directly from a producer even if they had to sign a waiver, would the minister consider allowing producers to sell beef that's been slaughtered by a mobiler?

Mrs. McClellan: No, Mr. Speaker. We wouldn't consider allowing this to happen, and there's a good reason why. Because the person who signed the waiver would have to eat all of the beef. Otherwise, we'd have to have a waiver from anybody else in the family that was going to consume that. So the person couldn't feed it to his family. He couldn't feed it to his friends. He couldn't feed it to his neighbours. How useful is that? It's an if. We assume that all food is safe, but if there was an incident, the liability would be incredibly high.

Mr. Speaker, we're fully aware of the pressures that our industry is feeling, and I have to say that my colleagues have brought these issues to me. We've debated them through a policy area, and we're trying everything we can to alleviate the backlog, but we've made a decision as a government that we will not compromise Alberta's quality food safety system in this or any other issue.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

VLT Payout Rates

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Gaming Research Institute released a report on VLT gambling in Alberta recently which indicated that there was significant player confusion over VLT payout rates. The report indicated that this was "startling and runs counter to the precept of 'informed consent' that undergirds consumer protection legislation." Signs in VLT locations read: the video lottery network in Alberta has been designed to pay out approximately 92 per cent. My questions are to Minister of Gaming. Given that signs promising a 92 per cent payout are misleading, when is the minister going to correct the signs or change the payout?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, thank you, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. I think it's important for those who are

listening to recognize that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is the Gaming critic for the Liberal Official Opposition, and the fact that the last question she asked me as Minister of Gaming was a year ago speaks volumes to the quality and substance of our gaming policies. Indeed, I think that a lot is to be said of the men and women who implement those policies through the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission.

Now, with respect to the particular question the fact is that each and every one of these machines has a gaming chip, and each and every one of those gaming chips is verified by a certified organization, and the information with respect to those gaming chips has been available to players for a very long time. The information that the hon. member referred to is exactly right.

Ms Blakeman: I think the minister assumes too much and misunderstands the question.

What steps has the minister taken to make Alberta less susceptible to the same legal action that Quebec is experiencing over similar signage?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud of the work that the AGLC and Alberta Gaming do with respect to informing the public and with respect to responsible gaming.

I think it's fair to say that the initial question that the hon. member put to me referenced a report that had this particular matter in it, and one of the things about that particular report was that it was published on the Internet on February 12, one month ago. One of the comments I made at that time was that the report had not been peer reviewed and that there were some issues with respect to it and that I was looking forward to a scientific verification of a substantial portion of that report.

One of the things I would like to do today, Mr. Speaker, is to table with you a letter that I have received from the Population Research Laboratory, which is well known to the opposition – it's a very credible research component at the University of Alberta – that comments on the limitations of that particular report. I think it's important that that be put on the record given the general line of questioning that this hon. member is taking based on comments in the report.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Given that the minister constantly touts the new responsible gaming features on the VLT machines, how can the government expect these to work when, at the same time, the new VLT machines you spent so much money on are filled with all the new flash and dazzle that incites people to come and play them?

Mr. Stevens: Well, Mr. Speaker, the responsible gaming features, which we call reality checks, are based on some work that was done in Nova Scotia a couple of years ago. That was the first provincial jurisdiction to introduce these reality checks into the gaming machines.

Essentially, what they are are things like a clock. There's been a criticism that people lose sense of time, so there is now a clock. There's another feature which has both credits and dollar value. There have been suggestions that people, when they see only credits, don't have a sense of the value of what they are playing for, so that particular feature is now there. There's also a pop-up which says: "You've been playing for 30 minutes. Do you wish to continue?" You have to engage that particular message in order to continue. A criticism was that people had lost the sense of time, and that addresses that issue. Another one is a responsible gaming banner

which indicates information with respect to where people can get help on problem gambling matters. That has obviously been an issue, so that is there.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that when this came forward, we said that what it will do is it will help players manage their time and money. The full impact of that particular program is not known. The research has not been done, but I can tell you that we have embarked upon research that, hopefully, will provide us with some assistance in determining the value of those particular features. Admittedly, we do not know in full what they will be, but the fact is that the general consensus is that it is a good first step.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven members to participate.

Well, hon. members, I'm not sure if this Assembly can handle this twice in one day, but is the Assembly prepared to allow the hon. Member for Red Deer-North to redo her introduction?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:30 **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to see that the students from Red Deer have arrived safely, and it is now my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 43 of the most enthusiastic and energetic kids in Alberta. They're here with some of their teachers and some of their parents, and I'd like to introduce them: Ms Janice Dempsey, Mr. Bob Irwin, Mr. Kenton Biffert, Mrs. Gwen Pozzolo, Mrs. Barb Vold-Bowd, Mr. Bill Bowd, Mrs. Derilee Zeibart, Mrs. Monica Janzen, Mrs. Lorraine Irwin, Mrs. Karen Ritchie, Mrs. Sherry Brock. They are in the members' gallery, and I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Recognitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Kids Help Phone

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize a phenomenal service, the Kids Help Phone. This is Canada's only national, bilingual, 24-hour, toll-free telephone counselling service for children and youth who are experiencing difficulties or situations of personal crisis. The phones are staffed with professional counsellors with backgrounds in social work, education, and health care, who provide confidential counselling information, education, and referral services.

The Minister of Community Development and I were at a launch for the Bell Walk for Kids, which will take place in 35 communities across the country on May 2. Anyone interested in participating can sign up on-line or pick up a brochure at Bank of Montreal for the Bell walk, which will support this worthy cause for children and youth, Kids Help line.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to recognize the work of the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative. Their

mandate to support immigrant and refugee individuals and families in attaining optimum health through relevant health education, community development, and advocacy support has been a great asset to Edmonton. Their services are available to anyone at no cost. As the MLA for Edmonton-Centre, many of my constituents are immigrants and new Canadians. The Multicultural Health Brokers can offer services in over 16 languages including Spanish, Eritrean, Kurdish, Persian, French-speaking African, Somali, or Sudanese.

Emerging from health initiatives in the early '90s, the co-operative is now a registered workers' co-op and has since 1995 been providing culturally and linguistically relevant prenatal and postnatal outreach as well as parenting support. The Multicultural Health Brokers will do home visits or counsel by phone. They organize hospital tours, do community education, consult and advise concerning crosscultural issues, and provide advocacy support to individuals and families.

I'm so grateful that this group of dedicated multicultural professionals make Edmonton better by helping all cultures to achieve wellness and to thrive.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Gloria Miller

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very proud to recognize Gloria Miller, a constituent of mine in Calgary-West who was recently awarded a Lifesaving Society rescue award by the Lifesaving Society, Alberta and Northwest Territories, for her immediate reactions to a situation at hand on July 20, 2003.

On that day Riley Minue dove off a cliff at Nature's Hideaway along the Sheep River near Okotoks. He hit the water the wrong way and was knocked unconscious on impact. Gloria Miller, who was in the area with family and friends, noticed Riley's body face down in one and a half feet of water. She immediately pulled him to shore, had someone call 911, and applied CPR until he was breathing again and until emergency medical services arrived. Riley was airlifted by STARS air ambulance to a Calgary hospital and has since recovered from his extensive injuries. There is no doubt Gloria's quick actions saved Riley Minue's life.

Congratulations on your rescue award, Gloria.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Arthur Bruyere

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 12, 2003, Percival Meruena was working on a boat near a pier in Hawaii when he fell overboard and got caught in the propeller of a tender boat. Coworker Arthur Bruyere of Grande Prairie, Alberta, was on the beach when he received a radio message from security requesting immediate assistance. Arthur ran to the pier, assessed the situation, and without any thought for his own personal safety dove into the water to help safety manager Billy Gilbert in keeping Percival's head above water. His pants were wrapped around the propeller shaft, so he was unable to move.

Arthur knew that time was of the essence so he obtained a mask from a bystander and went underwater for long periods of time, working as quickly as he could to untangle Percival's pants. His efforts met with success. With the assistance of Billy they removed Percival from the water to safety.

There is no doubt that Arthur Bruyere's quick action and disregard for his own personal safety saved the life of Percival Meruena. It is for this reason that Arthur Bruyere from Grande Prairie was the recipient of a life-saving rescue commendation award and the

Lifesaving Society medal with the bar of merit, and it's for his heroic action that I'm recognizing Arthur Bruyere today.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

**Sheri McDougall
Kyle Blocksom
Brent Miller**

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, March 8, it was my distinct pleasure to attend the annual life-saving investiture ceremony organized by the Lifesaving Society for Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Three of the recipients are from my constituency of Calgary-Mountain View, and I'm proud to recognize them today. Sheri McDougall and Kyle Blocksom were presented with the M.G. Griffith certificate in recognition of their heroic efforts in the execution of two separate life-saving endeavours.

On August 9, 2003, Sheri McDougall drew upon her life-saving and lifeguarding skills when she came upon a motor vehicle collision near Stettler. Sheri was instrumental in assisting both drivers involved in the accident until police and emergency response personnel arrived.

On November 30, 2002, Kyle Blocksom drew on his bronze medallion skills to rescue Wayne Thomas, who had fallen through the ice on Bow Lake. Along with help from others they got his friend Lori off the ice to safety as well.

Brent Miller of my constituency received the Commonwealth certificate of thanks for his dedication and commitment to the society's drowning prevention program known as Canadians Water Smart.

I would like to extend my sincere congratulations to all of these brave and dedicated members of our community.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

**Matthew Rice
Lee Chambers
DeeAnn Daniels**

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today on behalf of the Member for Rocky Mountain House to recognize Matthew Rice of Rocky Mountain House, who was awarded the Royal Life Saving Society's M.G. Griffith certificate on March 7 by the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. This award is the second highest national rescue award of the Royal Life Saving Society and is presented for demonstrating significant personal bravery in an outstanding rescue attempt.

On August 9, 2003, Mr. Rice came upon a motor vehicle collision near Stettler and using his acquired life-saving skills was able to immobilize the semiconscious driver, thus saving her life. Two other constituents, Lee Chambers and DeeAnn Daniels, were awarded the bar to the Commonwealth service medal and the certificate of thanks, respectively.

I would like to ask members of this Assembly to join me in recognizing the bravery of Matthew Rice and the outstanding volunteer service of Lee Chambers and DeeAnn Daniels.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Preserve Garneau

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to stand and recognize Preserve Garneau, an organization that's

been, along with many residents of the Garneau community, striving to protect Garneau's unique historical character.

In their ongoing efforts to stop the encroachment of the University of Alberta into the Garneau community, residents have had some notable successes. Last September I had the pleasure of attending the dedication of Adair park, named in honour of Joseph and Dorothy Adair. Among the many accomplishments attributable to this remarkable couple, I would like to note that Dorothy Adair was a founding Alberta member of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the forerunner of the party I'm privileged to lead. Community residents and groups have also been able to obtain historical designations for many of the houses in the area such as Rutherford House and the Cecil Burgess House.

So congratulations to Preserve Garneau and other groups and residents for their successes. My thanks for their efforts and my best wishes as they continue their work. Thank you.

head:

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As chair of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, I hereby submit five copies of the Report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for the Third Session of the 25th Legislature covering the committee's activities in the year 2003.

Thank you.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to give notice that I plan to raise a matter of urgent and pressing necessity under Standing Order 40 at the appropriate time.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to table the required number of copies of the Social Care Facilities Review Committee annual report for 2001-2002. As you know, the Member for Calgary-Shaw chairs this particular review committee. During that year the committee visited 103 foster homes, 37 child and youth social care facilities, 17 women's emergency shelters in 11 of our regional authorities. During those 157 visits the committee interviewed more than 750 service recipients, foster parents, and staff members. There's been huge work done in these reports, and I commit them to the Assembly.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm tabling five copies of documents tabled in the House of Commons Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food showing that meat packers have made an extra \$227 million in profits since October 2003.

The Speaker: Are there others?

The hon. Government House Leader on a point of order.

Point of Order Allegations against a Member

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I raised a point of order

during question period today when a question was being posed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. My point of order is raised under Standing Orders 23(h) with respect to making an allegation against another member and 23(j), using abusive language. I'm going to be very straightforward and brief with respect to this point of order.

The hon. member clearly made an allegation against the Minister of Energy when he indicated in the preamble to his question on numerous occasions that the minister was making secret orders with respect to secret taxes. I think that's clearly an allegation that's outside the scope of question period. He could have asked his question in an appropriate manner relative to the issue with respect to the sum of money which was purportedly being paid by consumers, but instead he was suggesting – more than a suggestion, making a direct allegation – that the Minister of Energy contravened the law and imposed a secret tax without telling anybody. That is an allegation which should be ruled out of order, in my submission.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to answer the point of order raised by the Government House Leader. I'm going to approach this in two parts. One is the question of whether something was secret or not, and the choice of the word by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was not arrived at lightly. It was some effort to find a ministerial order, and in fact it was not gazetted; it was not available through sessional tablings. When I looked at a dictionary definition of what secret is, it's kept from the knowledge of others, a mystery, kept hidden.

So, certainly, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar felt that the information was kept secret. It was not available through the usual processes that this House is accustomed to using, that being the tabling or the *Gazette*. In fact, he had to get it through a third source, so it was kept hidden from here.

As to the allegation that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was somehow saying that the minister had contravened a law, he says quite clearly – I was not able to look at the Blues; I'm going off the question from the member – and does repeatedly talk about secretly raising taxes, which was the anecdote he was using to describe the money that was being asked for, and that he passed secret orders commanding energy users to pay for the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

In fact, that appears to be a reality. There are no allegations involved there about doing something that's contravening the law. I would argue that in fact the minister did pass a secret – that is, kept hidden – order that was asking for payment for the Utilities Consumer Advocate. That is backed up by the information that in fact is available through this ministerial order 82/2003. The member did not make an allegation that he contravened the law. He very clearly said that the Minister of Energy had passed a secret order, and in fact an order has been passed, and it was kept hidden, which would make it secret.

So I would argue that there's no point of order. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, are you involved?

Mr. MacDonald: No. Thank you.

The Speaker: Most of what we do in this House is based on the temperance of the language in the time in which this would happen. So this is during question period. Well, of course, everybody knows that the motivation in question period is to pin somebody's shoulders

to the wall. So one takes every available kind of opportunity within the squares given to them, i.e. the rules, to try and get there.

In this case the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar uses the phrases “secretly raise taxes”, “secret orders”, “secret orders.” Well, I'm sitting here saying: my lord, if this is secret, why are we talking about it here today? If it was secret, how could it have been kept so hidden? Obviously, I mean, if it was secret, we wouldn't be talking about it today. So there had to be motivation for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to cast some form of aspersion on another member with respect to this.

So I think this is a dutiful point of order, dutifully raised, and we should not use language like that. I cannot believe – I just cannot believe – all the hard work that the chairman of the Members' Services Committee does to ensure that in the research facilities for all the parties in this Assembly people are actually studying documents to try and find words to do this. I can't believe that I've spent all this time on behalf to try and find that.

Why don't we use tempered language, which civilized people would use, on all occasions? We'd be much happier, wouldn't have to do this, and we'd be able to move on, and I would feel much better.

head: **Motions under Standing Order 40**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview under Standing Order 40.

Calgary Emergency Health Services

Dr. Taft:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to appoint an independent, nonpartisan commission under the Public Inquiries Act with a broad mandate to review the financing and delivery of health services as it relates to emergency services in Calgary as per the recommendation made by the fatality inquiry of April 2003 into Vince Motta's death.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on a Standing Order 40 application to present a motion to the Assembly. I've got the appropriate copies here for distribution. As you know, Standing Order 40 applications are to be made “in case of urgent and pressing necessity.” I can think of no matter more pressing than addressing the mismanagement of services that Albertans rely on when they are sick and in desperate need of medical attention.

The problem with emergency health services in Calgary is not new, but it is urgent because the situation is only getting worse. Almost one year ago the fatality inquiry into Vince Motta's death found that the Calgary health region's emergency services were quote, under siege, end quote, and quote, in crisis, end quote.

In light of this situation, the Motta inquiry called for dramatic and immediate change. In the words of the inquiry's final report, quote, a system under siege or in crisis requires dramatic change, not incremental change, end quote. In fact, the Motta inquiry recommended very clearly that without dramatic changes, an independent, nonpartisan commission be appointed under the Public Inquiries Act with a broad mandate to review the financing and delivery of health services as it relates to emergency services in Calgary.

Well, Mr. Speaker, here we are almost an entire year later, and things have not gotten better. They've only gotten worse. In the past six months the Calgary health region has implemented 14 code burgundies, as compared to six in the entire previous year. Code burgundy refers to a situation where the region is so desperate for beds because of emergency admissions that they re-evaluate patients

who otherwise would not be discharged to determine if they can be safely sent home.

2:50

I've been receiving letters from patients waiting unreasonable amounts of time in emergency, leaving without seeing a doctor, and some even being left to lie on the floor because there are no beds. Last week I raised questions in the Legislature about Kathy Briant's mother – and I used her name with permission, Mr. Speaker – an elderly woman suffering from a stroke, spending over eight hours in emergency at the Foothills. I raised the issue of an elderly man being forced to lie on the floor for hours in emergency at the Foothills hospital because of a lack of beds.

These stories of unacceptably long waits and the lack of resources in emergency are more and more the norm. The Calgary health region's own numbers show that the length of stay for admitted patients in emergency has grown at all four of Calgary's hospitals while many other statistics on emergency services have improved very little.

Mr. Speaker, this matter is urgent not because I say it is but because the thousands of Calgarians who use Calgary's emergency services say it is, because the inquiry into Vince Motta's death says it is, because we can't afford to have the recommendations of the Motta inquiry ignored or forgotten. Too much is at stake.

I ask you and this Legislature to heed the words of the Motta inquiry when considering this motion. The inquiry stated that if the situation in Calgary's emergency services did not improve dramatically and if a public inquiry was not held, and I quote, the alternative is to wait until another death becomes the subject of inquiry in the context of beleaguered emergency services, end quote.

To you, to all members, don't let that happen. Let's vote to change things for the better. For the health care workers who work tirelessly every day in Calgary's emergency rooms and for the thousands of Calgarians who rely on this service, we must do this. We need this debate.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, under Standing Order 40 a motion such as this requires unanimous consent of the Assembly in order to proceed.

[Unanimous consent denied]

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

Bill 15

Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to move third reading of Bill 15, the Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004.

There's been good debate on this bill in the Legislature. I believe that it meets the needs of the people of the province of Alberta. It is the result of the first year of operation under our new fiscal regime that was recommended by the Financial Management Commission.

I would encourage all members in the House to approve third reading.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just rise again to re-emphasize the points that I made during committee in the sense that, you know, we need to check and make sure that this new amendment to this act really, truly lets us use the flexibility that's intended by the fiscal stabilization fund.

The interpretation that I have on it says that the only time we can actually take money out is if there is a deviation in the nonrenewable resource revenues. If we have a reduction in other revenues, other than the nonrenewable resources, and if that creates a shortfall in the middle of the year, can we still trigger the stabilization fund to support programs with that? I haven't had a clarification on that concern from last night, and I would still like to put it on the record.

Other than that, as I said, the other amendments to this bill are very supportive and improve the bill, and I look forward to hearing an eventual clarification on that. Thank you.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member opposite that the bill is reflective of his concern, and it is there, and it does meet the needs, I believe, of the fiscal framework for this province.

[Motion carried; Bill 15 read a third time]

Bill 13

Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to move third reading of the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004.

We've updated the legislation to reflect changes in the department, to delete obsolete parts that were covered elsewhere, and to make the wording consistent with other legislation. We have added more responsibility for the minister to broaden enforcement of the act and to introduce a streamlined process to update the legislation as situations change. As well, we've included a provision to be able to address the control of restricted and noxious weeds, as required under the Weed Control Act.

There were a number of other questions that arose from Committee of the Whole, and I'd like to address those now, Mr. Speaker. During committee the question of who will administer the legislation was again raised. I did address this yesterday, but I'd like to explain it again. This legislation simply gives the minister authority to appoint the appropriate staff to administer the legislation. Government has always had the ability to contract services out, and where appropriate it has done so, but that is not the intent of this amendment.

When this legislation was originally drafted, forest officers primarily administered the legislation. As a result of some department and broader government reorganization, professional rangeland agrologists mostly administer the legislation these days. These are very well trained and well-educated professionals employed by the government. In the same way that forest officers are governed by legislation, so, too, will these agrologists be under this act. They are obligated to adhere to professional standards and guidelines. This change to the legislation was made simply to reflect what is currently happening on the ground. Alberta continues to have trained professionals administering the legislation. These changes to the legislation will not change that.

Mr. Speaker, one of the other members also suggested that people charged under the new administrative penalty won't be able to appeal. I'm not sure how the member can interpret the legislation that way. In fact, the opposite is true. Section 8.3 clearly states: "Subject to the right to appeal a notice of administrative penalty."

Section 8.4 goes even further, indicating that the minister may in fact create regulations that deal specifically with appeals.

Moreover, there's absolutely nothing in this legislation that says that a person charged under an administrative penalty cannot appeal. In fact, under the administrative penalties and related matters statutes amendment act an appeal process is being developed. This process will apply to several pieces of legislation including the Forest Reserves Amendment Act. Addressing appeal processes with one act ensures consistency and ensures that the appeal process is the same across the board. A more effective and a more efficient process will result. To me that makes sense.

The size of the forest reserve was another issue brought up. These comments were around the management of the forest reserve. Some suggested that this legislation would shift responsibility for this area from the government to the private sector. Some even went so far as to question the area's sustainability. The reserve is about the same size as it was originally in the early 1990s. If the member wants me to show him some pictures from that period of the 1990s compared to today, there's even more forest in some of those areas than there was back in the 1990s due to forest fire control and that sort of thing.

So this act continues to address the many uses in the area today, and these amendments will not change that. They're simply needed to update the legislation and bring it in line with other pieces of legislation like the Public Lands Act.

3:00

Again I'll say that this legislation will not change the way in which the forest reserve is managed. It will not change the current land uses in this area or impact the area's other values. It will continue to address the important environmental values of the area, and it will continue to be managed sustainably for a variety of uses, as it always has been.

As I said before, the changes proposed are required to update the legislation and ensure consistency with other legislation. They allow for continued sustainable grazing in the Rocky Mountain forest reserve, which is an Alberta heritage practice dating back to the early 1890s. We continue to protect the integrity of the land, the environment, and respect for other land users.

With that, thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 13 read a third time]

Bill 10 Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to move third reading of Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

We've had a discussion in this House on Bill 10 previously, and I think it's common ground that the bill, which amends seven statutes, is one which has been relatively well consulted, such that members of the opposition have not heard back, as I understand it, from anyone with respect to any concerns relative to the proposals that are being raised.

In brief, the act amends the Court of Appeal Act, which allows for the empanelling of fewer than three judges on certain specific items to come before the court, and that is done at the request of the Court of Appeal to allow it to be more efficient in hearing matters which don't actually require the full panel of three.

The amendments to the Court of Queen's Bench Act and, I guess, further amendments to the Court of Appeal Act allow for changes to the rules. I explained, I think, earlier in the House that we amend the

Rules of Court from time to time on recommendations from our Rules of Court Committee, which has representatives from the bench, the courts involved, a representative from the Department of Justice, and a representative from the Law Society.

Generally, we get the Rules of Court amendments as proposed by that committee, their recommendations, which are given to the Minister of Justice and then brought before Executive Council for an order in council, but periodically we have to come back to the House and actually verify or approve those rules because there may be an argument raised from time to time as to whether the rules actually impact substantive law rather than just procedural law. What we're purporting to do with this act is not only to actually verify the rules that have been passed from time to time since the last time this was done but also to put in place a process which would actually substantiate those rules as and when they're passed without the requirement to come back to the House.

The most substantive portion, of course, of Bill 10 is the amendments to the Judicature Act which put in place on a request by one of the parties the proposal for the use by the courts of the concept which is colloquially known as a structured settlement. I believe, Mr. Speaker, that this will be a major step forward. Up to this point or at least until mid-December of last year structured settlements would only be put in place with respect to any personal injury action if both parties to the claim agreed. We had some comments in committee from the Member for Edmonton-Calder outlining, I think, some of the benefits of a structured settlement.

It is pretty clear, when you look at the available information, that lump-sum settlements and major damage awards relative to personal injuries can be problematic at times. Statistics will show, at least to the extent that there have been studies available, that some two years after a major lump-sum award is made, in the vast majority of cases the award has been spent.

We have to keep in mind that these awards are made not only for the current costs – for example, making adaptations to houses or purchasing a special vehicle or those sorts of expenses which are immediate – but also for long-term living expenses. In other words, the awards tend to replace income, and the awards also tend to be in place for longer term payments which may be needed for particular specialized medical services which aren't necessarily covered under health care.

So the concept of a structured settlement would allow for the payment of an upfront lump-sum damage award sufficient to cover expenses that have already been incurred and expenses that may be incurred to deal with issues that are immediate but then provide for, in essence, periodic payments over time, perhaps with lump sums built into it, to take the place of the income that was lost on a periodic basis so the person who was aggrieved can actually have the benefit of those payments when they need them throughout the course of their life. The act purports to set out specific rules relative to how that might apply and how that could be done in a fair and beneficial manner to the parties.

The act also provides for an amendment to the Jury Act which would, where a justice of the Court of Queen's Bench considers it appropriate, allow for the judge to indicate that a proceeding be tried pursuant to summary trial procedures set out in the *Rules of Court*. In other words, where the matter is of such a nature that it should be tried under the summary proceeding rules, it ought not be allowed to be tried before a jury.

Under the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act the amendment is simply to align the definition of motor vehicle with that in the Traffic Safety Act. Again, this is just simply to make sure that our acts are consistent and that people making claims under the Motor Vehicle Accident Claims Act are in fact those who would have been covered by public liability insurance of an individual operating a motor

vehicle who was in an accident with them if, in fact, they had complied with the law and had insurance. So that definition change merely aligns with the Traffic Safety Act and makes it clear that it's those people that the motor vehicle accident fund is there to protect.

Under the Provincial Offences Procedure Act, as I explained to the House earlier, we are simply moving into the electronic age even more so than we have before to allow for the movement of huge volumes of paper – I might say with respect primarily to traffic tickets that are written – each time a traffic ticket is written and then is moved through the various processes. This will allow us to use some of those processes electronically.

Mr. Speaker, the last item I address only briefly, and that is with respect to the Queen's Counsel Act. We have, in fact, in this province a Queen's Counsel Act. Some other jurisdictions have actually abandoned the opportunity to award Queen's Counsels. I am, in fact, a very, very strong supporter of the concept of awarding Queen's Counsels. I think that there are far too few ways in our society today that we can actually acknowledge service, that we can actually acknowledge the contributions that are made by people.

In this case under the Queen's Counsel Act every two years we're acknowledging the service that lawyers provide both to their profession and to the community. As I say, we don't often have that opportunity to say thank you in that way, and the Queen's Counsel Act allows us to do that every two years, to say to a certain number of lawyers in our community that we recognize the service that they've provided in enhancing the rule of law in our society and, most importantly to me, to make a contribution to the community.

3:10

Just for the record I'd like to say what I often take the opportunity to say in public meetings when lawyers are there and, obviously, often helping to organize the event. As we look around in community organizations, we often find that there are lawyers there that have helped set up the organization, helped put together its constituting documents, helped provide the order and structure for the organization, volunteering their time on a pro bono basis to help societies get up and running, to help community organizations get up and running. I find very often, when I'm involved with community organizations or attending a community function, that lawyers, in fact, members of the Law Society, are there behind the scenes doing a lot of good work to help make our community a better place.

The Queen's Counsel Act allows us on a periodic basis to say thank you and to acknowledge that and to hold out those who do give exemplary service and are of exemplary character as models and as examples to others in our society. It's for that reason, Mr. Speaker, that we need the amendment that we're proposing here.

The amendment, as it indicates, will allow us to also remove the designation of QC from a person who no longer exemplifies that model of conduct, in particular somebody who has been disbarred or is deemed to have been disbarred by virtue of a resignation by a member in the face of discipline pursuant to section 61 of the Legal Profession Act. In other words, if a person has committed a criminal offence for which they've already been convicted but also have lost the opportunity to practise law – they've been disbarred – then they ought not to continue to carry around the designation of QC, which is a designation which says that we respect and honour that member for the contribution that they've made to society.

So those are the amendments that are proposed to various justice statutes in Bill 10, and I would ask for the support of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 10, the Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, in its third

reading. I'm pleased to extend the support of the caucus of the New Democrat opposition to Bill 10. I also want to compliment the Minister of Justice and Attorney General for providing good, thorough briefing to us before the bill was introduced. That really is very helpful for me and for our staff to respond appropriately to the bill.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The bill is in part housekeeping, and parts make some substantive changes, and I think they certainly have our support and deserve the support of the House in general. The only questions are some concerns that I have with respect to the flexibility that's built into the alternative, the lump sum payments, to people who win these court awards. There may be cases where some lump sum payments are necessary, although the minister has indicated that such provision will be made, but I guess it's going to be outlined in the regulations. There's perhaps not enough detail in the act itself with respect to that.

That said, I'm happy to take my seat, Mr. Speaker, and indicate our support for the bill.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just to rise to briefly summarize the Official Opposition's position on the bill. It's great that occasionally we do update the laws that relate to the workings of the court, the workings of the judicial system.

One of the really good aspects of this bill is the ability to take and review the QC designation for individuals. I think this is something that in my travels across the province we've been really encouraged to do on a number of different occasions, so I think it would be a good addition to the process and the procedure that's available.

I hope that we do move forward on this because it really helps to bring the laws that relate to this aspect of our legal system into current expectations, the use of more of the electronic age components. That all helps. It makes things work easier.

I commend the minister for making these changes. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General to close debate.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Only to add something which I forgot to say, which is that I wanted to thank the critics for both parties opposite for making themselves available to discuss these aspects, and I also wanted to mention that in bringing forward modernization to various justice statutes amendment acts, there's a lot of work that goes into that, even though it may be simple provisions. That work is obviously done by members of the Department of Justice, but also we look to the Law Reform Institute for its guidance from time to time on matters. Often matters which are brought forward in the justice statutes amendment acts are, in fact, an attempt to implement what we've been advised by the Law Reform Institute.

With respect to the structured settlement process I would advise the House that there's still some discussion around the appropriate mechanisms and processes, and I may in fact be back to this House at some point in time asking for slight changes to the process or amendments if we get further advice in that regard. I brought it to the House this spring in order to ensure that our law with respect to personal injury was aligned with the law which we passed in December relative to insurance.

[Motion carried; Bill 10 read a third time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 19
Public Trustee Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to move Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act, for second reading.

I will just indicate that having moved it and spoken to it, at the end of my comments I will move that we adjourn debate in order to allow my critic from the Official Opposition to speak to it later in the day.

The office of the Public Trustee, part of Alberta Justice, administers over \$400 million in assets for nearly 14,000 clients. Most Public Trustee clients fall into one of three groups: minors, vulnerable adults, and estates of deceased persons. The Public Trustee also holds property for missing persons.

Bill 19 repeals and replaces the current Public Trustee Act, which has been in force in this province since 1949. Although the bill modifies many details of the legislation governing the office of the Public Trustee, the core functions of the office remain the same under the new act.

The modifications are intended to allow the Public Trustee to serve clients in as an effective and efficient manner as possible. Organizational aspects of the office of the Public Trustee are mainly unaffected by the bill. However, the existing requirement that the person appointed as a Public Trustee be a lawyer will not be continued.

I have mentioned that one of the Public Trustee's functions is to hold property belonging to missing persons. The new provision will make it clear that the Public Trustee may make expenditures out of such property to try and locate the owner.

3:20

The bill contains a provision dealing with unclaimed property in the hands of the Public Trustee. The current rules in this matter are unduly complex. In some cases the Public Trustee must hold the property for at least two years. At the end of two years the property or the proceeds of its sale may be transferred to the general revenue fund. If a person later establishes a claim to the property, they can get it back along with interest. The claim could in theory be asserted many decades after the money was transferred into the general revenue fund. If the claim was established, interest would be payable for the entire period.

In some cases—namely, where the public trustee cannot determine whether anyone is entitled to the deceased person's estate—the rules are different. Again unclaimed money is paid into the general revenue fund, but here a person only has six years to start legal proceedings to establish a claim to the property. If they do establish their claim, they will not get interest on the amount that was transferred to the general revenue fund.

Under the proposed new act the same rules would apply in all of these cases. The Public Trustee must hold the property for at least 10 years. Only then could the Public Trustee transfer the property including any accumulated interest to the general revenue fund. There would be no cut-off date for a person to start proceedings to establish a claim to the property, but if someone establishes a claim, they will not be entitled to interest on the money that was transferred to the general revenue fund.

In a typical year, Mr. Speaker, the Public Trustee takes on the administration of several hundred deceased persons' estates. The

Public Trustee sometimes administers an estate to protect the interest of a vulnerable person who is interested in the estate. The vulnerable person might be a minor or an adult for whom the Public Trustee is acting as a trustee under the Dependent Adults Act. In other cases the Public Trustee becomes the administrator because no one else is able or willing to do it. The changes in this area are intended to allow the Public Trustee to administer estates where needed in as cost-effective and efficient a manner as possible.

The circumstances in which the Public Trustee has priority to administer an estate will be broadened slightly. Currently the Public Trustee may administer the estate of a deceased who has not left a will if no one else steps up to do so. The bill extends this to cases where the deceased has left a will but no one has taken steps to administer the estate.

The bill also broadens the scope of an expeditious procedure that applies to estates of modest monetary value. Generally, the Public Trustee must apply to the court for a grant of administration to acquire the right to administer an estate, but if the deceased has not left a will and the estimated value of the estate is below a prescribed amount, another procedure is available. Instead of applying to the court for a grant of administration, the Public Trustee may file an election to administer the estate. The bill extends this procedure to cover smaller estates where the deceased has left a will.

With respect to minors the new Minors' Property Act, which was introduced as Bill 20, deals with how property of a minor gets into the hands of the Public Trustee for safekeeping. The new Public Trustee Act being proposed addresses how the property is dealt with once it's in the hands of the Public Trustee.

One of the changes in this area relates to the Public Trustee's discretion to make expenditures out of property held for a minor. The current act gives the Public Trustee varying degrees of discretion depending on the value of the property held for the minor. This bill eliminates the distinctions based on the value of the property held by the Public Trustee. The Public Trustee will have broad discretion to make expenditures out of property held for a minor. The main criteria is that the Public Trustee must be satisfied that the expenditure is in the minor's best interest.

The bill contains new provisions that clarify the Public Trustee's role in monitoring trustees of minors' trusts. Currently there's very little legislative guidance regarding the Public Trustee's role in this area. The new act states that the Public Trustee must monitor in two situations: if the creator of the trust appoints the Public Trustee to monitor or if the court directs the Public Trustee to monitor. In either case, the bill defines the scope of the Public Trustee's duties when appointed or directed to monitor.

The Public Trustee also plays an important role in protecting the financial interests of vulnerable adults by acting as trustee under the Dependent Adults Act. The bill does not make any substantive changes to the Public Trustee's role in this area.

The investment provisions under the current act are focused on two related funds: the common fund and the special reserve fund. Money held by the Public Trustee may be invested in a common fund held and controlled by the Public Trustee. The current provisions relating to the common fund are somewhat convoluted. However, upon close inspection the following points emerge.

The amount of the client's claim against the common fund is determined much as you would determine the balance outstanding on a bank account. Clients are paid interest on their common fund balances at the rate prescribed by the Public Trustee. The amount of clients' claims against the common fund is unaffected by fluctuations in the market value of its assets or by realized gains or losses. If the common fund's earnings for a period exceed the interest payable to

clients for the period, the excess is paid into the special reserve fund. Conversely, if common fund earnings fall short of what is required to pay interest at the prescribed rate, the shortfall is made up from the special reserve fund. The amount outstanding on clients' common fund accounts is fully guaranteed by the province.

The Public Trustee may invest the common fund and special reserve fund only in securities listed in a schedule to the Trustee Act, the so-called legal list. Clients whose money is invested in the common fund benefit from an unconditional guarantee of capital, including capitalized interest. Whether you're looking at a period of a month or a decade, clients never incur negative returns. The money in the clients' common fund account is always available to the client. Clients may expect generally higher returns than could be expected if the Public Trustee had to invest each client's money individually.

The current act's investment provisions also have their drawbacks. They provide almost no guidance as to when the Public Trustee should invest a client's money in the common fund or invest it separately for the client. They provide no guidance as to how the Public Trustee should set the interest rate on the common fund. They are not as clear as they might be in describing how clients' claims against the common fund are quantified.

The legal list approach may preclude the Public Trustee from adopting optimal investment strategies. Some long-term plans would benefit if the Public Trustee could establish pooled investment funds that are more like mutual funds. The Legislature will recall that we passed amendments to the Trustee Act last year which allowed for the prudent investment rule to be applied, and that would be a similar concept that we're talking about here.

The new act's investment provisions are designed to build on the current act's strengths while addressing its drawbacks. The common fund and special reserve fund will be merged into a single common fund. The Public Trustee will still maintain reserves within the common fund, but the purposes for which the reserves are maintained are not advanced by maintaining two legally distinct accounts.

The new act introduces the concept of guaranteed accounts to clarify how clients' claims against the common fund are quantified. The government guarantee will continue as a guarantee of the amount outstanding on the clients' guaranteed accounts. The Public Trustee will continue to set the interest rate payable from time to time on clients' guaranteed accounts. In setting the interest rate, however, the Public Trustee will be governed by criteria to be established by regulation.

The Public Trustee will be governed by prudent investment principles, not the legal list, in investing common fund assets. The Public Trustee's application of prudent investment principles will reflect the objectives of the common fund.

It needs to be kept in mind that the common fund supports the Public Trustee's obligation on accounts that are fully guaranteed as to capital, including capitalized interest. This entails that the common fund will remain heavily weighted towards high-quality, fixed-income investments. The common fund will be the appropriate destination for most money of most clients.

However, the bill recognizes that the common fund will not always be the appropriate destination for a client's money. Long-term clients with assets of substantial value are a case in point. They could benefit if some of their assets are invested in a manner which accepts moderate short-term volatility in exchange for higher expected returns over the long haul. The bill authorizes regulations that would specify conditions under which the Public Trustee may make separate investments for a client.

This bill also authorizes regulations that would allow the Public

Trustee to establish pooled investment funds. Pooled investment funds would differ from the common fund in that money placed in such a fund would not be guaranteed. Pooled investment funds would be analogous to mutual funds in that a client's return would directly reflect the return on the fund's investments.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act, is a complex act, but it's essentially a modernization of the act that was passed in 1949 and has not had any significant review since then. We've engaged in a process over the last two years to consult primarily with the people who are affected; that would be the legal community, the investment community, the insurance community, and clients. While it's not a broad community consultation, that opportunity was available for members of the public, but as you might expect, not too many people afforded themselves of the opportunity to comment.

However, we believe that we've done a thorough job and the department has done a thorough job of reviewing the Public Trustee Act, modernizing it, ensuring that we're in a position to deal with the concerns that have been raised from time to time by the Auditor General with respect to how the common funds and reserve funds are handled. Mr. Speaker, I hope that the House will support Bill 19.

I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

3:30

Bill 20

Minors' Property Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to rise to move Bill 20, the Minors' Property Act.

In many ways it's a companion to the Public Trustee Act, as I referenced. Again, at the conclusion of my remarks I will move to adjourn debate to allow the opposition critic the opportunity to speak later in the day.

Following consultation with the public, Bill 20 was introduced and will update and replace the current Minors' Property Act. The bill omits obsolete provisions in the current act while simplifying and again modernizing the provisions that remain relevant. The bill also deals with a few subjects that are not addressed by the existing act.

The common thread that runs through the bill is the protection of minors' financial interests. The bill attempts to strike a balance between two objectives: ensuring that minors' property is administered and used in their best interests and acknowledging the important role of parents and guardians and, indeed, of minors themselves in looking after minors' property.

One of the ways the law protects minors' financial interests is by curtailing their ability to deal with their own property or to bind themselves to contracts, but there are circumstances where it is in a minor's best interest if there is a mechanism to facilitate transactions involving minors' property. This mechanism has long existed for certain types of transactions, and application may be made to the Court of Queen's Bench for approval of a transaction. The court will confirm the transaction if it's satisfied that it is in the minor's best interest. Court approval makes the transaction binding on the minor. This bill consolidates and streamlines provisions that allow the court to authorize the sale of a minor's property where the court is satisfied that this is in the minor's best interest.

The bill also retains a provision of the current act relating to settlement of minors' legal claims; for example, a claim by a minor

who has been injured in an accident. Under the current law and under this bill a settlement of a minor's legal claim is binding on the minor if and only if the settlement is approved by the court.

To reinforce the importance of obtaining court confirmation of settlement of minors' claims, the bill contains a provision making it clear that an indemnity given by a parent or other guardian of a minor in connection with the settlement of a minor's legal claim is void. A new provision based on legislation in force in British Columbia will make it clear that the court may confirm any contract entered into by or on behalf of the minor if the court is satisfied that the contract is in the minor's best interest.

I've already mentioned that the law attempts to protect minors' financial interests by limiting their ability to deal with their own property. One aspect of this is that a person who holds property to which a minor is entitled cannot necessarily discharge their obligation by handing over the property to the minor.

A problem with the current law is that it is not always clear how the person who is under the obligation to the minor may actually discharge that obligation. Can they safely turn the property over to the minor, hand it over to the minor's parent or guardian, turn it over to a trustee who is authorized by a will to receive the property, or deliver it to the Public Trustee? These are all questions to which the existing law does not always provide a clear answer or may provide what seems to be a stranger impractical answer.

I'll provide an everyday example to illustrate the point. Suppose a 15 year old takes her bike into a bike shop for repairs. When the repairs are completed, she pays the bill. What should happen next? You might think the answer would be simple: the shop should return the bike to the 15-year-old customer. It's her bike, and she's paid the repair bill. But if you were to read section 6 of the current Public Trustee Act, you would find that the bike shop's apparent legal duty is to deliver the bike to the Public Trustee, not to the owner, the customer.

In fact, if you were to take the current provision at face value, any property, including money, to which a minor is entitled must be delivered to the Public Trustee except in three cases: where the money is due as wages or salary, where someone has been appointed by court order as a guardian or trustee of the minor's estate, where the property is worth less than \$4,000 and the Public Trustee exercises a discretion to allow the property to be turned over to a responsible adult.

None of the exceptions to section 6 accommodates the reasonable expectations of the parties to the transaction involving the bike that I mentioned or a host of other similar transactions in which minors are involved every day. So one of the objectives of the bill is to clarify how persons who owe money to a minor or hold property to which a minor is entitled may discharge that obligation.

The bill deals specifically with three situations. The first is where a minor has entered into a contract that calls for the other party to deliver property to the minor. Subject to the regulations the other party to the contract may discharge their obligation by doing precisely what the contract requires them to do, hand over the property to the minor. The regulations might exclude contracts involving a very large amount of money or property of a very high value.

Second, the bill provides for situations where a trustee has been appointed by a trust instrument such as a will or by a court order. The bill provides that the person who is holding the property may discharge their obligation by paying the money to the trustee appointed by the instrument or the court order.

The third scenario dealt with by the bill is where the value of the property to which the minor is entitled is relatively small. The new

provision is similar to the provisions of the current Trustee Act that give the Public Trustee the discretion to allow a third party to deliver property with a value of \$4,000 or less to a responsible adult. However, under this act the Public Trustee will not be involved at all. The new provision will apply where the value of property involved is less than an amount prescribed by regulation. The person holding the property will be able to discharge their obligation by delivering the property to a guardian who has responsibilities for making day-to-day decisions affecting the minor. Alternatively, the person could deliver the property to the minor if the minor has a legal duty to support another person.

The three situations I've described cover the majority of everyday situations in which someone owes money to a minor or holds property to which a minor is entitled. But they don't cover some of the less common but significant situations such as the following: a minor is entitled to property of considerable value from the estate of a deceased person and no trustee has been appointed by the deceased person's will or by a court order, a minor is entitled to a large sum of money under a life insurance policy that does not appoint a trustee of the money, or a minor is entitled to the money under a court judgment or settlement and no trustee of the property has been appointed by the court. In situations like these, the person obligated to pay the minor may discharge their obligation by delivering the property or money to the Public Trustee, who will then hold it for the benefit of the minor.

Mr. Speaker, the bill also clarifies the process for the court to appoint a trustee of a minor's property. The current legislation assumes that if the court appoints a trustee of a minor's estate, the trustee will automatically be entrusted with all of the minor's estate. The bill will allow the court to appoint a trustee of specific property; for example, money payable under a settlement or for a minor's property generally. Existing legislation provides the court with no guidance as to the matters the court should consider when asked to appoint someone as a trustee of a minor's estate.

This bill emphasizes that the best interest of the minor is the fundamental issue when someone asks the court to appoint a trustee of a minor's property. It also identifies specific matters for the court to consider when deciding whether to appoint the proposed trustee. The current legislation creates a presumption that the proposed trustee must provide a bond. This bill retains the presumption but is framed as a requirement to provide a bond or some other security approved by the court. The bill provides for forms of security other than a bond because bonds may be very expensive and difficult to obtain.

The bill also encourages the court to consider whether safeguards other than the provision of security might be in the best interests of the minor. Security will not be required if the appointed trustee or one of them is a trust corporation.

A new provision gives the court a power to direct someone who is in possession of a minor's property to deliver the property to the Public Trustee for safekeeping. It is anticipated that this provision would be rarely used but would be of value in situations where a minor's property is being placed at risk.

The bill requires the Public Trustee to be given notice of any application under the act. This provision is new to the Minors' Property Act, but it is based on a similar provision in the current Public Trustee Act.

The bill requires the consent of a minor who is over the age of 14 to any application under the act unless the court allows the application to proceed without the minor's consent.

Mr. Speaker, that gives a general overview of the Minors' Property Act, Bill 20, that's being proposed. It replaces an existing

act, again as I indicated with the Public Trustee Act. The intent is to modernize a provision that is there to allow the Public Trustee to act on behalf of the vulnerable and disadvantaged, in this case children. It updates our existing act, but most importantly it adheres to the guiding principle that all decisions affecting a child's property or legal rights are to be made in the child's best interest.

So, Mr. Speaker, with that, I would move that we adjourn debate on Bill 20.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to move that we call it 5:30 and adjourn until 8 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 3:40 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 10, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/10

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I would now like to call the Committee of the Whole to order. For the benefit of those in the gallery this is the informal part of the Legislature. In this part members are allowed to move quietly about the Chamber and even to talk quietly with one another, take their jackets off, that kind of thing. In the debate part it can go back and forth between the sponsor of a bill and the members that wish to ask questions about it. One person may speak more than once to the same topic, which is unlike, usually, in the Assembly.

Before we begin this evening, I wonder if we might have unanimous consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly this evening seven young ladies. I believe I see them up there in the members' gallery. They are Girl Guides in grades 4 to 6, and they are from the constituency of Edmonton-McClung. They meet every Wednesday night in the Westridge community hall in the constituency of Edmonton-McClung. One of their teachers or group leaders is Janine Kolotylyuk, and the other one up there, as you can see, is Shannon Dean, who is our Senior Parliamentary Counsel. I would ask these young ladies and their teachers to please rise and receive the welcome of this Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure indeed to welcome and introduce to you and through you to the members of this Legislature 39 air cadets tonight. They're from the 699 Air Cadets Squadron Jasper Place, and they're accompanied by four adults: Lieutenant Paul Alberto—Lieutenant Alberto is the nephew of Tan McCara, our Sessional Parliamentary Counsel here in the middle of the room—also Second Lieutenant Trevor Strome, Dr. Ted Greenaway, and Mr. Dennis Lehar. Dr. Greenaway reminds me that I worked closely with him in the days when I was at Jasper Place and provided space to the group. Guests, would you please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Legislature.

Bill 16 Residential Tenancies Act

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be made with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to have an

opportunity to respond to Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act. I've listened intently while the debate has occurred about this bill over the past couple of days and look forward to the amendment that I believe is forthcoming, which will strengthen it.

In general, I can say that I support the provisions of this bill. I think that it moves us in a direction where we need to go, giving tenants the same rights as landlords to terminate tenancy, which has been often the problem with constituents in our constituency, and the new changes with evictions ensure that landlords can't punish tenants if they make complaints about them.

However, there does seem to be a discrepancy in this bill, Mr. Chairman. I have a letter from a constituent who has intently watched what has happened over the years with the landlords and tenants act. This fellow, Jim Sexsmith, is a senior. He is keenly observant of what happens in politics and is quite quick, and rightfully so, to express his opinion in writing and in person when he likes or doesn't like something that any level of government is doing. He had a particular concern with this bill and changes that may have been made to it, given that he is a tenant himself, and acts really, I think, as a community captain for seniors in the area who have these and other kinds of issues.

He wrote to me on February 24 of this year in anticipation of this bill having come forward.

In the February 6/04 *Edmonton [Journal]* the enclosed write-up appeared, Keep Interest on Deposits.

This letting the landlords make money off our deposits. These monies are the property of the tenants.

The interest on \$500.00 is \$45.00. A landlord with ten thousand tenants would be getting \$450,000.00. The . . . government thinks this is not much to mention.

What right has . . . the Justice Department to set the interest rate on our deposits. When money is put into a trust fund in a chartered bank the interest rate is decided by the amount of interest they receive on their investing the deposits.

The Alberta certificates are one of the worst to invest our monies on. And further the government of Alberta is not a trust company. They are the last I would entrust my money to.

I ask that the honorable member bring this matter up in the Legislature and put a stop to this shameful system of cheating the elderly and low bracketed pension earners.

So he is referring to a situation where a set rate for the interest on damage deposits is established, and the interest paid on the Alberta savings certificates then is subtracted by 3.5 per cent. That money is held by the landlords, and if the average interest rate for the year is not greater than 3.5 per cent, then tenants get no money back on their deposits. So it's three years that tenants have had no money back on deposits that they've held. Mr. Sexsmith feels that this is very much an unfair practice.

We do not see anything in this legislation that addresses this particular issue. I would hope that we would get some response from the sponsor of the bill on this particular issue: whether or not it was under consideration, whether or not it could be under consideration in the next little while. He believes that landlords should return the full amount of the interest to the tenant. They've had the ability to hold that money for some time and earn additional interest off that, so he feels that people should be getting their money back.

I will, Mr. Chairman, table the appropriate number of copies of this particular letter so that they can be a part of our permanent record on this bill.

With that, I'll take my seat because those are my concerns. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I, too, would like to make a few comments about Bill 16 at the Committee of the Whole stage. I'd like to focus my comments on section 70, if I might, and that's the section that outlines the areas in which the minister may make regulations. The regulations that concern me are those in section (k), the regulations that will be enacted with respect to alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

If you read through that section of the bill, Mr. Chairman, it outlines that the minister may make regulations respecting the establishment of alternative dispute resolutions and then talks about

- (i) providing for the establishment of one or more dispute resolution bodies,
- (ii) providing for all matters relating to the appointment of members to a dispute resolution body,
- (iii) respecting the kinds of disputes that a dispute resolution body can deal with.

This is all very formal, Mr. Chairman. Make regulations respecting the proceedings that come before that body, authorizing a dispute resolution body to make rules governing its proceedings, and it goes on at some length to section (x), even talking about levying fees. As I read those regulations, it did seem to me that it was very, very formal, and I wondered if we wouldn't be better off with a mechanism that was more community based and one that was made up of people involved more directly in the neighbourhood, one that would be far less formal.

8:10

I looked again at the growing number of mediation efforts on the continent. We find attempts to resolve conflicts through mediation panels everywhere now: in grade schools to resolve conflicts among youngsters and students, in high schools, and in neighbourhoods in this area. I know that there's a neighbourhood disputes board in Beaumont that helps neighbours there when they have conflicts with their neighbours over noise and property lines and other kinds of disputes that often arise between neighbours. The board out there is extremely busy and extremely successful.

There are examples elsewhere of less formal boards working. The Bellevue neighbourhood mediation program is a program that is designed by the city and neighbourhood, but it's able to help citizens with any civil disputes. They assist with the resolution of disputes involving landlords and tenants, just what this bill is about, business partnerships, elder care, consumer conflicts, in addition to neighbourhood concerns. But what is so striking about the Bellevue program is how it contrasts with what's proposed in the bill.

I have to admit that the bill doesn't fully explain how this is going to be set up. It lays out some of the parameters, but there seems built into it this fairly high, centralized, paid group of individuals who'd be involved in disputes resolution, although it does say that they can create other boards. It seems to me that if we could have a more local, more neighbourhood, more community-based disputes resolution mechanism for landlords and tenants, we might solve a lot of problems before they could get to the point where they're carried on into court or into some more formal body for resolution.

I noticed that the Bellevue model had trained 47 volunteer mediators and counsellors. They worked in eight different languages. They were community based, and they had a very high success rate, Mr. Chairman. Their success rate was 80 per cent with respect to solving disputes that included landlord and tenant disputes.

I would ask the mover of this bill if consideration was given to a more community-based disputes resolution mechanism, one that could refer disputes from police officers, from bylaw enforcement officers. One that would be more neighbourhood oriented and one that would be seen in the eyes of citizens as much more user friendly

than the central body that I think is being proposed here. I would be interested in hearing from the mover of the bill.

So with those comments, Mr. Chairman, I'll conclude. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll try and answer a couple of the questions that were raised just this evening.

Firstly, on the return of the full amount of the interest: I think the amount of the interest that is retained is in recognition of the administrative work that's involved. Just checking through the bill, I see that there are four pages dedicated to security deposits, interest on security deposits, return of security deposits, obligations of the landlord regarding security deposits, obviously a lot of red tape involving security deposits and where the money has to be deposited, the records you have to keep. All of this doesn't come without some kind of cost. So I think that as long as the costs are reasonable, it's reasonable to expect that the landlord would be able to retain a small amount of the interest in order to cover those costs of administering that part of the act.

When it comes to the alternate dispute resolution process, it's very much a work in progress. Lots of work to be done on that yet. I can assure the hon. member that his comments are recorded, and they will be taken into consideration as the more definite rules are developed around this alternate dispute resolution process.

There are two real purposes for the alternate dispute resolution. Those are, one, to reduce the time that people have to spend getting disputes resolved and, secondly, to reduce the expenses that could be incurred. The minute you start going to court, you start involving lawyers and time and court time and running up the bills. If we can come up with an alternate resolution process that is satisfactory to both landlords and tenants – and that is the ultimate goal – then we will reduce the time and the expenses involved. I think that should be the goal of all of us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have an amendment I'd like considered. I've left it at the table. If it's possible to get that distributed, then I can discuss it.

So I'd like to move the amendment that I have put forward, and I guess we'd be calling this amendment A1. I am asking that the Residential Tenancies Act, that is, Bill 16, be amended in section 30(3) by striking out "within 5 days" and substituting "within 10 days."

The Chair: Hon. member, I think most people have it by now, or almost all members, so we'll note that the amendment here as moved by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre will be amendment A1.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. This is the suggestion that I was making last night, so I've turned it into something concrete by way of an amendment for the committee to consider.

The issue that I was raising last night is that particularly where we have landlords who are what I was calling small landlords, meaning that they were people who were renting a suite in their house, or perhaps they owned one or two properties in which there were a couple of suites, or a house with a main floor and an upper suite or a basement suite, something like that. I wasn't particularly intending this for larger landlords, because they don't encounter the same kind

of issues. The situation that I was finding was that people that aren't professionals in this but are doing it to help pay their own mortgage or to build a nest egg for themselves or for whatever reason tend to be pretty normal folks – they're not lawyers – and they, generally speaking, don't like to get into . . .

Oh, I'm sorry. That wasn't a dig against lawyers. It just came out that way. Oh, dear. I'm just going to keep moving on here. [interjection] Yup. Can't get out from underneath that one. Sorry to the lawyers in the crowd. But, essentially, people I think generally avoid conflict.

8:20

Often when you get to a situation that would require the use of section 30(3), you are pretty close to a conflict situation as a landlord with your tenant. In all likelihood, at that point you have given them a 14-day notice to vacate. The five days comes into play here, and you have five days after they have failed to vacate at the end of that 14-day period or during a 14-day period in which to take your failure to vacate to court, pay your \$100 fee or whatever the regulations deem it to be at the time – but it's \$100 right now – and get the court involved with this, get a court notification, in other words.

A couple of things here for the individual landlord or the smaller landlord. One, they're not keen to fork out another hundred dollars if they're already in a situation where they've had to issue the notice to vacate because somebody didn't pay their rent. That just puts them more money out-of-pocket, and I'm sure they're not very keen to do that. Also, it's usually involving some kind of conflict directly with the tenant that's failed to vacate, and people tend to avoid it. What happens is you end up with your five days going by and you haven't in fact gone to court. Now, if that's the case, you have to start all over again with the 14-day notice.

Most small landlords will only let that happen to themselves once, and the next time they won't bother being nice. In other words, the process that's in place right now with the five days really does force people to be hard-hearted, and it forces the process towards the courts rather than towards an alternative dispute resolution process. I'm trying to remove the barriers for a successful alternative dispute resolution process with this new Residential Tenancies Act.

So that's why I've brought forward this motion which would expand the amount of time you've got from five days to 10 days. That's giving you a week and a half. That should give you enough time to in your normal schedule as a smaller landlord be able to get by your rental property and check it out, see that in fact your tenants have not vacated. Now you've got a problem. You've still got time to get to court and act on it, or you can then go to them and say: "Okay, this really isn't working. You guys didn't get out. We've got to make something work here, either, you know, one more chance to pay the rent or we can go to this alternative dispute process," which, I think, most people do want to take advantage of, particularly if it's not going to cost them the \$100 that the court fee is going to cost them.

From our point of view as legislators it will steer people away from that expensive and time-consuming court process. Let's face it: having the lights on in a courtroom with all of the protection services there, the lawyers in place, the judge in place – that's a lot of money that's sitting there that one way or another we're going to have to cover the cost of. So the alternative dispute processes are certainly an economical way and also a less hostile, a less adversarial way of dealing with some of these landlord and tenant issues.

So that was the set-up that I was working with, and as I looked through it, I realized that there's another part to this issue. I mentioned it last night, and it involves the Member for Calgary-Currie and his MLA Review Committee on Secondary Suites

building regulations in that we are trying to draw people out and make use of the secondary suites that already exist but that are not legal. In other words, they're not legitimate. People are not fessing up to actually having them. Well, what's part of the reason about fessing up? Well, you then have to participate in legitimate processes, which some people may be avoiding till now, and of course there's also the building codes and fire codes issues that the member and his committee are looking at at this point.

But part of my hope with this motion A1 that I brought forward is that, again, it would make it easier for those individual landlords that have in all likelihood secondary suites. It would help them to be on the right side of the legal blanket, so to speak, to become legitimate and help to draw them out so that they could be more up and up with their suites and more involved in the processes and following all the rules that we need them to follow.

I think my suggestion here is giving room to allow for human nature. That human nature is to avoid direct, one-on-one adversarial conflict and to ease people towards the use of these alternative possibilities. This is a situation that I've run into a number of times, and this was my solution to it.

I did give a copy of the wording of the resolution to the sponsoring Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti last night in the hope that he would bring it through his internal legislative process. I've heard some rumour that it's not going to be accepted, so if that's the case, I'm really hoping that the member is going to get up and tell me why, because I think this is one of those rules that gets in place, and then it just tends to stick there. Not that there's a really good reason for it to stick there, but nobody else – they kind of go: well, we had it, and we don't really remember why any more, but we can't really remember why we'd want to change it either, so we're going to leave it as it is. I think we've got an opportunity here to start moving in the direction that we say we want to move in. I see the government put that up as a standard. They say that they want to go there, and then they don't follow through with the rest of the things that make it possible.

One of the things that we have to remember as legislators is that human nature causes us a lot of work. If people did what they were supposed to do, we could save ourselves an awful lot of legislation, but the truth is they don't. They do tend to avoid conflict. They do tend to stall and procrastinate. They do tend to not do the things legal paper-wise that we need them to do. So we end up with things like intestate succession laws because people won't write wills because, of course, they're putting it off and delaying and hoping it won't happen. Well, that causes us a whole other raft of problems.

So I'm hoping that the government members will be able to support this amendment. In my research I can't see any reason why we can't do this. We're not totally abandoning the time limit that's in place here; we're just expanding it to allow for human nature. I don't think it would be fair to remove that time limit completely, but essentially that leaves a landlord with the ability to wander around with a 14-day eviction notice hanging over somebody's head ad infinitum. The point of this was to give people enough room to manoeuvre so that they wouldn't have a bad experience, which is what tends to happen, and the next time they get into this situation, they wouldn't be going straight to the courts without passing go. The idea was to encourage people to explore other possibilities.

So I think I've laid out my arguments, and I certainly did at length last night. I'm going to take my seat now, but I'm certainly willing to answer any other questions or engage in any other debate that people feel necessary. If they need it in order to support the amendment, I'm more than happy to help them out with that. Otherwise, I'm hoping I can engage the Member for Calgary-Currie maybe from his point of view with the work that he's trying to do on

the secondary suites, if this sort of thing would be helpful, and as well the sponsoring Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti on whether or not the government is willing to accept the amendment.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to respond and to speak, unfortunately, against the amendment, but I think I have good reason to do so. As we reported several times during debate on Bill 16, there has been very extensive consultation with both landlords and tenants on this bill, and I must admit that this particular issue, this particular clause, did not come up in any of that consultation. That's not to say that this was not a big issue. If we go back a couple of years in history, at that time if you had this situation, you had to appear before Queen's Bench to get this order removing the tenant from the property, and that tended to be a lengthy and very costly process.

8:30

Approximately two years ago the Provincial Court Act was changed and allowed this type of action to proceed through the Provincial Court system, which is much quicker and not as costly. In fact, the way it's set up now, you do not need a lawyer. It's basically a fill-in-the-blanks form. You can print it right off the web site if you are at home with the computer and you want the form to fill in before you head down to the provincial courthouse. You print it off, fill in the blanks, take it down there – no muss, no fuss, no lawyers' fees – and you proceed.

I can appreciate the arguments about extending from five days to 10, but I think that those people who procrastinate and don't make the five-day limit will probably be there on the ninth day or the 10th day with the same list of excuses: gosh, I was out of town, or I was ill, or whatever the situation may be. But an extra five days probably isn't going to cut it, so I think we should stick with the five days that is in the bill. As I said, it has not been an issue with landlords or tenants that were consulted in working on this bill, and the changes that were made two years ago did address the concerns that were around at that point in time.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. When I looked at the calendar, I noticed that there in fact is a five-day period across the last Christmas holidays in which the courts were not open. What does the member suggest is the remedy in that case? Had one gone to the courts after about 11:30, I think, on the 24th, you would not have been able to have filed your notice for a five-day period. What was the remedy that was available then?

In other words, I think my argument for an extension beyond five days is a good one. It didn't take me very long at all to come up with one very recent example of a five-day period when someone would not have been successful, even if they were trying to stay within that five-day limit.

Mr. Graydon: I would look, maybe, for some direction from the Justice minister. There must be other situations where if the court's not sitting for five days, there are some allowances made of some sort. So I'm not sure if anyone else can enlighten me on that or not.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Well, just because I was asked. I'm not sure that I could help on that point. I think there's a fair point to be made,

actually, that in five days you may end up, the way it's written here – it would be subject to the Interpretation Act whether these days are calendar days or business days, but it says "days," so I would have to interpret this, on the face of it, to be calendar days, which would mean that you might have, for example, a weekend, which would limit your available court days to three, and if you were on a holiday like a Christmas holiday, you might in fact not be able to have access to an open court within the five-day period.

So I would have to agree with the Member for Edmonton-Centre. In some circumstances if a landlord was not alert in providing the termination notice and wasn't alert to the rules, they might get themselves into a bit of a jam on that particular point.

I'm going to keep talking because I understand that they're consulting over there a little bit.

I have to say that the amendment is not wholly helpful in this regard, because you would not only have to amend section 30(3), but you would also have to do a corollary amendment to 30(5) because in 30(5) you're also talking about that five-day period. The effect of this section is that if the notice of termination is served and the 14 days expires and the person fails to move out of the suite or the rental premises, then the landlord has five days after the termination date to apply to the court for an order confirming the termination of the tenancy or any remedy that might be granted under section 26. Then sub (5) indicates that if the landlord has not applied to confirm the termination, then the termination is in effect void. So, essentially, the landlord is in a position where they have to start over.

If this bill were to pass with this section as it is, then what that would mean is that a landlord would have to be on his toes or her toes, as the case may be, and would have to be alert to those time frames in serving a notice of termination and then be alert to the five-day period.

So it's workable, but I tend to agree with the Member for Edmonton-Centre that it puts a fairly tight time frame on a landlord to be precise and make sure that they know what their time frames are and know what their time frames are when they prepare and serve the notice of termination so that they don't fall into that holiday trap.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In speaking to the minister involved and listening to our minister there and to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, it has certainly brought up some compelling arguments to accept this amendment, so at this point I am going to recommend to our caucus that we do accept the amendment she has brought up. This business of the Christmas break is a very important issue and one, I must admit, that I hadn't thought of. So if we put something in that's impossible to meet, we should be flexible enough to change that.

Thank you.

The Chair: We have a variety of individuals standing, and the Government House Leader is the one that is recognized first.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wonder if it would be in order to propose an amendment to the amendment. I would hope that it would be a friendly amendment. It would be to be amended in section 30(3) and 30(5). It would just be adding "and 30(5)" after "30(3)" so that you'd change both of the five-day periods to 10 days, and in that way the amendment would actually be an effective amendment.

The Chair: The Government House Leader has moved a subamendment to amendment A1 to extend this to "30(3) and 30(5)." I would

want to check with a couple of people here before I hear further. We now have a subamendment on the floor.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the subamendment.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. On the subamendment. I'm willing to accept the subamendment as a friendly amendment being as it's simply after the number "30(3)" inserting "and 30(5)" and then carries on with "by striking out," et cetera, the rest of the amendment. Yes, I'm willing to accept that as a friendly amendment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Now the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie on the subamendment.

Mr. Lord: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is a bit unusual this evening, but the committee that I co-chair with my colleague from Calgary-East was brought up. I do think that some of the arguments that have been put forward previously on the amendment and now on the subamendment do make sense to me, so at this time I would certainly be speaking in favour of the subamendment and the amendment that gave rise to it and would urge my colleagues to support it as well.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti on the subamendment.

Mr. Graydon: Just speaking in favour. It makes complete sense. Thank you.

8:40

The Chair: We'll go through this slowly so that I understand it, and correct me if I've not got it right. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre has moved amendment A1, to which a subamendment has been offered and moved by the hon. Government House Leader. This subamendment is really a consequential subamendment because 30(5) would have to be the same as 30(3). They'd have to be in agreement. So we'll need to vote twice on this thing to get it all right.

[Motion on subamendment carried]

[Motion on amendment A1 as amended carried]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Calahasen: She's so excited.

Ms Blakeman: I am so excited.

Thank you very much. I know that there are others who wish to discuss this in committee, and I would now move adjournment of Bill 16.

Thank you.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report progress on Bill 16.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports progress on Bill 16. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly. I would also like to table copies of a document tabled during Committee of the Whole this day for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? The motion is carried.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 12
Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased to move on behalf of the Member for Little Bow Bill 12, the Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to speak to third reading of Bill 12. We've had a good look at this bill, and we agree with the government that it streamlines and clarifies how government manages and invests funds by clarifying words and definitions and making some other technical amendments.

The part that we particularly like is that it updates the legislation to allow the province to use electronic fiscal transactions within its investment portfolio. That's a very smart move to have made. I'm on the Heritage Savings Trust Fund Committee, and we repeatedly ask the question with each quarter update about why we're paying such high fees to the investment companies who are managing the funds, and in fact this is part of the answer. Beforehand, everything had to be done on paper, which is not a very efficient way to manage investments in today's world.

The money paid out in investment management transaction fees I believe will be lower in most instances as a result of this bill having been passed. Liberals aren't just about taxing and spending; we're also very much about being fiscally responsible. This bill moves this government's position into a more responsible position, so we do support it, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 12 read a third time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 18
Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate March 9: Mr. Hancock]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise in second reading on Bill 18 and follow the minister's comments on the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004. Well, sometimes it's good, and this is one of those times.

The point of the maintenance enforcement program is that the court is ordering maintenance payments for children, and I think a lot of times we get knocked off kilter here with a lot of personal arguments about, you know: "I'm not giving money to the custodial parent of the child. Nuh, nuh, nuh. Nope. We're not going there." This is about maintenance payments for the children, and that's what we always have to keep in mind. The point of this is for the children.

Since this program was put in place in Alberta, we have actually increased our collection numbers to the point where they're not bad. They're not too shabby; 78.4 per cent was the collection rate in the 2002-2003 fiscal year. But that does still leave us a bit more than 21 per cent of \$187.4 million that we're not collecting on behalf of children in Alberta. Often that has to do with people who are chronically avoiding this court-ordered payment.

8:50

Over the years the maintenance enforcement program, often with this member's support, has strengthened its enforcement arm. It's given itself teeth to pursue these chronic nonpayers or chronic debtors. What we see in this legislation is a bit more fine-tuning, some more enforcement teeth, and some minor administrative cleanup, just the lessons we learn as you administer a program over a long enough period of time. You learn to fine-tune it, and I think the minister is taking the opportunity to do that at this point.

Let's be clear here. When we're talking about chronic nonpayers, we're not talking about someone who occasionally misses, or perhaps they are a seasonal worker and sometimes it's a bit tough for them, and that always seems to roll around in the spring of the year. No, no. That's not what we're talking about. And we're not talking about somebody who, you know, accidentally leaves the cheque near the back door, and it blows out the door, and they forget once. I mean, that's not what we're talking about.

We're talking about people here that change their jobs so they don't have to pay. They hide their assets under somebody else's name so they don't have to pay. They move around often enough that we can't locate them, and they don't have an address that we can track them through. These are people that are taking deliberate action in their lives to avoid making these payments.

We need to be able to get at them and get these payments because these are children that we are talking about. These are children that are owed this money, and the courts have said that's reasonable that these kids get this money to live their lives.

It's not as though they're living high on the hog for the most part, by the way, folks. This is to pay for their participation along with their classmates in all the things that Albertan kids hope to be able to and usually can participate in, things like school sports and field trips and some kind of extracurricular activity and some entertainment and movies that you don't have to wait until they come out on video or DVD. You want to be able to go to the movie theatre and see them. This is reasonable, and we have people that are being unreasonable.

The tools that we're talking about using here to encourage, if I can put that in quotation marks, these chronic debtors are things like being able to take lottery winnings, which seems perfectly reasonable. That's a windfall to begin with. This legislation is contemplating that any lottery winnings over a thousand dollars could be picked up here. Again, we're talking chronic nonpayers. These are people who have a long history of not doing this, and then they default for six months in a row, which then allows the director of maintenance enforcement to open the door and a number of these enforcement possibilities become open to them. But it's only after that six consecutive months. So this is a lot of messing up that has gone on prior to this.

We were able with recent legislation to cancel driver's licences, which would make them have to appear, and in order to get their driver's licence again, they would have to make arrangements to make payments on the arrears that they owed. The other thing that's been added to that list now is hunting and fishing licences. For those people that are really keen on those activities in the summer or in the fall, they're going to have to settle up their maintenance arrears before they're going to get their hunting licence, and I have no problem with that whatsoever.

There's also the ability to report noncompliance with a maintenance order to the governing body of one's professional association, and that's an interesting way of reminding us all that people who choose to not pay maintenance enforcement cross all socioeconomic lines. Sometimes in order to get somebody to pay up, you've got to embarrass them a little, and if that involves going to the pharmacists' or the dentists' or the engineering technologists' professional association and reporting that you have a significant noncompliance with a maintenance order and that will result in the debtor paying up, so be it. Good. Another tool to use.

This legislation is also adding in municipalities, utility and insurance companies, nongovernment organizations, and cheque-cashing companies to the list of groups that are required to provide information if they have it. Remember I was talking earlier about people that hid their assets and changed their home address or their mailing address so you couldn't find them? Well, usually somebody somewhere along the line knows they're paying for a phone or a cell phone or utility bills in their name. It's another way of tracking them and finding them to be able to get hold of them and get the payments from them. So this is a good way of being able to gather more information there.

It also adds in other government departments. There was a situation where when we were trying to garnishee people's cheques, if they were with the credit union or Alberta Treasury Branches, you had to serve the garnishee on the correct branch of Alberta Treasury Branches or the credit union. This is changing it now so that the Treasury Branches or the credit unions will designate one central location that their garnishees will go through, and that again is helpful as an administrative process to try and collect the monies.

The legislation is also requiring proof from debtors. They have to provide proof of the facts necessary to administer variable orders, or the maintenance enforcement program can charge the highest amount. In the past the onus has been on maintenance enforcement to run around and get the proof on that. Often it's not possible to do so, and it also costs maintenance enforcement money, which costs taxpayers money, and/or it's money that's not going to children. So this is a good update.

It also allows for a fine for failure to provide the statement of finance, which is another sort of point of argument that chronic debtors will often do: you know, claim that their circumstances have changed but then they won't provide that financial information. So this is saying: fine, if you're going to do that, then you're going to pay a fine for it.

It allows MEP to get at the locked-in retirement plans, the LIRAs, another way of accessing money for children.

Then there are a number of sort of administrative adjustments that have been made, things like the liability for the maintenance enforcement program, the ability to explain how the reciprocal programs work, streamlining the interjurisdictional support orders, which was a piece of legislation we had in here last year, I think, or the year before, but it's allowing all of those processes to be explained to people, which we haven't had previously.

Clarifying the whereabouts: when we talk about the debtor's whereabouts, we mean the whereabouts of their assets as well as of the individual themselves.

The program can charge a fee for serving documents. In maintenance applications now it can be for any documents.

The debtors can request that there be direct withdrawals from their bank accounts, which again is another really simple administrative thing that can be done that makes it all easier.

So nice work from the maintenance enforcement program to work through all of this and to keep an eye on the ball at all times. We are trying to make sure that if you're going to parent a child, then you are going to support that child. If it has to be court ordered, so be it, but this gives the province the ability to secure those funds on behalf of those children. I am very supportive of anything that can be done there.

I'm not saying that, you know, we need to take debtors and turn them upside down and shake them until every last penny comes out of their pocket, but frankly if the last penny was part of the maintenance order, I'm willing to go there. Congratulations to the minister and to the program for following through and continuing to uphold the maintenance enforcement program with this kind of legislation.

Thank you very much.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a second time]

9:00

Bill 19 Public Trustee Act

[Adjourned debate March 10: Mr. Hancock]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise and speak in second reading to Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act. I think the original Public Trustee Act has been in force since 1949. I believe this has been the first major update and overhaul of the legislation, so it's quite overdue.

I have gone through what's being suggested here, and it breaks down into a couple of categories. One is clarifying the legal status of the office of the Public Trustee. A number of things have changed over time where we regard, you know, corporations as legal persons and things like that, so it's important to clarify that changing legal status so that we keep up with the times. There are a number of sections in there that are dealing with the ability to hold legal title to property and things like that.

Another area that's updated in the bill and cleaned up, really, is the whole area of the trust funds, because the Public Trustee does

hold money on behalf of people, whether they're a missing person or a person that's been deemed a mentally incompetent adult or a minor or someone that dies without a will. It's adding in some newer things like even if they weren't designated the executor, they can do that over the estate under certain circumstances. It also really cleans up the way they hold the trust accounts.

Before, there were two different accounts, basically, that had to do with the investment of the money, and that's been cleaned up and turned into one account. For people that have significant estates that need a different treatment for their money over the longer term with larger amounts of money, it still allows for that to be dealt with appropriately. Basically, the people whose money is being held always come out ahead, and that's fine.

We are looking at a new Minors' Property Act, which is Bill 20 this year, but in some cases the minor's property may well fall under the purview of the Public Trustee, in which case it has to be built into the legislation what's going to happen so that it's all clear. That's the third part of what's happening here. It's adding in how to deal with missing persons and clarifying that, and I think it's also updating the mentally incompetent adults.

Now, as far as I'm aware, I've had no negative feedback from this in any of the feedback loops, stakeholder groups that I tend to put this legislation out with to see if they've got anything to say about it. It's been out there for quite a while. I've had no negative feedback on it. I sometimes get feedback once we've commented in second reading, so I may well be back here in Committee of the Whole with additional things to say. But from what I've seen, I have no problem supporting this act in principle in second reading. To my eye it appears to be the modernization and updating of the act that we need as we are now several years into the new millennium.

So I'm happy to support this new Public Trustee Act in second reading. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 19 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:06 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, March 11, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/11

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We give thanks for our abundant blessings to our province and ourselves. We ask for guidance and the will to follow it. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'm pleased today to introduce a distinguished Canadian and former resident of Alberta who has just completed a challenging and often dangerous mission in Kabul, Afghanistan. In the Speaker's gallery is Major General Andrew Leslie. He's a former deputy commander and the senior Canadian officer in the International Security Assistance Force.

He and his fellow soldiers brought peace and order within their area of responsibility. Beyond that, they laid a strong foundation for an increasing respect for the rule of law. This was achieved at some cost. Canadian soldiers were killed during the course of their duties with the ISAF in Afghanistan.

He has served his country at home and abroad for nearly 25 years. While on his disembarkation leave, he has undertaken a speaking tour of Alberta and British Columbia in order to acquaint Canadians with a better understanding of the complexities of operations in Afghanistan and to raise the awareness of the superb work that men and women of our armed forces do on our behalf.

General Leslie and his wife, Karen, are in the Speaker's gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the men and women representing the people of Alberta.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and to members of the Assembly guests who are touring the Legislative Assembly. Six of these guests have just completed their 2003-2004 municipal internship program, which is a valuable program sponsored by Alberta Municipal Affairs in partnership with Alberta municipalities.

I'd ask the members to stand when I call their names. These are municipal managers of the future. From the town of Whitecourt we have Hong Liu, from the city of Spruce Grove, Sarah Robbins. From the town of Innisfail we have Carey Keleman. From the town of Taber we have Angie Keibel. From the town of Bonnyville we have Crystal Kwiatkowski. From the county of Grande Prairie we have Bryce Stewart. Also joining them today are members of the Municipal Affairs staff: Terry Brown, Wendy Peters, Mary Jo Lauder, and Helen Chow. Again, I'd ask them all to stand and to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a great group of students from the Trinity Christian school. I'd like to

welcome the students, teachers, and parents, in particular their teacher Mr. George Graffunder, parent helpers Kent Blanton, Chris Mellenberg, Carol Nudd, Susan Kist, Barbara Barwich, Michelle Karperien, Kathleen Lefevre, and last but not least, Pat Lagore, who is a former EA in the Legislature, as well as her husband, who was instrumental in helping our Speaker actually enter politics. So if they would rise, I'd like them to receive the special welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce 35 grades 5 and 6 students from Dr. Elliott school in Linden, Alberta. They've taken advantage of a beautiful day to make the trip, and they are accompanied by quite a number of parents.

First of all, I'd like to introduce the teachers, Mrs. Sherri Hempel and Mrs. Mary Hughes. The parents that are accompanying them are Mr. Ken Boekema, Dan Colyn, Mrs. Arlys Davis, Mrs. Caroline Dyck, Mrs. Dorothy Edgecombe, Mrs. Donna Esau, Mrs. Irene Griesbrect, Mrs. Char Howe, Mrs. Caroline Kung, Mr. Ken Leinweber, Mrs. Helena Ratzlaff, Mr. Darryl Toews, and last but not least and also a municipal councillor with the county of Kneehill, who ended up taking a job I used to have, Mr. Murray Woods. So I'd ask them to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Legislature 15 friends of mine seated in the public gallery. They are members of the West End Seniors Activity Centre, an organization nearly 1,000 strong helping seniors remain active and vital. My guests include group leader Pearl Figol, Lila Loughheed, Laverne Filips, Rose Boucher, Edna Jolly, Joan Jackson, Gloria Campbell, Phyllis Krucik, April Eltom, Elizabeth Clare, Derek Clare, Dorothy Chester, Jean Miskew, Marie Prezanowsky, and Linda Klassen. They're seated in the public gallery. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two constituents from St. Albert. The first, Lorie Veldhuis, is a parent of three children in grades 2, 3, and 4, a very busy lady. One is attending J.J. Nearing Catholic elementary, and the other two children are attending Catholic French immersion at l'école Father Jan.

The second introduction, Mr. Speaker, is Wendy Battenfelder, who is also a parent of two children who are also attending J.J. Nearing Catholic elementary school in St. Albert.

They are with us today as part of the Education Watch initiative and because they are very concerned about the quality of education their children are receiving and the funding for separate public education in the province. They are seated in the public gallery, Mr. Speaker, and I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you some very special friends who are visiting us today and who are working with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. They are here primarily to show their support for the Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, for which we are anticipating royal assent later this afternoon from Her Honour.

These individuals have worked very closely with me and my department on these important amendments, and I would ask them to rise as their names are called so that we can salute them jointly: Mr. Bryan O'Donnell, chair of the board for the CNIB; Mr. Bill McKeown, executive director of the CNIB; Ms. Ellie Shuster, director of communications for the CNIB; Mrs. Roberta Wilmott, director of finance for the CNIB; and Diane Bergeron and her guide dog, Polar. Diane, of course, worked with the city of Edmonton as a co-ordinator on the Advisory Board on Services for Persons with Disabilities, and she's also a board member of the CNIB. They are accompanied by a member of my staff who worked on this particular act, Mr. Andrew Turzansky. Would you please all rise and be welcomed by our Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of the Assembly a constituent of mine who is very active in a parent volunteer group called Education Watch. He's an active participant in this initiative. Dr. Wilson has a child who is in grade 2 at McKernan elementary school. He is also accompanied by Preet Sara, who is co-ordinator of the Education Watch initiative. Both of them are seated in the public gallery. I'll request them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

1:40

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to the Assembly Mr. Gerry Russo. Gerry is a parent of a child attending grade 1 at McKernan elementary junior high in Edmonton-Riverview. He's here, as many parents have been, as part of the Education Watch initiative, and he's seated in the members' gallery. He's concerned about the quality of education that his child is receiving, and he's concerned about funding for public education. I'd ask him to please rise and receive the warm welcome of all members.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, seven years ago today, on March 11, 1997, 21 members of this Assembly were elected to this Assembly for the first time, so I thought that today I would introduce them on their seventh anniversary: the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, the Minister of Gaming, the Minister of Children's Services, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, the Minister of Revenue, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, the hon. Member for Redwater, the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, the hon. Member for Leduc, the hon. Member for Calgary-West, the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, the hon. Member for St. Albert, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, the hon. Member for West Yellowhead, the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane. Seven years.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Review of Pricing in the Beef Industry

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Premier stood in this House and said: tomorrow the minister of agriculture will release a full accounting of where every dollar of assistance went. Today the minister of agriculture released this report, which is just a whitewash. Beef producers and consumers are still asking: where did the money go? My first question is to the Premier. Why less than 24 hours later have you broken your promise? This is not good accounting.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I didn't break my promise. If I created confusion, I apologize.

The report relative to all the dollars spent, the breakdown of how the dollars were spent – and I've said this publicly many times – will be released when the program is finished. I understand the program is not yet finished, and the hon. minister has given a commitment to release that information once the program is finished.

What was released today, Mr. Speaker, was a report that indeed was not a whitewash. This is the terminology that has become so typical of the Liberal Party: "whitewash" and all kinds of very descriptive but misleading adjectives that lead people to read innuendo and wild accusations based on no evidence at all. Today's report regarded the beef industry pricing practices in the wake of BSE. The results of the study indicate that there was an overall average, not a monthly as the NDs pointed out, decrease in the price of beef – it was about 20 per cent – and that packers didn't engage in unfair pricing practices. The study showed also that our assistance programs were effective in keeping prices higher than they otherwise would have been.

The report, of course, was released today at 11 a.m., and as I understand it, the minister will be available with me at 3 p.m. again today to answer questions relative to this issue.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the hon. Premier: given that the hon. minister of agriculture sits right next to you, why did you not know what she was investigating in this report?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I did know, and I have stated publicly that the information relative to where every dollar went will be released once the program is complete. What more can I say? I already said that if I've confused the opposition members, then first of all that's not difficult to do, and, secondly, I apologize if I did.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the cow-calf operators that I had the privilege of meeting with in Vegreville last night demanded to know, "Where did the money go?" why does this government continue to ignore the interests of small farmers?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, how many? Who did they represent? We paid out to 1,534 feedlot operators totalling \$359 million. I don't know who he was talking to. Who was he talking to? Will the hon. member tell us how many were at that meeting and who they represented? He won't because he knows that they are a special-interest group that are not sympathetic or supportive of this government in any way, shape, or form.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's unfortunate that the hon. Premier didn't accept my invitation to Vegreville. I would easily have given him a ride.

Again to the Premier: in making this report, why did the government not ask the meat packers to open their books?

Mr. Klein: Again, this was an investigation conducted by officials in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development – officials – and this hon. member is questioning the integrity of those officials, those government employees, those dedicated government employees. This member is questioning their integrity and their ability to conduct an investigation or a review to report to the minister. Mr. Speaker, that is sad. That is sad for this so-called hon. member to pick on public service employees who cannot be in this Legislature to defend themselves.

Mr. Speaker, relative to the question that was asked, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is right. The packers were not compelled to open their books to us. That is highly competitive information. He may not understand that, but it is highly competitive information that we have no authority to ask them for. We wouldn't ask an individual producer for that information, we wouldn't ask Safeway for that information, and we did not ask them. However, there are authorities that can and will ask for that information if they believe it's pertinent to this discussion.

The hon. member knows full well – he was at the news conference – that this was not an investigation. This was a report that I asked my officials to deliver to me, done in-house at no cost to taxpayers other than my talented, hard-working, dedicated civil servants provide every day of the week to us. They were asked to provide three things to me. One, was there a change in retail price? Is there evidence of change in how packers have to handle materials that would affect pricing? They brought that information back to us. The third thing was: did the programs work for the intention that they were put in place for? Indeed, in fact it showed that that happened too.

1:50

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that we had a list of industry members interviewed, what information did this government get from the packers to formulate this report?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. minister respond. It was her officials who conducted the review for the minister – her officials – the same officials who are being questioned relative to their integrity and their capabilities by the hon. member.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out while I'm on my feet that it wasn't this hon. member who invited me. He offered to drive me to Vegreville, but it was the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands who invited me to go. It just goes to show that the Liberals will go to any lengths to hijack the NDs' agenda, and the NDs should be offended.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: why did your government yet again overlook small farmers when this report was made? You're continuing to overlook small farmers. Why?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, I forgot to ask the hon. minister to respond to the actual question. I was just responding to the preamble and throwing in a little editorial comment.

But to respond to the questions, I'll have the hon. minister reply.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, small producers in this province have not been overlooked. As was indicated, 1,500-plus feedlot owners received to date \$359 million. I can assure you that many of those feedlots are small. They may be 50 head; they may be 100; they may be 500. In fact, if the hon. member moved out of the city and got out in the countryside, he would understand that there are not 1,500 and some odd large feedlots in this province.

So, Mr. Speaker, small producers have not been overlooked. However, I think this issue of the small family farm being overlooked is one that we should address here because this is a fallacy and it is being promoted for all of the wrong reasons. In fact, the small cow-calf producer, whether he had 50 cows, 20 cows, 100 cows, or 500 cows, was addressed in this program in the way that the majority of cow-calf producers want to be addressed, not by receiving a cheque from government but by receiving a fair return in the marketplace, which they did in the fall of 2003. In July of 2003 those producers told me that it would be 50 cents a pound for steer calves. In fact, the average was more like \$1.26 and a high of \$1.45.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Drug Abuse Treatment

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A Lloydminster detox centre admitted that it had turned away 90 patients last month. Last year the government made \$588 million from liquor and related revenue but only spent \$48 million on direct services and treatment for alcohol and drug addictions. In Alberta crack cocaine and crystal meth use are increasing problems for both urban and rural youth. My questions are to the Premier. How does the government justify huge liquor sales profits while people with addictions go untreated?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is not true. Taxes from liquor go into general revenues and are used for a multitude of services including services for those suffering addictions and those suffering other forms of abuse. So you can't tie any specific program to any set of revenues.

You know, I can tell you where 7.2 billion – billion – dollars of that money went. It went to health care generally and . . .

Ms Blakeman: Travel?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the amount that went to travel can't even . . .

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Speaker: Please, please. You know, the tradition of this House is that you speak through the chair. I recognize somebody to ask a question. Then I recognize somebody to respond. In the meantime, then, there's all kinds of stuff happening. Well, it doesn't work. That's why I have to stand up, and I don't want to stand up. This is your question period. This is your answer period; it's not mine.

So the second question, please.

Drug Abuse Treatment (continued)

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is the government refusing to cover the cost to send youth addicted to crack cocaine to secure treatment facilities?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll take that question under advisement.

I see that the hon. Solicitor General is not here. Perhaps the Attorney General can shed some light on it.

Mr. Hancock: Actually, it should be AADAC.

Mr. Klein: Oh, well, maybe I'll have the hon. minister of health respond because this could be a matter related to AADAC.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, in answering a question earlier this week, we were talking about crystal meth or methamphetamines, and I indicated at that time that there were a number of different drugs that we actually covered with respect to their treatment. I would refer the hon. member back to my response to it at that time. I don't have a complete list before me at this time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why is the government not doing more to assist rural centres with youth drug problems, especially detox centres?

Mr. Klein: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, I believe that we're doing all we can do in light of trying to strike the right balance, but relative to the specifics of the question I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, again, earlier this week when we were talking about methamphetamine, which is a serious issue – I believe that the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar asked this question – we indicated at that time what we were doing in places like, for example, the Yellowhead corridor in treating young people and adults who have these difficulties with these very highly addictive drugs. So I again would refer the hon. member to my earlier response.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Review of Pricing in the Beef Industry (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The minister of agriculture released a report today claiming that beef prices are down by 20 per cent over the last six months. However, figures on her own department's web site indicate that the store price of beef has only dropped by 3 and a half per cent over the past three years. This discrepancy is just one reason that Albertans are already calling this report a joke, a farce, and a whitewash. To the Premier: how can this government look Albertans in the eye and claim that grocery store beef prices are down 20 per cent when Alberta Agriculture's own figures show that that's not true?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm just quoting from the study that was conducted for the hon. minister by dedicated and committed public service employees with no axes to grind. The results of the study indicate that there was an overall 20 per cent decline in beef prices last year. That's what the report states.

Now, the NDs can post what they want on the web site. Different things are posted on the web site for different days or different weeks or different months. But what we are doing is taking an overall price over one year, not one month, not one week, not one day, not one hour but a year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:00

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: how does the Premier expect Albertans to buy into a study that simply asks the packers, "Are you fixing prices?" rather than actually look at whether or not there's evidence one way or the other?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I've said time and time again that there is a process for determining whether, in fact, packers are engaging in inappropriate activities. One of those activities is going on right now in Ottawa, where the all-party committee on agriculture is now calling evidence relative to the pricing practices of packing houses.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I have said time and time again that if this hon. member or any other member has evidence that there is something inappropriate going on relative to packing plant prices, then pass that information on to the proper authorities. Now, you can pass that information on to our own Auditor General, Mr. Dunn, and I'm sure that he will do what he's able to do with that information. You can certainly pass it on to the all-party committee. You can certainly pass it on to the Competition Bureau.

I don't know if the hon. member has done any of those things, because I suspect that this hon. member is more interested in grandstanding, in trying to get the ink, to create fear, to create misapprehension, to create concern in the minds of the public than he is in getting to the bottom of this issue and getting the facts.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier says that this report and his government's responsibility is not to look into these kinds of allegations against packers, then why does the government news release say, "Ag report shows no unfair packer pricing because of BSE"? Why are you putting this out, Mr. Premier? Why?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister indicated that she would prepare a report, a report that would cover three things. One, what is the price of beef, generally? The report did that, and her dedicated and committed employees did the best they could to come up with an average figure relative to beef prices.

Number two, the report would indicate to the minister whether or not the program, the combined federal/provincial program, worked to assist farmers, those involved in the beef industry, and, number three, whether there was any surface evidence, anyway, to indicate that price-fixing was going on amongst the packing industry.

The report concludes that overall the price of beef has dropped over a one-year period by 20 per cent, that generally the assistance program put in place was beneficial to producers, and, thirdly, that there was no evidence, at least on the surface, of price-fixing by the meat packers. However, a more detailed investigation will be undertaken by the Competition Bureau and by the all-party committee of Parliament.

One more thing, Mr. Speaker. I'll be very, very brief. There is another component to the report, and that is the component relative to the breakdown of where the dollars went, and that will come once the program has ended.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As earlier mentioned, numerous times I would say, this morning the Minister

of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development released a report prepared by her department entitled Pricing in the Beef Industry. Now, given recent allegations of price-fixing and other wrongdoings in the beef industry, I'd be pleased to share this report with my constituents. However, as answered by the minister, officials did not have access to the financial records of packers in this province. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Can she elaborate on what the report did accomplish, seeing that only half of the financial picture was available?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I think we have to put this into perspective. There were a lot of accusations being hurled around hither and thither, and this disturbed me, disturbed me at a time when this industry is facing the worst crisis in the history of the industry. So I asked my department. Essentially, the first request was: do a carcass evaluation and give me an indication of what's changed.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's useful if we can just take half a minute and outline what has changed for the industry. Today they have to separate SRMs and contain them differently. There are no automated deboning devices used any more. You have to segregate cattle under and over 30 months, which means mouthing those cattle if there's a suspect animal, which means you have to check to see if their incisors are coming through or in. You have increased rendering costs today. You have no market for a large part of the carcass, that previously went to offshore markets.

You have stranded product that was left out there en route to a market that was no longer available. That was short term but something that's just not talked about at all, and if you followed the Canadian dollar, you also know that there have been some very wide swings in that. Anybody who understands the export market knows what the impact of a cent of change, let alone 5, 6, 7, or 8 cents, can cause.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, when the border opened to boneless, we have to understand that for the first period of time the discount on Canadian beef went very high compared to what it was originally, which was sort of in the grading system and maybe 4 to 6 cents and went as high as 25 cents. That's what the report told me, and that's what I wanted to know, and it was my report.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister and in reference to the contents of the report itself: did the report examine why cow-calf producers – and I stress: cow-calf producers – hadn't received any actual money from the BSE support programs?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, yes. It was asked. Supplementary to the first request, on carcass evaluation, was to do an evaluation to see if the programs did what they intended to. In fact, the first four, five, six programs that this government put in place, that were designed with the industry, did exactly what they were designed to do; that is, to move product through the system. I remind all members of this Assembly that we had what we thought was 650,000 head of fat cattle on feed in Canada, 50 per cent of which no longer had a home or a market, which subsequently came to be 1.2 million head. Indeed, those cattle moved through the system, and the cow-calf producer enjoyed a higher price for his calves than he would have seen.

The other thing that the cow-calf producer has seen, will see, and is seeing is some assistance on their market cows and bulls, in the terminology of the industry, culls. If they have applied for that

program, they had two options, a one-time payment or a price differential, which would bring them back to more normal. They also have access to a federal program. So while the cow-calf producer may not have yet received a cheque, the cheque they will receive from this government will be on the cull cows. The cheque for their calves came from the marketplace.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister to further clarify. My constituents are asking: why haven't we seen the beef price decrease in the grocery store in comparison to the decrease that has taken place for producers themselves?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, we've discussed this a number of times over the last months. It's well known in the industry that about 24 to 25 per cent of the carcass is high end, which is steaks, roasts, et cetera, which is primarily what we buy as Canadians. The lesser cuts of chucks and fronts and grounds we buy some of but not as much. We had a very high offshore market for that. Offals we virtually didn't use. Tallow primarily was shipped to other markets.

Mr. Speaker, when BSE hit, we had to consume that whole animal and use all of those parts. There's no question that the high-end priced steaks, roasts did not come down. But it is a fact, and it can be demonstrated that when you take everything into account, including in-store specials, in the last half of 2003 retail prices were down 20 per cent.

2:10

Health Care Funding

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, on two separate days earlier this week when answering questions on out-of-province health care services, the Minister of Health and Wellness said that it wasn't worth fighting the federal government over \$20 million or \$30 million because "it's not really a material amount." That is the attitude of a government that has become lazy, lazy, lazy with taxpayer dollars. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: since the minister considers \$20 million or \$30 million to be immaterial, is it his department's policy that when they prepare their budget, they also consider amounts of \$20 million or \$30 million to be immaterial?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, \$20 million or \$30 million in the context of a \$7.2 billion budget strikes me as being something that, while a significant amount of money, is what we will spend in one day in the health care system. So let's put this in context. Now, of course, a \$7.2 billion budget is made up of a whole series of \$10 million, \$15 million, \$20 million, \$30 million slices, so when dealing with the federal government, provinces and territories are talking about billions of dollars. So if we're going to get some significant dollars from the federal government, let's talk in the billions with a "b," not millions with an "m."

Dr. Taft: Since the minister considers \$20 million or \$30 million to be immaterial, does he also consider the 500 nurses that that money could hire to be immaterial?

Mr. Mar: Not as immaterial as his question, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Taft: Since the minister considers \$20 million or \$30 million to be immaterial, can he tell us how many community-based mental health programs could be funded with that amount of money?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview

speaks with an aggressive certitude that's normally reserved for people that know very little about what they're talking about. By comparison this government speaks with optimism, not with pessimism. We seek to inspire people with hope; we don't traffic in despair. And finally, we persuade the public with passion tempered by reason; we don't do it with innuendo wrapped around in fear.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Funding for Homeless Shelters

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the homeless shelters in Calgary, two of which are in my constituency, the Drop-in Centre and the Salvation Army Centre of Hope, reported over 14,000 occupying 1,500 beds in emergencies, a movement of a thousand individuals per month showing a 29 per cent increase over two years, and also given that I participated in the Calgary biannual homeless count, in which we took a snapshot of the number of homeless in Calgary in one night in May, at the rate of increase we'll need about 450 beds over the next two years. Also, the news is saying that the homeless shelter operators are concerned about the funding from the province for their current operation. The question is to the Minister of Seniors, responsible for homeless shelters. What is the status of provincial funding in Calgary homeless shelters?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm fully aware of that report, and I have to point out a couple of things. There are 1,500 beds in Calgary for emergency usage. A lot of the 14,000 counted were on a one-night basis, fully 6,000, or 55 per cent, of the count have been counted. The names have been identified in 2000 as well as 2002, which means that we have to address how to move people through and out of the shelters on a permanent basis.

With respect to the question on the funding, Mr. Speaker, Alberta Seniors has full intention of meeting our obligations to the shelters in Calgary as well as the rest of the province. For the funding arrangements the contracts expire on March 31. We're currently looking at streamlining and improving these contracts, and the shelters have been or will be told that their funding will continue uninterrupted until the contracts are put in place. This applies to Calgary as well as the rest of the province, and my officials have already spoken on a couple of occasions with the operators of the Calgary Drop-in Centre, the largest centre in Alberta with that particular information. I might want to point out that we invest, if you will, through Alberta Seniors alone over \$8 million in shelter operations in Calgary on an annual basis.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: I have used up my time in the preamble, so I don't have further questions. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Sustainable Resource Development

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Logging occurring in the provincial forest reserve northwest of Cochrane has been the source of an ongoing battle between area businesses and loggers and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. Yesterday the Court of Queen's Bench made a precedent-setting decision to revoke SRD's

logging permits for the area and to award all costs and damages to loggers and to a local ecotourism business. My question to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: given that the judge cited poor consultation and lack of integrated planning as a reason for revoking the permits, what does this ministry have to say for itself?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, when you manage over a hundred million acres of public land in Alberta on behalf of Albertans and when there are multi-uses, including recreation, grazing leases – we have commercial operations, we have industrial operations, and of course we have just general use of public land – it's always a challenge.

But in relation to the particular question, Mr. Speaker, the process is in the court system right now, and if anyone should know that you do not bring up questions in the House when they're in the court system presently, that member should know that.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, the decision was completed yesterday.

Why does it take the Court of Queen's Bench to teach this government's SRD department what is sustainable and what is not? The decision is over and done with, sir.

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, again the member knows better than to bring up issues like that.

But in relation to the whole issue of forestry itself forestry is a very, very active industry in Alberta. It's a challenge to maintain it the way it is because there are really multi-use areas in those areas. It's a \$9 billion industry. In fact, over 54,000 people in Alberta are employed in forestry. So it's very, very important and continues to be a challenge for us.

Specifically on that issue, Mr. Speaker, the member darn well knows that you cannot bring up issues once they're in the court system until the final decisions are completed for the process.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General on the sub judice aspect.

2:20

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just for the purpose of adding to the point that the hon. minister just made, the hon. member indicated that the last word has come out, and in fact there is an appeal period after a Court of Queen's Bench decision. The final word doesn't come out until after that appeal period has expired or, if an appeal is filed, the appeal has been heard and the decision taken.

So one should be very careful in language around a decision with respect to a matter. That consultation is obviously important. One does not want to have questions in the House which might affect the ongoing discussion of this in the courts if, in fact, an appeal is filed, and it is sub judice until the appeal period has in fact expired or the appeal has been heard insofar as questions that may be raised that might affect the matter before the court.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, when will this government actually commit to sustainable resource development and conduct appropriate environmental impact assessments and public consultations whenever they need them instead of relying on outdated information from the late '80s to make these forest decisions?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, we do have proper processes in place

to deal with issues like this. Like I said, you know, we manage over a hundred million acres of public land. There's oil and gas activity. There are grazing leases. There are recreation leases, and there's general usage in that area. The way our province has grown, with the strong economy in Alberta, including southern Alberta, the demand for public land use is increasing. We're trying our best to ensure that we keep a balance between the economic development that's required and also the environmental protection.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, we just recently, in the past year or so, finished the Bighorn backcountry, which covers, I believe, over 5,000 square kilometres, access management plan, which is ongoing. We have the Ghost-Waiparous plan underway now, which is in a similar area, that will develop a balanced approach in how we use the public land. So we are doing things.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Alberta's Electricity Policy

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Deregulation remains controversial for some of my constituents. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. Minister, once you take government debt incurred into account as well as system stability and supply, how does Alberta's electrical system stack up against other Canadian provinces?

Mr. Smith: Extremely well, Mr. Speaker. There's no question, and I think that it's important for members opposite to maybe have a little review.

In British Columbia there are some 11,000 megawatts, Mr. Speaker. Their taxpayer guaranteed debt is about 7 and a half billion dollars. If you move over to Saskatchewan, which has about 2,300 to 2,500 megawatts for a million people, their debt is in excess of a billion dollars. Manitoba, which has 5,300 megawatts and right now with drought conditions can't supply all the power that it's contracted to export, has \$7.2 billion against it. We now go to the granddaddies of all, Ontario and Quebec hydro. Between those two jurisdictions there's in excess of \$75 billion worth of taxpayer guaranteed debt. This means that in the electrical system across Canada, there's just about a hundred billion dollars' worth of taxpayer guaranteed debt in order to bring prices that are in the neighbourhood of what they are today in Alberta.

Just for more elucidation, I think, yesterday New Brunswick was converting their only power plant, besides the nuclear power plant, to something called orimulsion, which comes from the Orinoco heavy oil fields in Venezuela. That conversion is about a billion dollars. Now the company in Venezuela has reneged on the contract, and taxpayers are on the hook for a billion dollars. There's a steel plant in Hamilton that's gone bankrupt. There's a 7 and a half million dollar charge on their electrical bills. This is not happening in Alberta, Mr. Speaker, because there's a competitive market system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is again to the same minister. Considering system stability and supply, how does Alberta's electrical system stack up against North American jurisdictions?

The Speaker: Well, I hope we're not going to go through 50 different, separate states.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can only thank you for the confidence you have in my intellect, that I would be able to do that. Would you like to go alphabetically from Alaska?

Let me say, Mr. Speaker, that in the United States the eastern seaboard because of its congestion actually does have higher prices, much to the tune of twice to three times as high as what Alberta does. In areas where there are more bountiful supplies, such as Arizona and those areas, the prices are naturally more competitive. As we watch what happens in California, I think that's going to be a key indicator of what goes on in the United States.

What has been proven certainly through the Ohio blackout situation is that there is a lack of market design that allows areas where there is excess power to move to areas where there is a shortage of power, thus giving rate stabilization across the continent.

Mr. Lord: My final question, Mr. Speaker, is: how does Alberta's power system stack up against the rest of the world considering the importance of global competition?

The Speaker: Same advice, hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: So Albania, Afghanistan – it's difficult, Mr. Speaker.

We do know that across the globe countries and jurisdictions have been struggling with how to provide economic growth because they know that adequate electricity generation is a key underpinning for economic growth. Probably the most visible one is China. China, which manufactures over 13 per cent of the world's goods and uses over half the world's cement production, is, in fact, in a power deficit, and that's given the Twin Gorges project of some 22,000 megawatts.

In effect, Mr. Speaker, if you go to Japan at, I believe, 23 cents to 25 cents, Denmark at 22 cents, and particularly the United Kingdom, which is a competitive market and which has seen prices drop, there's ample evidence to realize that competitive market generation is a compelling economic alternative to fuel economic growth in those areas that need electricity.

Edmonton Southeast Ring Road

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, one of the companies shortlisted to bid on the Anthony Henday P3 project, Borealis Infrastructure, has been involved in some very controversial P3 projects across Canada. To the Minister of Transportation: why has the ministry shortlisted a company whose P3 schools were such a financial disaster for the Nova Scotia government that it had to abandon the remainder of its P3 plans and is now stuck with costly 35-year leases?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, this question you could just plan. I was kind of waiting for it over the last week since we did our news release to the public of the province of Alberta. This is a situation which is quite serious.

In this House we are awarded some certain privileges. We are protected in terms of the kinds of names we bring up in this facility, in this House, in this Legislature, in terms of saving us harmless from those names that are brought up here that could be erroneously brought forward by the opposition, simply by the fact that they have something against public/private partnerships. There has been a whole process and one where we were quite open and transparent in this particular House. [interjection] He asked the question; I'm giving you the answer. Do you have any decency in you at all? Can you just listen? So what happened is there's a very open, transparent process in terms of the adjudication of all of those companies that put forward their requests for qualification.

Now, if the hon. member has something beyond what he brought up in this House, information that he might have that nobody else has that is of very important consequence, and wants to make an accusation against anybody other than some company, make it outside, put it in writing, and send it to me, and we'll review it. But make the accusation. Note it. Just don't get up in the House and start throwing around company names.

2:30

The reason I say that, Mr. Speaker, is because this province is open to investment. We want to attract as many investment dollars as we can. We don't do that when people want to do business in this province, spread this news around the province like there's something clandestine here: oh, there's something behind this company that nobody knows. Why do it? If you're not happy with the policy, change the policy.

Mr. Bonner: Well, I think we touched a raw nerve.

Mr. Speaker, given that Borealis is currently involved in a P3 project in B.C. where the costs have doubled and the government is facing pressure to abandon the project, what evidence has the company produced to make this government believe that the same won't happen for the Anthony Henday project?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, as far as our department is concerned and as far this government is concerned, we will make the evaluation on the applications and requests for qualifications based on the very thorough process we have in this province. What other provinces have done in terms of public/private partnerships – I don't know what process they use, although I do know that we have listened to others that have endeavoured into public/private partnerships, learned from their errors and mistakes, and have brought that information forward to the province of Alberta. I firmly believe that we've put together an excellent process and one which others can learn, including those across the other way.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker. Taxpayers want to know: why would this ministry shortlist a company whose track record on P3 projects is so poor?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member makes an assumption, an accusation. All I'm saying is: back it up. If that's the issue, send me a letter, put your name to it, and I'll take it over to the adjudicators. Otherwise, don't bring up some company name, because this will never come to an end. If you're not happy with the public/private partnership policy of the government, criticize the policy, but don't start criticizing individual companies.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, do you know that after the request for qualifications and then the request for proposals ends, this city, by 2007, quite frankly, will have two-thirds of its ring road completed? And here they're doing everything they can to drive investment away.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of four to participate.

The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize and bring attention to the Canadian Agricultural Safety Week campaign, which began March 10 and runs through the 17th.

This year's theme is Farm Safety Makes Sense, and it examines the physical, social, economic, and possibly legal costs of farm-related injuries and fatalities in Canada.

Agriculture producers spend all year planning for their operations: cropping alternatives, animal husbandry and dispersal, fertilizer and herbicide selection, machinery repair, revitalization, and new investments. But planning for safety is sometimes an afterthought. In 2003 there were 1,376 farm-related injuries and 14 farm-related fatalities in Alberta. That number is much too high.

We invest in our farms, so we should invest in our safety because safe agriculture is a sound business practice that pays off. Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development takes an active role in providing farmers with information that promotes farm safety year-round.

This year Alberta Agriculture is launching a CD-ROM that will help producers assess the safety of their operations. The CD-ROM is available to the public free of charge thanks to the generous sponsorship of corporations such as ADFarm, AgriCore United, Bayer CropScience, and the Royal Bank of Canada. Their commitment demonstrates just how important farm safety awareness is to agricultural communities.

With more than 50,000 farms in Alberta many Albertans are already aware of the importance of safe farming practices. Canadian Agricultural Safety Week aims to increase awareness for people working and visiting farming operations because we, Alberta farms, want to be a safe place to grow.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Easter Seals March of Dimes

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, in 1951, motivated by the polio epidemic sweeping the continent, a group of mothers gathered and marched to raise funds for services needed by physically disabled children. As a result of their efforts and the efforts of other Canadians the research of Dr. Jonas Salk was well funded, creating the historic made-in-Canada cure for polio.

Yesterday Mary Hanley Catholic elementary school in Edmonton hosted the official launch of the 53rd Annual Easter Seals March of Dimes campaign in Alberta. This campaign raises funds for children with physical disabilities, which in turn will ensure that these children obtain necessary equipment such as wheelchairs, communication aids, vehicle adaptations, wheelchair ramps, and other equipment in order to be as independent as possible and to have an improved quality of life. The March of Dimes also funds the Easter Seals Camp Horizon project in Bragg Creek, which supports children with physical disabilities and serious illnesses. Another important project is the March of Dimes McQueen Road residence in Edmonton, which is Canada's first accessible group home for adults with disabilities.

The government of Alberta is a proud supporter and co-sponsor of these initiatives primarily through the ministry of Human Resources and Employment and the community initiatives program within Alberta Gaming. That is why I am pleased that, along with the Minister of Community Development and the Minister of Human Resources and Employment, numerous children, parents, supporters, and staff members attended these ceremonies to officially launch this year's campaign.

Congratulations to the volunteer president of Easter Seals, Ken Bagnell, and his board, to executive director Jodi Zabloudowski, to principal Joanne Ritcey-Devaney and her staff and students at Mary Hanley school, and particularly to our Easter Seals kid ambassadors

Joanne Picard and Todd Davison for all their efforts in promoting such a worthy cause. I ask all members of this Assembly and, indeed, all Albertans to join me in thanking and congratulating everyone involved with the Easter Seals initiative and in wishing them a very successful campaign.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Public Accounts Committees

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My private member's statement this afternoon is not necessarily reflective of the opinions of any other members of the Public Accounts Committee or of government members or of members of the opposition.

There is a global trend towards greater openness in government finances. This is based on a belief that transparent budgetary practices can ensure that funds raised by the state for public purposes will be spent as promised by the government, while maximising the benefits derived from spending. One crucial component of a transparent system of resource allocation involves an independent assurance of the integrity of public budgeting through an audit process, and the scrutiny of its outcomes by the representatives of the people, in the form of parliament.

This is the opening paragraph of the 2002 report by the Association of Public Accounts Committees in South Africa entitled *Best Practices of Public Accounts Committees*.

It is with interest that I first note that the very first public accounts committee was formed at Westminster in 1861. From that point forward, Mr. Speaker, almost all parliaments and Legislatures have established their own public accounts committees or public audit committees. The job of these committees is to effectively exercise parliament's oversight responsibility over the government's spending program.

2:40

Some would note that governments today publish quarterly and annual financial statements and business plans. This is true for the majority of provinces, including Alberta and the federal government. What I would like to see as chair of the Public Accounts Committee is a more active committee here in Alberta.

The Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees was established in 1979 to share best practices so that the quality and practices of public accounts committees throughout the country could improve. In 1981 a report entitled *Improving Accountability* was published by the Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation that contained 69 recommendations on how public accounts committees could improve their effectiveness at probing the government's spending. In 1989 the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees published guidelines for public accounts committees which contained a further 59 recommendations.

The Speaker: Time.

Mr. MacDonald: Oh, I apologize. I didn't hear it.

The Speaker: Forty-five seconds ago.

Mr. MacDonald: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Health Care Funding

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the value of a dollar. One of the most important duties of government is to ensure that ordinary

citizens, Albertans, are receiving value for their taxpayer dollars. This requires the attitude that every dollar is important, that every dollar is taxpayers' money.

On two separate days this week in this House we heard the Minister of Health and Wellness refer to \$20 million or \$30 million as an immaterial amount. At a time when provinces are screaming for federal money, when this government tells us that health care is too expensive, when this government cries poverty, this reflects a lazy attitude to public money. This minister says this because he claims that in the scheme of regional health authority budgets in the billions, tens of millions don't really matter.

Well, I say that \$20 million or \$30 million do matter. With \$30 million we could hire 500 new nurses. That doesn't seem immaterial. With \$30 million we could build six new community health centres. That also doesn't seem immaterial. With \$30 million Alberta Health could fund over 170 family physicians. With \$30 million we could pay for 632 long-term care beds for an entire year.

Who knows what else it could buy, Mr. Speaker? Maybe it would have funded better emergency services in Calgary so that Kathy Briant's mother, suffering from a stroke, didn't have to wait eight hours in emergency only to leave without seeing a physician. Maybe it could have bought a bed for the gentleman left lying on the floor in emergency that night.

What Alberta has is not a money problem; it's a management problem. It's a matter of mismanagement: mismanaging our dollars and mismanaging our resources.

Mr. Speaker, the greatest challenge facing our health care system today is not whether we're spending too much or too little; the greatest challenge is how to best spend the dollars we've got. It's clear when the Minister of Health and Wellness refers to \$20 million or \$30 million as immaterial that this government doesn't know how best to spend the money we've got.

Thank you.

Speaker's Ruling Members' Statements

The Speaker: I'd like to remind all members once again that there is a time limit to this.

Now, the Standing Orders provide for members' statements. It was quite a debate for a great number of years to have the Members of this Legislative Assembly agree to have on the agenda an opportunity for members to give members' statements. As I was at that time the negotiator on behalf of the government who negotiated with the then House leader of the opposition party, we agreed that there would be a number of things. We would give as wide latitude as possible with respect to members' statements. We would ask the Speaker never to interfere and accept a point of order about anything said in the members' statements. One third thing we also stressed very, very strongly: that these would be opportunities for members to speak on policy and not bring in personalities.

If anything, I fear as the Speaker of this House that every time we deal with personalities and individuals, it just gives leverage to those who never, ever believe in having on the Routine something called Members' Statements.

head: Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development and Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and

retain their places with the exception of written questions 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 32.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 20, 22, 32, and 33.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to give notice at this time that I plan to rise and raise a matter of urgent and pressing necessity under Standing Order 40 at the appropriate time.

Thank you.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have today 710 pages out of 10,000 pages that I am tabling as a result of a freedom of information request by the opposition party with respect to the power purchase auction of 2000, the Balancing Pool legislation of May of '99, the market surveillance administrator's regulation of December of '99, and so on and so forth. This is only one copy. The other copies have been delivered appropriately to the Clerk's office. It shows the lunacy of their actions, and I will be seeking to offer them a data room where they can come in and peruse this information at their leisure.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in accordance with a commitment that she made in the House, she's pleased to file with the Assembly copies of the report Review of Pricing in the Beef Industry as well as the news release issued today in that regard. The main conclusion of the report is that the overall price of beef at the retail counter had declined 20 per cent, the BSE program has worked as intended in moving cattle through the system, and from information available to the department there was no evidence of unfair packer profits.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of information from the Alberta Agriculture web site showing that retail beef prices have gone down less than 3 and a half per cent in the last two years.

Thank you.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, yesterday in question period I indicated to the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition that I would provide more detail to the questions that he asked, and today I'd like to table those responses.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under Standing Order

7(5) I would ask that the Government House Leader please share the projected government business for the week of March 15 to 18, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, March 15, in the afternoon we anticipate the introduction of Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; and Bill 23, the Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004. In the evening at 9 o'clock under Government Bills and Orders for second reading Bill 20, the Minors' Property Act, and Committee of the Whole on Bill 18, Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act.

On Tuesday, March 16, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders we anticipate receiving certain messages from Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor with respect to interim supply, and government motions 11 and 12 relating to interim supply. Time permitting, second reading of Bill 21, Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 23, Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004, could be commenced and continued on Bill 20, the Minors' Property Act. Third reading could be available with Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act, and time permitting, Committee of the Whole on bills 17 or 18. At 8 o'clock in the evening on March 16 under Government Bills and Orders we would anticipate the first day of what is anticipated to be two days of Committee of Supply on interim supply.

On Wednesday, March 17, under Government Bills and Orders at 2 p.m. in Committee of the Whole bills 17, 18, 20, and second reading or committee on bills 21, 22, 23 and as per the Order Paper. At 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders Committee of Supply, day 2 of 2, interim supply; time permitting, Committee of the Whole on bills 21, 22, 23; and third readings as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, March 18, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders introduction of Bill 24, Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004; Committee of the Whole on bills 21, 22, 23; and third reading on 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, and as per the Order Paper.

head: 2:50 **Motions under Standing Order 40**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on a Standing Order 40 application.

BSE Assistance Program

Mr. MacDonald:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly express its opposition to the way the government handled the crisis surrounding bovine spongiform encephalopathy particularly for cow-calf producers and backgrounders and that the Assembly hereby establish a special select standing committee which must report to the Legislative Assembly no later than May 31, 2004, and which has the power to send for persons, papers, and records, sit jointly with other standing committees, and print evidence to examine the BSE aid packages and to determine who received the money.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This afternoon I rise on a Standing Order 40 application to present a motion to this Assembly. As you know, Standing Order 40 applications are to be made in cases of urgent and pressing necessity. Well, over the past two weeks Albertans have been asking the government to provide details about the BSE compensation packages that were handed out and who got them. The farmers and the ranchers that I've spoken to at

several meetings have indicated to me that they haven't seen a cent, didn't see a trickle-down, and are in real financial trouble if the border with the United States doesn't open soon.

The response of this government has been to stall, avoid the issue, and keep the light of day from shining on the books. This must end now, Mr. Speaker. This motion is urgent and pressing because Albertans want to know where the money went. They want to know now. They want to tell us their story, and they want to help all of us to make better decisions.

The government has continually shuffled this matter off to someone else. Government members won't let this matter be discussed in Public Accounts. The Auditor General has indicated that it will take months to look at this, and yesterday we were told that this matter should be taken up in the Assembly. Well, Mr. Speaker, here we are.

It's time to get to the bottom of these BSE aid programs. Our farmers and ranchers deserve better from us. I urge all hon. members of this House to grant unanimous consent for the motion and to establish this committee today so that it can begin its work immediately.

Thank you.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Speaker: A point of order, hon. Government House Leader?

Point of Order

Notice of Motion under Standing Order 40

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My point of order with respect to the last notice of motion is that it was out of order and ought not to have been put at all. Standing Order 40 allows motions to be brought without the usual notice, but the notice that was given today on the Order Paper – and I raise it only for the benefit of your direction for the future. I have not received nor to my understanding did anyone else receive early notice of this, which is normally delivered prior to the House sitting.

Also, in giving notice earlier today in session, the hon. member just rose to say that he was giving notice that he was bringing a motion and gave absolutely no notice of the content of the motion, in which case it's not notice of a motion.

As well, the notice of motion itself is constructed in such a manner as to ask the House to actually pass certain activity levels. My understanding, without having had the opportunity to research it because I hadn't seen the notice until just now, is that under a motion brought under Standing Order 40, the House normally would debate for the afternoon the matter of urgent pressing necessity but would not, in fact, pass a motion requiring the establishment of a committee. That would come under a motion brought more properly to the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader on this point of order.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. If I may respond, I would argue that the Government House Leader has failed to prove that, in fact, the actions of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar contravened any Standing Order that's written. Standing Order 40 clearly says that it can be made "without notice having been given under Standing Order 38." Therefore, there was no notice requirement. I believe that it was in fact furnished to the Speaker's office. [interjection] Oh, okay. But the process was followed. There's no requirement that that happens. Read Standing Order 40.

The same process was used yesterday, and there was no objection

raised at that time. So following exactly what's put before us, it says very clearly that "a motion may, in case of urgent and pressing necessity previously explained by the mover, be made by unanimous consent of the Assembly without notice having been given under Standing Order 38." Therefore, notice was not given.

Additionally, a motion can require action of the Assembly, which is certainly what's called for in the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar's Standing Order 40 motion, that the Assembly take some action. Motions often ask that the Assembly take some action or accept a report or accept a budget or agree to proceed with Committee of Supply in so many days of debate. So I would argue that it's accepted that a motion, in fact, can request action from the Legislative Assembly, and that, in fact, is what the member's Standing Order 40 has done.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, let's be very, very careful that we do not confuse the intent of Standing Order 30 with the intent of Standing Order 40. No one makes a decision with respect to an application under Standing Order 40 other than the House. It is not the chair; it's the House. The Assembly must provide unanimous consent. The chair is not involved in it. Under Standing Order 30 the chair is involved in it.

In terms of the requirements of notice, that has been discussed on previous occasions in this Assembly. In fact, the chair did make a statement with respect to this on November 29, 2001. At that time the then Government House Leader, the current Government House Leader, rose on a point of order, and the then Opposition House Leader, now the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, also rose, and the chair made it very clear how we would deal with this. I'd refer this as weekend reading for all hon. members.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Royal Assent

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor will now attend upon the Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, one of the courtesies we've had in the past is we would not have laptops in operation when Her Honour is present, if you don't mind, please.

[Mr. Hancock and the Sergeant-at-Arms left the Chamber to attend the Lieutenant Governor]

[The Mace was draped]

3:00

[The Sergeant-at-Arms knocked on the main doors of the Chamber three times. The Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms opened the doors, and the Sergeant-at-Arms entered]

The Sergeant-at-Arms: All rise, please. Mr. Speaker, Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor awaits.

The Speaker: Sergeant-at-Arms, admit Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor.

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE, and Mr. Hancock entered the Chamber. Her Honour took her place upon the throne]

Her Honour: Please be seated.

The Speaker: May it please Your Honour, the Legislative Assembly has at its present sittings passed certain bills to which and in the name of the Legislative Assembly I respectfully request Your Honour's assent.

The Clerk: Your Honour, the following are the titles of the bills to which Your Honour's assent is prayed.

- Bill 1 Alberta Centennial Education Savings Plan Act
- Bill 2 Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act
- Bill 3 Architects Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 4 Blind Persons' Rights Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 5 Family Support for Children with Disabilities Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 6 Income and Employment Supports Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 7 Senatorial Selection Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 8 Blue Cross Statutes Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 9 Prevention of Youth Tobacco Use Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 10 Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 11 Alberta Personal Income Tax Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 12 Financial Administration Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 13 Forest Reserves Amendment Act, 2004
- Bill 14 Appropriation (Supplementary Supply) Act, 2004
- Bill 15 Fiscal Responsibility Amendment Act, 2004

[The Lieutenant Governor indicated her assent]

The Clerk: In Her Majesty's name Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor doth assent to these bills.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: All rise, please.

[Preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, the Lieutenant Governor and Mr. Hancock left the Chamber]

[The Mace was uncovered]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

Hon. members, this could be quite an historic kind of day. This is the 15th day of this session and 15 bills have now received royal approval. I do not know if in the history of Alberta that has ever happened before, but I'm going to have it checked. I will report back to the House if that has ever happened.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Now I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 16 Residential Tenancies Act

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

[The clauses of Bill 16 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following with some amendments: Bill 16.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **3:10 Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 17 Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate March 9: Mr. Klapstein]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make a few brief comments on this particular bill because it does have quite an impact on rural Alberta, and I'd like to preface my comments first by mentioning that I've had a little bit of experience along this line, being in local government for 17 years. I'm not sure if I mentioned that in this House before, but it was during a time where the . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, the chair does have difficulty hearing certain things, but now that I turn my volume loud, I find that I have many voices. Of course, the rules of the House are only one, and that's the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, please.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure that everybody would be interested in listening to what I have to say too.

It was during a time that I was involved in this where the confined feeding operations, what we called intensive feeding operations at the time or intensive agriculture operations, were going through quite a process, and there was a patchwork of land use bylaws across the province and not a whole lot of rules. My colleague from Lacombe-Stettler knows what I am talking about because she's been around long enough and has experienced some of the drama in rural Alberta that played itself out and the problems that arose between neighbours on this whole thing.

I can tell you that back then there were a lot of problems within neighbourhoods. Some municipalities took it upon themselves to improve their land use bylaws with the interest that the industry would not move forward unless it moved forward in a very responsi-

ble manner. No longer would people put up with having dead animals cast into waterways to get rid of them and letting the coyotes eat them up at will while they smelled and rotted.

So some municipalities took the bull by the horns, and my municipality was one such municipality because we had a lot of intensive operations happening at the time, so we were faced with doing something. My record shows that I have been an advocate of value-added agriculture. I've been an advocate of advancing agriculture in a very responsible manner. Some of the things we did in our county were the first. First time a direct injection of liquid manure was a condition of development. I believe we were the first ones to, as a condition of development, have lagoons fill from the bottom instead of from the top, so it controlled the odour and the nuisance that it caused.

It did disturb some farmers at the time, and they got the Farmers' Advocate office down, and they basically told us we were against agriculture. We had a far greater vision than that. We knew we weren't against agriculture, and if it was going to survive, it had to change and continue in a very responsible way. So we did that.

In two short years the same Farmers' Advocate office at a regional conference had a model bylaw that they suggested all municipalities in the province go to because there was such a patchwork, and it was almost a carbon copy of what we had developed in Kneehill. I guess they did that because they discovered that it worked.

So I'm going through here. I recognize that since the NRCB took control of confined feeding operations back two years ago, there's been more consistency in the province. I think the standards overall in the province have increased, and I think that's a good thing. In some areas where the standards were higher, I don't believe provincial standards have come up to those in a few areas, and I happen to be a representative in one of those areas. So as a result of that where people were used to a high standard and now see something a bit lower, they have some concerns about it.

I'd like to thank the Member for Leduc for actually improving some of these things in this amendment act by bringing clarity to quite a number of areas in the act that was brought forward in 2001. I think that makes it better.

I do have some concerns that perhaps the member could address when this bill gets to committee, and I'll briefly go over them. The first one is on giving the NRCB discretion to determine what the minimum distance separation, or MDS, should be for a residence that lies within an existing operation's MDS when the operation applies for an expansion. There may be some reasons to have that happen if, for example, you want to put a residence for hired help on a place next to a confined feeding operation or something like that, but where are the controls on the NRCB that they don't like it to some unwilling or unwanting neighbour to have that reduced? Perhaps the member could make note of that and provide that answer for me.

The other issue I see in going through the bill is giving the minister additional discretion to deny requests for the establishment of a practice review committee. I'm not sure in the last two years how many practice review committees have been established. Could you maybe justify why we're doing that, if that's the only way of doing it to achieve that end or would perhaps putting a deposit down that would maybe be refundable if the complainant was found to be legitimate? So that's the other concern I have there.

Another one is neighbours that have had manure spread next to their residence, and when I say manure, I mean manure, composting materials, or compost as defined by the act. Adjoining neighbours were always considered in my memory, both in municipal bylaws and since the NRCB took over, as affected parties, and I'm just wondering why that is changing in this particular act?

I remember a story of a fellow spreading manure that was going right over the road and actually was hitting cars. They were probably not affected neighbours, but I would say that they were certainly affected drivers. So if you can spread it across the road and hit cars, I'm sure you can spread it across the road and be in someone's else's yard, and someone probably would be affected if it ended up on his lawn and he was going to have a barbecue that night. [interjection] Yeah. It could start rusting the barbecue prematurely.

The act deals with changing the short-term manure storage from six months to seven months. I think that that's a good thing and certainly support that because it does provide for spreading manure over a period of time when there's no snow or you're not spreading on frozen ground. So you can store it over the winter and spread it at a more opportune time when you can actually incorporate it into the ground. I see that as a huge improvement, and it gives a little better window for spreading.

I just wonder, though, where the corresponding sections in the act are that restrict manure spreading in the wintertime? Or is that in the regulations? And is there some way we can maybe ensure that manure is not spread on snow or frozen ground as it does create problems in runoff periods, especially if you get a quick thaw, and that can create some problems. So if the member could make a note of that as well.

3:20

The other thing regarding manure storage: it also allows for manure storage facilities to be constructed with less than nine months' capacity if the NRCB approves the applicant's manure-handling plan, and that seems to in my mind perhaps contradict the first clause of increasing it from six months to seven months unless it's for moving product off the farm to some other location like to a mushroom plant or something like that where you wouldn't need nine months. If that's the case, I would like clarification on that. If that is the case and those contracts are discontinued, what happens then? Is the NRCB going to ensure that a storage facility is established at that time? What happens in a case when perhaps a market for that product dries up?

The other thing is that manure can now be applied on saline soils. For those that don't know what saline soil is, it's a shallow water table, and the water comes up and has minerals and salts in the water, and then as it goes down, it deposits those salts and minerals on the top, leaving a kind of white surface. I'm wondering if the member could provide the science maybe in his comments either in second reading or in committee. If the science has changed, what is that science to show that that water table is going to be protected from those effluent materials going down in the water as the water recedes in the water table.

Other than that I believe the bill does provides some clarity to the act of 2001, and I'll conclude my comments, Mr. Speaker, with that and appreciate the member responding when he's able to research those answers.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise this afternoon and make a few comments on Bill 17, the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Smith: You're an expert on manure.

Mr. Bonner: Certainly, we get a lot of opportunities with what comes out of the hon. Minister of Energy's mouth to deal with these types of issues, and I thank him for that opportunity.

I would also like to thank the Member for Leduc for sponsoring this bill, Mr. Speaker, because it is a bill that has caused a great amount of concern to many municipalities throughout this province and is certainly a bill that I think a lot of municipalities are looking for clarity in. The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills has mentioned that he has a number of concerns and questions that he would like answers to further on, and I have a few here as well, and I certainly look forward to the answers that will be provided by the hon. Member for Leduc.

With this bill there are several objectives, and we have a number of concerns with this bill or, if not necessarily concerns, certainly questions. This particular bill adds in a provision which allows the minister to refuse to consider establishing a review committee to look at a person or an operation that is creating "an inappropriate disturbance." If the minister finds a claim to be without merit, then they can refuse to look at it, and again this would be one of the areas that begs the question: what does "without merit" mean? How can this be judged? Will there be a set of guidelines that can be followed to determine what is with merit and what is without merit?

A second objective of this bill is that it deals with amending approvals for an operation. The bill allows the approval officer the discretion to determine if it is a minor alteration, and then they can waive notification of the affected parties. Once again, one of the questions that this raises is: what is a minor alteration? As well, will there be objective standards in place, and if there are, when could we expect to see those?

A third objective of the bill is that it allows approval officers to ignore any provisions respecting tests or conditions related to the construction of the site of a confined feeding operation when it comes to alterations or expansions of an operation or for a registration of an operation. It also allows them to ignore provisions respecting the application of manure, composting material, or compost.

Again, one of the questions that I'd have here – approval officers should not be ignoring anything that is relevant to the establishment of CFOs, be it environmental, health-related, spreading manure, whether the people in the municipality even want the CFO. It should not be up to the approval officer to override municipal concerns. I think that when we look at our local levels of government, particularly those in which the CFOs are going to be established, certainly they have a better handle on what is happening in their particular area, and they should have the option of making those decisions and not be overridden by an approval officer.

Another objective of the bill is that it allows multiple amendments and expansions of approvals, registrations, or authorizations of CFOs. The Society for Environmentally Responsible Livestock Operations wants the expansion factors limited to one at a time, not in bundles. I think that this is a wise recommendation, Mr. Speaker, in that if we are trying to deal with multiple issues at once, certainly it is very easy for the water to be muddied and for us to end up with a decision that isn't in the best interests of the municipalities.

Those are some of the concerns that I had.

One of the things I like in this bill is that there is a process called emergency orders which is being brought in, and these will allow inspectors of CFOs to issue orders to the operator to deal with the release of manure, compost materials, or compost into the environment. The government has the power to initiate an action for the costs, so I think this is one of the good things about this particular bill.

Another thing is that they're updating the definition of a CFO to be less about the activity on the land and more about the land itself, and the Society for Environmentally Responsible Livestock Operations is quite okay with this definition.

So I will certainly look forward to the responses from the hon.

member when the opportunity does arise. I will take my seat and listen to further debate from the members of the Assembly. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments at second reading of Bill 17 when we're looking at the principles that have been established for the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004. It's an issue that concerns I think all Albertans, there being concerns with those operations over the health impacts, over water contamination – odour, of course, has been a huge, huge concern – issues of dust, and even some questions about the impact of the operations on the meats produced. So there's a wide range of issues related to the operations, and they have raised questions in a number of communities. For those of us who remember the previous debate, in 2001 I believe it was, that we had with respect to ILOs at the time, some of the same issues are raised with the bill in front of us right now.

3:30

I stand to be corrected, but in reading the bill, it seems that there's some loosening of the process for approving confined feeding operations, and I wondered if that was the intent of the bill drafters. It seems to me that there are principles in three major areas that the bill addresses, and the adequacy, I guess, is something that we'll have to determine when we move to Committee of the Whole.

Certainly, health concerns. The regional health authorities in the province have been recommending a two-kilometre radius around those operations. Some groups have asked for even larger areas, up to five kilometres, but it seems that there is a need for a good area around them to be established and to be held to.

We've heard from some areas of the province where there's difficulty with land that has been designated for residential development but with no buildings on it being allowed inside the radius and not being taken account of. The federal Health department, as I understand it, has asked for a moratorium until the effects on health can better be determined, but it's, again, part of the issues that are being raised with respect to those operations.

Environmental concerns. There are some sections of the bill that address environmental concerns, and those principles I think are sound. There's a principle in the bill that seems to be an important principle, and that is that neighbours should be protected and their well-being considered when those operations are being established.

So it's a bill that's certainly very important in some rural parts of the province and is of interest to all Albertans. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Under 29 do we have any comments or questions?

If not, then the hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been desperately trying to look through the bill to be able to make some observations or ask some questions and have been listening intently to what hon. members have had to say to this point on Bill 17, Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004.

I want to note as well the lengthy debate that we had on a similar bill in 2001, I think it was. Lots of questions were raised. Lots of Albertans expressed concern about the intent of the bill at the time to facilitate the further expansion of the confined feeding operations in the province and the relaxation of the conditions to so do and the removal of the local powers that at that time still did exist so that it

was within the powers of local municipal authorities to say yea or nay to the establishment of these and that theirs was the last word. I remember that debate. Additional concerns had to do with the impact on health and contamination of air, water around those communities, noise, dust, whatever have you. Public health and related concerns were certainly part of the debate at the time.

Reading quickly through the bill – and I must confess that I have not read it with the care that it deserves because of the problem of time available at the moment. My general impression is that Bill 17 would seem to relax the conditions for expansion and establishment of confined feeding operations in the province. If that is the case, I would like to obviously hear the hon. Member for Leduc, the sponsor of the bill, address some of the questions that have already been posed in this regard to see what his views are as to whether the bill before us will in fact further relax the conditions for the establishment or expansion of the confined operations for livestock. If that is the case, then I would be concerned because I know lots of Albertans would be very concerned.

Add to that the more recent commitment of this government to prevention aspects of the health care delivery system as distinct from the clinical, curative side once the illness has happened. I think we need to be cautious and careful if this bill relaxes the conditions and allows either the practice review committee or the approval officer to overlook or overrule the Public Health Act requirements related to the development of these kinds of operations in neighbourhoods and communities and districts where this might occur.

One other comment, Mr. Speaker, that I would like to put on record has to do with, it seems, the grandfathering of these operations which had been in place and had the licence to operate before January 1, 2002, I think is mentioned here. I think the section that I noted is on page 5. Yes. “Deemed approvals, registrations and authorizations.” I think that if my read of that new section being added here is accurate, it would suggest that that corresponds to the concern expressed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods a few minutes ago and which I can also share, that the nature of the act, the legislation before us that we are debating, would lead to relaxing the conditions under which these operations can be operated in the province.

That section on grandfathering under deemed approvals, registrations, and authorizations, rather than requiring that facilities licensed prior to the coming into effect of the act that this bill is amending, they should in fact be required to meet the new conditions, the new conditions related to pollution, a consequence on health of the activity that they undertake if they are not up to par. If they don't meet these standards, they should be tightened. The grandfathering here would suggest that they are exempted from any such obligation, and if that is the case – and I certainly stand to be corrected with respect to this intent of the bill – then that's another concern that I'd like the hon. member, the sponsor of the bill, to address.

So at the moment I would just conclude my remarks and take an opportunity later on during the next stages of the debate on the bill to make some more comments based on a closer study of the text of the bill. Thank you.

3:40

The Deputy Speaker: Comments? Questions?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this afternoon to participate in the debate on the amendments to the Agricultural Operation Practices Act. Certainly, it's not long since the original bill was discussed in this Assembly, with its proclamation on, I believe, January 1, 2002.

But here we are after the consultation process that was very ably done by the hon. Member for Leduc, and here we have in this bill some of the changes that were the result of that consultation process. It is noteworthy at this time, Mr. Speaker, to recognize the role the hon. member played in this and the work the hon. member has done. Regardless of whether one is accepting or speaking against this legislation, one can't doubt that hon. member's commitment to this issue.

Now, it is interesting to note – and maybe the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills can help us out here – that one of the things that we're contemplating doing with this legislation is that any individual who applies less than 500 tonnes of manure per year will not be required to keep records or conduct soil tests. Also, individuals who transfer less than 500 tonnes of manure per year will not be required to keep records of the transfer. What size of operation are we talking about here that produces less than 500 tonnes of manure on an annual basis?

Certainly, at one time – and many hon. members of this Assembly, Mr. Speaker, may be astonished to know this – it was a tradition, I'm told, in the spring of the year, and this was a tradition that came, apparently, from the Premier's office, that at the last of the snow, when the frost was starting to come out of the soil, the grounds-keepers here were told to use manure to fertilize the grass. It was Premier Manning's theory that all the rural members would smell that aroma of the frost coming out of the ground and the chemical reaction of the manure and decide that the session should be over in May and that they should get back to their farms. This was Premier Manning's theory. Apparently it was a tradition around the grounds here for quite a few years, because that man was . . .

Mr. Marz: Maybe that's why he's not here any more.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, he was Premier for 25 years. I may stand corrected, but that's one-quarter of the history of this province. He thought it was a way that if the session was lingering, the rural caucus would want to get home to their own farms. But enough of history.

An Hon. Member: What has this got to do with this bill?

Mr. MacDonald: What does this have to do with this bill? Well, we are looking at a provision, and 500 tonnes of manure on an annual basis is the requirement so that we do not need records or need to conduct soil tests.

Now, when we talk about changing the definition of the confined feeding operation, this is certainly a big issue in the province. Many people are not happy with this whole idea of a CFO, as it's called. These details regarding manure handling, I don't know how they will be received. I'm sure the hon. member has reasons for that requirement.

We are looking at changing the complaint and review processes in this bill. We are also looking at changes to the process for approvals and restorations, and we are also looking at changing the powers that we give approval officers to decide if a confined feeding operation fits within the municipal development plan.

Hopefully, in committee we will get an opportunity, and if not, I could review *Hansard* because I haven't had a chance to review *Hansard* in regard to previous statements from hon. members. When any landowner can waive the minimum distance separation which is between a residence and an operation, as I understand it, why is the landowner being allowed to waive this minimum distance separation? What exactly is the purpose of that waiver? If I could have that information in due course, I would be very grateful.

So, there certainly are, Mr. Speaker, many objectives to this bill, but there are concerns as well. The concerns that the Official Opposition has have been outlined by previous speakers, but we need to have a thorough discussion on this. We can do that in the Committee of the Whole. There are many individuals and there are some groups that have contacted the Official Opposition in regard to this bill. We are going to have to have further consultation with them, hopefully, if we get time tomorrow. If the initial response is any indication, we will have some amendments to propose for this bill at the committee stage.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any questions or comments?

If not, then the hon. Member for Leduc to close debate.

Mr. Klapstein: I will respond in Committee of the Whole, but I can make a few comments here. The discretion on the MDS that the board will be given is a limited discretion. If you draw a perfect line and a very rigid MDS, it's sometimes impractical because you take a look at the topography, the prevailing winds. If there is a residence a hundred feet from the line, do you have to say no, or can you have some discretion on what you're doing? The NRCB is being given quite a bit of trust, and we hope that that'll work.

On ministerial discretion to not allow a review, that would happen if there had already been a review shortly before or if that operation is under an NRCB order. There's not much point in having one review after the other after the other after the other. If you look at the legislation, the minister has the discretion as to whether or not that review can happen anyway.

3:50

The question with regard to spreading manure and neighbours being affected. When there is an application, the applicant will show the lands to cover that application, but there's nothing preventing him from using different lands the very next year and affecting people that are adjacent to those lands. So what we did is we said: okay, we're not going to make people that are neighbours to the lands on which manure is spread be affected parties, but we are

going to make more stringent restrictions as to what you have to do when you spread that manure, how close you can come to a residence and those sorts of things.

Short-term storage from six to seven months: that was to encourage people not to spread on snow or on frozen ground. We did not want to extend it to nine months because then they say, "Why do I have to construct manure storage capacity?" The intention is that if it's temporary storage, it has to be stored in such a way that it does not affect the environment.

The NRCB and the manure management plan. In other words, if you can show to the NRCB's satisfaction that the manure will be handled in such a way – and the example would be: if you have a contract with a mushroom producer and all the manure is going to leave the site, why would you force him to build a nine-month storage capacity?

Manure and saline soils. Well, the information we've been given is that it's actually an amendment to the soil, and it helps rather than hinder. So I will try and get some further information on that one.

Again, someone had asked about the review committee. The minister will only deny a review committee if there is no merit or it's vexatious, for those kinds of reasons. Perhaps I'll leave it at that and get some more detail.

I move second reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 17 read a second time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Acting Deputy Government House Leader.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There's been a lot of talk about things going through fields this afternoon in this House. I think it's time to get out and have a look at them.

I would like to move that the House now stand adjourned until Monday at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; at 3:54 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 15, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/03/15

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Guide us all in our deliberations and debate that we may determine courses of action which will be to the enduring benefit of our province of Alberta. Amen.

Now, hon. members, would you please remain standing, and I'd invite you and all members in the galleries to participate in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly His Excellency Georgiy Mamedov, ambassador of Russia to Canada.

Alberta has a long-standing relationship with Russia that dates back over 30 years in both the energy and agricultural sectors. Alberta and Russia share common challenges and opportunities because of our shared northern geography, wealth of natural resources, and unique aboriginal populations. The government of Alberta has special twinning relationships with three subnational areas in western Siberia. Mr. Speaker, the number of Alberta companies active in Russia has increased substantially since the year 2000. This increase is due in part to the Russian government's legislative reform.

Mr. Speaker, this is the ambassador's first visit to Alberta. I would ask that our honoured guest please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise on this glorious Alberta day to introduce to you and through you some constituents of mine who are visiting the Legislature today, the grade 6 class of Callingwood elementary school. They are here with their teachers, Mr. Wilcox and Mrs. Eastman, and their parent helpers, Mrs. Elniski and Mrs. Gillard. I'd ask them to rise and please accept the warm welcome of this House today.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I wish to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature an

honoured constituent of Vegreville-Viking. He's seated in your gallery. Born in 1929 and raised in a trapper's shack in the St. Paul area, one of 14 children, great-great-grandnephew of the missionary Albert Lacombe and great-grandson of Edmonton pioneer Laurence Garneau, he served in the Canadian army from 1949 to 1973, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, peacekeeping in various trouble spots – Cyprus, Gaza, Egypt – during the 1950s and '60s. He was Alberta's Sergeant-at-Arms for 13 years, five years' overlap doing both, the first Métis ever appointed to that position anywhere in Canada. Honoured by a special resolution of the Legislature as honorary Sergeant-at-Arms for life, I would ask Mr. Oscar Lacombe to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed a pleasure to rise today and introduce to all members of this Assembly Mr. Andrew Brown, a devoted constituent of Edmonton-Castle Downs who has been an employee of the Alberta government in various departments and ministries for a number of years. Now he is redirecting his efforts in making our community a much better place to live. I would like Mr. Brown to rise and accept the traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly a visiting delegation from Hardisty school in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. This delegation of students and parents is led by their teacher, Mrs. Sharon Loughheed, who is the spouse of the very distinguished hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. They are visiting the Legislative Assembly this afternoon. They are seated in the public gallery. Before I ask them to rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly, I would like to introduce the parent volunteers: Mrs. Lucie Zuidhof, Mrs. Ivonne Ortega-Gaete, Mrs. Joan Geisterfer, Bonnie Bjornson, Corinne Knop, and Mr. Craig Hutschal. Again, they're in the public gallery, and I would ask them now to please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to my colleagues in the Assembly 30 grade 6 students from Garneau elementary school in my constituency of Edmonton-Strathcona. They are attending the School at the Legislature this week. Garneau elementary school has many achievements to its credit. I'll just give you one example. Last year all grade 6 students had either met or exceeded the provincial achievement test average. The guests from Garneau elementary are accompanied by their dedicated teacher, Jeanne Commance. They're all seated in the public gallery, and now I ask them all to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Mr. Norris: Well, I'm not sure whether this gentleman is going to welcome this introduction, but I see an old friend sitting up in the gallery, so, Mr. Speaker, I would like to introduce to you and through you Mr. Link Byfield, one of the publishers of *Alberta*

Report. Mr. Byfield's father is a constituent and a good friend of mine. I'd like to recognize him and have the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alongside Mr. Byfield there is also a great Albertan, one of the people who works for the citizens centre. His name is Craig Dockstader, and I'd ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

1:40

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After the broken promises of electricity deregulation, the failures to fund public education, the failures to adequately fund public health care, there's now more evidence of another broken promise from this government, this time on auto insurance. According to a letter that was mentioned in *Thompson's World Insurance News*, a very respected industry newsletter, from Dominion Insurance CEO George Cooke, 80 per cent of Albertans won't see savings from this government's auto insurance reform package. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. Is this government setting up auto insurance consumers in this province for a colossal letdown?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, if this hon. member would get current, the article that he's referring to was published over three months ago, and the letter was written well before that, and there's been an awful lot of work done on the implementation of the new automobile insurance reform within this province. Quite frankly, I have been a little surprised that he wasn't aware of some of the implementation processes that have taken place because we've certainly been public about it. We've been open about it, and the implementation team has been very, very thorough at communicating with the industry as well as consumers.

Mr. MacDonald: But prices haven't gone down in the last three months.

Again to the same minister: given that the hon. minister heard the Premier state that he considered his insurance package a failure if 60 per cent of Albertans didn't see savings, does the hon. minister now agree with Mr. Cooke that the insurance plan is doomed to failure because there are no savings?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, I now go through a chronology of meetings that occurred with Mr. Cooke through not only my ministry but also with myself and other members of the implementation team.

On November 5 Mr. Cooke did in fact write to the Premier. We responded. On November 11 the Deputy Minister of Finance along with the Assistant Deputy Minister of Finance met with Mr. Cooke and the other Insurance Bureau of Canada representatives in Toronto. On November 25 there was a letter from Mr. Cooke that went to the Deputy Minister of Finance. On November 27 the Deputy Minister of Finance and the assistant deputy met with Mr. Cooke and, again, other IBC representatives in Toronto.

On December 11 and 12, Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Minister of Finance and the ADM of Finance met with Mr. Cooke again in Toronto. On December 16 the Assistant Deputy Minister of Finance

met with the IBC representatives. On December 19 I personally met with the IBC representatives. On December 12 Mr. Cooke wrote to the Premier.

On January 27 and 28 the ADM of Finance met again with the IBC representatives. On February 26 the minister responded to Mr. Cooke in writing, and on March 3 the hon. Member for Medicine Hat met with the IBC representatives.

Mr. Speaker, we've come a long way on automobile reform, and that has been because the people involved – the industry players, the legal community, and the public – have come together to realize that a reform had to take place. Status quo was not acceptable. We're moving down that path very well. We have some regulations to sort out. We told this House that we would take our time and do it right, and when they're ready, we'll bring them back. But we are committed to a reform package, and we're not going to do the ready, fire, aim scenario that that hon. member wants us to do.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: will the hon. minister agree to release Mr. Cooke's letter as well as all other documentation on insurance so that Albertans can see for themselves what's going on? Let's have an informed public debate on this matter.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has mentioned in his press release that he read this in *Thompson's World Insurance News* dated December 15, 2003, on page 5. It's already out there, so I would suggest he read the article.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the same letter Mr. Cooke warns that under the government's plan insurance companies will be forced to find ways to subsidize young drivers. Again to the hon. minister: does this mean that rates will go up for the rest of us? Is that the best that this government can do?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member had been paying attention through this debate over the last year and a half, he would realize that the new structure, the made-in-Alberta structure, focuses on rewarding good drivers and penalizing bad drivers. We want bad drivers off the roads, quite frankly. We're not so focused on whether they're male or female or where they live but that good drivers drive at a reasonable price, with accessibility to insurance. Bad drivers are going to be penalized. That's what we've been saying from day one.

Mr. MacDonald: This debate is going on behind closed doors. Insurance rates are going up. Consumers have no choice, and they want a public debate here. Now, will the Premier confirm . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, this being Monday, the start of a new week, remember the rule that you agreed to: no preambles on the second question. Remember that? Okay; proceed. The question.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, again, if the hon. member would pay attention, we've had a freeze imposed on insurance rates in this province since October 30, and that was for 18 months. That's given us the latitude and the time frame in which to work with the industry and to put this framework in place. The industry has co-operated. Were they happy initially? Probably not. But have they come on

board? You bet they have. In fact, over 90 per cent of them have complied and put in place the refunds and the credits to their customers as we speak.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister: given that the government's plan is doomed to failure, will the government now consider a plan for public auto insurance as outlined under liberalopposition.com? Why don't you go there for a policy?

Mrs. Nelson: I'm not going to say what to do with the liberal.com edition or whatever it is, but the doom for failure is, in fact, their own web site. If they'd pay attention to what's happening in this program, they'd see that Albertans, the consumers, the people we represent, come first, and we will put a structure in place that will serve the people of this province that's accessible, affordable, and comparably priced.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Long-term Care Accommodation Rates

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A government news release states that last summer's 42 per cent increase in long-term care fees was the result of its work with the Alberta Long Term Care Association to help its membership improve services to residents. Seniors, however, continue to express their concern over this increase. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. How did the Alberta Long Term Care Association twist the arm of the minister to give them such a staggering increase? Will he now table the information they used to convince him?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we looked at long-term care rates across the country, and we looked at the real costs associated with providing the type of care that is being done in our long-term care centres throughout the province. It had been some number of years since there had been a meaningful increase in the long-term care rates, the contributions by the seniors who actually use this service. Again, when we looked at our rates and compared them across Canada, we found them to still be, even after the increase, in the lower tier of costs to the individual seniors who use this very important long-term care system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Health and Wellness: given the number of concerns that are still being raised by groups such as FAIRE and the Elder Advocates of Alberta, they question whether any independent audit was conducted to ensure that accommodation fees were being spent properly before this increase was brought in.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, long-term care operators have contracts with regional health authorities. We ask our regional health authorities to ensure that there are certain standards put in place and to monitor those. We, of course, do such monitoring ourselves, and when problems arise, we're certainly very aggressive in our attempts to look into these issues to determine whether there are legitimate concerns. Sometimes there are, but we move very, very quickly to rectify them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: given that the minister said that the increase in long-term care rates would result in better food, why didn't this government make improvements to food and accommodation a requirement when this fee increase was granted? They're not tied together.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I can certainly have the Minister of Seniors supplement this answer, but my understanding is that that's exactly what was done.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Mr. Woloshyn: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I think it's important to note that before these long-term care rates went into effect, the increases, a few things were done to ensure that the people who were in these facilities would be looked after. First of all, we added a provision for folks on our seniors' benefits program where they would have the same take-home residual income after paying their fees as folks in lodges. Other ministries who have tenants there looked after their tenants.

There were some stipulations put on. For example, there would be no charges for bathing; there wouldn't be any charges for wander bracelets; there wouldn't be any charges for cable TV; there wouldn't be any charges for incontinence supplies. At the same time, individual places that may have had – and I stress: may have had – some menu concerns were addressed; for example, the one right within this city where the operators committed to putting over half of the increase into wages and the other half into meeting menu requirements as identified by the tenants.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

1:50

Cattle Industry

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Many Albertans will be shocked to learn that millions of their hard-earned tax dollars went to the bottom line of two multinational giants, Cargill and Tyson. The minister of agriculture confirmed last week that the Alberta government provided provincial BSE money to meat packers who own cattle on their own or other people's feedlots. Tyson Foods was just fined \$1.2 billion in the United States for manipulating cattle prices in that country. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. In the dysfunctional market Alberta has had since last May, what would have prevented Tyson, Cargill, and other meat packers who own feedlot cattle from buying their own cattle at artificially low prices, thereby putting extra BSE aid in the pockets of their feedlot divisions?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I don't know what basis that question is phrased under. I mean, he's asking me to explain what a packer who owned cattle might have done. Let me say this. It is not against the law in this province for feedlot divisions of packers to own cattle. They bought the cattle; they took the same risk as any other feedlot owner in buying those cattle. There was a discussion around this issue, and the industry determined that the fair thing to do was to protect that risk for those people who had invested in those cattle as for any other feedlot.

Mr. Speaker, the packer-owned cattle in this province range over time from 12 per cent to a high of 18 per cent, from what I've been able to find. There are at least two states that I know of in the

United States that limit packer-owned cattle to 10 per cent. That's been discussed here, but it is not against the law for them to own cattle. They bought the cattle, they took the risk, and they were compensated on the same basis as everyone else.

Mr. Mason: Again to the same minister: what would have prevented packers from selling their own cattle to themselves at artificially depressed prices in order to pocket more assistance from this government?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the market function, which, obviously, during this time wasn't operating the same as it might have at other times, allowed packers to buy cattle out of their own feed yards, cattle from some 1,500-plus feedlots across this province, which they did, and process those cattle and move them.

The hon. member seems to have missed a very important point. We had an incident of one animal contracting BSE, being found with BSE in this province. That totally changed the way we market cattle and the way we move cattle. Mr. Speaker, there was no market as we understood it after May 20 because we were confined to domestic buying. Cattle were bought by packers in the east, by packers in the west. The industry in this province did a phenomenal job of working with government to move over 1 million head of fed cattle through the system. We should applaud the ability to do that rather than trying to find holes in something that was so wholly successful.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, when the minister tables her account of the expenditures made under the BSE compensation programs, will it specify exactly which recipients received exactly how much money?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'll say it one more time very slowly. When we conclude these programs – we're 97 per cent paid out as of Friday – I will present a list of every recipient. It will have the name of the recipient, the number of cattle, and the amount of the cheque. To date, as I indicated last week, we have distributed \$359 million to 1,534 feedlots.

Mr. Speaker, as I indicated last week, the unfortunate part of this debate is that we're losing sight of the fact that this industry still has some very critical issues in front of it. I don't know whether to thank the hon. member or not, but I can tell him that I have had a deluge of calls from producers, feedlot owners across this province over the weekend thanking this government for the programs that it put in place that were successful and their annoyance – maybe that's a mild way – at the discussions that have I think sidetracked the really important issue, which is the recovery of this industry.

Health Care Reform

Mr. Graydon: Mr. Speaker, last week the Conference Board of Canada released a report detailing why health care is not fiscally sustainable in any province – I repeat: any province – in Canada. The Premier and minister of health have been commenting that Alberta will introduce health care reforms in the next couple of months that may include user fees and the delisting of services and moving Alberta out of the Canada Health Act. My question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: can the minister tell Albertans how a province with an estimated budget surplus in excess of \$3 billion is unable to sustain health services at their current level?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, let me say, first of all, that this government supports the principles of the Canada Health Act both in spirit and in law, and this support is part of the province's Health Care

Protection Act. But we also recognize that maintaining our health care system cannot – and I say again: cannot – be about just spending more money. It's not just the province of Alberta that's saying this. All the Premiers of territories and provinces across Canada agree that the Canadian health care system is in need of urgent reform, and on March 9 of this year the Conference Board of Canada in its report echoed this sentiment.

The Conference Board projects that the total provincial/territorial public expenditures on health will more than double – more than double – by 2020 to over \$170 billion, up from \$72.5 billion in the last year, 2002-2003. This means that the province of Alberta by itself would have to spend an extra \$600 million a year just to maintain, not to improve but to maintain, the system that we now have, and at that rate, Mr. Speaker, by the year 2020 the province of Alberta will spend 53 per cent of its budget on health care alone.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. Many Albertans understood that the reforms undertaken in the Mazankowski report over the past two years would make the system sustainable. Why is the government starting another series of reforms?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, this province has implemented an aggressive agenda for reform that's making better use of technology, delivering better services, improving access, but these by themselves are insufficient to slow down the rate of growth in health care costs. This province and other provinces across Canada are experiencing cost drivers that are largely outside of anyone's control, such as population growth, aging, and inflation.

The Conference Board of Canada's report indicates that there's a difference between cost drivers and cost escalators. Cost drivers in this case, Mr. Speaker, include a population growth in this province that's set to be at about 1.5 per cent, aging at 1 per cent, both of which are exceeding national projections. Our current health reforms attempted to address some of these concerns. For example, our focus on staying healthy has been an important part of this.

But what we now also need to do in addition to dealing with the cost drivers is deal with cost escalators. The escalators include non Canada Health Act-related things like drugs, which have been growing on average, Mr. Speaker, 17 per cent a year for each of the last five years. So what we need is flexibility in how the Canada Health Act is interpreted so that unilateral decisions by the federal government do not impact how Alberta delivers its health care system to Albertans.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you. My second supplemental is to the same minister. The Conference Board reported and pointed to drug costs as one of the major drivers in the health care costs that we're facing right now. What is the minister doing to contain drug costs in Alberta?

Mr. Mar: Well, we've done much, Mr. Speaker, to try and maintain costs, but as I indicated, notwithstanding all of our efforts costs went up by roughly 17 per cent a year for each of the last five years. Efforts that we've made include the introduction of the provincial drug list, mandatory generic substitution, and the increased use of special authorizations for high-cost drugs. The Conference Board of Canada highlights a variety of techniques to manage drug costs, and

I've instructed the people of the Department of Health and Wellness to review the Conference Board's report and develop a plan of action accordingly.

Emergency Services in Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, Calgary's head of emergency medicine in a letter to Kathy Briant about her mother's long stay in the Foothills emergency admits that bed shortages are leading to increased risk for patients in Calgary's emergency rooms. In fact, the head of Calgary's emergency medicine has been publicly quoted as saying that the future is a little bit scary. Despite government denials the situation is worsening in Calgary thanks to this government's mismanagement of the health care system. My questions are, first of all, to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that it was four years ago that the Calgary health region termed their emergency room services to be, quote, under siege, end quote, can the minister tell us why this situation only continues to worsen?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the hon. member review *Hansard* from last week. He asked very similar questions last week. The answer remains the same, and that is that the regional health authority in Calgary has moved on a number of different actions including recommendations established in the Motta inquiry to improve access, to improve the triage system, to ensure that patients who leave the emergency room certainly notify people of their intentions to depart.

Mr. Speaker, people from around North America come to see how the emergency room system works in the city of Calgary. It's a good system. It is not perfect. In my recollection last week I indicated that the number of visits to emergency rooms in the city of Calgary was something in the range of a quarter of a million visits. The fact and the reality is that the overwhelming majority of people of those 240,000 to 250,000 visits a year get the service that they need in a timely way.

There are, of course, exceptional circumstances. We know that there are times in the year when perhaps an early flu arrives and emergency room visits go up. But, again, things like Health Link have helped to dramatically reduce the number of unnecessary visits to emergency rooms. This has been a very positive step in the right direction. During peak times in emergency rooms the regional health authority in Calgary has also put in more emergency room physicians.

So all the right steps are being taken, Mr. Speaker, and I have full confidence that the regional health authority in Calgary will continue to improve an already good system.

Dr. Taft: The minister mentions the Motta inquiry. Well, given that the Calgary health region told the Motta inquiry almost two years ago that changes were being made to improve the system, how does the minister explain that the number of code burgundies has quadrupled?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, again, the use of code burgundies is a management tool put in place by the regional health authority in an effort to try and move people around where necessary. We recognize that, again, it's not an exact science to be able to anticipate with perfect knowledge how many people will come into an emergency room on a given night or even in a given month. So it is a management tool that they use.

The regional health authority has put in place its capital requests for improvements, for example, at the emergency room at the Foothills medical centre. It has also put in place what it believes to

be its needs in a 10-year capital plan for the city of Calgary. The government has accepted those plans and is in the process of reviewing them. Will we be able to fund the almost billion dollars of capital that the regional health authority has requested? Not all at once, but over time we will address the real and legitimate needs expressed by the Calgary regional health authority because of the growth of the city of Calgary, a dramatic growth. I'm confident, again, that the regional health authority will meet the legitimate needs of Calgarians.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. This time to the Minister of Infrastructure: given that the head of Calgary's emergency medicine also says that, quote, developing a new southern hospital will greatly alleviate the capacity issue, end quote, why is the government refusing to provide funding to build that hospital?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I think it's important to recognize that the Minister of Health and Wellness and myself and the Premier have met with the Calgary regional health authority. We have heard their need for additional facilities, and of course we are working on those. I sure don't want to have the impression left that we have done nothing. In fact, if the member would visit the site in Calgary, the Children's hospital is under construction. That is a very necessary facility. Also, if the health clinic within the south part of Calgary is not open yet, it's very near open. The regional health authority has been purchasing land for the south Calgary hospital that's going to be constructed.

Mr. Speaker, we have to also remember that there are other needs around the province. As a matter of fact, over the last three years we have approved just about a billion dollars' worth of health care facilities in the province of Alberta. That's over the last three years.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Report on Rural Development

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In July of 2002 the Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development announced the creation of a steering committee to examine rural development in Alberta. This committee, which was chaired by the members for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and Wainwright, was given the responsibility of examining why the Alberta advantage had not appeared to create much growth outside the Edmonton/Calgary corridor. My question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. With many individuals, especially our representatives from municipal governments, anxiously awaiting the release of the report, when can we expect this report to be made available?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, first, let me acknowledge the great work done by the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and the Member for Wainwright. These two members of this Legislature travelled the province and listened—listened—to individuals, elected officials, and anyone who chose to come to the meetings as to how they envisioned rural development in their communities and took careful note of what these individuals felt were barriers to rural development and to their communities growing.

Mr. Speaker, this report was presented to me in the fall, and because of the multifaceted issues in the report we determined that we should share it with other ministries. A lot of the information in

that report requires other ministries' responses. They talk about economics.

Speaker's Ruling
Questions regarding Unreleased Report

The Speaker: Hon. minister, please. There's a bit of a dilemma here. A question is being raised about a report that has not been made public yet, and there is discussion going on in the Assembly. I think that to the privilege of all members of this Assembly, should questions be addressed on a report, it would be to their advantage to at least have access to such a report.

The hon. member.

2:10 Report on Rural Development
(continued)

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The question was: when can we anticipate the release of that particular report, and how will that report help our rural communities?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I apologize, but I was getting to the reason that the report has not been released yet, and it is because of the complexity and because of the number of ministries that would be involved in the implementation of that report. We felt that to do justice to the work that was done by these individuals and by the people that participated in these meetings – and I must say a great turnout right across this province – we would spend some time doing that. It is my anticipation that we will release this report in the next short weeks or even days because the majority of that work has been done, and I know that many, many communities are anxiously waiting for that.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Forest Stewardship Council Certification

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The demand for Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood products is increasing rapidly. Earlier this year Weldwood of Hinton was dropped by IKEA because its forestry practices did not meet IKEA's wood purchasing standards. This is merely one example that shows how Alberta's forest management strategy is becoming a target for market action. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: given that the FSC certification standards were finalized last fall, when will this ministry finally work with Alberta conservation groups to identify areas for protection so that Alberta forest companies can become FSC certified?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, that's a very, very good question because forestry continues to play a very important part of our overall economic diversification plan. In fact, there are thousands of people employed in that industry. I'm sure a lot of the members' constituents also work in that industry, so this is a very, very important part of our economy and industry in Alberta.

The issue of certification is only one challenge amongst many challenges, such as the softwood lumber agreement, the endangered species legislation that the feds are proposing, the Kyoto agreement that the feds are proposing. All those areas, Mr. Speaker, are a challenge. This international certification, of course, is another process, and we are working very closely with the Alberta Forest Products Association, the industry, and the users out there in relation to working toward proper certification for industries in Alberta.

Some of the challenges we have, of course, are that a lot of the small operatives – there are about 125 in Alberta – produce less than 5 million board feet. Some of those industries, of course, may not have the capacity and the finances to be able to meet some of those certification standards, so it is a challenge and continues to be a challenge. You can be assured that we will meet those standards as required when the time is right.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, the minister misses the point of the question. When will the ministry stop industrial development in the most endangered areas of the boreal forest so that conservation planning can be completed?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, of course, the Liberal way would be to stop everything. Fortunately, they're not the government and probably will never be the government, so we don't need to worry about that.

Mr. Speaker, we do have a good balance in Alberta with industrial development and environmental management, and that will continue.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, given that the minister needs to take into consideration that their forest management strategy is affecting Alberta businesses, when is he going to show some commitment to improve forest management and to the Alberta forest industry and trash its policy of no more protected areas in Alberta?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, you know, we probably have the most efficient mills in North America in relation to harvesting our resources, but that also goes along with the forest management. A lot of our FMA holders have won international awards in relation to forest management and harvesting. Of course, the Liberals would never see that because all they see is the negative side.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

West Nile Virus

Mr. Renner: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, last summer the West Nile virus arrived in Alberta, and the Palliser health region in southeastern Alberta reported 131 of the 275 West Nile infections reported province-wide. The Minister of Health and Wellness recently announced a mosquito control program for the coming summer. Medicine Hat and the surrounding municipalities will receive about \$350,000 in funding to implement or adapt municipal mosquito control programs to combat West Nile virus. My questions this afternoon are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that almost one-half of the West Nile virus cases occurred in a region that accounts for only about 3 per cent of the total population of Alberta, how can the minister be confident that this funding will be adequate to minimize the risk of further outbreaks of West Nile in this region?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, prior to the summer of 2003 we had no evidence of West Nile virus in this province, nor did we know with any certainty at all which of the 43 species of mosquitos which live in this province might actually carry the virus, nor did we know where they would lay their eggs. So it would have been premature to implement a broad larvicide program last year.

We did work in the past year, Mr. Speaker, with municipalities and our colleagues at the ministries of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development to determine from mosquito surveillance where these mosquitos might be, and we did that on the basis of incidences of bird and human cases province-wide. What we found

is that communities and counties like Newell, Forty Mile, and Cypress had been assessed to have the highest risk, so our program for larvicide this year will target our dollars at those areas that are at highest risk.

Now, I need to say this, Mr. Speaker. I cannot guarantee that this will entirely reduce the risk of infection to human beings. No mosquito control can kill every mosquito, but it is important to remember that this will be a very important part of supplementing the most effective means of reducing the risk to human health, and that is every individual taking the proper steps, like wearing DEET and wearing the right kind of clothing, to avoid the risk of being bitten by a mosquito.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Renner: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I have only one supplemental question. To the same minister: how will the minister ensure that municipalities within the region use the funding in the most effective way?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, this department has worked very closely with Alberta Environment to develop the program. Alberta Environment is enforcing the guidelines around the use of pesticides in the province of Alberta. The insect and pesticide specialist responsible for this mosquito control program will be working with municipalities to ensure that their staff are properly trained to find and identify the correct species of mosquitos and certified to apply the chemical agents that are used to kill the mosquito larvae.

Municipalities participating in this funding formula are required to provide detailed plans for their mosquito control programs for approval, and any funding that is unused at the end of the season will be returned to the Department of Health and Wellness.

Intermodal Traffic Safety

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, despite a shortage of approximately 5,000 qualified workers CN Rail continues to send traffic in and out of intermodal terminals. This has led to complaints by striking workers that inexperienced drivers are leaving the yards here in Alberta with containers that have not been locked down properly, compromising safety for both the workers and for Alberta drivers. To the Minister of Transportation: is the minister currently working with CN Rail to ensure that traffic safety here in Alberta isn't compromised during this time of shortage at CN Rail?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the member is referring to a matter that is totally under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

Mr. Bonner: Given that these trucks are travelling on Alberta highways, Mr. Speaker, and that at least three accidents involving intermodal truck traffic have occurred in Alberta in the past 21 days, what steps has the ministry taken to ensure that adequate inspections are taking place and that violations of safety standards are being appropriately punished?

Mr. Stelmach: When it comes to truck traffic, that is under the jurisdiction of the provincial government. In terms of load restraint the fines have been increased rather significantly, and also any violations of the current Traffic Safety Act will go on the company profile. So those are quite serious allegations.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: what is Alberta Transportation doing to work with companies to ensure that traffic

safety standards aren't compromised when there are shortages of experienced workers?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member talks about a shortage of experienced workers as a result of the strike. Actually, there is a shortage of experienced drivers right across Canada. In fact, a number of larger trucking firms are bringing people in from other provinces. Some are actually training people from Yugoslavia and other countries in Europe, because when it comes to the spring run in terms of fertilizer, anhydrous ammonia, et cetera, all companies want to do the best they can in terms of the proper training of the drivers and also to ensure that all safety standards are met. As I mentioned before, it is very crucial that all trucks on Alberta highways operate as safely as possible.

2:20

The other is that through co-operation with the Department of Learning we've actually put together a course that will be starting soon where companies can send their drivers for additional training, but this is quite in-depth. It is not only the standard driving practices on Alberta highways, but this would be load restraints, crossing borders, proper waybills. At the end of the period the driver will actually have a certificate. They can then present their certificate to other trucking companies when they're either seeking employment or to show their expertise in this particular area.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mental Health Services

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. About a week ago in this House the Minister of Health and Wellness gave the government a grade of 99 per cent when it came to Alberta's mental health system. By contrast, a leaked government report on mental health gives the government a failing grade. The report states that there are significant capacity and service gaps across the entire spectrum of mental health services and that Alberta's spending on mental health is far below the average of the percentage of budget that other provinces spend on mental health. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What immediate action is the government taking to address the deplorable gaps in services, the insufficient funding, and the tragic lack of strategic vision outlined in the leaked report on this province's mental health services?

Mr. Mar: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, let me say this. This was a draft report. It was not leaked to anybody. It was released to stakeholders for their input. We asked stakeholders throughout the province: where are the areas that we can improve our mental health services, what are the visions and the strategies that we should put in place in order to ensure that Albertans have access to the right kinds of services that they require, and what are the kinds of community services that are needed by people who have needs in mental health? We are taking steps to address these even now, even in advance of the plan being finalized.

As an example, Mr. Speaker, fairly recently we announced that four psychiatrists and five other mental health workers have gone into an arrangement with 44 general practitioners in the city of Calgary to better identify and help those patients of the 44 general practitioners whose patients need mental health services. So we are taking steps in the right direction.

I would also say, Mr. Speaker, that it would be false to suggest that there's a conclusion that we're not spending the right amount of money on mental health, because you need to know first what

services you need before you can tell how much you need to spend on it. So this comparison with other jurisdictions, saying that expressed as a percentage, it's lower than other parts of the country – I've yet to see any evidence that backs up that assertion. But even if it were true, I'd say: what does that tell us? It doesn't tell us anything, because until you know what it is that you need in the system, you cannot say how much it will cost.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: how long will Alberta families have to wait before meaningful action is taken to not only make the plan that the minister talks about public but to meaningfully address the critical gaps in mental services and funding identified in the report?

Mr. Mar: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, there were a number of false assumptions in the premise of that question. We've indicated that health care, particularly mental health care in this province, is critically important. It's the reason why we've asked Albertans and asked stakeholders how we should proceed on a province-wide mental health plan. It will be done in the fullness of time, and it will be done in a way that makes sense, where there's a consensus among stakeholders as to the direction that we move forward.

But, again, Mr. Speaker, to reiterate what I said in my response to his first question, I wouldn't want the hon. member to think that there is nothing happening in the meantime. We are taking appropriate steps to close gaps. We have increased our funding for mental health. I spoke about the dollars involved last week in this Assembly. I invite the hon. member to refer to *Hansard*. We do spend some \$240 million or \$250 million with the Mental Health Board. That's over and above the hundred million dollars that regional health authorities estimate that they spend. We know that many visits to a doctor's office, general practitioners, involve matters of things like depression. We cover the cost of that. We cover the costs of drugs in this province, including psychiatric drugs.

So, Mr. Speaker, we do devote enormous resources to this area, and I wouldn't want the hon. member to leave Albertans with the impression that we don't do anything with this area of mental health, because it is very important.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary to the same minister: given that the minister is proposing to act only in the fullness of time, how can he justify pushing Albertans with mental illness into the community without providing the community supports necessary for successful treatment?

Mr. Mar: Again, Mr. Speaker, there are so many false premises to the question asked by the hon. member. I want to emphasize that we do provide community supports for those suffering from mental illness in the community. We are asking our stakeholders: are there other things that we can do to improve this? They indicate to us that the answer is yes, so let us wait for this report to be responded to by stakeholders in the province, and we will move forward with our plan from there.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Film Development Program

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is for the Minister of Community Development. Constituents in my riding

were very excited when Wetaskiwin was recently the production location for a new movie, *Santa's Slay*. Usually it's the major cities and the mountain areas that attract the film industry. Can the minister tell us what impact the Alberta film development program is having on our province?

Mr. Zwodzesky: Mr. Speaker, the impact of the Alberta film development program throughout this province has been and continues to be absolutely enormous. I can tell you that within the last four years and since the introduction of this program the number of persons involved in the film industry has grown by 220 per cent. The number of actors alone has increased by about 195 per cent, and as a result of those couple of increases, the dollar value of production in this province has increased about fivefold. So we know that the program is working and working well.

From an artistic, creative, and technical point of view it is having an enormous impact on the personnel involved in that industry. It also fuels local economies in places such as Wetaskiwin, Bruderheim, and Edmonton, which is where *Santa's Slay* is currently being filmed. It is a production with which a local producer has a coproduction arrangement and, obviously, one with which we have a record of association.

Two other quick points, Mr. Speaker. The taxation coffers of the province of Alberta are directly impacted also because these individuals involved in this industry pay corporate, private, personal taxes, so that's helpful there. I think, finally, the impact is being seen in the promotion of Alberta as a go-to or a come-to location with incredible scenery, tremendous support crews, and staff who can help out with these films. So we see a great deal of benefit to the tourism industry, and we know that this is a multimillion dollar industry, and we hope that within a few years it will become a billion dollar economic generator in this province.

Mr. Johnson: My first supplemental is to the Minister of Economic Development. What role did Economic Development play in attracting the *Santa's Slay* production to Wetaskiwin?

2:30

Mr. Norris: Well, thank you very much to the hon. member for the question. At the outset I don't think I can add much more to what the hon. Minister of Community Development said about the impact on this industry. But I do think certain thanks should be given to our colleague for Airdrie-Rocky View, who has been the chairman of this film commission for so long and has fought passionately for it.

Mr. Speaker, the answer to the hon. member's question is yes. We took a mission to Los Angeles, we met with the producers of *Santa's Slay*, and we, I believe, convinced them to come to Alberta to do so. We have some 17 other films that are going to be produced here in the next year, we believe. One of them, entitled *My One, My All, My Everything*, I'm told is a love story, which should lend itself very well to the beautiful Alberta west that we have here.

Mr. Speaker, I would also echo the comments that the hon. Minister of Community Development said. We have targeted this industry in particular for what it does for tourism. If one looks at what happened with New Zealand and *Lord of the Rings*, they've generated some 3 and a half billion dollars in new tourism opportunities because of that remarkable film sequence. So in Alberta we've targeted that as well.

Again, my thanks to the Member for Airdrie-Rocky View for all her hard work in continuing to promote this remarkable industry.

Mr. Johnson: My last question is to the same minister. What role is your ministry playing to specifically attract more film production opportunities to the rural area?

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the absolute delights of this job is that rural Alberta is already built. It has everything that people are looking for. So our job in our two missions to Los Angeles that we undertook with producers was to let them know that if they're looking for badlands, we have it, that if they're looking for an old western town such as Lacombe, we have it. We have everything. The sets are already built; they're here. God made them for us. We just have to utilize them. As a result, we want to let them know what's going on also in northern Alberta, as my colleague says, in Medicine Hat. A beautiful province, a remarkable province.

The other thing we're doing, Mr. Speaker, is working with our regional economic alliances, of which we have 12 in the province, to let them know how to promote this remarkable industry and how to get the message out that production can take place not only in Edmonton and Calgary but also in rural Alberta, which is very important.

The Speaker: Hon. members, prior to calling on a number of hon. members to participate today, I'd just like to make a follow-up comment to something I said in the House the other day. On Thursday last I indicated that last Thursday could have probably have been a remarkable day in the history of the Legislature of Alberta. That was day 15 of the session, and Her Honour came in and gave royal assent to 15 bills. That was a productivity of 15 bills in 15 days.

Well, weekend research shows the following. In 1944 on day 14 of the Ninth Legislature 20 bills received royal assent, and in 1941 on day 16 of the Ninth Session 21 bills received royal assent. However, the record is in 1913. In the Second Legislature 87 bills received royal assent on day 29 of the session.

Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce people from Special Olympics. We have the group leaders visiting today in the gallery accompanied by athletes. Group leaders include Louise Suru, Corey Coldwell, Gary Lefleur, Michael Daly, Sarah Lavin, and Michelle Deering. Several athletes are accompanying them, among them Ambyr Lindon, Adam Faulkner, Robin Friesen, Andrew Rys, Steve Rabeeh, Joe Knorr, Calvin Webster, Warren Pattison, Randal Thurston, Najden Ciric, Geoff Yuzyk, Jack Ringdahl, Tammy Royan, Shilo Sutton, Steven Weigelt, Randy Royer, Wayne Poloyko, Edward Busch, Kevin Shoenberger, Jim Combs, and Chris Stoikopoulos. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Recognitions**
Alex Girvan, Aidon Girvan, Willie King

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, on the third of May 2003 one-year-old Cameron Girvan was playing with his brother, two-year-old Aidon Girvan, and his cousin, three-year-old Willie King, at his grandparents' farm. The boys were playing around the slough when Cameron decided to chase a beaver wandering on that slough. Cameron broke through the thin ice and fell into the water. He was not able to get up or breathe as he had fallen through the ice into mud and water that was approximately three feet deep.

At the tender ages of two and three both Aidon and Willie had enough sense to immediately run the 70 metres back to the house to get help instead of trying to help Cameron on their own. In response Alex, the father of Cameron and Aidon, ran out of the house to the slough. He found Cameron lying on his back, his head stuck in the mud with the water washing over his face, kicking his feet trying to get up. Alex was able to grab Cameron out of the water to safety. Cameron was conscious and crying, but his lips were blue in colour. Alex immediately carried Cameron back to the house and administered first aid.

Aidon Girvan and Willie King responded wisely to the situation. It is for this reason that the Lifesaving Society awarded Aidon Girvan, Willie King, and Alex Girvan with the rescue commendation award.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Spain

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 11, 2004, the world was horrified once again by the terrorist bombing in Madrid, Spain. This cowardly act extinguished the lives of 200 innocents while injuring more than 1,000 other citizens who were merely going from one place to another, unsuspecting parents, children, and elderly.

I have had the opportunity to spend time in Spain, and she is very dear to me. One of the most splendid features of this unique country, Mr. Speaker, is her people, who are some of the most friendly, hospitable, and peace loving I have ever encountered.

March 11, 2004, will be a day that I will not forget soon. Although it will be remembered as a day of grief and tears, I hope that it will also be the start of a new unity in Spain and in the global community in our collective resolve to rid ourselves of terrorism.

To all our Spanish-Canadian citizens and especially to those of Spain, my deepest condolences on your tremendous loss. May God bless and keep Spain in her great time of sorrow.

Thank you.

Special Olympics Canada Winter Games

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to rise today in this Legislature to acknowledge the 72 athletes and 28 support team members from Alberta who attended the 2004 Special Olympics Canada Winter Games recently in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. These athletes braved the near-record snowfall in Prince Edward Island to compete in events such as alpine and cross-country skiing, figure skating, floor hockey, curling, snowshoeing, and speed skating. The Alberta contingent did quite well this year, placing third overall, receiving 28 gold medals, 29 silver medals, and 24 bronze medals. In fact, the Strathcona Strikers, a floor hockey team from my constituency, won a bronze medal in their division.

But the Special Olympics is more than winning medals. The athletes' oath for the Special Olympics is "Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." I have heard, Mr. Speaker, that all the athletes from Alberta were brave in their attempt and were fine ambassadors for our province.

I'd ask all members of the Assembly to join me in recognizing the athletes and coaches who represented Alberta this year at the Special Olympics.

Beef Consumers

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Alberta beef consumer. After the single case of a BSE-infected cow was

detected in this province, hundreds of community groups, industry groups, producers, the government, and the Official Opposition hosted different events in support of Alberta's beef producers. The response to the crisis by Albertans has been tremendous. Across this province at community halls, parking lots, the Saddledome in Calgary, and in many, many other places Albertans lined up to show their support. It is not a rare occurrence, by any means, to be driving down the road and see a bumper sticker that states, "I love Alberta beef" or "I still love Alberta beef."

I want to thank those who have purchased Alberta beef and have helped keep the industry afloat. Let's keep it up and work hard to open the borders to our world-famous product, Alberta beef. Alberta prime rib belongs on all fine restaurant menus around the world.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

2:40

Clear Vista School

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to recognize the Clear Vista school in Wetaskiwin, which held the official opening of its new school last week. It was the pleasure of the Minister of Infrastructure and myself to participate on behalf of the government of Alberta.

Clear Vista dates back to the late '40s and '50s in Wetaskiwin. It was originally established as a school for the children who lived outside the city in neighbouring municipalities. The school remains an important part of meeting the needs of county students as well as being open to students within the city of Wetaskiwin.

With the growth of the community around Wetaskiwin a new school building was desperately needed to house the students at Clear Vista. What began as a small school over 50 years ago has grown to a student population of 517, offering a wide range of learning opportunities for both city and county students from kindergarten through grade 9 in the Wetaskiwin-Camrose constituency.

The students, teachers, and staff are extremely excited and proud to move into their beautiful new facilities, that will continue to serve the educational needs of the Wetaskiwin area for years to come. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Toni Ingram Constable Jeff Fox

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. All of us at times take emergency workers – police, firefighters, and EMS – for granted because we know that they'll be there when we need them. Last Sunday on highway 2 near Leduc was one of those times for me. After hitting a patch of ice, my vehicle lost control at highway speed and rolled off the road. I called for assistance and was met on the phone by dispatcher Toni Ingram, whose calm and presence of mind kept me calm and under control until Constable Jeff Fox arrived on scene moments later.

Constable Fox spent two hours helping me pick up my belongings and generally kept me safe in this traumatic time. The most danger I felt was not during the accident but afterwards on the side of highway 2 with vehicles passing at highway speeds only feet away despite the flashing emergency lights.

My thanks go out to Jeff and Toni for their professionalism and kindness, but the best thanks of all would be to help make Alberta roads a little bit slower and safer for them. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yellow Ribbon Gala

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, last Saturday evening the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills and I attended an exciting and special evening hosted by the Military Family Resource Centre. Many months of hard work and planning went into the yellow ribbon gala benefit dinner and silent auction. This very successful event is a major annual fundraiser for this nonprofit charitable organization.

Padre Laurelle Callaghan, Global's woman of vision for April 2003, was the featured speaker. Major Callaghan recounted her experiences as senior Canadian chaplain during Operation Apollo in Kandahar. Her presentation was a highlight of the evening as she skillfully wove humour and wise advice into her presentation on her experiences.

The proceeds for the benefit dinner and silent auction are reinvested into the Military Family Resource Centre to assist in providing programs and services designed especially for military families. Their mandate is clear: supporting the heroes behind the heroes.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to ask all the members of this Assembly to join me in recognizing the outstanding work and contributions the Military Family Resource Centre makes in the lives of military families. Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition signed by 176 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government "to invest a portion of the multi-Billion dollar budget surplus to properly fund education, thereby avoiding layoffs of teachers and staff, ballooning class sizes, program cuts, and closure of schools."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am giving notice that I will be rising later this afternoon at the conclusion of the daily Routine to move a Standing Order 40 application.

Thank you.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Bill 21

Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004.

These minor amendments will clarify wording and ensure that the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003, which received royal assent last spring, is aligned with the Family Law Act and the Vital Statistics Act. These amendments will also allow for a smooth transition from the existing legislation.

I'd like to move first reading of the bill.

[Motion carried; Bill 21 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 21 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 22 Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, for first reading.

This bill makes numerous amendments to four acts: the Election Act, the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Act, and the Alberta Corporate Tax Act. These changes are primarily the result of recommendations made by Alberta's Chief Electoral Officer to ensure that our legislation is up to date prior to the next provincial election. Changes range from minor housekeeping to important changes that ensure the accuracy of elector information, help protect elector privacy, and improve flexibility in the use of special ballots in advance polls.

[Motion carried; Bill 22 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Bill 23 Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 23, the Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004, for first reading.

This bill amends the existing act to align it with the government's recent decision to eliminate the 1 and a half cent per litre aviation fuel tax on eligible international passenger and cargo flights effective March 1, 2004. Eligible flights include those to the United States. This will enhance Alberta's aviation industry's ability to attract additional international passenger and cargo air service to Alberta. Other amendments to the bill strengthen controls and address administrative concerns.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 23 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise this afternoon to table the appropriate number of copies of *Albertans & Climate Change: Key Actions to Date*. This is a nice little booklet that shows what Albertans and Alberta have done to take action on climate change. We have taken more action than any other government in the country. It talks about our green power for government operation, our municipal energy efficiency loans, technology and innovation to maximize energy efficiency, as well as the royalty credit from the Department of Energy for sequestration of CO₂. It's an excellent little report, and I encourage all members to get a copy of it and read it.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development I'm very pleased to file today with the Assembly copies of a letter received from the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors with their reaction to the Review of Pricing in the Beef Industry report. The letter acknowledged that beef pricing is a complex issue. There's one sentence in this letter that I think is very important for all members to hear. It says, "What is most important is that prices went down, tonnage went up and consumers benefited from very aggressive feature pricing right across the country."

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am today tabling from 22 firefighters in the Grande Cache fire department support for private member's Bill 207, the Traffic Safety (Emergency Vehicle) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the Member for Calgary-North Hill. Also, the Hinton fire department, with 20 firefighters plus one firefighter/EMS worker, are supporting this bill.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table in the Assembly today the requisite number of copies of a request signed by a number of my constituents that asks for the Minister of Learning to undertake a cost-benefit analysis to examine the merits of a new Calgary inner-city public school board pursuant to the School Act and also asks for a moratorium on school closures until such a study has been done.

2:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm tabling five copies each of 135 letters that state that cancer is now the leading cause of death in Alberta, that 30 per cent of these deaths are caused by the use of tobacco products, and that at least 300 nonsmokers die each year from lung cancer due to exposure to second-hand smoke. These letters all request support for a provincial law to make all public places and workplaces smoke free.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling this afternoon. It's an article from the December 15, 2003, edition of *Thompson's World Insurance News*, and it quotes from the letter from Mr. Cooke we talked about in question period today.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With permission I table the required number of copies of a letter that I sent today to Mr. Randy Ferbey and his curling colleagues congratulating them on their fourth appearance at the Brier. The letter reads in part: "I wish to thank you for the outstanding skill you displayed on the curling rink, for the sportsmanlike behaviour you modeled for all who watched, and for being such excellent ambassadors for Alberta and Canada."

The Speaker: Hon. members, I wish to table the appropriate copies of a new pamphlet called *Seniors' View: Your Guide to Alberta's*

Legislature. It's outlining a new educational research program that we've developed tailored to seniors. In the next number of days this documentation will be sent to all senior citizen organizations, community residences, and affinity groups throughout the province.

head:

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the Minister of Learning. Pursuant to the Advanced Education Foundations Act the Arctic Institute of North America audited financial statements for the year ended March 31, 2003; public postsecondary institutions' audited financial statements – public colleges and technical institutes for the year ended June 30, 2002, and the universities and Banff Centre for Continuing Education for the year ended March 31, 2003; school jurisdictions' audited financial statements for the year ended August 31, 2002, sections 1, 2, and 3; pursuant to the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board 2002-2003 annual report; pursuant to the Government Accountability Act the Alberta Learning 2003-2006 business plan; and pursuant to the Teaching Profession Act the Alberta Teachers' Association 2002 annual report.

head:

Motions under Standing Order 40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on a Standing Order 40 application.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to establish a series of public debates surrounding automobile insurance which would include the disclosure of future government plans to implement the new automobile insurance system, industry comments and all objections, any reports which would assist the public to fully understand the changes to automobile insurance in Alberta, the KPMG report on automobile insurance, the letter to the Deputy Minister of Finance from George Cooke, and all polls dealing with automobile insurance conducted by the government since January 1, 2002.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you and all hon. members of this Assembly are well aware, Standing Order 40 applications are made in cases of urgent and pressing necessity. Over the past year or so Albertans have been calling for some form of relief from skyrocketing automobile insurance premiums. Albertans who hadn't been involved in any at-fault collisions were being asked to pay higher-than-usual premiums, and others were unable to find a company to insure them at all, and this is a mandatory financial services product.

The response from this government was no response as the issue grew. Finally, when they could ignore it no more, this government responded with an automobile insurance reform process that they have yet to reveal in its entirety. Both Alberta insurers and drivers are wondering how these reforms will help control rates while allowing insurance companies to make a profit, and they are wondering how this government arrived at the reforms it is committed to implementing. It is time for this government to make the process of developing and implementing changes to automobile insurance clear and transparent and give all affected parties the opportunity to make their opinions heard.

I urge all hon. members of this House to grant unanimous consent

for the motion and to establish these public debates today so that any necessary adjustments to insurance reforms can be made quickly and without major disruption to insurers and the insured.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Hon. members, a Standing Order 40 application requires unanimous consent.

[Unanimous consent denied]

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Written Questions

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 11, it's my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 32.

[Motion carried]

Coal Bed Methane Consultation

Q2. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What public consultation on coal bed methane development in Alberta is currently underway?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would be very grateful for that information. In my travels across the province I have been amazed to find that some landowners are not aware of any plans whatsoever by this government to develop this potentially very valuable resource. Certainly, there have been public meetings held, and I understand that there are going to be some more public meetings in the future.

Whenever we consider the potential amount of water that can be produced from these wells and what can be in those water samples, that could, hopefully, and should be tested – like what's the content of arsenic, beryllium, mercury, other elements? – I think this question is certainly in order, and I do hope that we receive the information from the government.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the member actually knows that there's an extensive amount of public consultation in process in the parts of Alberta where coal bed methane is in its most prevalent state. The member also knows through answers in this House that coal bed methane in this province actually happens to be very dry and that mid-level coal – the Edmonton coals, the coals that are in and around the 600-metre level – simply produce under depressurization when the well is drilled. Those coals in the 900-metre or deeper zones, the Mannville coals, in fact have salt water, and they are reinjected. But I want to certainly disabuse the member of any perhaps what he would consider secret public consultation to be going on, as he has said earlier that we've issued secret orders from public documents.

In our usual brand of openness, total transparency, and accountability, Mr. Speaker, we'll be accepting the question.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, I would just like to thank the hon. minister, and I look forward to the information.

[Written Question 2 carried]

3:00 Orphaned Wells in Parks and Protected Areas

Q3. Mr. MacDonald moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.
What is the total number of orphaned wells, pipelines, and facilities in provincial parks and protected areas broken down by category as abandoned, decontaminated, and reclaimed?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie instructed me to express gratitude to the hon. Minister of Community Development for providing the Official Opposition with an amended version of this written question. She is grateful for that in advance and is fine with it. She certainly can work with this.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to respond that I'm going to be accepting Written Question 3 with amendments. In a moment I'd like to provide some rationale around the changes proposed by those amendments, and then I will move Written Question 3 be accepted with the amendments.

As has been indicated by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I did share the amendment with my opposition colleague prior to 11 a.m. today, as per procedural requirements, and I note that the amendment has now been circulated to all members for their review.

Mr. Speaker, in coming to the conclusions that I'm about to, I want to indicate my thanks to the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie for posing the question and also for understanding that in order to respond to this question accurately, I have to propose some amendments that are basically nomenclature-type in nature. With the amendments, then, the new Written Question 3 would read: "What is the total number of active, capped, abandoned, and orphaned wells and the number of linear kilometres of pipelines in provincial parks and protected areas?"

I want to explain that just briefly, Mr. Speaker, if I could. First of all, active, capped, and abandoned are the categories used by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board for identifying the status of well sites. Secondly, orphaned well is a category used by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development that relates to the surface land disposition issued for a well site and refers to a well site whose licensed operator has ceased to exist either voluntarily or through bankruptcy and where there is no company that has assumed responsibility for the well site.

Pipelines are identified by length of pipeline in kilometres. These data would include all commercial pipelines that currently exist and also those that no longer exist but were part of the pipeline network at one time. The Alberta Energy and Utilities Board does not break down the data into more specific categories such as type or status.

Now, with reference to the term "facilities," as was proposed in the original motion, by facilities I assume that this probably refers to infrastructure on a well site. However, this is not separately identified. The number of well sites should cover the intent of this reference in any case.

The word "decontaminated" is not a category unto itself that is used in relation to well sites or pipelines, but the process of abandonment requires decommissioning. Decommissioning, just for

everyone's quick elucidation, means including capping and cementing of the well and removal of all infrastructure, so in that regard abandonment also requires the reclamation of the well site.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the word "reclaimed" of course relates to the land disposition for a well that is abandoned for which a reclamation certificate has been issued. However, the information is not separately maintained on an historical basis. In fact, a reclamation certificate is issued five or more years after an abandoned well site has been reclaimed and represents the final land inspection to assess effectiveness of the reclamation work completed after infrastructure has been removed. An ongoing historical record of abandoned well sites is maintained, which would correspond to the number of reclaimed well sites plus well sites that are at some stage in the reclamation process.

Mr. Speaker, I do hope that these further explanations will clarify the proposed rewording of the question as it applies to provincial parks and protected areas within my jurisdiction, and I hope that this requested information will meet with the requirements or at least the intent of the original question.

So I would like to move that Written Question 3 be accepted as amended. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate on this question as amended.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. Minister of Community Development. I believe that the hon. minister's definition of "decontaminated" and "reclaimed" were self-explanatory. I believe that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie was concerned about soil reclamation as well from some of those leases in the area immediately surrounding the wellhead or the gas well. So that would apply in the "reclaimed" definition hopefully, but again thank you.

[Written Question 3 as amended carried]

Property Theft in Energy Department

Q6. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.
What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Energy for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Hopefully, the amount is zero, but in the interest of accountability and openness that the hon. minister described earlier, I am anxious to see exactly how much money, if any, has been lost.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Sure.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. I assume that that "sure" was that we're going to get the information straightaway, and we look forward to getting it. Again I would express gratitude to the minister.

[Written Question 6 carried]

Property Theft in Government Services Department

Q7. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Government Services for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, I hope the amount is zero. Certainly, the Minister of Energy has shown some leadership here and has agreed to be open and transparent, and I would urge the hon. Minister of Government Services to do the same.

Thank you.

Mr. Coutts: We accept Written Question 7, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and again we look forward to receiving that information.

Thank you.

[Written Question 7 carried]

Property Theft in Human Resources and Employment Department

Q8. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Human Resources and Employment for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of written questions 6 and 7 certainly I hope that the answer is zero, and we will wait and hear the response from the hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Accept.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Just for clarification, Mr. Speaker, that was an affirmative from the hon. minister?

The Speaker: It was affirmative.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, and we will look forward to receiving that information in a timely fashion.

[Written Question 8 carried]

3:10 Royalty Tax Deductions

Q9. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the projected amount of royalty tax deductions for the 2003-2004 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is again to the Minister of Energy. This is a very important matter. It comes up in discussions across this province. There seems to be some concern with the taxpayers that many of these royalty tax deductions are just netted in the provincial budget. They are not described in any detail. Written Question 9 would provide not only the opposition with some answers in regard to the royalty tax deductions that are being projected but the taxpayers as well.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hate to interrupt a roll, but the member in fact is not accurate when he says that there are many discussions around Alberta with respect to royalty tax deductions, because there's actually no such thing. It's a great Liberal problem, and it has been since 1974.

Mr. Lund: Lack of understanding?

Mr. Smith: The lack of understanding that both the provincial Liberals and, of course, the federal Liberals have with what in fact a royalty is. A royalty is a measure of economic rent. A tax is something a government imposes as a fee or a levy or a revenue collection on the broad base of the population.

So because of the extremely inept wording and because of the fact that this does not exist, the government is compelled, although it would wish to answer all questions in the affirmative, to therefore reject this one.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Briefly, Mr. Speaker, I would like to express my disappointment in that response, and hopefully if there is, as the minister has indicated, no such thing, taxpayers will be delighted to read about his gracious response in *Hansard*.

Thank you.

[Written Question 9 lost]

Royalty Tax Deductions

Q10. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What was the total amount of royalty tax deductions for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is the same as Written Question 9 in the eyes and the ears of taxpayers who have asked about this, and if we can't ask in the Legislative Assembly to the minister directly, I don't know where else would be appropriate.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would have thought that in keeping with the spirit of the fact that if, in fact, the item on which the question is centred doesn't exist, then how can one break with the logic of rejecting one and not the other? Therefore, we are compelled by both logic and inaccurate wording to reject this Written Question 10.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At this time I would like to ask the hon. Minister of Energy why he wouldn't have amended this written question and followed the leadership of the distinguished Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek, who was quite anxious to provide an amendment to Written Question 3. Follow the leadership of this hon. minister.

Thank you.

[Written Question 10 lost]

Carbon Dioxide Projects Royalty Credit Program

Q11. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.
What is the total dollar amount of royalty credits that has been dispensed under the carbon dioxide projects royalty credit program for the period May 16, 2003, to February 17, 2004?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly there must be a lot of information from this time period in regard to the carbon dioxide project royalty credit program. There was also reference made to this program in the recent throne speech. So, again, that information would provide valuable insight to the citizens of this province in regard to that project.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do accept the question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. I would like to thank the hon. minister for that, and we look forward to getting the information.

[Written Question 11 carried]

Carbon Dioxide Projects Royalty Credit Program

Q12. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.
What are the names and the number of oil and gas companies that have applied for royalty credits under the carbon dioxide projects royalty credit program for the period May 16, 2003, to February 17, 2004?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This follows along the lines of Written Question 11 and, again, this information would be appreciated. It would shed some light on this entire program.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, there is a great deal of light already existing around this program. Of course, it is all so very, very difficult, even as an elected member of this Assembly, to predict the

future, so not knowing the final outcome of companies that will receive approval in this program, it is very difficult to publish those names at this juncture, although as the program unfolds in its entirety, we will make the appropriate revelations, if I may say, or the appropriate tablings known to everybody.

So, again because of timing, Mr. Speaker, I'm compelled to reject the question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In light of that, I will look forward to the hon. minister tabling those lists in the Assembly here at the appropriate time, hopefully in the fall session.

Thank you.

[Written Question 12 lost]

Enhanced Recovery of Oil Royalty Reduction

Q13. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.
What is the total dollar amount of royalty reductions under the enhanced recovery of oil royalty reduction regulation from April 1, 2002, to March 31, 2003?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, that information would be appreciated. There is significant interest in the general public, as I said before, in regard to our total royalty reduction programs and our regulations. There is a perception that we are not getting enough royalty. If the minister could provide that information at this time, myself and taxpayers would be grateful.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's presumptuous to speak for the taxpayers out there, so in fact I'll simply address the question that he has read into the record. The enhanced oil recovery program is critical to Alberta. I would encourage anybody here to read the Alberta Energy Research Institute's paper Spudding Innovation, which really talks about another Alberta waiting for technology to discover more oil and gas that is cached or secreted in reserves throughout this province that we have not done a complete job of recovering. So in order to ensure that the House is better off – and certainly I find that this member is particularly better off when he is better prepared – we will be accepting this question.

3:20

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: At this time I would just like to thank the hon. minister.

[Written Question 13 carried]

Enhanced Recovery of Oil Royalty Reduction

Q14. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.
What is the number of oil and gas companies that were eligible for royalty reductions under the enhanced recovery of oil royalty reduction regulation between April 1, 2002, and March 31, 2003?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, that follows along the same path as Written Question 13, and hopefully we will receive the same gracious response as we had previously from the Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Graciously accepted.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: I would just like to acknowledge my gratitude to the minister.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Ho ho. A love-in today, hon. members.

[Written Question 14 carried]

Utilities Consumer Advocate Budget

Q16. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total budget for the Utilities Consumer Advocate for the 2003-2004 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you. There has been a lot of information provided already in regard to the Utilities Consumer Advocate. We see a special committee of advisors from all over the province for that office. It would be very interesting to know what the total staff is, the staff requirements for 2003-04, what these individuals are going to be doing in regard to the electricity market. The utilities office will be obviously divided between questions on electricity and questions on natural gas delivery. In light of the fact that this budget is being provided by industry, I think that a very important question at this time is to know exactly what the total budget is.

Thank you.

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, in the spirit of openness and accountability of this government we accept Written Question 16.

The Speaker: The hon. Member of Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker. This is a new spirit of openness and accountability, and I appreciate it. I look forward to getting the information and thank the minister.

[Written Question 16 carried]

Advisory Council on Electricity Report

Q17. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total cost of the 2003 report from the Advisory Council on Electricity?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There have been a lot of reports issued or sanctioned by this provincial govern-

ment in regard to electricity deregulation, and no one knows the cost of all these reports. I can imagine that if we had a list and the total cost of these reports going back to, say, the year 2000 . . . The minister is shaking his head over there. He must be amazed at the total cost. I'm sure that at some point he has asked his department to look into the total cost of all these reports, but we're only asking at this time for the total cost of the 2003 report from the Advisory Council on Electricity. Electricity ratepayers would also be interested to know that information, I'm sure.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, when the member speaks – and his preambles, similar to what they are in question period, are such nose stretchers that I feel compelled to correct the information prior to moving on to the business at hand. There has not been an endless group of reports published by this department with respect to the subject of electricity deregulation. There have been some. They are posted on the web site. They're all transparent. They all involve consultation. They, in fact, are not all that expensive, as the member will see when the cost for the Advisory Council on Electricity comes forward, because we are graciously accepting the question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I would like to at this time on behalf of all Albertans thank the minister, and I look forward to getting the information.

[Written Question 17 carried]

Advisory Council on Electricity Report

Q18. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total cost of the 2002 report from the Advisory Council on Electricity?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am quite confident that the minister is going to provide that information also in a timely fashion.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Sure.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, I would like to thank the hon. minister.

[Written Question 18 carried]

Department of Health and Wellness Conditional Grants

Q19. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation that the Department of Health and Wellness improve its control processes for ensuring accountability for conditional grants?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The purpose behind this is to see whether or not the government is actually carrying through on the recommendations that are made by the Auditor General. If the Auditor General is going to truly serve his function by making recommendations, we need to know what the departments are doing when these recommendations are made, so we're asking the minister to let us know what he's doing to implement that.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness we are prepared to accept Written Question 19.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close the debate.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you.

[Written Question 19 carried]

Property Theft in Sustainable Resource Development Department

Q20. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.
What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Sustainable Resource Development for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's just imperative that we find out what's going on and how these are reported and whether or not we're keeping track of them, so we'd ask the minister to provide us with that.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The government is prepared to accept Written Question 20.

Dr. Nicol: Thanks to the minister.

[Written Question 20 carried]

Property Theft in Revenue Department

Q21. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.
What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Revenue for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For the same reasons I did on the previous question, if they could.

3:30

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, the government's prepared to accept Written Question 21.

Dr. Nicol: I thank the minister.

[Written Question 21 carried]

Property Theft in International and Intergovernmental Relations Department

Q22. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I would like to indicate that I am prepared to accept Written Question 22.

Dr. Nicol: I would like to thank the minister for providing us with that information.

[Written Question 22 carried]

Property Theft in Finance Department

Q23. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Finance for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, we accept.

[Written Question 23 carried]

Property Theft in Environment Department

Q24. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Environment for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

Dr. Nicol: Again, same rationale we had: we need to know how this is being tracked.

Dr. Taylor: We are accepting the same rationale as the previous question. We're glad to accept that.

Dr. Nicol: Thanks to the minister for helping us with that.

[Written Question 24 carried]

The Speaker: Just a note, hon. members, before we go on to Written Question 25. As Speaker I asked the administration of the Legislative Assembly Office of Alberta if we had any thefts, and the only one brought to my attention was that a chair belonging to the deputy clerk had left her office mysteriously, and that was in room 315. So if anybody is aware of where this chair might have been relocated, it would help us in dealing with this type of question as well. It was just probably inadvertently mislocated.

Health Care Premium Accounts

Q25. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted.
As of April 1, 2003, what was the total number of employer health care premium accounts and the total number of individual/family health care premium accounts, and of the individual/family accounts what percentage were seniors' accounts?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness we are prepared to accept question 25.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to conclude the debate.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the minister for offering the good news.

Thank you.

[Written Question 25 carried]

Health Care Premium Arrears

Q26. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted. For each of the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, and April 1, 2003, to February 17, 2004, what is the total number of health care premium accounts that were in arrears that were forwarded to collections agencies, and what was the total value of these accounts for each of these years?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness we are prepared to accept Written Question 26.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the minister for conveying the information.

Thank you.

[Written Question 26 carried]

Health Care Premium Arrears

Q27. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted. For each of the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, and April 1, 2003, to February 17, 2004, what is the average length of time between a collection agency receiving a health care premium account that is in arrears and the payment of those arrears in full?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness we are prepared to accept Written Question 27.

[Written Question 27 carried]

Fatality Inquiry Recommendations

Q32. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted. In which correctional facilities has the Department of the Solicitor General implemented the recommendations listed in the fatality inquiry of Reginald Grant McLeod for the prevention of drug-related deaths in all of Alberta's correctional facilities?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We need to know whether or not the government has been following up on the recommendations that have been made out of these reports and to what extent they're actually doing this. So we'd appreciate this kind of information from the minister.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is prepared to accept Written Question 32.

Dr. Nicol: I thank the minister. This will help Albertans keep informed on the progress.

[Written Question 32 carried]

head:

Motions for Returns

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 11, it's my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 20, 22, 32, and 33.

[Motion carried]

Access to Crown Lands

M1. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of all reports and documentation issued by the Aboriginal Affairs facilitator, John McCarthy, to the government between January 1, 2003, and February 17, 2004, inclusive pertaining to the discussions between First Nations bands and oil field contractors regarding access to Crown lands.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hate to break the roll that they are on; however, due to the fact that there was no additional information or paperwork pertaining to the drafting of this document and only receiving the final copy of the paper, we are not recommending that we accept this. Further to that, the McCarthy document is only for cabinet and Treasury Board confidences and, therefore, is a mandatory exception, thus not releaseable. So, no.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, with the public debate that went on surrounding this, I think it's imperative that Albertans be informed of the degree to which both the First Nations communities and the contractors were in discussion, both between themselves and with government. So I find that basically not helpful to this whole situation by not having those documents released. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 1 lost]

3:40 Automobile Insurance Consultation

M2. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list of individuals and organizations that were consulted and provided input on automobile insurance to the Automobile Insurance Reform Implementation Team.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it would be in the best interests of the public and, certainly, of certain insurance executives if this information were made available. We heard that this was an open and transparent process earlier in debate this afternoon in this Assembly, and this gives the government an ideal opportunity to back that up.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am prepared to accept Motion for a Return 2 with an amendment. Numerous companies, organizations, and citizens of Alberta have provided significant and valuable input to the Automobile Insurance Reform Implementation Team. I am prepared to list the names of the companies and organizations that have been consulted and provided input to this team.

However, I should note, Mr. Speaker, that half of our freedom of information legislation is the protection of privacy, so I'm not prepared to release the names of individuals providing comments. I am willing to provide the aggregated number of individuals that have provided input to the team.

Therefore, I move that Motion for a Return 2 be amended as follows, and it would read that

an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a list of companies and organizations and the number of individuals that were consulted and provided input on automobile insurance to the Automobile Insurance Reform Implementation Team.

Mr. Speaker, this amendment and this notification have been provided to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar prior to 11 a.m. this morning as per our procedure. I would ask that the amendment be circulated to all members. I believe that's the case.

So, Mr. Speaker, I move Motion for a Return 2 be accepted as amended.

The Speaker: On the debate on the amendment, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, on the amendment. Just for the record I would like to express my gratitude also to the Minister of Finance for providing this information in advance. As the Rolling Stones would say, you can't always get what you want. But this is a good start, and I look forward to the list as provided and described by the hon. minister.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate on the question as amended.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker, on the question that has been amended. I look forward to getting the information.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 2 as amended carried]

Participation in RTO West

M4. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all documents, including but not limited to letters, faxes, e-mails, meeting materials, memos, reports, and notes, pertaining to Alberta's participation in the Regional Transmission Organization, RTO, West from December 1, 2000, to February 17, 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much again, Mr. Speaker. These documents, it would be my view, would be very instrumental in getting more information on how this government plans to link our electricity grid with the electricity grids of the Pacific northwest, California, and Nevada.

Now, as we can see, there has been a consultation process for

some time. We look at the Bolger commission. There was an indication in there that we could see price increases domestically if there were exports of electricity from this province. It is apparent to this member that the government is going ahead with a policy of electricity exports from this province without an adequate public consultation process with the consumers of this province. This Motion for a Return 4 would help everyone understand the role that the Alberta government is playing not only currently in the Regional Transmission Organization West but what the future plans for the province's electricity grid in relationship to the Regional Transmission Organization West are.

This motion for a return is very important, and I certainly hope the hon. minister agrees with me because many consumers of electricity in this province are very concerned that we are planning to link ourselves very closely with the electricity grids of the Pacific Northwest.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you. I guess, Mr. Speaker, this motion would be best entitled Looking for Mr. Gold Bar.

It's important, Mr. Speaker, that we again look at what the member said after he talked about the motion. The policy for electricity export from Alberta into other jurisdictions has been a clear, publicly documented record for two years. There are nine tenets to the export policy. They're very clear, they're very obvious, and they're very public.

In fact, we have corresponded with this member on the subject. He knows that there is third party confidentiality involved, and he knows that he is also entitled to pursue this under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act as well.

So, accordingly, Mr. Speaker, we'll be compelled by rule to reject this motion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Well, I'm disappointed that this Motion for a Return 4 is going to be rejected. Certainly, as I said earlier, all this information would be vital to the consumers of this province when they make their decision on whether their economic interests are being served or not in regard to increasing our exports of electricity. And I'm disappointed.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 4 lost]

Participation in RTO West

M5. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a breakdown of all expenses, including but not limited to travel, accommodation, food, and registration fees, associated with Alberta delegates attending Regional Transmission Organization, RTO, West conferences from December 1, 2000, to February 17, 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now, again what is all this costing Albertans? Who is paying for it? Is it the Department of Energy? Is it some other government department?

Certainly, there have been conferences. I know that there are routine conferences held in Portland, Oregon, that government

officials attend along with AESO officials. It would be very, very important to electricity consumers to know the breakdown of all the expenses that have occurred between these time periods in regard to plugging into, shall I say, the Regional Transmission Organization West.

This motion for a return is in my view self-explanatory, and I can't see why the minister would reject this motion. I just can't understand why he would reject it.

Thank you.

3:50

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, there continues to be an aroma of conspiracy wafting from the member at every turn with respect to RTO West. So I would ask the House for some direction, guidance on this. I have two choices. I can either reject the motion, or I can accept the motion.

Now, if I reject the motion, Mr. Speaker, it will be because Alberta delegates have not attended any RTO West conferences because RTO West is not an operating entity. It exists only on paper. As such, there have been no RTO West conferences.

Mr. Speaker, on the other hand, I could also accept the motion, and then reply that I'm accepting the motion because there is no conspiracy; there is no conference.

So may I ask the House, or is there a way that I could follow this through on a more appropriate basis?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly there is information available, and if the Minister of Energy is too busy to have a look, perhaps some of his staff could do it for him. There are web sites where there are delegations, as I said earlier, from this province listed. Of the four people from the Alberta delegation there would be at least two from the Department of Energy.

Now, precisely how all this works I don't know, but this is the place again where these questions should be raised, on the floor of this Legislative Assembly. There are two individuals from the Department of Energy who routinely go to these meetings, and I think this question is quite appropriate.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, this matter is very, very clear. Once a question is on the Order Paper, it becomes the property of the Assembly. It is no longer the property of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar or any other member. Regardless of what any member says about it, it's the decision of the Assembly that will determine the procedure with respect to this question.

[Motion for a Return 5 lost]

Workers' Compensation Board Appeals Commission

M6. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the voting record for each member of the Workers' Compensation Board Appeals Commission for the calendar years 1997 through 2002.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We hear all the time from injured workers and we hear all the time from the industry about the Appeals Commission, and it would be of a great deal of interest if one could have the voting record. I understand that

in the last year and a half that record has been made public on the Appeals Commission's web site. When the commission hears a case and determines whether they're going to rule in favour of the injured worker or they're going to rule in favour of the employer or whatever happens in those cases, that information is public for those who want to go to the Appeals Commission web site and have a look.

So, in light of that, I think it would be very important if all members of this Assembly and the public could have a look at the voting record for each member of the Workers' Compensation Board Appeals Commission for the period going back to 1997. I'm very interested to hear the hon. minister of human resources and enjoyment in regard to this matter. If it's good enough for the period after the WCB reforms, let's go back to the period to 1997.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I believe the hon. member meant the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes.

Mr. Dunford: Well, I do forgive his comment. I do enjoy this portfolio. I wasn't sure, though, whether it was a slip of the tongue or whether he was being playful, because he's certainly being mischievous with this motion for a return. He knows full well that the Appeals Commission operates as a quasi-judicial body.

So we will be rejecting this motion for a return on the basis that the concept of a voting record of course does not apply to the Appeals Commission. There's no distinct subject matter on which a voting record could be based. Maintaining actual and perceived independence is critical to the operation of the Appeals Commission. Given that the concept of a voting record is artificial, it would be not appropriate to respond further.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'm disappointed in that — I certainly am — in light of the fact that one can go on the web site and check out all the hearings and what happened at those hearings before the Appeals Commission. I guess we're just going to have to now look at the period between the implementation of the Workers' Compensation Board reforms that were initiated by the hon. minister and the current time. I thought that it would be important to go back to 1997, but in this case I will just have to express my disappointment.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 6 lost]

Department of Energy Performance Measure

M7. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the data survey referred to in the Ministry of Energy's 2002-2003 annual report under the performance measure Albertans' Understanding of Alberta's Energy and Mineral Resources and their Economic Significance.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This data, I think, would be of a great deal of interest to all Albertans, and hopefully the minister will agree through this Assembly and through this motion to provide that data.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's precisely in the interests of all Albertans that we used this as a performance measure, and any data and any survey and any information that I can give to this member to help make him a better Member of the Legislative Assembly, I will most willingly do.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: There are all kinds of surprises in this world, Mr. Speaker, and the minister's response certainly would be in that category. With that, we will wait and we will look forward to the response.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 7 carried]

Electricity Deregulation

M8. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all documents, business plans, performance measures, and statistical data regarding the government's deregulation of electricity from January 1, 2001, to February 17, 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, this information, again, is vital. Consumers certainly are confused. Consumers don't think that electricity deregulation has reduced prices, and this information would be very interesting for them.

Certainly, the government has promoted the idea that deregulation of electricity increased choice and would reduce prices. The more choice we have in our options for the purchase of electricity, the better off we would become. But we all know that that hasn't happened.

This information would shed a lot of light on what data the government is using to continue to cling to the policy of electricity deregulation when we know that instead of reducing prices as was promised, we have gone to some of the highest prices in North America. Thank you.

4:00

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, again I feel compelled to speak on the member's argument simply to correct the inaccuracies put forth in that argument. He knows full well that since the year 2000 electricity prices have gone down in this province. He knows full well that in the last three months electricity prices have gone down even further. Of course, we continue to seek guidance and clarity from the member by offering freely and openly to examine his own bill in this Legislative Assembly.

With respect to the motion itself, Mr. Speaker, I would agree with the member that this information is vital. In fact, it is so vital that it has been made public since 2001 and continues to become public throughout the process. So this information is all in the public domain. We know that they have ample resources for research and for crafting questions and looking for correct information, so I would direct the member accordingly into that vast array of information that exists in the public domain.

Therefore, because of the abundance of public information already available on this topic, we'll accordingly be compelled to reject the motion, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. minister knows full well that power bills in this province have not gone down as a result of electricity deregulation. Certainly, there are many, many Albertans who after question period daily phone this side of the House and question the government in their responses because their power bills have not gone down either.

When one looks at what we had before electricity deregulation on a power bill, Mr. Speaker, there would be two line items: one for energy cost, and there would also be one for distribution. Now all that has changed, and we see prices that go up, up, and up. Regardless of whether it's for energy charges or it's add-ons to the bills or it's distribution or transmission charges, nothing has gone down, and I'm disappointed.

If the minister feels so strongly that prices have gone down, why doesn't he accept this motion and back it up with the facts that his government obviously has? If the facts indicate that electricity prices have gone down, well, show us the proof by accepting this motion for a return. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 8 lost]

Department of Energy Performance Measures

M9. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the Environics West surveys commissioned by the government referred to in the Ministry of Energy 2002-2003 annual report under the performance measures Industry Satisfaction and Information Management.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, this survey, again, would shed a lot of light, so to speak, on this department, and I would urge the government and particularly the hon. Minister of Energy to accept this Motion for a Return 9.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, when a member refers to a business plan, I think that's certainly a sign in the right direction. As the minister for this important department we take our business plan very seriously and the components of that business plan, not only in terms of who does something, why you do it, and how you measure it. The how you measure it is an important piece.

We would be most pleased to, again, continue to help make the member a better MLA. Accordingly, in that spirit we will be accepting this motion. Interestingly enough, Mr. Speaker, if I could just add, because he does feel so concerned about the cost of some items, that the cost of this survey is not included in the question. I'd just add that maybe when he crafts the next question, he could add the cost too.

So we'll be accepting Motion for a Return 9.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I would just like to say that the Minister of Energy is now a better Minister of Energy for accepting this motion for a return, and I look forward to getting the information.

[Motion for a Return 9 carried]

Kneehill Animal Control and Rehabilitation Centre Ltd.

M20. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the zoo plan for the Kneehill Animal Control and Rehabilitation Centre Ltd., GuZoo.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Yes, Mr. Speaker. This motion is so that we can look at the operational plan of that zoo and see what it's actually doing and whether or not it's following the guidelines. So I'd ask the government to release that business plan.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Yes. On behalf of the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development I'm pleased to reply. Unfortunately, I have to reply that it will be rejected.

The reason for this, Mr. Speaker, is that this information requested is not publicly available in the Wildlife Act. As a result, it's governed by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. When something is governed by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, then we must release it under the conditions of the FOIP Act. So we would ask that the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie please make this request through the FOIP process. That way, we can be sure that it's appropriately handled and that third party information will be protected.

Thank you.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, I guess the question that we'd raise is that if this is a business plan – it's a zoo plan – they should be public documents as they submit them. This is not disclosing information that would necessarily be reflective of their competitive position, so I don't see how it can be passed off to the FOIP Act. It should be just a normal business plan under the government and should be released.

[Motion for a Return 20 lost]

Provincial Police Force

M22. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the cost-benefit analysis, any literature reviews, comparative reports and studies, and timetable for the implementation of Alberta's provincial police force.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This helps us and members of the public to understand where they're at, what the positioning is, and the rationale for or against the formation of this police force, so we'd like to see the member release that information.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are rejecting this motion for a return.

At this time, Mr. Speaker, there's no real plan for implementation of the Alberta provincial police force. We do intend to review provincial policing alternatives in the next few years as we approach the end of the current RCMP provincial police service agreement in 2012. Our review, in keeping with the recommendations of the

MLA policing review committee, will look at a variety of policing alternatives from the perspective of cost and service benefits to Albertans.

I might add, Mr. Speaker, that the MLA Committee on Strengthening Alberta's Role in Confederation, chaired by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, is looking into this issue as part of their mandate. I look forward to hearing the results of their committee's consultation.

4:10

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Centre I'd just say that it's too bad that they're not releasing the other parts of the information just because they don't have a timetable available. This is the only reason that was given for rejecting this. It would be helpful to Albertans to fully understand the ongoing status and position of the discussions if they could get any kind of cost-benefit analysis or the literature reviews, the comparative reports and studies that would be available, that the government is using currently to make their decision. It's inappropriate that it gets rejected just because there's no implementation plan at this point.

[Motion for a Return 22 lost]

Alberta Career Computer Centre Inc.

M32. Dr. Pannu moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the report prepared by Don Logan of the audit and special investigations unit of Alberta Learning completed in 2002 on complaints by students and former students of the Alberta Career Computer Centre Inc.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Dr. Oberg relative to the motion I would like to propose the following amendments: (a) striking out "copy of the report prepared" and substituting "summary of student concerns gathered" and (b) striking out "completed in 2002 on complaints by" and substituting "after meeting with." The amended motion for a return will read as follows:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a summary of student concerns gathered by Don Logan of the audit and special investigations unit of Alberta Learning after meeting with students and former students of the Alberta Career Computer Centre Inc.

I understand that the wording has been circulated to the hon. member opposite and due notice provided by 11 a.m.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Minister of Children's Services for presenting the amendment on behalf of the Minister of Learning and want to thank the Minister of Learning, who provided this information on the amendment this morning to my office. I thank the minister for this courtesy. In addition, the minister shared with me the briefing that he received from his department for the reasons for the amendment that he's proposing.

I do accept the amendment, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to conclude the debate.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, I just want to thank the Minister of Learning for sharing the information with me and extending the courtesy of sharing his reasons for the amendment. I accept the reasons, and I look forward to receiving with the rest of the members of the Assembly the information requested in the amended motion for a return.

[Motion for a Return 32 as amended carried]

Report of Task Force on Health Care Funding and Revenue Generation

M33. Dr. Pannu moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the report of the government MLA Task Force on Health Care Funding and Revenue Generation, Graydon report, submitted to the Minister of Health and Wellness in 2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To speak briefly to the motion, with your permission, it is exceedingly important for the citizens of this province to have access to the report, the response which was given by the Minister of Health and Wellness towards the last part of January 2004, which indicated that the government was not going to proceed with the implementation of the recommendations of the report. Then within a week after that announcement the Premier reversed the decision and indicated to Albertans that he was going to move right ahead with the implementation of this report.

This whole matter caused a great deal of confusion, Mr. Speaker, for Albertans and, it seems, the government ranks as well. So the sooner this report is tabled here in the House and shared with the members of the House, the better it is, because Albertans then will know what is awaiting them. The Premier has of course gone beyond the report and indicated and threatened that he's ready to withdraw from the Canada Health Act, which is quite an ominous statement from the point of view of Albertans who are concerned about the future of public health care in this province and this country.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness this government has agreed to release the Graydon report shortly and, therefore, would not wish to pre-empt that release by agreeing to Motion for a Return 33. Therefore, on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness I respectfully reject this motion.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to conclude the debate.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm obviously disappointed by the decision of the Minister of Health and Wellness to reject this motion for a return. The use of the word "shortly" begs the question, you know: how soon? The report has been around for a long time. The report deals with some of the recommendations made by the Mazankowski committee. That report is now more than a year and a half old. So the question is: how much more time does the Minister of Health and Wellness really need?

So the reason for my disappointment lies in the very use of the term "shortly." Months and months have gone by, yet Albertans don't have access to the recommendations of the report, which they know are going to immensely put them in a very difficult situation if those recommendations are accepted. To continue to keep this report secret, to keep it away from the gaze of Albertans I think is denying the principle of transparency that this government so strongly claims it is committed to. So I'm very disappointed that this right of Albertans to transparency and access to information that rightly affects their concerns is being denied to them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 33 lost]

The Speaker: Might I express appreciation to the Deputy Government House Leaders for ensuring that all members of Executive Council abided by Standing Order 34(1), (2), and (2.1) today. This, I think, allowed us to be more effective in Motions for Returns and Written Questions than normal. So that's good. Thank you.

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 201 Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with pleasure I rise in the Assembly this afternoon to move third reading of Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

As has been mentioned by so many speakers during both second reading and while in committee, by enhancing existing legislation and regulations, Bill 201 will enable a vast number of disabled Albertans to either remain or become more self-reliant than they are at present. This, I believe, is how most Albertans like living their lives: independently and without needing to rely on others, either family members or friends or the government, for their everyday needs.

4:20

Furthermore, this is in keeping with a variety of government goals. For instance, Bill 201 fully reflects government goal 3, "Alberta's children will be supported in reaching their potential." Data from the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities shows that disabled Albertans continually lag behind Albertans without disabilities in a wide range of areas, such as education, social status, and other opportunities.

Among the most interesting and desirable opportunities that Bill 201 brings about is perhaps the notion that by enhancing existing legislation and regulations in terms of barrier-free design and accessibility, Bill 201 will enable a greater number of disabled Albertans to be self-reliant. By ensuring access and by paying more attention to issues of design, many Albertans will become less dependent on others, including government.

Bill 201 is also fully consistent with the goals of several government ministries. For example, core business 2 of Alberta Community Development states that the ministry's mandate includes

protecting human rights, promoting fairness and access, and supporting the protection, inclusion, and participation of all Albertans.

Similarly, among the goals of Alberta Children's Services we find a commitment that our children and youth will have a healthy start in life and the supports they need to reach their potential. Bill 201 is consistent with the ministry's strategy to develop legislation and policy to refocus resources for children with disabilities on their abilities rather than their disabilities. In doing this, the ministry advocates taking a proactive rather than a reactive approach to issues of mobility and disability.

Bill 201, therefore, has dual motives. On one hand, it aims to give Alberta's disabled community a greater voice in matters of access and design of buildings in our province. By taking advantage of the expertise of the disabled, expertise, I might add, that they have gained the hard way each and every day, we'll be in a better position to design and build buildings that will be able to accommodate all Albertans without regard to whether they are able bodied or not and without regard to whether they are young or not.

This, Mr. Speaker, leads me to the second purpose of the bill. It allows us to prepare ourselves for what some have labelled the seniors boom, the first wave of which we can expect to arrive in five or six years. As the first of the baby boomers reach retirement, every demographic forecast indicates that we are facing a dramatic increase in the number of seniors in our province. We all know that as we age, our bodies have a tendency to become less co-operative than we once took for granted, when we could do things without any difficulty at all. Now, instead, we require sometimes the utmost of effort and perhaps a great deal of pain to do what came easily previously. It's, therefore, in our own best interest that we now start taking steps to prepare ourselves for what inevitably and unforgivingly is coming our way, and that's old age.

If the forecasts are correct – and there's no reason to believe that they aren't – the segment of Albertans who can call themselves seniors will grow rapidly in the course of the next two decades. Currently 10 per cent of us are 65 or older, but by 2016 that number is expected to reach 14 per cent. By 2026 it's expected that more than 700,000 Albertans will be 65 years of age or older, and that's roughly, at that time, 1 in 5 Albertans.

With this in mind, Bill 201 is a pragmatic initiative to help set the pace for what is coming. By starting to take action now rather than later, we'll be considerably better able to face the challenges that having an aging or maturing population is going to bring. That maturing population will make it necessary for government to take a lead role in preparing workplaces, the labour force, and communities, both large and small, for the increasing number of seniors. Initiatives and programs that recognize the diversity of the elderly population must be developed in a wide range of areas, including but not limited to health and wellness, independence and vulnerability, financial security, and education. Bill 201 will of course not be the only manner in which we prepare ourselves for the impending seniors boom, but making our buildings accessible is an important aspect of this preparation.

Equality is another significant component of Bill 201. To summarize the matter, having and creating access are issues of basic fairness in our society. To purposely or systematically, albeit most probably also unintentionally, deny a particular group of people in our society access to buildings is wholly inconsistent with our values. Bill 201 thus places a great deal of emphasis on the high priority the Ministry of Community Development has given to fostering equality, strengthening community, inclusion for persons with disabilities, and supporting the reduction of discrimination and barriers to full participation in society. As well, Bill 201 would go

a long way toward realizing the ministry's goal to ensure that Albertans with disabilities have the opportunity to be fully included in the social, economic, and cultural life of the province.

This isn't just a matter of making sure the disabled community gets to participate with those of us who are fortunate enough to be able bodied. No, Mr. Speaker. This is very much a two-way street. By removing barriers and increasing access, those of us who are able bodied will have the opportunity and the privilege to increase our interaction with the disabled, many of whom will be our family members in the future.

Here I'd like to take the opportunity to stress once again that Bill 201 will not change the manner in which the Alberta building code applies to existing buildings and/or renovations, nor will the bill change the Alberta building code and how it is applied to private homes.

To summarize, Bill 201 amends the Safety Codes Act to clarify the applicability of the act to matters of barrier-free design and access. As well, the bill provides a proper voice for persons with disabilities by specifically enabling representation of persons with disabilities on the Safety Codes Council.

Lastly, Bill 201 specifically enables the drafting of regulations with regard to barrier-free design and accessibility. As we have heard, the bill calls for the addition of a 10th technical council, tentatively called the barrier-free council, to the Safety Codes Council to work alongside and together with the nine councils that are already in existence. Through this newly created entity, access and design concerns relating to barrier-free issues would have an opportunity to inform and be informed about issues regarding elevators, fire, plumbing, gas, boilers, among others. By establishing a barrier-free council, Alberta would really take the lead in advancing many of the issues that will be part of the next building code cycle, which is expected to begin around 2009.

What's more, by taking this step forward for the disabled Albertans, Alberta will continue to do what we have done for so long, and that's leading the way in building safety and accessibility provisions that enable persons with disabilities to achieve independence by both contributing and sharing in the opportunities and responsibilities of our society. This is something we take a great deal of pride in, I think, and passing Bill 201 will serve only to re-emphasize our commitment to the principles of universal access for all Albertans. With this in mind, I'll end my comments until such time as other members have concluded their comments and I have opportunity for some closing comments.

I would encourage all my colleagues to vote in favour of this third reading of Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the pleasure to rise and speak on Bill 201, Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, in its third reading. I'm pleased to support this bill, and I'm also pleased to have this opportunity to congratulate the hon. member for bringing this bill forward.

Mr. Speaker, as the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan has just stated, this bill, though very brief, makes some important changes in the existing legislation. One of those changes has to do with the representation of persons with disabilities to be represented on the barrier-free council. I think it's a very good addition or change to the existing legislation.

4:30

Mr. Speaker, I have spent lots of time at the University of Alberta both as a student in the '60s and then starting in the late '60s as a

faculty member. The University of Alberta and other public institutions like the University of Alberta have already done a great deal of work to facilitate changes in the design of buildings and to in fact bring in changes in existing buildings to improve access for persons with disabilities. I know that many hospitals have done the same.

I think it's important that this legislation be passed and implemented in all buildings and public facilities or residential places which are used by, frequented by persons with disabilities or begin to make adaptations in conformity with the intentions expressed in this bill, and those intentions are being legislated as we speak.

Mr. Speaker, I have a fair number of disabled persons who are my constituents and who live in buildings, and when I visit those buildings, I notice that those buildings could probably benefit from some improvements in their design so that the use of those buildings and access to those buildings becomes easier for my constituents who use them.

I also want to mention that the city of Edmonton, as we know, has changed its sidewalks and street crossings to facilitate movement by Edmontonians and other Albertans who need to use wheelchairs to get across various intersections and move from one place to another using public access and facilities.

So it's a good bill. It deserves the support of the House, and the New Democrat opposition is pleased to extend its support to Bill 201.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly a pleasure to rise today to support Bill 201 in third reading. It is a bill that I believe will be of great service to disabled Albertans and one that will provide a new vision for how we look at the construction and renovation of publicly accessible structures in our province.

Mr. Speaker, I can see many areas where this bill will have a positive effect on Alberta's disabled individuals as well as for all Albertans. As members have stated and as is noted in the bill, this bill is not a heavy-handed one. What the bill does is provide room on the Safety Codes Council for a representative of disabled Albertans.

If Bill 201 is passed, this representative for the disabled will have the mandate of increasing the safety and accessibility of publicly accessible buildings in our province to ensure that all Albertans can use the services provided within these buildings with safety and ease. Just as important, as disability representatives make continued recommendations to the Safety Codes Council, the wealth of knowledge of all contractors and experts in the field will grow, ensuring that newer buildings are constructed in innovative and safe ways that increase accessibility for everyone.

Further, we see built into the bill qualifications that are designed to make public structures more inclusive for disabled individuals. We also see a balance in that a review and appeals process has been put into place to ensure that nobody is unduly affected by the new changes this bill seeks to effect.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 201 is truly a bill built with the best intentions of all concerned parties and, indeed, all Albertans, and we would do well to support it here in third reading.

Today, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take a rural perspective and talk about the way this bill fits into and affects smaller rural communities in our provinces. I understand that when this bill was first contemplated by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, a lot of my rural colleagues were apprehensive about the effects this bill might have. For those of us who come from smaller communities, our focus lately has been on the rejuvenation of our rural economies.

The effects of drouth, BSE, and migration to larger communities mean that many communities are facing economic problems at rates unseen in their history. The fear was that on top of the problems we already face, this bill may be one more financial hurdle for our small businesses to jump over.

For years migration to larger centres has been a concern. Our young people often go to Edmonton, Calgary, or Lethbridge for university or to other regional centres for college or trade school. Our hope, of course, is that they will return with the expertise they gain and use it in their hometowns. While this does happen, often the reality is that these students stay in the city in which they go to university or migrate to other cities as a means of finding profitable employment, and not a single one of us here faults our young people for doing that. They, like young adults from all over the world, have to make a life for themselves, and oftentimes the opportunities just aren't there in our smaller communities.

Our goal as rural MLAs is to take steps to ensure that the Alberta advantage doesn't just occur in larger communities but in rural Alberta as well. So, of course, there was apprehension when this bill came forward.

Many local businesses are built in older buildings, and many of them are barely surviving. As many members know, renovating older structures can cause a great deal of difficulty, especially considering that some of the structures are made with older materials and were built with older methods. Providing the appropriate planning for renovations or placing an addition beside the original structure could prove to be quite a daunting and expensive task and could increase the costs of renovation beyond what they may be already.

The questions were many. Would all of these businesses be forced to install wheelchair and disabled-friendly measures tomorrow? Would any of these businesses looking to expand be unable to expand due to the increased costs of barrier-free access? What are the cost differences between ordinary access and barrier-free access? Are the costs truly more significantly onerous? In short, in our efforts to provide for the needs of disabled individuals would we be taking steps which expand the need for restimulation of Alberta's rural economy?

Mr. Speaker, to many this question may be somewhat impolitic, but that doesn't make it illegitimate. The concerns of our rural communities are real, and they do need to be considered in this type of legislation. After all, to pass a bill that would significantly damage the prospect of economic recovery in the rural Alberta business sector is nothing that this government would care to do.

Mr. Speaker, during debate many of the above questions have been answered, and the bill has received the favour of the House. Fortunately, Bill 201 is structured in such a way that it will not harm the prospects of economic recovery in rural Alberta. The bill is crafted in such a way that both appeals processes and reasonable requirements exist. The most reasonable part about this legislation is that it applies only to new structures and new renovations. I can think of other more intrusive ways that this legislation could be put in place, but again this sponsor has struck a balance, showing genuine concern and consideration for the practical challenges this bill could pose.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, we need to be clear on another aspect of Bill 201, and that is the inclusiveness it fosters for disabled individuals. This inclusiveness does not just concern those who have become disabled at a young age but those whose disabilities are the result of the aging process as well. As a result, we're not talking about a small subset of the province's population but a group of large numbers. We're also talking about a group of individuals who are part and parcel of the community fabric in rural Alberta.

As this relates to my discussion on rural economies, it is safe to say that strong economies are those that allow everyone the opportunity to get hold of or purchase the things they need. If business structures are designed in such a way that people are not able to patronize the business, well, that's just one more customer lost.

I mentioned at the outset of my speech, Mr. Speaker, that as our young people move away, rural communities are on average becoming home to populations that are older. These older Albertans often find themselves with disabilities which force them to either use a wheelchair or walker or cane or some other assisting device. Our community businesses must be able to accommodate these Albertans. It will not do for them to not be able to do this, because in the end their businesses will suffer if certain customers are unable to access the services within. So we must stress to business that accessibility is an important issue, not only for the purpose of economies but for the needs and participation of disabled individuals as well.

Mr. Speaker, I support the bill wholeheartedly, and I am anxious to see it implemented so that we may quickly provide disabled Albertans with a voice on the Safety Codes Council. Therefore, I urge all members to support this bill. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

4:40

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure this afternoon to stand and speak in favour of Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. One of the things that we have to look at is the approach that we take to making sure that every Albertan, every Canadian has access, that basically are given a sense that when we do things, we're doing it in an inclusive way.

Bill 201 points out that we have to recognize the need of all Albertans, all Canadians to in effect be considered when we're dealing with safety issues, be considered when we're dealing with building codes, be considered when we look at how they can participate in our society. That's important. That sends a real message out to Albertans and to individuals who have disabilities that we are considering their needs and we're considering what they need to participate.

I want to also recognize that the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan has not only said that these are important things that we need to do; he's taken an initiative here to make sure that individuals with those disabilities are involved in the process by creating a council to allow them to be part of any discussions that would affect new regulations, would affect changes in the direction that we go.

I support the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner when he talked about the fact that there's a beneficial part of this bill in the sense that it's talking about new construction or renovations to existing constructions so that it doesn't become a burden when we look at struggling businesses in many parts of Alberta. The Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner referred to rural Alberta, but I know that in my constituency in Lethbridge there are a number of businesses that couldn't undertake a significant capital project at this time.

We need to be looking at these projects and this accessibility over the long run, and the fact that we're building this into redesign, reconstruction, remodeling, renovation, and new buildings is really an important part of it. I think that if we look at it from the point of view of "Is construction of an accessible building any more costly than construction of a conventional building?" that is really something where we're going to recognize in the future that, no, it doesn't

cost a lot more to in effect build in accessibility and consideration for individuals with disabilities.

You know, Mr. Speaker, on a number of occasions you've been going through hotels or other buildings, and you come to the sign in front of an elevator that says: in case of a fire don't use this elevator. How is an individual in a wheelchair to get out of the building if they can't use the elevator? You know, these kinds of things. This is a new process of thought that we have to enter into when we start designing not only buildings but also safety codes, in the sense that if there is somebody with a disability there, are there provisions within the evacuation procedures and within the fire safety procedures to in effect make sure that that individual can get out from their place in the building if an emergency happens?

To the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan: thanks; this is a great bill. I think all Albertans should respect the intent of it and look forward to the future when all of our buildings are fully functional and fully accessible for all Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great pleasure to rise and speak at third reading of Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. I would like to begin my remarks in the time allotted to me this afternoon by congratulating the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for sponsoring Bill 201.

Introducing an initiative like this shows two things to me. First of all, it shows a great sensitivity to the needs of a group of Albertans whose particular needs in many instances have been addressed as an afterthought rather than anything else. So through the introduction of Bill 201 Albertans with disabilities have not only found a strong advocate in the government, but their collective voice has also been heard loud and clear by those of us who have the great privilege and responsibility of representing our fellow men and women in this esteemed Assembly.

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, given the impending seniors boom that will occur not just in Alberta but around much of the world in a few short years, it is imperative that we begin to address many issues that we'll have to confront on a daily basis. The median age of the province rises, and more and more people will be in a position to call themselves or, at the very least, be considered by others as seniors, with their abilities becoming more and more limited. So for most of us as we age, our body gradually becomes somewhat less co-operative. Although we may be loath to admit it, each and every one of us will eventually have a series of realizations that will cause us to say something like this: "Whoops, this requires more effort than it used to," or "I don't remember taking quite so long to walk up those stairs."

So planning ahead will therefore be tremendously important as our population ages. Whatever effort we put in today will have many-fold benefits in the course of the coming years and decades. It seems fairly obvious that to best realize such an effort, we must have a co-ordinated approach. Mr. Speaker, it's in everyone's best interests that there be a few overarching guidelines that help us as we prepare ourselves and our society for the needs we will face in the years ahead.

When it comes to buildings and construction, the Alberta building code will quite obviously remain the standard it has been over the last 30 years. As we all know, the safety and the technical specifications to which builders and contractors in our province must adhere are set forth in great detail in the Alberta building code. By using

this document, which is really about a three-inch thick binder, a benchmark against which the quality and safety of Alberta's many buildings are judged, we can be assured that there is some consistency in the construction industry, that buildings in our province, regardless of where they are built, are subject to the same standard.

Having a co-ordinated approach like that can be very helpful in ensuring adherence to the accepted standard. No building is treated differently from others. What's more, home builders and contractors in any part of Alberta are subject to the same regulations. We don't cut slack for some and none for others. There is no slack for safety consideration – no slack, period. Everyone is subject to the requirements and the specifications of the Alberta building code.

One of the things that has been the source of some concern is the so-called relaxation clause found in section 3.8 of the Alberta building code. Section 3.8 governs barrier-free design issues, common-sense exemptions already specified in the building code for such things as private homes, relocatable industrial buildings, and other industrial operations where the risk to the person with sensory and/or physical disability would preclude their working or being present in the building anyway.

4:50

In addition to this common-sense exemption, builders and contractors have additional options for a situation where they think that compliance with a barrier-free requirement might prove cumbersome, costly, or otherwise not necessary. They can still apply for a relaxation of this requirement. Bill 201 does not affect the relaxation clause. It is still an option for those who think that they would have something to gain from filing the appropriate application with the director of the building code for a relaxation of the barrier-free requirement.

What is of considerably greater significance here, however, is that Bill 201 does not abolish the relaxation clause. It does strengthen its importance and its usefulness. First of all, by having a centralized process for assessing the merits of each and every application for relaxation, we can be assured that the manner in which the applications are processed is even-handed and fair. All applications receive the same level and kind of attention, and all are subject to the same interpretation and application criteria. While there is no reason to fear that such would not be the case in the centralization process, the variations and the differences, however subtle they may be, the assessment would increase for the purposes of our discussion here and during the preceding weeks.

The most important point with regard to the relaxation clause is this. By retaining the option of applying for relaxation rather than removing it, Bill 201 provides for the creation of a regulation to govern the relaxation process which could specify the participation of persons with disabilities in the application process. Thus far an application for relaxation has tended to be a matter between the director of the Alberta building code and the petitioner. With few, if any, exceptions the petitioner has always been a builder or a contractor or a building owner. In other words, when it comes to having had input to the process, the disabled community has had almost none.

With Bill 201, however, this will change. Just like the bill makes it possible for the addition of a 10th entity in the Safety Codes Council, so it makes possible enhancing the application process for a relaxation. From now on applications for relaxation will benefit from the input of the disabled community. At first glance this may not seem particularly appealing to either contractors, builders, or operators, on the one hand, or the disabled community, on the other hand. I think that there are certain different views from the two camps. While I am not suggesting that all members of either side

feel the same this way or that way, I think that there is a perception that all contractors, builders, and operators want to have as few barrier-free designs and access requirements to contend with as possible. Conversely, there is a view held by some that the disabled community wants everything to be accessible without regard for the usefulness or utility of doing so, not to mention regard for the cost of removing every single barrier in society.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I know from experience that the two sides are not quite as far apart as people perceive. While there are always those who in a dispute will assume the most extreme positions imaginable, the vast majority of those involved tend to congregate in the middle. As a result, they are quite close to one another. This is, of course, something that bodes well for compromise.

For this reason I support the bill, and I encourage all the members to support the bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate this afternoon on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act. We've heard that this act proposes to promote barrier-free design and access for persons with physical and sensory disabilities to all buildings and facilities. It certainly is something that I think we should support. I think that with some of the barrier-free designs and access for people with disabilities this province is leading the way. One can venture to other jurisdictions, and you can see just exactly how we compare. Now, that's not to say that improvements cannot be made or that this is not an improvement, because it is my view that it is.

Now, this amendment, as has been described, I believe applies to fire protection and to the design, manufacture, construction, installation, operation, and maintenance of buildings and their electrical systems, elevating devices, their gas distribution systems, plumbing systems, sewage disposal, and pressure equipment. As I said before, this will be an improvement, but people with disabilities should be able to access any building that an able-bodied person can. However, I would like to caution or state that this legislation seems only to encourage barrier-free design.

I know that there have been remarks made earlier in reference to how great the Safety Codes Act is, but certainly I think that there can be improvements made to the Safety Codes Act. I'm not sure that this was such a good idea now that we've almost had a decade of the Safety Codes Act. There was certainly a common belief among government members that all government regulation was bad. We got downsized; we got to remove regulations. As a result, one of those initiatives created the Safety Codes Act, or the safety codes system.

Has it worked? Well, I don't think so. I don't think it has improved conditions for consumers. When one looks at the condos that are being built, some of the issues around condominiums, we have had spectacular fires. We have had fires while construction was occurring. We've had spectacular fires after condo owners had purchased the units and moved in.

There's a great deal of dissatisfaction in regard to this bill, Mr. Speaker. This would be a very good time, after this legislation has passed, for this government to consider a complete review of the Safety Codes Act and the system of inspection that is the result of that, to look at this entire system and see if it's working in the interests of consumers. I don't think it is, but this amendment certainly is a good idea. Whenever one endorses this amendment, it's not an endorsement of this entire process. I was talking about fires in the condominium complex. As well there was a serious fire in 2001 in Fulton Court, which is a 70-unit, three-storey structure in Edmonton-Gold Bar.

5:00

In the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar there was an over \$5 million fire in the spring of 2001. There are still, unfortunately, issues to be resolved in regard to this fire and how all this is going to work. There are alleged reconstruction deficiencies. Mould and the discovery that the building needed upgrading to comply with the building code have led to a number of lawsuits and counter claims, and that's why I think we should consider again looking at our entire safety codes system. If the hon. member is looking for a job after he finishes doing such a good job on this one, well, we could maybe, Mr. Speaker, put him to work.

When you consider, whether it's Calgary or Edmonton, that whenever you have a situation such as the fire that I have described, that puts a strain on the entire condominium community. It also reduces the confidence consumers have when purchasing a new condo. You don't have to go by any road in this city or in Calgary or in a lot of other communities to see how many condominiums are being built. Unless we want more problems, I would urge this House and its members to have a good, close look at our entire safety codes system.

Mr. Speaker, with that I will cede the floor to another member of this Assembly. When I say that I'm supporting this bill, it does not mean that I have a ringing endorsement of the entire safety codes process, the permitting process, nor the inspection process, because I think there are too many deficiencies in it, and there is not enough protection for consumers, nor is there protection for individuals who are considering or have purchased a condominium recently.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I take great pleasure in rising to share my thoughts on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004. If passed, the bill, sponsored by the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, will serve to amend the Safety Codes Act. In its current form this act concerns itself with protecting the safety and well-being of Albertans by setting and enforcing building standards. The Alberta building code, as we know, concerns itself with the structural integrity of buildings, along with ensuring that certain safety precautions and building standards are met.

Unless you are directly involved in the construction industry, this topic might not be something that is thought about on a daily basis. However, this topic is one that concerns all Albertans because it affects everyone in our province. In order to construct a new building or make structural changes to an existing one, it's necessary to obtain a building permit. There are several reasons for this, but the one that most concerns us is that this places controls on who is constructing our homes, shopping centres, office complexes, and apartment buildings. It also notifies the proper authorities so that the proper system of checks and balances can be put into motion.

Our province requires that every aspect of structures built here is inspected by qualified professionals to ensure that it meets the standards set out in the Alberta building code. These standards apply to a range of items, including the types of building materials used, the thickness of the foundation, fire escapes, and electrical breaker panels. Safety code officers physically visit and inspect buildings, and it is this function that is most important. By having the resources to send experts to the construction site, it is possible to ensure that the contractors are adhering to the Alberta building code.

A lack of inspectors on the ground can lead to tragic consequences. For example, the standards laid out by the building codes in Turkey are very high in part because of the frequency with which

the region is affected by earthquakes. However, these codes are not well enforced, and this can lead to tragedy such as the one that struck in mid-February. An 11-storey apartment block collapsed, resulting in the deaths of 92 people.

The reasons behind this accident centre around the failure of the contractor to adhere to the standards that are laid out in Turkey's building codes. In this situation the contractors used substandard building materials coupled with poor workmanship and made alterations to the original blueprints. These factors combined to seriously compromise the structural integrity of the building.

The fault for this tragedy lies directly at the feet of the contractors. However, they felt that they could cut corners and make more money because there is a lack of enforcement of their building codes. While this is an extreme example for sure, it illustrates the importance of the work that is done by the Safety Codes Council and the inspections officers that ensure that the standards set out in the building code are adhered to.

Mr. Speaker, as we have heard in the previous stages of debate, Bill 201 aims to expand the role of the Safety Codes Council. The council is primarily concerned with one task: the structural integrity of buildings to ensure that they are safe for those that inhabit them. Currently the council is composed of members considered to be experts in their chosen fields. These areas of expertise include fire protection, buildings, electrical systems, elevating devices, gas systems, plumbing systems, private sewage disposal systems, and pressure equipment. Bill 201 would serve to expand this council to include a member who is an expert in barrier-free design and access.

The building codes governing universal accessibility are already in place, and contractors must adhere to them. Public buildings must be laid out in such a manner that they're navigable by any person, whether they live with limited mobility or not. Why is it important to expand the council to include a member that has practical experience in dealing with barrier-free design and access issues? The answer to the question is simple: the current members of the Safety Codes Council are not experts in the field of universal accessibility.

The other major facets of construction are represented on the council except for an expert in this field. The exclusion of a representative with the expertise in the field of universal accessibility represents a significant omission, an omission that will be corrected by passing Bill 201. The inclusion of an expert in the field of universal accessibility will improve the council's ability to apply the Alberta building code in this area.

In many cases persons who do not live with reduced mobility do not fully understand the implications that come with using a wheelchair or a walker or a cane. The example of the ramp at the east end of the Legislature Building has been discussed previously and with good reason. Those of us who are not confined to a wheelchair are unaware of the mechanics involved in travelling in one. The distances that are necessary to turn the chair and the types of corners that are not easily navigated are not familiar unless you have actually used a wheelchair. The addition of a member from the disabled community will expand the council's expertise to encompass this area. This expert would be able to offer advice that's grounded in real-world experience that other members of the council may not have had.

While the Alberta building code does stipulate that universal accessibility is a necessity, the details of applying these provisions are not specified. By giving suggestions on the details of how to implement the requirements set out in the code, the expanded council would become more effective. The design of components that make a building universally accessible would over time become less of a secondary concern, and these components could become more user friendly.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to remember that passing Bill 201 will not change the existing requirements that must be met by contractors regarding barrier-free design and access, nor will it expand the types of buildings that would be required to meet the current standards. I realize that both of these points have been made numerous times previously, but I feel that it is important to mention them once again.

Another argument that I feel cannot be stressed enough is the steadily growing population over 65 years of age. Before long all those present in this Chamber will become seniors. The reality of this situation is that for a significant number of older persons, reduced mobility becomes a fact of life. This can be due to a number of reasons ranging from a bad back to a hip that needs to be replaced. It is important for this Assembly to act now to start the process that will build the infrastructure that will become increasingly more important as we look into the future.

5:10

By acting now, there will be significant financial gains to be made in the long run. If a building is made universally accessible at the time of construction, there will be an added cost of roughly 4 per cent to the base building price. If a building is constructed without accounting for universal accessibility, the cost of retrofitting the building to meet these standards is roughly 10 to 15 times more.

I know that using percentages such as these makes the costs seem vague; however, I agree with using percentages, so I would like to illustrate this using a hypothetical situation. The cost of making a \$500,000 building universally accessible at the time of construction would be roughly \$20,000. The cost of retrofitting this building at a later date to make it universally accessible would be estimated to cost anywhere from \$200,000 to \$300,000. Mr. Speaker, the math of this situation speaks for itself. By acting now, we will be preventing large costs from haunting building owners in the future.

Passing Bill 201 will show other jurisdictions the steps that can be taken to ensure that their communities remain open and accessible to every member of the community. Hopefully, this will prompt other areas to follow where this province will have led and choose to utilize the expertise that resides in their communities on the subject of barrier-free access and design.

Bill 201 is a sensible and well-thought-out piece of legislation that will act to ensure that those of us who live with limited mobility will not have their options for work or recreation limited by disability. I fully support the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, and I would ask that all of my colleagues today support it as well.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to join the debate in third reading on Bill 201, the Safety Codes (Barrier-free Design and Access) Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. I have no doubt that the disabled will benefit if this Assembly passes this bill.

Through Bill 201 this Assembly has an opportunity to ensure that the basic needs of the disabled related to daily living are met. This legislation can remove physical barriers from public buildings and allow disabled Albertans to become full participants in community and employment opportunities.

I like this bill because there's no direct involvement from the Alberta government other than establishing a position on the Safety Codes Council for the disabled and enshrining the need for barrier-free access. Improvements to barrier-free designs will come from the experts on the Safety Codes Council. Disabled Albertans are the

best people to improve accessibility by offering practical ideas for consideration by the Safety Codes Council. It's likely that further changes may be added to the safety codes as a result of the input and experience from the disabled representation on the Safety Codes Council.

I'm confident that the changes proposed to the Safety Codes Act in Bill 201 will have a negligible impact on the construction industry. The money earmarked for barrier-free designs already exists.

Mr. Speaker, it could be argued that a great deal of progress has already been made toward the goal of barrier-free access without Bill 201. Many examples of physical barriers to accessibility could be remedied through minor adjustments to current provisions. For instance, some speakers mentioned wheelchair ramps that were not placed in the most convenient location. These could be moved or easily rebuilt to accommodate the disabled. The private sector would be in the best position to make these changes, not the Alberta government.

I realize that improvements to barrier-free access will not occur overnight. This bill is not retroactive and will only apply to future renovation and construction projects. The changes proposed in Bill 201 will only apply to certain buildings, and the exemption clause will remain in place. That being said, if the previous work of the Safety Codes Council is any indication, then changes to barrier-free designs will happen as fast as possible, and they will be consistent and even-handed.

The new representation for the disabled will ensure that resources are used correctly the first time. Again, as previous speakers have mentioned, these changes would add to the value of the building. The need for innovative and improved barrier-free designs will increase. These changes will allow the growing population of disabled Albertans to use public buildings more freely and with less difficulty.

I'm supportive of this bill because it will bring about effective changes to better help disabled Albertans rather than creating another commission or funding some sort of review. This bill addresses the issue of accessibility up front and proposes a realistic, common-sense solution for improving accessibility.

I, too, would encourage all members to vote in favour of Bill 201. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I conclude my remarks.

The Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order 8(5)(a)(iii), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a private member's public bill to close debate, I would now invite the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan to close debate on third reading of Bill 201.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would first of all like to thank all those members who have spoken so well in favour of Bill 201, stating the examples that they were aware of and were advised from their constituents about.

Many people worked on this bill. Certainly, the research department started off working in many different areas in looking at issues and how to work through that, led by one of our researchers, Frank Ostlinger. I'd like to thank him for that. Legislative Counsel was involved in helping to draft it, and that was after Municipal Affairs had had a great deal of input. Under the leadership and support of the minister they advised which directions to go with this that would work out the best for the Safety Codes Council.

Many organizations were involved. The Canadian Paraplegic Association, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, and the Multiple Sclerosis Society were also in there giving advice and talking about situations that they felt needed to be remedied.

There were other people; David Pinney, for example, who was involved in barrier-free design and access architecture. People like that were very beneficial in giving me advice about what was important.

But, Mr. Speaker, most important and the reason that this bill came forward was because of many people passing along information to me in my role as chair of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. They talked about challenges they faced and how design improvements could be made.

I'd like to read a couple of short sentences from a letter I received from a lady who perhaps is the best example of the challenges that can occur when one becomes paralyzed. Her name is Barb Gulka. She lives in Lloydminster. She advised me that I could use her name and read a little bit from her letter. She was a businessperson, a successful businessperson, had a business in Lloydminster. One day, shortly after the noon rush she had a little bit of pain in her hip, and 40 minutes later due to a blood clot of some sort she was paralyzed and in a wheelchair.

The circumstances for her were such that her store wasn't accessible to her as a person who had just finished building it and had been advised that it was, according to code, barrier free. She was unable to get into the building, into her business because the incline on the ramp was a little too steep. The bathroom, which she was told was accessible and built to code, wasn't useful for her as a person in a wheelchair. She makes several comments with respect

to this that the code was there. She was told that it was built to code. But perhaps there could be some small changes in the code requirements, because it was her intention to build it completely barrier free, but in fact it wasn't in the end.

These kinds of comments were important in bringing this forward so that we can address those kinds of issues in the future. So I thank the members that spoke in favour and those other members who I hope will support this bill. I would ask for the question, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 201 read a third time]

5:20

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm just delighted with the passage of Bill 201, and I, too, just wanted to say thank you to the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for what he's done for the disabled community. I thank all members in the House for their rather unanimous support today.

Mr. Speaker, in view of that excellent progress, I would move that we now call it 5:30 and reconvene at 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:21 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 15, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/15

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Special Constables

503. Rev. Abbott moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation which would make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and require special constables to take enhanced weapons training thereby creating the appropriate conditions under which the province could consider allowing the option of arming special constables with better defensive weapons such as Tasers.

Mr. Magnus moved that the motion be amended by (a) striking out “make special constables accountable” and substituting “provide the option of making special constables accountable” and (b) by striking out “enhanced weapons training” and substituting “enhanced training” and (c) by striking out “thereby creating the appropriate conditions under which the province could consider allowing the option of arming special constables with better defensive weapons such as Tasers.”

[Debate adjourned March 8: Mr. Cenaiko speaking]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The current special constable requirements need to be altered to recognize the difference between those involved in supplemental policing and those performing specialized duties.

The policing review committee saw a way to improve service levels throughout Alberta by creating deputy constables. The committee proposed legislation to create a supplemental level of policing that would be part of the local police service. These officers would perform specialized duties such as traffic enforcement, responding to low-priority calls, delivering prevention programs, or acting as school liaison officers. These officers would also have to meet provincial recruiting and training standards. Establishing a second tier of law enforcement would be very helpful in rural Alberta, where the population is small and spread over a large geographic area.

The concept of deputy constables supports the changes proposed in Motion 503. A two-tiered police service will improve the response times to provincial and local priorities. The growth of organized crime, drug production, and drug trafficking are major concerns for police services in all areas of Alberta. Creating a responsible and accountable supplemental level of policing will help police officers effectively tackle larger crime issues. I think these new positions would also be effective as a developmental program for future police officers.

The role of the special constable will change if recommendations from the policing review are implemented. Currently special constables fulfill their duties and do an incredible job assisting Alberta's broad law enforcement initiatives. In the future some of these special constables may be elevated to the new position of deputy constable.

The second part of the amendment to Motion 503 asks the

government to require special constables to take enhanced training. As the responsibilities of this second tier of policing expand and evolve, the minimum requirements may change for the deputies with more responsibilities. Motion 503 would not hand over the use of lethal force to special constables without any strings attached. The Solicitor General may decide that a policing diploma from Grant MacEwan or Mount Royal College may be a minimum requirement.

The second statement in the amendments to Motion 503 regarding enhanced training for special constables will generate the most controversy, but it should be noted that the amendment takes out any mention of weapons. As a former police officer I'm fully aware of the consequences of discharging a lethal weapon. Police officers are trained at length during the recruit phase and qualify three times a year for their entire career in law enforcement. I believe that this philosophy can also be taught to deputy constables before they are armed with lethal force.

Their responsibilities will most likely increase, and their importance to law enforcement initiatives will be more prominent. I support the idea of equipping constables with better defensive weapons, but I do not think we should do this overnight.

Some may argue that the original wording for Motion 503 would needlessly arm special constables with a potentially fatal prohibited weapon; this would give too much power to untrained personnel. As other speakers have pointed out, special constables are already equipped with nightsticks and pepper spray. These weapons can cause severe or permanent injury. It's also been pointed out that special constables aren't even supposed to be in situations that would require the use of a restricted weapon.

In fact, I believe the amended wording for Motion 503 is consistent with the future of policing in Alberta. The face of policing in Alberta is changing. Recommendations from the policing review give more prominence to special or deputy constables.

Financing in law enforcement is also changing. A new funding formula for policing between the Alberta government and the municipalities was referred to in the 2004 Speech from the Throne. If funding for policing becomes a provincial responsibility, then introducing legislation making special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board would also seem to be a reasonable amendment to the Police Act.

Mr. Speaker, the public's expectations for law enforcement have increased. The government should seriously consider new initiatives and alternatives to raise the level of service and enforcement to meet these expectations. Making special constables accountable to the government would be the first step. The next step would be deciding which special constables or deputy constables would require additional tools.

I agree that special constables should avoid dangerous situations. This may be easier said than done in some circumstances. For example, what are special constables who stumble upon poachers supposed to do? According to the Solicitor General's department they are supposed to tactically reposition. In other words, they are supposed to leave the area as fast as possible and contact the local police service.

In this case, these criminals are armed and likely in a remote location, and I find it hard to imagine how special constables are supposed to tactically reposition themselves when they're in the middle of nowhere and in very real danger. In these circumstances enhanced training would be required. This enhanced training may allow constables to arm themselves with better defensive weapons. Sometimes the mere presence of a weapon can be enough to avoid confrontation.

The amended wording considered in Motion 503 points out that officers would have to complete enhanced training and under the

Police Act would be accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board rather than their employer.

As the face of policing evolves, the new level of law enforcement will require additional training and stronger educational requirements. As I mentioned earlier, deputy constables could be responsible for enforcing traffic laws and low-priority calls. These situations could be very dangerous for any police officer.

This amended motion, Mr. Speaker, is a reasonable consideration for the Alberta government as we reform law enforcement in Alberta. I believe that the proposed amendment fits better with the Alberta government's vision for the future of policing, and I encourage all members to vote in favour of Motion 503.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. We are on an amendment, hon. members.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, I think context is really important when we examine proposals that are brought before this Assembly. In fact, I was going to refrain from commenting on the motion that's been proposed, but the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo raised an issue that reminded me how important context is because he referred to the MLA policing review committee. That's the context that I think is missing from the discussion which I as a member of the Assembly think I need in order to understand where the member's proposal would fit and, in fact, the amended proposal would fit.

Two very different things have come before us in connection with this Motion 503: the original motion, which had three parts to it, including arming special constables with Tasers, and then the amended motion, which has removed the part about Tasers and retained the part about accountability to the Law Enforcement Review Board and enhanced training.

What we're missing here is the final response from the government on the recommendations from the MLA policing review. Originally that report was produced by the committee in July of '02. By October of '02 we had a response from the government that they were considering some things and sending the rest back out into the community for an additional feedback loop, and that's the last we ever heard of it.

So I don't have any idea, and I'm listening carefully to the member, who I believe was a member of that policing review, and I'm thinking: am I getting dropped hints here? Is there something that I am supposed to be gleaning from what the member is saying that's in context or not in context? I really don't know, Mr. Speaker, because we don't have that final report and the government's final response to it before us in which to consider this recommendation.

That's not the only part that's missing from this discussion. The other part is the police staffing levels and the implementation plan for that. Now, that's something that's been asked for by the Auditor General, and he's made it very clear that, you know, he can't sort of pass any kind of comment on value for money around policing in Alberta because we don't have any idea. Well, he said, actually: we have no idea whether we're safe in Alberta right now because that plan is still not forthcoming from the Solicitor General.

It's not that I haven't tried, Mr. Speaker. I've tried a number of times to ask the Solicitor General to provide not only the final response to the MLA policing review and the police staffing levels and the implementation plan but, in fact, the corrections review that was done and, finally, the report that was done on the victims fund. So very difficult to comment on the motion that's before us while we're missing that information.

8:10

In response to my most recent set of questions to the Solicitor General, we were told to hold tight; the budget's coming, and somehow that would answer all questions. Well, I hope that's coming with the tabling of those four reports or studies because without those I don't know how we can be discussing this motion here tonight. It's completely without context. It's not tied to anything. We can't tell whether we've got more policing, less policing, who's funding it, who's not funding it. It's just floating out there in space and it's to my mind not a terribly useful exercise without understanding where it might be fitting inside of some plan, which we have yet to get from the Solicitor General.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and contribute to the discussion regarding Motion 503 and the amendment that's currently before us.

Now, in the original motion my colleague the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar proposed that two courses of action be taken. The first suggestion was to make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and secondly, special constables would be required to take advanced training. This training would better equip special constables to carry out their duties.

I am prepared to fully support the general direction of the hon. member's motion provided that this amendment passes tonight. I do feel that special constables should be made accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board. Special constables are being given a greater level of enforcement powers, and this should be balanced with greater responsibility to a governing body. I think this idea holds great merit, in fact, and that it should be investigated further.

So if this motion passes in its proposed amended form, I would then be able to support the second part of the motion as well. In the original wording I had reservations regarding the second goal of the motion as I am very reluctant to consider arming any person other than a police officer with a weapon capable of delivering a lethal charge. I'd like to take this opportunity to outline the reasons that I feel that only police officers should be armed with weapons such as Tasers.

Now, a Taser is often regarded as a nonlethal weapon; however, that's not always the case. These weapons are capable not only of temporarily incapacitating an individual but also of delivering a lethal charge. In certain cases Tasers can be lethal weapons, and I feel that this Assembly should be aware of that and be wary of arming any person who is not a member of a police force with a lethal weapon.

Mr. Speaker, special constables provide an invaluable service for a variety of employers, including municipal governments, police services, and the SPCA. They are charged with the enforcement of city bylaws, patrolling our provincial parks, and recently the Solicitor General has granted special constables a greater level of authority to enforce traffic laws in certain circumstances and situations. The functions that special constables perform serve to alleviate the burden of enforcement that is felt by regular police forces and do it in a far more cost-effective manner.

It is more cost-effective for several reasons, but one of the major ones is that the duration and therefore the expense of training for a special constable is actually quite a bit shorter than for a normal police officer. Special constables receive one month of training at the Alberta Justice Staff College as opposed to a five- or six-month training course that regular police officers are subjected to. This

level of training gives special constables the knowledge necessary to perform their specific duties.

The enforcement provided by special constables allows organizations such as municipal police forces and the RCMP to put greater focus on areas of major crime such as drug trafficking and theft. While special constables do perform certain tasks that regular police officers perform, it is important to note that special constables are not police officers, and this is reflected nowhere more prominently than in the selection process and the level of training that applicants are subjected to.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to briefly outline the selection and training regimen of applicants looking to become an RCMP constable, for example. The selection process is divided into roughly six steps. The first is comprised of writing the RCMP police aptitude test. This exam measures candidate skills in areas such as logic, reading, comprehension, written communication, mathematics, and use of personal judgment. This test is used to screen the usually very large number of applicants by determining whether they possess the basic core skills that will allow them to succeed during the training program. If a candidate is successful at this stage, he is then allowed to officially apply to the RCMP. It is during this time that candidates need to pass the physical abilities requirement evaluation, or the PARE test, which tests a candidate's physical strength, stamina, and agility.

Provided they meet the requirements for the PARE, candidates will then move on to a formal interview, which is composed of two parts: suitability for the job and a security component. This interview is conducted by an experienced RCMP officer who uses the interview to get the most accurate picture of the applicant's abilities and assess their potential to function as an RCMP officer.

The suitability portion of the interview measures applicants' aptitude in eight areas including oral communication skills, integrity and honesty, leadership and interpersonal skills. All of these competencies are necessary to be able to carry out the duties of an RCMP constable. Many candidates are screened out at this stage and not necessarily because they're ill-suited to be a police officer but because they do not yet have the life experience necessary that allows people to make good judgment calls.

Now, if the applicant has the skills and life experience necessary and he or she passes both the suitability and security portions of the interview, then their medical and psychological health would be assessed through a battery of tests to ensure that they are also physically and mentally fit for the rigours of police work.

While this is happening, RCMP constables are conducting an extensive background check on the applicant's entire life. This is to ensure that he or she has not been giving false information during the interview and that they would not pose a security risk if they were to eventually become an RCMP officer.

After successfully passing all of these screening procedures, the candidate is then engaged as an RCMP constable and goes to Regina for training, which lasts for a full 22 weeks. During this time, trainees are barracked with their troopmates and start at 6 in the morning and finish at 6 in the evening. It's a rigorous training process that covers not only the basics such as law and how to handle a firearm but also gives officers the skill they need to assess situations they might encounter.

It is these skills that I believe to be of utmost importance because they determine when an officer feels it is necessary to use any of the weapons they are equipped with. Teaching someone just to fire a gun or a Taser is a fairly basic endeavour and can be accomplished with relative ease. What is of greater importance is to make sure that that person possesses the skills that will allow them to evaluate a situation to determine whether it is necessary to use a weapon and to

have the diplomacy and leadership skills to be able to defuse confrontations before they happen.

Mr. Speaker, police forces utilize a rigorous physical and mental training program to prepare their constables for police work. In addition to this, the trainees are screened to ensure that they not only have the necessary skills but also the necessary life experience that leads to better judgment calls and decision-making in high-stress situations. The training that Alberta's special constables receive simply does not compare to this. If we are to arm them, we would need to expand training to a level that is on par with that of regular police constables, in which case they may as well just be members of the RCMP or municipal police force.

Additionally, the physical requirements and conditioning would need to be expanded as well. Police services demand a high level of physical fitness for their applicants and their officers. This physical training serves police officers well for chasing down and apprehending suspects, but it actually serves another important purpose as well. It ensures that the police officers are strong enough and that they have enough combat training that they will not have their weapon or weapons taken away from them and consequently used against them or other innocent bystanders.

If special constables are armed with a weapon that is capable of causing death, we would be derelict in our duty if we didn't train them physically as well as mentally to deal with that level of responsibility. Again, this would require expanding training for special constables to a level that is on par with that of regular police forces, and this is simply not necessary for special constables to be able to fulfill their duties.

Mr. Speaker, special constables play a key enforcement role in our society, but the fact remains that they are not given the same level of training that regular police forces receive. In addition, special constables are not subjected to the same mental, physical, and ethical screening standards that police candidates endure. As the Taser can be a lethal weapon, I feel that it should only be issued to police officers. Members of Alberta's police forces have the training, experience, and judgment skills to ensure that a weapon of this aggressive nature is only used in the proper circumstances.

It is for these reasons that I feel unable to support the original motion's wording. That's why I will be supporting this amendment. Having said that, in its amended form I feel that this motion will do much to assist special constables. I would urge all my colleagues to stand with me in support of Motion 503.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

8:20

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the merits of Motion 503 tonight. By introducing Motion 503, the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar has raised two very important issues: first, whether or not to make special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board and, secondly, whether or not doing so is something that should require these special constables to take enhanced training.

Mr. Speaker, special constables are a part of our everyday lives. We may not fully be aware of who they are and where we might interact with them, but I can assure each and every one in this House right now, today, that all of us have dealt with at least one special constable. For those of you who are a bit puzzled, the several gentlemen and ladies who are stationed at the various security checkpoints here in the building as well as over in the Annex are all special constables. While we may think of them as security guards or simply by their names, their official title is special constable.

One can find special constables working in a variety of locations and situations from the bases of the Canadian Forces to the SPCA. There's no question that what they do is valuable work, and they certainly contribute to our collective safety and the efficiency with which a variety of organizations and agencies are run.

Mr. Speaker, I think that part of the reason for the great value inherent in the work and efforts provided by the special constables can be found in the fact that many but not all of them are former police officers, whether with the city police department or the RCMP. As a result, they have extensive experience dealing with the public. They have knowledge of police procedures. They know how to handle potentially volatile situations with grace and professionalism, and they know how to remain calm even under adverse circumstances. This may be one of the foremost attributes for special constables as a group. Many are former police officers whose training received during their time in the police academy prepared them for careers in policing and serves them well also in their careers after policing.

Standard police training, Mr. Speaker, is both rigorous and extensive. I think most people are aware that police officers must meet minimum physical standards with some regularity and some similarity. There are some stringent psychological standards that police officers must pass. Also among the standards that police officers must meet are those of certain weapons. Officers must routinely demonstrate that they maintain their adaptiveness at properly using their weapons. In fact, they are only granted permission to carry a gun, let alone be police officers, after meeting very strict weapons standards.

Mr. Speaker, under Motion 503 special constables would become accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, and they would also be required to undergo and pass an expanded training regimen. In my view, an enhanced training program can only result in better special constables, making this yet another attractive feature of this motion. It is one thing to give anyone a weapon but quite another to show him or her how to use it properly and, perhaps even more importantly, when not to use it. It is, after all, a well-known fact that one of the primary functions of any kind of weapon is not that it can be discharged or used, but it's the ability to deter someone from doing something undesirable.

And so it is, Mr. Speaker, that sometimes the very knowledge of the presence of a weapon may be quite sufficient to give a would-be perpetrator pause before he or she, as the case may be, decides to disturb the peace and engage in some other kind of behaviour warranting more aggressive intervention short of detention or arrest. But what if that's not enough? What if the special constable finds himself or herself in a situation where discharging or otherwise using some weapon or other is deemed necessary? Then what?

Whenever we deal with would-be perpetrators and other potential criminals of whatever stripe or calibre, we have to consider what we may call "what if." I understand that at the present time special constables are under order to tactically reposition themselves whenever a what-if situation arises. That is, whenever a special constable finds himself or herself in a situation he or she considers threatening to life or limb, the sanctioned response by the Alberta Solicitor General is to leave the premises to call the police. As much as that may be the only mandatory response, it seems to me that that opens up the possibility that the perpetrator or perpetrators can get away quite easily while the special constable calls for assistance from the police or RCMP.

We have a motion before us that seeks to strike some sort of middle ground or middle link in the road of compromise between the current mandated response to tactically reposition themselves and call for back up, on one hand, and the prohibition on the use of

firearms by special constables, on the other hand. For this reason, Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to see that the motion has been amended.

In its previous form I would have not been able to support it due to the lack of emphasis on the enhancement of all training rather than just the weapons training for special constables. At the present time special constables undergo a four-week training program before they are considered ready for the job. Not only are the physical and psychological standards they must meet considerably less stringent than those their counterparts in regular police forces and the RCMP must meet, but only one of the four weeks of training is devoted to weapons training.

Mr. Speaker, members of this House who have any experience serving in the armed forces know how extensive and rigorous the weapons training is that soldiers must undergo. It is, to say the least, a rather lengthy and involved process. Before you get anywhere near a firing range, you learn the various parts of your weapon and how they function, how you take them apart and put them together, and how you properly clean and maintain your weapon. That's before you even get to use bullets. Once you graduate from blanks to live ammunition, the rigours and the emphasis on safety border on the extreme. By this time, several weeks or even months may have passed, but the soldier is still in training.

I would strongly suggest that any increase in arsenal availability to special constables must be preceded by a significant increase in the length of training that any special constable recruit must undergo. However, even though the amended motion calls for increased training, I agree with concerns about providing special constables with more weapons than at the present time. It has come to my attention that the policing review committee raised concerns about the difficulty of providing weapons training to deputy constables, as would be the official title of these new and improved special constables. As these deputy constables would be performing a variety of functions, their weapons training would have to be rather comprehensive to offer what could be called the one-size-fits-all approach to the said training.

A willingness to serve does not equal immediate street readiness, Mr. Speaker. One thing that we can all agree on is that it is never a good idea to place weapons of any kind in the hands of those who have not been rigorously screened and adequately trained, particularly so if the weapons in question are intended to be used to maintain peace. Mr. Speaker, I have no reservations about how or that we would properly screen special constable trainees as well in the future . . .

The Speaker: Excuse me, hon. member. I hate to interrupt, but our Standing Orders do provide for five minutes for the sponsor of a motion other than a government motion to close the debate. I now invite the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar to close debate on Motion 503, recognizing that we have an amendment to the motion before us.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour to be able to stand here and close debate on Motion 503. In fact, I do fully accept the amendments that have been put forward by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill. In fact, I think that what the amended motion does is basically stress the two main parts of the motion.

By making special constables accountable to the Law Enforcement Review Board, amended Motion 503 brings added accountability to the special constable level of policing and, thus, should improve public trust in special constables. Also, amended Motion 503

requires special constables to take greater training for the position. This would result in better prepared special constables.

8:30

So, Mr. Speaker, I see this as a win/win. Like I said, I accept these amendments, and I think that they will really help the special constables of Alberta. I really like what the Member for Calgary-Buffalo talked about with regard to deputy constables, and certainly some day that may be the direction that this province decides to go. But there's no question that these men and women are a very valuable part of Alberta's peace officer force. As we said earlier, there are in the neighbourhood of 2,400 of them in the province, so I know that accountability and training are something that they certainly need and look forward to.

I'll just close by saying thanks to everybody that participated, and I do appreciate your support on this motion.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 503 as amended carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: May I ask for unanimous consent first, Mr. Speaker?

The Speaker: The hon. member would like unanimous consent so that he may proceed to Introduction of Guests. Would anybody be opposed to having introductions?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions to make this evening. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a constituent of mine and a parent, Barb Strange. Barb is a parent of a child in grade 2 at the Child Study Centre, and she also has a four year old who is entering kindergarten this coming September. Barbara is present in the members' gallery and is part of the Education Watch initiative. I would ask her to please rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

I'd also like to introduce someone who helps me daily with my research in my office and does it effectively, efficiently, and with a smile on his face. I'd ask Emir Mehinagic to please stand and accept the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

(continued)

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

504. Mr. Hutton moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to (a) continue to develop and implement strategies to reduce and ultimately eliminate alcohol consumption prior to and during pregnancy, (b) develop and implement initiatives to support Albertans affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, FASD, and (c) continue to work with all levels of government, partners and stakeholders, and members of the public to create an environment that would address the systemic problem of women consuming alcohol while pregnant.

Mr. Hutton: Now, Mr. Speaker, I would very much like to introduce Motion 504, which aims to address an issue that is increasingly becoming more systemic and more prevalent not only in certain

communities within our province but our country as well. It is a problem that bears not only a heavy human cost but fiscal ones as well.

The purpose of Motion 504 is to support existing and encourage new strategies to combat fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, more commonly referred to as FASD. In my remarks today I would particularly like to applaud the Minister of Children's Services and the Minister of Health and Wellness, as they are partners and stakeholders, for all their efforts to educate the general public about the dangers of the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy and also for their support of those individuals who have the misfortune of being affected by FASD.

My personal involvement in the area of FASD began when I became directly involved with the Glenrose rehabilitation hospital, which provides care to children and adults suffering from the effects of this disorder. Over the years the Glenrose has provided care to thousands of patients and families who are affected by FASD, many of whom have come from communities in northern Alberta, Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon.

Many of the children that find their way to the Glenrose tend to come from low-income families and in many cases from First Nation communities. These are children who due to unfortunate circumstances will never have a chance to lead a normal childhood or a happy and productive life. The regrettable fact is that while hospitals like the Glenrose can provide these children with diagnosis and care services, they cannot provide them with effective treatment as there is currently no cure for this disorder. The effects of FASD are permanent, Mr. Speaker. At the end of the day all that the hospitals and treatment facilities can do is ease some of the suffering and pain experienced by some of these individuals.

When I became an MLA in Edmonton-Glenora, I soon became keenly aware of the fact that it is false to assume that the occurrence of FASD is more prevalent in lower income than in middle and higher income families. As a matter of fact, research seems to indicate that the disorder is just as common and potentially more common in prosperous communities as it is in lower income families. According to a national population health survey conducted by Stats Canada, researchers found that 25 per cent of all women in Canada with children under the age of five admitted to drinking while pregnant. The surprising figure is that 29 per cent of those women came from higher income families.

As you can see, Mr. Speaker, this is an issue that transcends all social boundaries and whose effects are felt as much in the city of Edmonton as they are in communities in northern Alberta. However, before I discuss some of the social impacts of FASD, I would like to provide the House with a bit of background concerning this particular type of condition.

Mr. Speaker, FASD is an umbrella term used to describe a range of disabilities and diagnoses associated with parental exposure to alcohol. The development of such disabilities is directly related to a range of factors including the timing and the amount of alcohol consumed by a mother during her pregnancy, the use of other substances, the genetics of the mother and her fetus, and the mother's overall health. Furthermore, other aspects including economic, social, and physical status of the parent can also play a role in the development of the disorder. Consequently, FASD includes such diagnoses as fetal alcohol syndrome, partial fetal alcohol syndrome, fetal alcohol effect, fetal alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder, alcohol-related birth defects. Those all go under the heading of FASD now.

While being the leading cause of developmental disability among our children, FASD is one of the most poorly understood medical conditions in Alberta and across Canada. Children born with this

disorder face a number of physical and social challenges which in turn prevent them from functioning in similar manner and settings to those born without the disorder. According to the last statistics, 9 in every 1,000 babies born across Canada are affected by this disorder. In Alberta 3 to 6 out of a thousand are born with FASD, while 1 in 3 is born with FAS. To put this into perspective, experts claim that in North America alone approximately 1 per cent of the population suffers from some form of FASD, which is four times more than those affected by HIV or AIDS.

Unfortunately, at the present time we have no way of knowing exactly how many individuals living in Alberta or Canada are affected by this condition. This is largely a result of the fact that there are currently no set standards for detection of the disorder and because of the negative stigma associated with women who are known to have produced a child with FASD.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, while this scientific community has been able to determine the prevailing factors that contribute to the development of FASD, they have not been able to determine exactly what amount of alcohol is healthy for the fetus. The reason behind this lack of understanding is partly due to the fact that not all mothers can metabolize alcohol at the same rate. In other cases doctors have found that mothers who drank heavily during pregnancy have produced perfectly healthy offspring who show no signs of brain damage. Therefore, while we do not know exactly what quantity of alcohol consumed will end up hurting a child, we do know that alcohol does dehydrate and destroy brain cells, which tend to be extremely vulnerable during the development of the fetus.

We also know that of all the substances that can cause birth defects, which includes heroin, cocaine, and certain medical substances such as codeine, alcohol tends to be the one most dangerous for the fetus. As a result, some of the most common physical defects associated with babies affected by alcohol and, consequently, FASD include small birth weight, small head circumference, small, widely spaced eyes, flattened mid face with a short upturned nose, thin upper lip, and no noticeable curve between the nose and mouth. It is important to note that these particular physical defects occur usually if the mother was drinking within the first trimester and may not show up at all if she consumed alcohol within the second or third trimester.

The most common mental problems and challenges faced by individuals with FASD include attention deficit, memory deficit, hyperactivity, and difficulty absorbing concepts. While many of these children and adults suffer from certain behavioural problems, it would be incorrect to assume that the majority of them enjoy lower intelligence levels. As a matter of fact, recent data seem to indicate that only 15 per cent of the children with FASD have IQs under 70, while the vast majority enjoy IQs of normal or above-average range.

8:40

However, Mr. Speaker, this statistic is a bit misleading because while many children and adults who are affected by the disorder can perform well on tests and execute tasks that are repetitive or familiar in nature, they are unable to use their knowledge gained in the tasks to adapt to new situations or environments. Unfortunately, this means that many of them who have difficulties absorbing new concepts do not possess the ability to solve new problems and challenges.

On a more serious note, Mr. Speaker, their mental disabilities also tend to hamper their capacity to learn from mistakes and the consequences of their actions. Many of them display immature social behaviour, display poor social judgment, lack the capacity to control their emotions, and some tend to be inappropriately friendly to strangers. Consequently, many of those who suffer from various

forms of FASD tend to be socially unfit, unemployable, and even worse, vulnerable to high-risk behaviours and situations including crime.

Research done across Canada seems to indicate that a high percentage of homeless people and juvenile and adult offenders suffer from undiagnosed FASD. While there is no hard data available, some researchers estimate that as many as 1 in every 4 inmates found within our correctional institutions suffers from the effects of this disorder. This not only places a great pressure on our criminal justice system but also places great social and financial burdens on our society as a whole. The sad part about this situation is that if circumstances had been different, these people would have had the opportunity to lead perfectly normal lives.

While we are on the subject of costs, Mr. Speaker, I would like to highlight the fact that since there is no known remedy for FASD, individuals affected by the disorder require lifelong care and treatment. This, in turn, means that the costs associated with FASD treatment are very, very high. More specifically, Health Canada reports that without taking into account the lost potential and opportunity of these individuals, direct costs associated with FASD over a lifetime are estimated at \$2 million per person. However, the figure includes costs related only to medical care services.

I fully support the government's approach in dealing with the problem and pursuing the strategies. With this in mind, I urge all members present tonight to support our future generations and vote in favour of Motion 504.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's with pleasure that I rise to speak to Motion 504 as presented by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. In Alberta research suggests that anywhere between 19 to 113 children for every 1,000 are born with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder each year. Fetal alcohol syndrome and related disorders are the leading causes of developmental disabilities in Canadian children today. What gives us hope is that it's entirely preventable.

As the minister responsible for the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission I'd like to add my support to this Motion 504. With the introduction of this motion the sponsoring member is asking this government to renew its commitment to this very important issue. At the outset I'd like to commend the Minister of Children's Services for all her department's valuable work to date and her continued dedication to educate the public on FASD.

This evening, Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to highlight the contributions being made by my ministry including our participation on provincial and national FASD committees and other initiatives as well as contributions of the liquor industry. Alberta Gaming and the AGLC will continue to support efforts to combat FASD. My ministry is committed to addressing this issue. In fact, one of our guiding principles is to ensure that liquor policies reflect a commitment to social responsibility.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Just recently we created a social responsibility division within the AGLC. The newly formed division will enhance our focus on social responsibility including new opportunities to increase awareness about responsible alcohol consumption. This includes monitoring emerging issues and trends and developing policies to address the social and economic implications of those issues and partnering with the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission and the liquor

industry to develop and deliver programs related to the responsible sale and consumption of alcohol and ensure that consumers of alcohol are aware of the prevention and treatment programs for alcohol abuse. As well, the ministry will continue its investigation into warning labels on alcohol beverages. I'm confident the efforts of the social responsibility division will serve to strengthen our commitment to FASD reduction strategies.

Alberta Gaming is also a member of the recently established Alberta FASD Cross-Ministry Committee. This committee supports a collaborative approach to planning and delivering provincial government programs and services. The AGLC also represents Alberta on the Social Responsibility Committee of the Canadian Association of Liquor Jurisdictions. As the provincial representative we put Alberta's initiatives on the table and bring back useful information on other jurisdictions' liquor-related programs and campaigns including those relating to FASD. At the annual meeting last fall Alberta announced that it will develop a new strategy for fetal alcohol spectrum disorder to be led by Alberta Children's Services.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased that the liquor industry shares our view that FASD is a serious issue and is proactive in promoting responsible consumption. A very good example of this is the Brewers Association of Canada, which considers FASD among its top three social issues along with drinking and driving and minors accessing liquor. Through its funding of FASD initiatives, the association is helping to raise awareness about this disorder. According to a recent survey by Ipsos-Reid, 98 per cent of women in Canada understand that drinking alcohol during pregnancy is harmful. In other words, awareness appears to be generally very high.

Once you build awareness, the challenge is to help direct behavioural changes. An example of this is the mother that has given birth to one FAS child. It's my information that the likelihood that she will have another is an alarming 776 out of 1,000 live births. Because of information like this, the Brewers Association has indicated that they will take a more targeted approach to future allocation of funds for education initiatives.

The Brewers Association will continue to promote the message that drinking responsibly during pregnancy should mean not drinking at all. Together with the College of Family Physicians they are promoting this message through the alcohol risk assessment and intervention program. This program gives physicians the tools they need to identify at an early stage those most likely to have a problem with harmful drinking. Currently it's used by 4,000 health professionals and all 16 medical schools across Canada.

A spinoff of this program is the Caring Together initiative developed with the Native Physicians Association. This initiative focuses on education about drinking during pregnancy within the aboriginal community. Most importantly, the program is culturally sensitive in that it combines western medical practice with aboriginal healing methods and native spirituality to promote responsible consumption of drugs and alcohol.

Mr. Speaker, education and information go hand in hand. Industry is committed to making sure Albertans get educated by improving the availability of FASD information. Over a three-year period with funding of \$350,000 the Brewers Association has supported the Motherisk program at the Hospital for Sick Children in Ontario. The most significant advantage of Motherisk is its toll-free help line, especially helpful for remote communities in Alberta where FASD information is hard to access. This along with FASD community programs and articles in magazines like *Canadian Parent* is helping Albertans and families affected by FASD.

Another key industry leader, the Alberta Liquor Store Association, is also making sure that Albertans get the facts on FASD including

partnering to run the Your Baby Doesn't Need a Cold One campaign in liquor stores throughout the province. This pilot project included FASD promotional displays and nonalcoholic beverages.

8:50

This April the annual ALSA conference and trade show will provide another opportunity for the liquor industry to find new ways to deal with FASD. I encourage the liquor industry and its associations to continue these and all other important efforts to prevent FASD.

Mr. Speaker, I support Motion 504, and the Minister of Children's Services can continue to expect support from Alberta Gaming as we explore new partnerships through our ministries and with industry stakeholders. Of course, I encourage all members to vote in favour of the motion. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with a great deal of pleasure that I rise in support of Motion 504. I'd like to give a bit of brief background and then tell you about some of the exciting initiatives that Children's Services and our partners are undertaking with FASD.

I reflect the pleasure of learning so much about this from the now Minister of Learning, who, when he had this portfolio or this responsibility centre, pursued avidly and aggressively the issue of putting FASD on the map of the Alberta government. We owe him a great debt, and I say thank you. He is possibly the only one that drives a truck in his neighbourhood with a sign on the bumper sticker saying, "Don't spoil your child," and for that advocacy and that continuing support I am also grateful.

It's astonishing to know that right from biblical times, when in the Bible there is reference that a mother should not consume wine or alcohol or spirits because it might make the baby to turn out to be silly, throughout the ages at different times there have been whole societal structures that seemingly have ignored FASD. Today with our knowledge of the permanent brain injury of FASD, I think it's important to pursue the results of this motion and carry one step further every program that would accelerate education to absolutely everybody.

Tonight we've heard references to supports for people who have a disposition to diabetes and to effects of alcohol abuse, namely some of our native population. But today at the Glenrose they will tell you that it's most frightening to contemplate the martini moms, as they're known, who will sit in fancy neighbourhoods in fine houses and drink and then just pray at the time of that birth that the alcohol will not be demonstrated in any tangible way on either the face of the baby or on the resulting imprint of the brain. I find it astonishing that people can still believe that it might not have an effect: oh, well, it doesn't affect everyone. Well, why take the chance, Mr. Speaker?

This year we had a mocktail contest between a number of the media who on two separate days in Calgary and in Edmonton put together cocktails that were mixtures of juices or milk that were safe for a pregnant mom to consume, and through that we have been working to energize the media to be very aware of FASD/FASE. I think that to their credit they have done quite a fine job of putting articles in periodicals and talking about it with more knowledge than we had seen previously on this subject.

But, Mr. Speaker, I'm going to reflect on something that for me is a cruel disappointment, and that is that when we ask for leadership from our federal government on this issue, we're met with platitudes and no money. We continue to ask for an allocation of funding

which has been promised under the FASD initiative federally, especially concerning our on-reserve funding formulas. Repeatedly we say, "Please provide us the support," and repeatedly it is not delivered.

We believe that women who continue to drink alcohol during pregnancy have many complex needs. Some do not want to confide in their partner that they have been indulging in alcohol, and we know from our discussions with addiction experts that many would have undertaken treatment if they weren't so conscious of the shame that that intervention might bring forward.

Frequently women who divulge that they have had an addiction or drank alcohol during their pregnancy will lose a male partner, and the partner will leave them alone to face the situation by themselves. As a result, Mr. Speaker, often they are unsupported women who have the babies and then turn them over to the province to take care of. I think that that's one of the most tragic circumstances of all because often that is an impediment for people who may wish to adopt a child. So we've given somebody a life sentence that is completely preventable, one hundred per cent preventable, and we should in fact as Albertans do everything we can to be aggressive in providing people with the information so they'll stop drinking.

Mr. Speaker, I'm going to relate for the record an astonishing circumstance I find myself in when I go into schools. That is that I tell grade 6s about FASD. I tell them the effect of it. I draw the picture of the mother on the blackboard. I draw the picture of the brain, their beautiful whole brain, and then a brain that has had that compounding injury of FASD.

Now, during this period I look at the children, and I say, "How many of you pour alcoholic beverages for your parents?" I can guarantee you, Mr. Speaker, that if you could go to any part of Alberta and put 52 kids in grade 6 in a class and ask them that question, you'll get over 80 per cent that will put up their hands. They, in fact, either pour their dad a beer or get their mother a glass of wine. The implication of that is that kids that are too young to know the effects of alcohol are pouring alcoholic beverages for their parents.

So then you ask them, "Well, you know, have you heard about fetal alcohol spectrum disorder if a mummy drinks when a baby is in her tummy?" And, believe me, they all know how it got there, and they may be on the threshold of making those decisions themselves.

Dr. Taylor: I didn't know that until I was 20.

Ms Evans: And I'm not surprised, Mr. Speaker, that some wouldn't have known that.

But, Mr. Speaker, when you tell them that if the mummy drinks alcohol, the brain on the blackboard that looks like Swiss cheese might actually be the result, and when you look back at the kids and you don't let them put their hands up, I'll tell you what you see: you see at least half a dozen kids that look sick to their stomachs. I think the reason they look sick is because they know full well they've been asked by somebody who's pregnant to pour them an alcoholic beverage.

So, Mr. Speaker, we've got a long way to go on the education of FASD/FASE in the province. We've made a good start both with the resources and the awareness, but I think this activity, this motion, and promotion of this can only accelerate it. I challenge hon. members on both sides of the House to contact our office, and we'll be pleased to provide you materials for your constituency offices and, what's more, a bumper sticker so that you too can join the wave started by the hon. Minister of Learning and carry the message.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to be here tonight to offer my thoughts and speak in favour of Motion 504. I'd like to begin my remarks by commending my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora and also the Minister of Children's Services for bringing forward this motion and for the work that she's done around FAS and FASD.

Before coming into office, I don't think I was aware that such a condition existed. I don't think I'd ever thought I knew anybody that had the condition. I wasn't even aware that it ever happened, and I'm not certain how that happened or why that happened, but I'd never felt like I'd had exposure to it. Shortly after coming into office, I was made the chair of the Social Care Facilities Review Committee, so as I began to interview kids out there, I ran into the condition for the first time.

What was really surprising to me was that I actually did know about the condition. One of my good friends back at home had adopted a child. They had never been able to have children, and they were very excited when they got this little baby girl. She was a beautiful baby, but by age five and six they began to notice deficiencies in the child. We weren't certain what those deficiencies were, and as a church community we worked very . . .

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded.

head: 9:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 20
Minors' Property Act

[Adjourned debate March 10: Mr. Hancock]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and comment on Bill 20, the Minors' Property Act, that has been brought forward by the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General. This bill is really a companion bill to Bill 19, which is the Public Trustee Act, and they need to be viewed together because they do refer to one another, but also they're both bills that are updating and consolidating and clarifying long existing pieces of legislation that need that update. They need to move into the 21st century.

So a couple of things that are changes to the existing act. Some of them I think might in fact be carried forward but are expanded. We've got the court confirmation of contracts, situations where minors have entered into contracts or people have entered them in, parents or guardians have committed them. Often that needs to have an overriding confirmation from the courts, and in fact that is anticipated and brought forward in Bill 20.

There's also a clarification of discharging a contractual obligation to minors, and I believe that the Minister of Justice had given the example of a minor taking a bike into a shop to be fixed and then trying to claim it back again. Under the existing legislation it was so broad that, in fact, strictly enforced and strictly interpreted according to what we had in the old act, the youth wouldn't have been able to get their own bike back even if they'd paid the bill for the repairs.

So this makes it clear where there's already a sort of contractual or implied contractual relationship how things can proceed there, especially around money – and that's money including wages and

benefits but aside from that as well – and also goods like the example that was used in the bike being fixed.

The bill is careful to always put forward the concept of best interests and that any decision that is made around a minor's property or money that's owed to a minor be contemplated in that context of best interest. The bill includes some reciprocal agreements back and forth between the Public Trustee Act, and it also looks at court appointment of a trustee, especially around the scope where they can appoint a trustee for just specific parts of a minor's property. In other words, mostly what this is anticipating is a large settlement that needs to be given full protection under the law, something like a settlement from a traffic accident or perhaps a large amount of money inherited through a will, for example. There might be other parts of the minor's property that don't need to get that kind of thorough safekeeping that's offered here, but in some cases it does need to be put under a trustee.

With the feedback loop that I've used, I haven't heard any concerns that have been raised thus far, but often once the minister speaks and we have a response from the opposition, people start paying attention. I may well hear some additional things over the next week or so, but given what I knew about the bill and had asked around about, I haven't heard any concerns raised thus far.

This is an update, a consolidation, a clarification, so I really wasn't expecting any great objections. I'm pleased to see the concept of best interest that is incorporated into it. At this point I'm willing to support Bill 20 in second reading, and I look forward to a more thorough examination of the clauses in Committee of the Whole.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 20 read a second time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 18 Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Happy to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 18, the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004. We've been waiting for this bill for some time. It makes some proposed amendments that we're very happy to see on this side of the House.

Certainly, maintenance enforcement continues to be an ongoing issue in our constituency office. It's sometimes the number one, sometimes the number two, and sometimes the number three issue. Custodial parents continually have a very difficult time in gaining access to the funds that are rightfully due to the children that they are trying to raise in a supportable fashion, and for years we've been asking for some strengthening of the rules that maintenance enforcement has at its fingertips.

Some of the things that we see in this bill are really good. I like the raising of the bar for the restrictions that we see in the different kinds of licences that noncustodial parents can be restricted in getting if they haven't kept up with their payments. There's no doubt that having the restrictions on the driver's licence has been a

positive step. Further, restricting hunting, fishing, and outfitter licences when debtors are in default is a good idea.

It's a new idea to me that lottery winnings of over a thousand dollars should go to support the family of a debtor who has maintenance arrears, but I think that's a good idea too, although certainly it's going to, I think, as some of these other ideas in this bill, increase the amount of paperwork, but it's a really good plan. If a noncustodial parent has a windfall, his children should share in that benefit if he's in arrears, I believe.

Some of the consistency that we see lining Alberta up with some of the other provinces is also supportable. The increased access to information sharing between banks, releasing information to police, providing addresses to courts, identifying reciprocal programs are all very good, I think. Deterrent fees are also very good, but those two, sharing the information and the deterrent fees, bring up for me the two still outstanding significant issues around maintenance enforcement, and those are the lack of co-operation and co-ordination we have between interprovincial jurisdictions.

It's still really difficult to find noncustodial parents who skip the province and try and hide. We have a great deal of problem dealing with other provinces in trying to find those folks. We've had some good co-operative efforts with B.C. and Saskatchewan, but other provinces farther away seem to be increasingly difficult, not increasingly easy, to work out situations with noncustodial parents.

So I would very much like the Minister of Justice to take this under advisement and to bring forward legislation soon that works at interprovincial co-operation in this issue. If we could get the other provinces to share information with us similar to the proposed amendments that we see in this bill, then we would put the money in the hands of the children and for their care in a much faster and far more appropriate fashion.

9:10

The other absence of information that I see here that I think is very necessary for us to talk about is the constant reduction we see of outstanding arrears for noncustodial parents. They let their arrears build up for months or years and then go to court and declare themselves to be under duress and have those arrears wiped out or significantly reduced and often then apply for a reduction of the monthly support payments that they should be making.

That penalizes the children, Mr. Chairman, and that rewards an offending parent. I think that that's just plain bad, and one of the most abhorrent things we do when we treat children badly in this province is to let those noncustodial parents get away with that. That's, to me, a crime and should be treated accordingly. Instead, we're letting them off the hook in these particular cases, and I don't see anything in this particular bill addressing that.

So I would again urge the Minister of Justice to take a look at that situation and to make it impossible in this province for noncustodial parents to weasel out of paying the money that is due to their children that those kids need in order to really live the lifestyle that they should be in terms of just generally being well-fed, well-educated, well-dressed, and available to participate in community activities. It's a real burden that we place on our future generation, and I think it's the wrong thing for us to do.

With those two points that I hope the minister takes a look at, if he'll take those under consideration, then I'm quite happy to support this particular bill. Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 18 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 19
Public Trustee Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I think I spoke in second reading to this bill last week, March 10. As I mentioned during an earlier debate, after second reading I often do hear from people who seem to become alert to the fact that an issue is being discussed, and they now want to make comment on it. I had not had any concerns raised with me about the Public Trustee Act prior to my second reading comments, and I have heard no concerns raised between that time and this.

I had gone through fairly thoroughly what was being contemplated before in that we were looking at clarification of the legal status of the office of the Public Trustee. There are a number of sections that deal with cleaning up the trust funds, their rules of operation, and how trusts could be maximized for the use of the intended person. The sections that have been put in around the minor's property: those are reciprocal references back and forth between public trustees and the Minors' Property Act. There are additional sections on incorporating issues around missing persons and also around the mentally incompetent.

Those are really the new pieces to this legislation. The rest is merely updating, getting rid of some of the archaic language and some of the no longer in use statutes. I think it's a good idea that we revisit legislation on a fairly regular basis. This one was not regular. I think it was originally in place in about 1959, if I'm remembering the right one, and hasn't been updated since then.

I have no concerns at this time with what's being proposed, and I'm happy to support it in Committee of the Whole. Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 19 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee now rise and report Bill 18, the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 18, Bill 19.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a productive evening, and I would move that the Assembly now stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 9:18 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 16, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/16

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Grant that we the members of our province's Legislature fulfill our office with honesty and integrity. May our first concern be for the good of all of the people. Let us be guided by our deliberations this day. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the privilege of introducing to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly a number of guests from the Bonnyville-Cold Lake constituency. They are seated in the members' gallery and are special guests who attended this morning's celebration in the rotunda to mark the sixth edition of Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie and International Francophonie Day, coming up on the 20th of March.

I am pleased to first introduce a group of students from l'école des Beaux-Lacs, a francophone school in Bonnyville. This group of students is part of the school band that played for us this morning, and they are accompanied by two teachers from the school, Mme Yvonne Veraart and Mme Nicole Jodoin. They did a wonderful job for us this morning. I ask them to stand and please be recognized by the Assembly.

Joining them on this special day at the Legislature is a group of senior citizens from Bonnyville, and I want to add that I'm very pleased that they were able to make the long bus trip to be with us today. I would like them to stand and be recognized as I call their names: M. René Dallaire, Mme Yvonne Chartrand, Mme Irène Plourde, Mme Marie-Claire Champagne, M. Réal Croteau, Mme Carmen Croteau, M. Jean-Claude Lajoie, Mme Monique Lajoie, Mme Denise Husereau, M. Paul Husereau, and M. Denis Tardif, the director of the Alberta Francophone Secretariat. Je vous invite à vous joindre à moi pour leur souhaiter une bienvenue chaleureuse. I would invite the members of the Assembly to join me in extending them a very warm welcome and, of course, a safe journey home.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. O'Neill: Mr. Speaker, I do recognize a resident of St. Albert who is seated in the public gallery, and I would introduce Ms Ireen Slater. My eyesight doesn't tell me whether there's anyone else from St. Albert there or not, but I would like to introduce her to the Assembly and ask everyone to give her the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a number of people who are representing seniors' organizations in Alberta. They are all sitting in the public gallery, and I would ask them to rise as I say their names. First of all, I'd like to introduce Jerry Pitts, who is the chairperson of the Coalition of Seniors Advocates. With him is Stan Nykiel, who is a director of COSA, the Coalition of Seniors Advocates. They've both travelled up from

Calgary today. I'd also like to introduce Ireen Slater, who is the chair of the St. Albert branch of SUN, Seniors United Now; Albert Opstad, who is the president of the Edmonton branch of Seniors United Now; and Ron Ellis, who is a director of Seniors United Now and their chairman of the communications committee. They're all standing. I would ask the Assembly to please give them a warm welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I again have the privilege of introducing parents who are taking time from their day to watch our proceedings here as part of the Education Watch initiative. They're in the members' gallery, and I'll ask them to rise as I mention their names. First is Ray Benton-Evans. He's a father of a child attending grade 9 at Avalon junior high, and he's the chair of the parent school council at Avalon. Next is Linda Climenhaga. She has four children; two are at Windsor Park and two are at McKernan. Finally, Karen Ferrari, who has three kids, two of them at Windsor Park, and one is too young to go to school yet. Well, thank you for standing. Please give them a warm welcome. They're watching our proceedings carefully.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a gentleman who has travelled all the way from Calgary to be here today to watch the proceedings of the Assembly. He has dedicated a good deal of his time in recent months to strongly advocating for Alberta's seniors and currently serves on the board of the Coalition of Seniors Advocates association, known as COSA. Mr. Arthur Clements is sitting in the public gallery. I'll ask him to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The year 2003 was a very good year for the insurance industry, which announced a windfall net profit of \$2.6 billion, but 2003 was a very bad year for Alberta consumers who saw their auto insurance premiums continue to skyrocket. It's no surprise that 60 per cent of Albertans told this government in a poll that they want public auto insurance. My first question is to the Premier. Why has this government done nothing to bring down auto insurance rates for consumers while we see insurance industry profits soar by 775 per cent?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, it's not right to say that he doesn't tell the truth. Well, I guess it is right to say that he doesn't tell the truth. I mean, the hon. Minister of Finance will explain and outline exactly the legislation that was brought forward to address the insurance situation. That legislation focuses on fairness, fairness to the consumer, and it doesn't focus on individual company profits, but if the hon. member is willing to stand up and say that profit is dirty, then let him stand up and say so. Say it. The reason he's not telling – well, I don't know the reason he's not telling. I know the reason he's not telling the truth. It's because he's a Liberal. That's the reason.

The insurance industry profits are based on a number of factors, and those factors include not just auto insurance – and that's all the hon. member alludes to – but they're based on factors related to fire insurance, home insurance, life insurance policies. They are also national. They are national in scope, not provincial. So they affect provinces that have so-called state or socialist insurance that the Liberals favour such as Saskatchewan and Manitoba and British Columbia. Well, I'll include, because it was brought in by an ND government . . .

The Speaker: Let's not get involved in a debate here.

Hon. member, second question.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: why has this government continued to disregard the opinion of Alberta consumers who want public auto insurance because they know it is fair, affordable, and accessible to all?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, alluding to his previous question, this has nothing to do with insurance profits. Again, our legislation that was introduced I think maintains the spirit of free enterprise yet protects good old and young drivers from being treated unfairly as long as they are good drivers. Now, bad old drivers will be treated with penalties, and bad young drivers will be treated with penalties, but good old drivers and good young drivers, along with good middle-aged drivers, will be treated with fairness. That's what the legislation is all about, and that's good legislation.

1:40

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: can the Premier explain why this government, which has been so quick to impose extra costs on Albertans, especially students and especially those seniors in the gallery, has been so slow to give them a break on their auto insurance premiums?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the legislation that was enacted specifically addresses young and old good drivers. It also addresses young and old bad drivers. It serves to punish the bad and reward the good. What's wrong with that?

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's insurance reform implementation committee has failed and failed miserably. Consumers were left out. There was no public consultation. Costs for consumers are going up, not down. Even the industry doesn't know what the future holds. To the Minister of Finance: why did the president and CEO of Wawanesa Insurance resign last December from the Alberta auto insurance reform committee?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, yesterday the hon. member asked me about an article that appeared three months ago, and today he's all of a sudden come to realize that we have an automobile insurance reform process underway in this province. Last summer the implementation team took forward a program to implement a policy for automobile insurance that clearly would provide Albertans with a fair approach to having automobile insurance because it is the law in this province that you must carry automobile insurance. We said: let's have one that's fair, that's accessible, affordable, and comparably priced across Canada. That's exactly what they brought forward and are bringing forward in this whole program.

To all of a sudden say, "Wow, we've all of a sudden discovered that there are huge profits in the insurance industry in Canada," well, no kidding. That's why this program said that we had to have a reduction in costs of insurance, and that's why over \$200 million in this province alone has to come out of the premium base to make this insurance program affordable for all Albertans. He's finally coming to grips with this. Thank you for coming on board, because that's supporting the reform that the Member for Medicine Hat has been leading with an implementation team. You're just about six months behind.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: why is it that even the insurance industry has very little confidence in this government's auto insurance reform package?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know that to be true. As a matter of fact, I don't believe that at all. There is one insurance company that has a problem. I understand that a lawsuit has been launched, and I can't speak to that particular situation because it is now before the courts, but generally the insurance companies are supportive of the program.

You know, it was very difficult to strike the right balance between the injury lawyers, various groups representing injured people, the insurance companies, but I think the Minister of Finance did an outstanding job along with the able assistance of the hon. Member for Medicine Hat, who did an outstanding job, Mr. Speaker, travelling the country, consulting with other provinces, and consulting with Albertans about the insurance industry. So for this hon. member to say that there was no consultation, he is not telling the truth. His nose is growing.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: will this government finally admit that this policy is not going to work for Alberta consumers? It's going to drive up premiums even higher. Will you cancel it immediately?

The Speaker: There are about four questions there. It's multiple choice; take which one you want.

Mr. Klein: Well, multiple choice. I'll give a multiple answer. Like what? Like Saskatchewan? You know, Saskatchewan insurance can come in here and compete with insurance companies. B.C. insurance can come here and compete with insurance companies. Manitoba insurance can come here and compete.

Mr. MacDonald: You own your own bank.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, owning a bank has nothing to do with insurance. We've gotten out of just about every kind of business, and by cracky if we ever suggested selling the ATB, these people would just go through the roof. "How can you do that? My God." You know, they would have Ernest Manning turning over in his grave and Aberhart too.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Seniors' Benefits

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last month members from the Coalition of Seniors Advocates – and some of them are here in the gallery today – met with the government's Calgary caucus and the chair of the Seniors Advisory Council and were frustrated by the

response. At a time when seniors are facing additional hardships due to electricity deregulation and high automobile insurance costs, all they want is for their seniors' benefits to be restored. My questions are to the Premier. Given that the COSA members felt that they were ridiculed and cut off, is this the government's idea of meaningful consultation with seniors?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I take very strong exception to the hon. member's remarks relative to insurance costs. Good older seniors are rewarded, as are good younger seniors. Good older drivers are rewarded.

Relative to the situation that the Liberals are alluding to – and that is calling on the government to reinstate universal optical and dental benefits for seniors – I understand that they had a news conference just before this session. The previous program, the program that the Liberals are asking to be reinstated, offered limited assistance, in the minds of the government. Only 30 per cent coverage was provided with the balance being paid by the senior, and only basic dental procedures were covered. As a result, less than half of all seniors accessed the coverage each year.

What we decided to do was to focus on those seniors who needed it the most and provide full coverage. So the current program provides much better coverage, in our minds. We focus that coverage on seniors who need it. I believe that the majority, not all but the majority, of Albertans support that approach. The special-needs assistance for seniors program provides up to 100 per cent, not 30 per cent but 100 per cent, coverage for optical and dental expenses for those eligible seniors and, furthermore, has no restrictions on procedures.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that the cost of dentures for a senior couple can be as high as \$8,000, beyond even middle-income seniors, when will this government restore the universal, not the paid-down but the universal, optical and dental benefit plan for seniors that the government took away? When will you restore a universal plan?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the program that the government took away was the previous program, which offered limited access. As I pointed out, only 30 per cent coverage was provided with the balance being paid by the senior.

Mr. Speaker, I would remind the hon. member that in 2003-2004 approximately 14,000 seniors received financial assistance under the special-needs assistance for seniors program. As well, the government has undertaken a pilot project with the dental school at the University of Alberta, one of the only dental schools, I believe, in western Canada to assist low-income seniors with the costs of dental services. This includes all forms of dentures. This pilot project, as I understand it, has been extended for a year.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that the recent Alberta Council on Aging poll shows that seniors are having to cut back spending on food and transportation, why does this government persist in policies that create hardships for seniors, particularly middle-income seniors?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't think that that is true.

Ms Blakeman: It is.

Mr. Klein: No. Would you stop the chirping from that other side, please.

Mr. Speaker, what they say is not true, and I'll have the hon. Minister of Seniors respond.

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, I think it is very important to point out that over the past 10 years we have chosen to focus our resources on the people who truly need them and can show the need. Although the number of seniors is increasing significantly in the province, I'm very pleased to say that a lot of the increase is people who are quite self-sufficient, shall we say.

To indicate that we are out and hurting middle-class seniors is totally erroneous. We have an ongoing review of things such as the threshold. We look at those to see when they can be adjusted, the costs of them. We've reacted at every turn to the needs. For example, I'm pleased to say that when the seniors were under considerable stress on utilities about a year ago from now, the special-needs program cut in and helped them out on that end of it. Yes, for seniors close to a threshold who may be suffering, we're having a look to see if we can address those issues also.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Despite a budget surplus that the Parkland Institute at the University of Alberta earlier today forecasted will top \$4 billion, the Premier seems bent on undertaking an expensive PR campaign to scare Albertans into swallowing the bitter medicine of delisting and user fees stacked on top of health care premiums. While the true magnitude of this radical surgery will no doubt be kept hidden from Albertans until after the next election, the PR strategy so far seems to be based on strategic media leaks while keeping Albertans in the dark. My question is to the Premier. Why do national columnists like Jeffrey Simpson from Toronto-based *Globe and Mail* get an advance peek at the Premier's radical proposals while the Graydon report, the secret blueprint for two-tiered medicine, remains locked in the government's vault?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, Jeffrey Simpson did not get a peek at our plans, which are under development as I speak. But he understands what has to be done because it has been talked about at Premiers' conferences, it has been talked about at finance ministers' conferences, at ministers of health conferences. It's been the topic of discussion at what is now called the Council of the Federation – before it was the Premiers' Conference – for at least the past seven years. The Premiers have been talking about achieving sustainability. They've also been talking about more cash from the federal government, which would be nice to close the so-called Romanow gap. But they all understand that money is not the only answer. So our caucus, this government, with the guidance of the Minister of Health and Wellness is preparing a plan to achieve sustainability.

Now, the hon. member likes to pick out those things that provide for a good 15-second sound bite, you know, user fees and this and that. Mr. Speaker, there are a multitude of things, even things that don't involve the kind of education that this person has; in other words, looking at what works in other countries and why it works and what's bad in other countries and how to discard that. You know, nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with looking at ways of allowing health jurisdictions to generate revenues as long as

they provide for the sick and injured, that they don't lose their homes and their dignity and other things because of illness or injury.

Mr. Speaker, I would remind the hon. member that even his mentor the late Tommy Douglas said that when you talk about user fees, which is – could be, could be, might be, maybe – one small component, one little wee, teeny, teeny component of the whole thing, you know, people should pay something to recognize the value of medical services. Tommy Douglas said that. He likes Tommy Douglas; he liked Tommy Douglas. He would agree, I'm sure.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is this Premier refusing to consult with Albertans before advocating snake oil remedies like delisting, user pay, and further privatization that far from saving money will only drive up the cost of health care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it is a big fib, to say the least, to say that we will not consult with Albertans. You know, stay tuned and see how the plan unfolds because I can tell you – and I don't think I'm spewing out any secrets – that consultation is one of the components of the plan.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary to the Premier: then why have this Premier and his government kept the contents of the Graydon report secret and not made the report public?

Mr. Klein: A very, very good reason. It's to prevent the hon. leader of the third party and his friends in the Liberal Party from picking out little pieces and using them for those 15-second sound bites. That's what it's all about. It's to prevent them from spreading misleading and false information. We will release it very, very shortly, but it will be released in its entirety, not only the Graydon report but other reports as well, and the plan will be released at that particular time.

I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

The Speaker: Actually, hon. members, we've spent a lot of time in this section here. We're going to move on. I've got a whole list of members.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Family Violence and Bullying Round-tables

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm aware that a family violence and bullying workshop will be held in Calgary this week. The workshop is being held as lead-up to the family violence and bullying round-table in May. In the past two weeks there have been numerous incidents of domestic violence across the province that have resulted in serious injury and death. My question is for the Minister of Children's Services. Can the minister tell us how the information from stakeholders in Calgary will be used?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, throughout Alberta we will have a total of 13 regional round-tables and separate focus groups including the aboriginal community, the faith community, the disabled community, the victims, the men's group. Like all of the other regional round-tables a coming together of those solutions that have been proposed

will take a very broad look at the issue on May 7 in Calgary at a province-wide round-table complete with experts' opinions and other data. So, in fact, it will be one piece of all of the information we are gathering to make sure that we have a full range, a full spectrum, of views from every single solitary member of the Alberta community including youth that will come forward and provide their views on what should be done to eradicate bullying and family violence.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My supplementary question is also to the Minister of Children's Services. How have Albertans been included or how have they been heard regarding being involved in the round-table process?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, right from the time we put our web page up on the family violence round-table, we have had the views of Albertans on what we should do for process. As well, today on familyviolenceroundtable.gov.ab.ca you can register and complete a questionnaire. You can respond if you're a youth by entering a My Alberta contest that was announced in order to give those artists and writers an opportunity to talk about what they see as a young person, what Alberta should look like in the future.

By the time we have finished all the regional round-tables, a total of 2,000 people will have participated. Today, as we speak, at the Fantasyland Hotel we have over 200 people in the Edmonton area that are responding. There will even be an additional round-table in Slave Lake that has been added so that aboriginal people will have an opportunity to come forward and express their views as well.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplementary question: can the minister tell us what is going to be done with the information coming out of the round-table?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, although Children's Services is co-ordinating the round-tables, there are a total of nine ministries involved in the Alberta children and youth initiative. We also have the Gaming ministry, which has frequently been involved in funding supports for construction of shelters and so on. So every single ministry will take a look at the recommendations, get integrally involved with the Alberta community, whether they're police, mental health workers, social workers, counsellors, schoolteachers, and so on. We will look at the strengths we can build into the program areas of delivery in support of the communities and the neighbourhoods where this violence takes place, in the homes of the Albertans that are affected, and try and provide them with ways of getting help before they desperately need it and ways to encourage a positive outcome for our children and grandchildren.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Electronic Health Records

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The main problem facing Alberta's health care system is not out-of-control costs. It's mismanagement of the money we have. Recently this government unveiled plans for an electronic health records system. While the idea of an electronic health records system is seductive, the minister

is in danger of sending Alberta taxpayer money into a virtual black hole. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that the minister announced \$59 million in October for health information systems and then provided the Alberta Medical Association with \$65 million in November and RHAs are spending untold millions more, will the minister tell us the total expected cost of establishing the electronic health records system?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I want to first elaborate a little bit in responding to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, and that is to say that consultation will be a very, very important part of what we do as we move forward into recognizing that our health care system in this province is not sustainable. Albertans can be assured that we will seek their input, as we have at all steps of our policy development, and they will have an opportunity to have their voices heard with respect to what it is that they want to do. Now, Albertans may want to say: we want the existing system, but we're prepared to pay a lot more money for it. If that's what Albertans say, then I suppose we can do that.

I think, Mr. Speaker, to suggest, as the Member for Edmonton-Riverview has suggested, that there isn't a problem, that it's simply an issue of better management of health dollars, if that's the case, then apparently every province of every part of this country has exactly the same problem. I don't understand how the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview can suggest that it's merely a management problem when the Premier of New Brunswick, Bernard Lord, is talking about how the system will not be here 10 years from now on its current track.

I need not refer only to Conservatives. Premier McGuinty from Ontario, Premier Campbell from British Columbia, Premier Calvert, an ND from Saskatchewan, Premier Doer of Manitoba: without exception, Mr. Speaker, they all agree that this is the biggest policy issue in Canada today, that we need to get our system to be sustainable.

Dr. Taft: I guess he doesn't know the answer.

Mr. Mar: You don't even know the question.

Dr. Taft: You can read it in *Hansard*, Gary.

Given the staggering amount of health information generated every day in clinics and labs and hospitals and doctors' offices, what cost controls are in place to ensure that costs for the health information system don't escalate into the hundreds of millions of dollars?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there may come a time when we find that spending tens of millions or perhaps even hundreds of millions of dollars over the next 10 years will make sense for our health care system.

Imagine this, Mr. Speaker. Imagine being able to call up an electronic health record with a diagnostic image on it by referring to it on your computer instead of sending your patient off to yet another unnecessary diagnostic test. Imagine that transaction being repeated hundreds or thousands of times today and tomorrow and the day after. There are tremendous advantages that are recognized by health care systems in other parts of the world and in other parts of Canada as well of the importance of having electronic health records and the appropriate infrastructure being put in place to ensure that these types of efficiencies can be developed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the minister table for us

or give us verbally any cost-benefit analysis that was done to justify spending \$124 million on information systems when the same amount could essentially resolve our long-term care crisis?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, it sounds like the perfect sort of question for a written question. To simply suggest that you can take this money and apply it and fix long-term care, the simplicity of that demonstrates the simplicity of the analysis conducted by the hon. member.

Labour Relations

Mr. Rathgeber: Mr. Speaker, Edmonton-Calder is the home of many small and medium-sized construction and electrical firms. Recently many of these reported that they have been targeted by salting campaigns, where union organizers target a job site and thereafter leave once certification had been accomplished. My questions are to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. When will we see amendments to the labour code to deal with this practice known as salting?

Mr. Dunford: Some time ago, Mr. Speaker, there was a call from many Albertans to have a look at the current Labour Relations Code as it related to those matters of discussions between our organized employees here in the province and employers, so we had put together a group of people to take a look. They came back with recommendations that indicated that here in Alberta we had, generally speaking, a good labour climate and really did not recommend that a full-scale review of the labour code take place at that time.

However, as minister there was concern expressed to me regarding an issue that's referred to as salting, and I believe that the hon. member in the question explained that particular practice. So we've had a committee looking at that situation. I am in receipt now of the report from that particular committee. We had our last meeting on Monday of this week with the members of that committee. It is now in my shop for me to determine a government response, and we'll be doing that within the next little while and then take it through the internal system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of the same firms report that they have lost bids due to competing with unionized contractors whose bids are subsidized using market enhancement recovery funds, or MERF. To the same minister: why does the labour code allow unions to contribute to employers while it prohibits employers from contributing to unions?

Mr. Dunford: This is a practice, Mr. Speaker, known as MERFing, and this has been in consideration for some time here within the province. There is currently a disagreement amongst people that look at these kinds of matters as to whether or not this is an issue that can be addressed or should be addressed by the Labour Relations Code here in the province or whether, in fact, it is something that is more in line with free trade or competitive trade, in which case one then might make the argument that perhaps it's the people in the federal government in Ottawa that ought to be looking at it.

Now, as much as some folks have tried to make an issue of this particular situation and even though the Competition Bureau is there to look into these kinds of matters, it is my understanding that they have yet to receive a request.

2:10

Mr. Rathgeber: Finally, Mr. Speaker, when will the report that the

minister referred to be released to ensure that this process moves forward?

Mr. Dunford: I've been contemplating how to deal with this matter, Mr. Speaker, and there are really two ways in which to do it. One, of course, is to release the report, again then to the public, and to provide for a further stakeholder response. The other way is to do it in a way that would release the report at the same time we release the government response. I'm not sure as I stand here today what the best approach would be, and any guidance that the hon. member wants to provide to me in this matter would be appreciated.

Long-standing WCB Claims Review

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, this government has been dragging its heels for years with the promise of a tribunal for long-standing, contentious Workers' Compensation Board claims. Many injured workers are being prevented from getting on with their lives while they wait to learn if their cases may be reviewed. To the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: when can these workers expect a decision on whether such a tribunal will be struck?

Mr. Dunford: I've been saying publicly for some time – and I guess the hon. member has missed it. It was always contemplated from early days in the discussion around this topic that the government of Alberta would be responsible for the administration of the tribunal, but whatever outcomes within that tribunal, whatever payments were due or if actual decisions were reversed, those payments then would be the responsibility of the Workers' Compensation Board.

We have various estimates as to what the administration of this program would be, but I can tell you that my priorities at the current time rest with other members of our client base that fall within our mandate, and that is the poor and the vulnerable here in the province. Until such time as we are able to fully enact the kind of reform that we feel is necessary in that particular area, we're not willing to invest our money in second and third chances.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, given that many of the poor and vulnerable are those injured workers waiting for the tribunal, can the minister tell me if changes to the Workers' Compensation Act passed in 2002 have corrected the complaints filed by injured workers against the WCB?

Mr. Dunford: As far as my reference to the people that need the help of this government, there is no wall that is drawn, wherever they come from. If people come forward to us for assistance and they need that assistance, then we stand there prepared to look after those folks.

Dr. Massey: It's a pretty high wall.

Mr. Dunford: I happened to hear from across the way about a pretty high wall, and in fact the member is right. One of the things that every jurisdiction in this country is trying to do is reduce the size of welfare walls. As a matter of fact, if the Liberal opposition will stay tuned, they will see in the next few months, of course, the kinds of reforms that we'll be bringing forward to in fact reduce that wall.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, given that we're not talking about welfare, that we are talking about settlements for long-standing, contentious claims that these workers are entitled to, will the minister commit today to striking a tribunal to hear those long-standing, contentious claims?

Mr. Dunford: I object to the use of the word "entitled". It is not an entitlement. The injured workers that the hon. member is purporting to represent today have in fact had their issues dealt with by the rules and by the people that were in responsible positions at the particular time.

I'm here to report to you, Mr. Speaker, that we are very proud of the changes that have been made to the Workers' Compensation Board, of the fact that since the years 2000-2002 we've been able to see where there's been effective change within the situation and how workers' compensation deals with injury claims. If people want to get anecdotal, we've got anecdotes we could stand here and talk about for the rest of the day.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

WCB Premium Assessments

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today go to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. A constituent of mine operates a small construction company in Calgary and received his WCB premium assessment for 2004. He learned his premium rates will go up actually from \$3.70 per hundred dollars of insurable earnings in 2002 to \$6.91 per hundred in 2003 to \$10.26 per hundred in 2004 even though he hasn't had a workplace accident in some five years. This is a 300 per cent increase, and I'm wondering if the minister can explain how such an increase can be justified to this small businessman.

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, there is some background that will be necessary for this question. First, I want to say this to the hon. member so that he can relay it back to his constituents and so that, in fact, any member here in the House, if they are running into that kind of a situation, can take this back as well that we tend to focus on the appeal system inside workers' compensation as somehow being there solely for injured workers. The appeal system is an appeal system, and any employer is entitled, then, to use that particular appeal system should they have a concern about their particular rates.

This is a very tough one not only for the member and his constituent, but we're finding that we're having this throughout the province. What happened was that at one time we had a huge category that included basically all of the construction activities. Representations were made to the Workers' Compensation Board by general contractors and by others, and they were successful in getting a new definition or, I guess, a new division amongst the construction trades, and what happened was that it put roofers and framers basically into a category by themselves. Now, anyone that has followed the lost-time claim rate in this province knows that that is an area of particular concern because of the incident rate that is happening in that area. So there's going to be constant pressure until the number of injuries in that area is reduced.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is to the same minister. Given that my constituent has had an increased cost to his bottom line that is challenging to absorb, are there any ways in which the impact of this large increase over the span of two years can be mitigated?

Mr. Dunford: Well, I thought I heard the word "mitigated" as the last part of his question. Again, I would urge the member to consult

with his constituent and to make sure that they have gone through the appeal system at the Workers' Compensation Board. I would further urge the member to talk to his constituent about certificates of recognition where we show, then, a commitment in writing by employers that they will in fact reduce the incident rate within their particular company.

Now, if the incident rate has been zero, then it's difficult to talk about any sort of reduction, but the very fact of being recognized with a certificate, of course, immediately enacts a 5 per cent reduction in the WCB assessment leading to a maximum of a 20 per cent reduction on that assessment.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

2:20

Fish and Wildlife Management

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Fish and Game executive are very concerned about fish and wildlife management in Alberta, and particularly they are concerned about how the Alberta Conservation Association has been handling the over \$7 million that they have under their control. My questions are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Can you tell us why there's a duplication of services with that \$7 million? It should more rightly be under your control.

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, there's no duplication in that process. This organization was set up as an arm's-length operation and given the delegated authority to be able to work and plan along with the interested shareholders. There is no duplication.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the minister could tell us why those in the employ of the Alberta Conservation Association have access to up-to-date, modern equipment and vehicles and your own staff members don't.

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, of course, the member wouldn't know what the Department of Sustainable Resource Development has or doesn't have, and you can tell by the questions. We do have over a hundred fish and wildlife officers. The budget has increased in that department. We spend close to \$38 million in that particular department. All we're trying to do is make sure that we operate efficiently within that department, and once that happens, once we do have the restraints in place, that will ensure that some of the jobs we do are necessary.

I can give you a good example, Mr. Speaker, in relation to travel because that has come up in the House before, where I suggested that, you know, when meetings are held in Edmonton that require staff, say, to come from Slave Lake and other jurisdictions outside of Edmonton, the meetings start at 10 in the morning rather than 8 in the morning so that those people do not have to leave a day earlier and travel the night before to come to Edmonton. Those types of activities are taking place.

The other area is the number of people sent sometimes when they have checkpoints. I've seen cases where they have a checkpoint where our department and the RCMP were involved in it. They had 20 vehicles doing a fisheries checkpoint on a Father's Day south of Calling Lake, where I come from. You know, they did not need 20 staff or 20 vehicles to do a minor checkpoint of that nature. I said: surely, we can do a better job than that in managing our resources within the department.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: why has there not

been any priority or focused spending for hunters and anglers so that they can conduct necessary fish and wildlife surveys and better manage the resources in the province?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, we have a fisheries strategy. Of course, that member would not know of it because she's not part of the government. She's the opposition. The sky is always falling on the opposition. In fact, they don't even listen to the answer when you try to answer after they ask a question. But that's fine. I'll channel it through you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you. I want the minister to know that I am listening.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Electricity Prices

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Energy minister knows no shame when it comes to spinning the fact that power prices are way up since deregulation. Now the minister has taken to calling Manitoba a communist jurisdiction to deflect questions about why Manitoba's power rates are stable while Alberta's have increased 60 per cent since 2000. The minister has gone from being the Baghdad Bob of energy deregulation to the Joe McCarthy of high power bills. To the minister: how can the minister justify his position that the 60 per cent . . .

The Speaker: Okay. We have a question. We have a question. [interjections] Please, please, please. Just a second. I'm going to recognize the minister.

Mr. Mar: Okay, Bob.

The Speaker: Whoa. We are exuberant today with all those personality things.

Okay. We've got a question.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We justify those statements by the very careful use of the facts.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I will attempt to restate my first question, and that is: how does the minister justify his position that the 60 per cent hike over four years with bigger spikes in between is nothing more than a simple cost-of-living increase?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member knows full well that the cost of electricity has dropped 24 per cent in the rural areas of Alberta in the calendar year 2004, and he knows that his own bill has dropped 20 per cent. Why don't we have a look at his own bill, and we'll just have a discussion on that?

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that the New Democrats have tabled hundreds of power bills that have gone up and thousands of names on petitions calling for an end to deregulation, when will the minister table even one single residential bill that has gone down since deregulation began, not just in the last year when these riders came off?

Mr. Smith: Well, all I can say, Mr. Speaker, is stay tuned.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Petroleum Reserves

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the livelihood of ordinary Albertans and the strong economy of Alberta depends a great deal on confidence in the petroleum industry and resources, given that the natural resources in Alberta belong to Albertans – my question today is to the Minister of Energy – could the minister tell Albertans how Alberta's petroleum reserves are categorized and estimated?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is very much a question of information. I think that I can start by talking about the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board. This organization on an annual basis publishes a document called Alberta's reserves, and through careful analysis and the use of skilled individuals in reservoir technology and the core analysis and in volumetric calculation as well as economic forecasting and economic use of price models, they are able to come up with specific reserve numbers.

Just for an example, Mr. Speaker, the 174 billion barrels of the Alberta oil sands that have been put forth with the U.S. Department of Energy last April and accepted by them as well as the world *Oil and Gas Journal* – that data comes from over 56,000 wells that have been drilled in the area of the oil sands, analyzed, as well as from over 6,000 core samples that remain in the possession of the Alberta government through the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board in a building directly adjacent to the University of Calgary.

Mr. Cao: My supplemental question is to the same minister. Mr. Speaker, given that there is recent news about unethical business cases in other parts of the world allegedly delaying the release of petroleum reserve estimates that may have negative impacts on their own companies in the financial market, how does the minister ensure that Alberta natural resource estimates, including reserves from oil companies, are consistently and correctly done and released?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I've heard comments, particularly from this side, saying that it's a very good question. It is a good question because we've seen what occurs with specific companies that get into difficulty about how petroleum reserves are stated. Although most shares of oil and gas companies are traded on price-earning multiples and on cash flows, the statement of reserves reflects the net worth of that company. So from a macro basis we use the numbers from the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, because anybody who's a resource developer in this province must submit a core sample. The well logs, the information about the various wells themselves – and I may even recommend a great publication called the Canadian Discovery Digest that outlines these logs – will tell us about the reserves. But we do not take the word of the individual oil companies. We use the EUB to calculate a gross quantity of our reserves.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you. My last supplemental question is to the same minister. What are the latest estimates of Alberta petroleum reserves in comparison with the major producing area in the world?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, we're number two in the world, which I think is very important. Number one is Saudi Arabia, which pumps right now about 9 million barrels a day. Last year, Mr. Speaker, Saudi Arabia, for the first time in 20 years, balanced their budget. They have produced some \$74 billion worth of oil, and that allowed them to balance their budget. The budget of this province has been

balanced since 1995, and the royalties that have been collected this year should be in excess of \$8 billion.

2:30

The Speaker: Hon. members, very shortly I'll call on the first of four to participate today, but just a couple of comments because of the equity in the question period. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, your second question had a preamble, but I let it go by. So I compensated to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry with the length of his third question, which was almost as long as the continuous length of the questions provided by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, however.

Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head:

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly some visitors from the province of Saskatchewan as well as Alberta. Our visitors from Saskatchewan are Richard and Angie Klassen. Mr. Klassen will be relating their story of false allegations at a meeting tonight and their 10-year fight in the courts to be exonerated. Richard and Angie are seated in the members' gallery along with Richard's brother Dale, his wife, Anita, and their son Trevor from Red Deer, Alberta, also four of their local friends and supporters, Mr. Gary DeVries, Angie Geworsky, Tracy Marcotte, and Mike Russell. I would like to ask them to please stand and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a number of injured workers that have joined us today to witness the proceedings in the Assembly. They are Reg Friedrich, Ralph Teed, John Steele, Terry Fedorak, Mike Renaud, Betty Chong, Charlie Sams, Rod Barrett, Ron Barrett, Ron Nahrebeski, Mike Beauchamp, Erich Schmidt, Karl Johnson, Lana Lamont, Bob Miller, Bruce Hall, Virginia Losier, and Don Purcell. With your permission I'd ask them all to now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm always pleased when visiting classes from NorQuest College attend the Assembly and allow me to introduce them to you and through you to all members of the Assembly. Joining us in the public gallery today we have 13 members of the NorQuest College ESL class for career options for new Canadians. They are joined by their teacher, Mr. Allan Carlson. I would ask them all to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly. Thank you very much for coming.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie

Mr. Ducharme: Merci, M. le Président. Aujourd'hui c'est un plaisir pour moi de présenter à la Chambre une explication d'un événement Canadien qui s'appelle Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie.

Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie se déroulent à la grandeur du Canada sur une base annuelle. Durant cette période de temps on célèbre les communautés francophones afin de promouvoir la langue et la culture françaises tant par ses activités sociales et ses célébrations que par sa dimension humaine et communautaire. Les Rendez-vous contribuent à renforcer les liens entre les anglophones et les francophones du Canada et favorisent un plus grand respect entre ces deux communautés.

De plus en plus nos municipalités Albertaines se joignent aux Rendez-vous en tenant des cérémonies pour reconnaître leur communauté francophone. Parmi ces municipalités cette année on compte Edmonton, Lethbridge, Calgary. Félicitations à ces municipalités.

Ce matin à la rotonde de la Législature le Président de la Chambre était hôte d'une belle célébration dédiée à la reconnaissance de la contribution des francophones à notre province. C'est un geste que la communauté apprécie beaucoup, si on en juge par la participation importante de la communauté. Je tiens aussi à remercier mes collègues de l'Assemblée qui se sont dérangés pour assister à la célébration.

Cette sixième édition des Rendez-vous revêt une signification spéciale parce qu'elle marque l'ouverture des cérémonies du 400ième anniversaire de l'établissement du premier établissement permanent français en sol Nord-Américain. Plusieurs activités se dérouleront au cours des mois qui suivent dans les provinces maritimes pour mettre en évidence cet anniversaire.

En terminant, j'aimerais remercier le groupe d'étudiants et d'ainés de ma circonscription qui sont venus de Bonnyville pour célébrer avec nous.

Merci, M. le Président.

[Translation] Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is my pleasure to provide the Assembly with information on a wonderful Canadian event called Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie are held throughout Canada on a yearly basis, and this year they run from March 5 to March 21. During that period of time attention is focused on francophone communities with the idea of promoting French language and culture, as much through community and human relations as through social activities and celebrations.

Les Rendez-vous contribute to the reinforcement of links between francophones and anglophones in Canada by fostering greater respect between the two communities. More and more of our municipalities are joining in Les Rendez-vous by holding ceremonies to recognize their francophone communities. Edmonton, Lethbridge, Calgary are some of the municipalities that held flag-raising ceremonies to mark the launch of these celebrations. Congratulations to all of them.

This morning the office of the Speaker hosted a wonderful ceremony in the rotunda to recognize the contributions of the francophone community to our province. It was very much appreciated by the francophone community judging by the large attendance. I also want to thank my colleague MLAs who took time off their busy schedules to stop by.

The sixth edition of these Rendez-vous takes on a special meaning because they mark the beginning of a full year of celebration to recognize the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the first permanent French settlement in North America. A large number of

activities are planned in the maritime provinces over the course of the year to celebrate this anniversary.

Once again I want to thank the group, composed of students and seniors, from my constituency who have come all the way from Bonnyville to celebrate this event with us.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [As submitted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Sour Gas Well Development

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to address an issue that is naturally of deep concern for my constituents. That is the application by Compton Petroleum that is currently in front of the EUB.

Mr. Speaker, Compton Petroleum is requesting permission of the EUB to drill an additional six wells into a site that has existed on the southeast corner of the city of Calgary for the past 30 years. They will argue that with new technology and additional wells they'll be able to remove the gas in approximately 11 years instead of 30. They'll also argue that it can be done safely.

As you can understand, my constituents have concerns about that argument. However, Mr. Speaker, there is a purpose, and the EUB is going to hear with their application whether that can be done. It will give those who disagree or have legitimate concerns about public safety the opportunity to intervene.

I've been working with the EUB, Mr. Speaker, to ensure that my constituents have an equal opportunity to voice those concerns. Whether they're the city of Calgary, the fire department, the Calgary health region, community groups, they all have a role to play. If the EUB is not convinced that an energy project can be constructed and operated safely, it will not allow that development to proceed.

For example, in December 2003 the EUB denied an application by Polaris Resources to drill a critical sour gas well near the Whaleback area in southwestern Alberta because the company did not convince the EUB hearing panel that it could drill the well safely. Companies are responsible for understanding the natural risks and hazards associated with what they propose, and if necessary, as in this case, there's a transparent and impartial EUB hearing.

Last week Compton Petroleum of Canada requested that the EUB postpone the hearings on the development of these wells. The EUB is expected to respond to Compton's request in the next while to postpone the hearing until late summer or early fall in 2004. I want to reassure my constituents that the EUB will give them a fair hearing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Seniors' Benefits

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Seniors feel that their programs have taken the brunt of this government's budget cutting over the last decade. A recent Alberta Council on Aging poll shows that this government has forced seniors to take from their food and health budgets for services that were once covered by the province. Forget having money for social activities and transportation; that was the first to go for many seniors.

Increases due to energy deregulation and mounting automobile insurance coupled with the elimination of seniors' exemption from health care premiums, the loss of universal funding for dental care, dentures, and eyeglasses, and the elimination of the education property tax exemption up to \$1,000 have made merely existing a hardship for many Alberta seniors.

Seniors were willing to make some sacrifices for the good of the province, but they never counted on being left with virtually nothing. Now they're mobilizing through groups like the Coalition of Seniors Advocates, COSA, in Calgary and Seniors United Now, SUN, in the Edmonton area, and the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, CARP, now has an Edmonton branch.

Seniors want the same benefits they had before this government started paying down the debt on their backs. Middle-income seniors are being impoverished by this government. The Alberta Liberal opposition believes that seniors make a valuable contribution to the quality of life in Alberta and deserve our respect, and that's why we've developed an alternative.

The Alberta Liberal opposition wants to see universal dental and optical benefits for seniors reinstated, health care premiums eliminated, people in private health care facilities and homes included within the Protection for Persons in Care Act or similar stronger legislation, consistent capital funding provided for seniors' lodges, and a body set up specifically to investigate complaints of elder abuse, among others. We believe there is an alternative to forcing seniors to take food off their tables to pay for dentures and eyeglasses. We have a better solution.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Long-term Care Industry

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As an MLA I've heard about the challenges facing the long-term care industry in Alberta from constituents in my Calgary-West office to representatives of the Alberta Long Term Care Association at the Standing Policy Committee on Health and Community Living. Quality of life for residents in the long-term care centres has improved due largely to the 2003 accommodation rate increase, but there are still quality-of-care needs that need to be addressed by government by additional funding through the health regions.

2:40

What is rarely reported on or spoken about, though, Mr. Speaker, are the many good-news stories that exist, such as Carewest's dementia care training program, supportive pathways, that will be offered to 3,000 front-line health care workers in Alberta. The benefits of this program will be far reaching as close to 75 per cent of long-term care residents in resident facilities have Alzheimer's disease and other related dementias.

Another story is that of the Capital Care Group celebrating 40 years of caring in 2004. Their well-known reputation has been built on visionary leadership, excellent management, education, and resources, as well as dedicated staff. Capital Care staff are a big reason why residents and families choose this organization for continuing care services.

Mr. Speaker, the truly unsung heroes, who care for over 14,000 residents in Alberta's long-term care facilities, are the staff, who are dedicated, skilled, and compassionate professionals who want to care for residents to the best of their ability but are frequently challenged; for example, when resident care needs exceed staffing levels or when resident behaviours prove almost impossible to contain or control.

I have met residents and staff in many long-term care centres and have come to fully appreciate the challenges to which I refer. Families and friends do a wonderful job as caregivers, but there comes a time when one spouse or parent needs the level of care provided in the long-term care centre. Who better to care for them on a daily basis than knowledgeable and caring staff?

I suggest to this Assembly today that we all make a serious effort to walk a mile in the shoes of our long-term care staff and award them the recognition and respect that is truly deserved.

Thank you.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm giving notice that I'll be rising later this afternoon, at the conclusion of the daily Routine, to move a Standing Order 40 application.

Thank you.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

Mr. Zwozdesky: M. le Président, c'est un grand plaisir pour moi aujourd'hui de déposer une lettre adressée à M. Ernest Chauvet, le président de l'Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, suite à la cérémonie ce matin à la Législature qui marquait la sixième édition des Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. Merci.

[Translation] Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to table a copy of a letter written to Mr. Ernest Chauvet, president of the French-Canadian association of Alberta, following this morning's ceremony in the rotunda of the Legislature to mark the sixth edition of Les Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. [As submitted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of a graph from the Parkland Institute report released this morning showing that provincial health spending is at about the same level as 1993 once inflation and population growth are factored in.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the appropriate numbers of correspondence referred to yesterday in question period. It's a letter from the regional clinical department head of the Calgary health region to Mrs. Kathy Briant relating to concerns in emergency wards in Calgary.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of Women and Non-Standard Work: A Grassroots Approach. This is a project of the Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge, Alberta, released in November 2003, written by Jane Barter Moulaison and researched by Barter Moulaison, Lisa Lambert, and Jackie Woodworth. It has been partially funded by the Alberta Community Development human rights, multiculturalism, and citizenship fund.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first is a letter from Marianne J. Murray to the hon. Premier. It is in regard to the devastation of electricity deregulation and how it has affected a business.

My second tabling is a letter dated March 16, 2004. It is a letter that I've written on behalf of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition for

Alberta in regard to the opening of the border with the Americans so we can ship live cattle.

Thank you.

head: **Motions under Standing Order 40**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on a Standing Order 40 application.

Seniors' Benefits

Ms Blakeman:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to reinstate the universal optical and dental benefits program for seniors.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This afternoon I rise on a Standing Order 40 application to present a motion to this Assembly. It has already been distributed to the members. Of course, Standing Order 40 applications are to be made in a case of urgent and pressing necessity, and it is asking for the Legislature to take a specific action.

Regarding the urgency, over the last few years I've been receiving increasing numbers of letters and phone calls from seniors groups urging the government to reinstate their benefits that were taken away a decade ago. In recent months the calls for the reinstatement of seniors' benefits from groups like COSA, the Coalition of Seniors Advocates, and Seniors United Now, also known as SUN, have become even more urgent as the people they represent have become more desperate.

Over the past decade Alberta seniors have seen the universal benefits they had enjoyed dwindle away to almost nothing. Middle-income seniors were hit the hardest since they now qualify for virtually no seniors' programs yet still bear the burden of increases to utility rates, car insurance, and long-term care. This was illustrated by a recent Alberta Council on Aging poll that showed that after social activities and transportation seniors were cutting into their food and health budgets to pay their bills. I believe that it is urgent that we address that concern.

The response from the government has been to reduce seniors' benefits by allowing the increase of other user fees that seniors have to pay and increasing health care premiums and soon likely Alberta Blue Cross.

I urge all hon. members of the House to grant unanimous consent for the motion and to reinstate the universal optical and dental benefits programs for seniors.

Thank you.

[Unanimous consent denied]

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Transmittal of Estimates**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have received a certain message from Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, which I now transmit to you.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order!

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Lieutenant Governor transmits interim supply estimates of certain sums required for the service of

the province and of certain sums required from the lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

Please be seated.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I now wish to table the 2004-05 interim supply estimates. These interim supply estimates will provide spending authority to the Legislative Assembly and the government for the two months ending May 31, 2004. By that date, it is anticipated that spending authorization will have been provided for the entire fiscal year ending March 31, 2005. As announced previously, we are tabling Budget 2004 on March 24.

When passed, these interim supply estimates will authorize approximate spending of \$5 billion in operating expense and equipment and inventory purchases, \$133.5 million in capital investment, \$66.4 million in nonbudgetary disbursements, and \$313.6 million in lottery fund payments.

Interim supply amounts are based on department's needs and fund government programs and services until the end of May. While many payments are monthly, other payments are due at the beginning of the quarter and fiscal year. Some payments are seasonal.

head: **Government Motions**

11. Mrs. Nelson moved:

Be it resolved that the message from Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, the 2004-05 interim supply estimates, and all matters connected therewith be referred to Committee of Supply.

[Government Motion 11 carried]

12. Mrs. Nelson moved:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 58(9) the number of days that Committee of Supply will be called to consider the 2004-05 interim supply estimates shall be two days.

[Government Motion 12 carried]

head: 2:50 **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 21 Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move second reading of Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill proposes a number of minor amendments to the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003, which received Royal Assent last spring.

The need for these amendments arose during the process of drafting regulations and preparing for the implementation of this new child welfare legislation. The amendments in Bill 21 are largely a matter of housekeeping. They will clarify wording in places where there are inconsistencies or ambiguities and will also ensure that the act is aligned with the Family Law Act and the Vital Statistics Act. This means making the wording consistent between the acts and allowing for the consolidation of some of the regulations. The amendments will also ensure that children receiving services under the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act will have access to services provided by the child and youth advocate.

These amendments, Mr. Speaker, will also allow for a smoother transition between the existing and new legislation by, for example,

providing sufficient time for facilities to apply for licensing under the new provisions. Other amendments include clarifying that a foster parent or someone with a very close relationship with the child can apply for a review of a director's decision and represent a child's wishes during a review and appeal process.

Mr. Speaker, the amendments in Bill 21 will fine-tune Alberta's new child welfare legislation. This is important legislation that will help us better support and protect Alberta's children, youth, and families.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to move second reading of Bill 21.
Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened with interest to the member speaking about Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004. The number of bills and amendments to the original Child Welfare Act are becoming numerous, and when I saw that this was on the Order Paper, it really made me wonder if things are being thought out as thoroughly as they should be. If they are, why do we keep finding ourselves back here with more and more amendments? Each time we're told that the amendments are minor, and that's only a prelude to a set of amendments that will be tabled the next session.

I think that some of the departments have managed to put up the draft regulations before we have to consider the bill in the Legislature. If I heard the member correctly, he indicated that these amendments are a result of changes needed after the regulations had been drafted. So, again, maybe it would be better if the department followed the lead of other departments like the Department of Justice, where we get a look at the regulations and, more importantly, where that department gets a look at the regulations and can make the adjustments needed in the bills before they appear in front of us in the Legislature.

That having been said, Mr. Speaker, I doubt if things will change, and I predict that we'll be back here next session with another amendment to the Child Welfare Act because something else has been overlooked.

There are a number of changes in the bill. It redefines the job of the child advocate and includes the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act. It allows the advocate to delegate his duties to people within the sphere of the youngster's life.

We have always had difficulty with the positioning of the child and youth advocate, Mr. Speaker. We believe that it should be a legitimate officer of the Legislature and that answering to the minister is an inappropriate position for the advocate to be placed in. As far as the amendments don't deal with that, we feel that it's a mistake, and that's a position we've had over the past number of years.

The changes in the alternative dispute resolution are going to be again defined by regulations, and I would ask if those regulations have been drafted. I guess there are some other questions with respect to the disclosure of documents created by the alternative dispute resolution. It's being broadened to include any documents that affect the development of a child, and when you think of it, Mr. Speaker, that really almost opens the door to anything.

How do you determine what isn't going to affect the development of a child? I guess the question it also raises is: who's going to protect a child's personal information after the dispute is settled? So there are a number of questions around this particular provision that I think need to be clarified before we proceed.

The bill removes the financial contributions that the family may have to provide when their child goes into the service and allows the court to demand treatment for both the child and guardian. It seems

to give the court the ability to make decisions without regulated control on what is required to bring the family back together. At least that's the impression that we're left with.

The bill further changes the amount of time for which a court can make a secure services order from 10 to five days. It forces the family guardians to be notified by any means necessary within one day if this secure services order is given by the courts. They may apply for five days to stabilize the child or assess the child and prepare a plan for services. There's also a set of information that is supplied to the child when a secure services order is passed. Some minor changes: change in the amount of time from two to three days for the review of the secure services order.

The bill also repealed all the information about how Children's Services would obtain child support and allows a director to apply for child support to the courts. I think this is a section that we have to look at carefully, Mr. Speaker. It deletes a large part about child support from the original act, and it removes the process by which directors would act to obtain child support. The question it raises, of course, is: what's going to be done now? Does the child support law handle this?

The act repeals the law that requires a native child to be registered under the Indian Act and removes the requirement for all documents to be sealed that are used to require a consent of the minister or the court. Again, it raises the question: how are these children going to maintain their treaty status after adoption? And why was this particular change brought in?

There's now an 18-month wait before residential facilities will have to be properly licensed, and the minister may also vary the terms and the conditions to which that licence is subject, Mr. Speaker. I guess the question is: why? Why does the minister need this control? And why was this considered an appropriate time period?

Another provision is that the court may direct a child to have legal representation if the court believes the views of the child are not being adequately represented. It further allows the court to ask for records from Children's Services if required in a case, but they still can't reveal the client or guardian. The bill has spelled out exactly what would be required to get a record and how that information would be treated once before a court. It gives the director licence to publish the name and personal information of a client if they deem it in the interest of justice.

3:00

The bill is, as the mover indicated, an amendment. Many of the clauses are housekeeping clauses, but there are some larger issues that I think we deserve an answer to before we proceed with the bill. Hopefully, we'll receive those answers from the minister or the mover of the bill.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

One final provision that I think again deserves some explanation is the change in the amount of time you can sentence a parent or guardian who causes a child to be in need of protective services from 12 months to 24 months. While we sympathize with that provision, Mr. Speaker, two years is really a long period out of the child's life, and that's particularly true of a very young child. Again, some explanation of why there has been this extension of that provision would be of interest.

I think those are the comments I have at this stage, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to just raise a couple of questions and concerns briefly touched on by my hon. colleague for Edmonton-Mill Woods. I'm particularly interested in knowing the history and the reasoning behind section 15 in the bill, which is – here we go again – really amending the old sections 57.2 and 57.5 to 57.9. Now, I know that we're not to be going into word-by-word and clause-by-clause analysis of a bill at this point. We're really talking about the principle of the bill, but I'm struggling to approve of the principle of this bill when I don't understand why these actions are being contemplated.

Specifically what's being considered here is that the sections talking about support orders – we would usually call them maintenance orders – are being eliminated from the originating act, the Child Welfare Act, and a very short section is being left in which essentially says that if the director of child welfare has a child in custody or has a temporary guardianship order or a permanent guardianship order, I suppose, or the director has entered into a family enhancement agreement, the director can enter into an agreement whereby the guardian of the child agrees to pay child support. The only other section that's left in here is that that doesn't prevent the director of child welfare from also applying to the courts for child support. That's it.

Now, what's being removed from the bill with this amendment is everything else. Well, what does that mean? Just let me briefly go over some of the things that it means. It's taking out the set-up, you know, if a director of child welfare takes over guardianship of the child. They, obviously, have been able in the past to go and seek an agreement or an order or apply, according to the form prescribed in the regulations, to the court for basically child support. Traditionally what we've had is the situation with maintenance enforcement where the maintenance is usually paid through the custodial parent. I'm struggling to see how this is still going to work out in this new arrangement.

Traditionally, if the custodial parent is receiving benefits from the government, the government has set it up that they have a right to claim the maintenance money that would usually be flowing through the custodial parent to the child, especially if there are arrears. Then we say that the government has subrogated that money; they've claimed it for themselves. They've repaid themselves the money that they are offering in assistance, and nobody seems to have a problem with that at this time.

When the government goes to chase down that money, they've been pretty vigorous in doing it mostly because they're getting it for themselves. That has had a lot to do with their tenacity in trying to get the regular payments established and also in pursuing any arrears, any debt that has built up as a result of this. We have a maintenance enforcement program to do that, and it also, of course, has been expanded and now will assist people whose maintenance orders are not subrogated to the government. That was the genesis of it.

So we have a child welfare agreement here that is now removing all of the other rules around how the director of child welfare goes about establishing support orders or obtaining money from a guardian in support of a child. It's striking out sections like an order of the court can be retroactive to the commencement date of the child coming into the custody of the government. If the court is going to make an order requiring a guardian to pay, they have to consider certain things like the income or the earning capacity and the financial resources of the guardian or the parent. They have to consider the value of the estate, if there is an estate that's being held in trust for the child. They have to take into consideration the needs

of the child. That whole section is now being taken out and another whole section around review.

We traditionally have had a system where someone is always able to appeal a decision. They can go to a higher level or a different level and appeal a decision that's been made. That's being removed in this section. So what we have in this amendment act is that it's proposing to strike out all of these things that I'm talking about. It would be striking out the ability of a guardian or a parent or a trustee that has been ordered to pay child support, their ability to apply to the court for a review of the order. That's now being removed.

The court when looking at an order under this section can decide to "vary, suspend or terminate the order or may reduce or cancel [any] arrears." That's being removed. So everything to do with support orders is being taken out except for the first two sections that I talked about; that is, that the director of child welfare can seek an order whereby a guardian would agree to pay child support – it doesn't say to whom; I'm presuming to the government – also that that doesn't stop the director of child welfare from going to the courts to seek a court order for child support. All the rest of the set-up, the rules around how we usually deal with child support are being removed, and I've already listed quite a few of them, including that review process and the ability of the courts to vary the order that's in place.

It sets out that an agreement or an order that was under this would terminate, and then it gave the conditions under which it would automatically terminate, like if the child is adopted or if the child died or if the child, you know, reaches the age of majority or if the child married, for example. All of those would be reasons that the court order would be deemed fulfilled or null and void. That section is being removed.

We also have a section where it sets out the responsibilities of the director of maintenance enforcement under this arrangement. It makes me a little nervous that all of this is going away, and I'm seeing two pretty narrow sections being left in place without all the rest of these supporting rules. So I'm looking to the sponsor of the bill to explain to me on the record why this is being removed. There may well be a very simple explanation, but I get a little nervous when I see things like this happening and I'm not hearing why being articulated.

Those are the concerns that I'm seeing because I'm a proponent of the maintenance enforcement program and of court-ordered support for children. I'm not sure why I'm seeing the government abolish all the rules that we have been operating under or what we understand has been the relationship we expect to have there, why it's all being taken out, including avenues of appeal, when the thing starts, when the thing ends, how one appeals it, how one buries it. All of those rules are now struck, and I would like to know why. How does the mover of the bill anticipate all of this is going to be handled? I sure hope I'm not going to be told that this is going to be under regulations now, because that will make me really unhappy, and you know that when I get unhappy, I get wordy, usually late at night.

3:10

So if I could hear from the mover of the bill why that is happening, it would make me more interested in supporting this bill in principle at second reading. At this point I will have to reserve my opinion. Well, actually, that probably means I'll have to not support it in second reading until I can hear some sort of explanation for this. There's something wrong here, and I'd like to hear the answer for it.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 21 read a second time]

Bill 22
Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to move Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, for second reading.

Like last year's electoral boundaries commission act, the responsibility for carrying this bill on behalf of government rests with the Department of Justice and hence the reason I'm bringing it forward, although it deals with acts which are really the purview of the Legislative Assembly itself.

The bill makes amendments to legislation based primarily on numerous recommendations made by the Chief Electoral Officer. This will help to ensure that our legislation is up to date prior to the next election. I must say off the top, Mr. Speaker, that I'd like to recognize Alberta's Chief Electoral Officer, Brian Fjeldheim, and all of the people who work with him. The staff at Elections Alberta had a busy year last year with the whole redistribution process and working with the commission on that behest. Their efforts on behalf of all Albertans ensure that we can be proud of our electoral events, that they're conducted fairly and in an unbiased and impartial manner, that all parties and stakeholders, regardless of political party or viewpoint, have a set of rules and can abide by those rules. Albertans can be proud of their democratic experience.

Tabling this bill does not, I hasten to add, indicate anything with respect to an early election call, as was suggested by the Member for Edmonton-Centre following the press conference that we had about the agenda for this year's session when I mentioned the Election Act. The question of an election call is not in my purview. This is simply a bill to update and improve the Election Act, based primarily, as I said, on input from the Chief Electoral Officer.

For the most part the bill contains minor housekeeping and updating of the legislation. It makes several important and significant changes, however, and I'd just like to highlight a few of them for the Assembly. Bill 22 makes numerous amendments to four acts: the Election Act, the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, the Alberta Personal Income Tax Act, and the Alberta Corporate Tax Act. I'll go through the key amendments in each of these acts.

There are more than 150 amendments being made to the Election Act. That may seem like a daunting task, but most of them, as I say, are amendments of a housekeeping nature that reflect needed changes recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer. Because the act is very specific and quite codified, small details that one might not otherwise expect to find in an act, like allowing the authority to hire and delegate certain responsibilities to an executive assistant, those sorts of things, are included right in the act.

Dr. Taylor: Is one of the changes an election every 10 years?

Mr. Hancock: The hon. minister from Cypress-Medicine Hat has advocated 10-year terms in the act, but I can assure him that most of us are quite happy to go back to the electorate and get our mandate renewed on a regular basis.

The bill will update and clarify a description of the duties of the Chief Electoral Officer and his office, amend several definitions such as the poll book, official agent, and seniors' lodge to ensure that they're up to date and deal with more current terms. Existing legislation also addresses how candidates' names appear on the ballot, updates the format of how names appear on the ballot. The change will basically boost the font size.

As you can tell, Mr. Speaker, some of the things that we're dealing with in this act are very, very detailed, not like you'd expect to find

in most acts but for the clarity of ensuring that electors, candidates, parties can look at the act and see all the rules clearly spelled out.

Other changes of significance in this act include amendments that will improve accessibility to apartment complexes and mobile-home parks for enumerators as well as for candidates and campaign workers. Again, we're trying to ensure here that Albertans have every opportunity to participate in their elections, so making sure that they're on the voters list is absolutely essential, of course, and making sure that they have access to information so that they can be informed prior to voting is also essential. In keeping with the tradition of the act, making sure that access is available for enumerators and candidates and campaign workers is essential. Enumerators will also be required to visit a residence at least twice more after an unsuccessful first visit.

Other amendments will help to ensure the accuracy of the register of electors, also known as the list of eligible voters, as well as control access to that personal information and protect the privacy of voters.

One very significant change will significantly improve the flexibility of the way we use advance polls. Under existing legislation advance polls can only be accessed by a select group of people under very specific circumstances. Eliminating the limitation will make this option available for even more Albertans who may wish to vote but for whatever reason are unable to get out to the polling station.

Mr. Speaker, we're always concerned about the turnout of voters and making sure that people have every opportunity to vote, and I think this change is a significant one, because while you're not encouraging everybody to vote in the advance polls, often people don't vote simply because of inconvenience. Opening up the advance polls so that people can vote at them without having to sign a declaration saying that they're going to be absent from their normal residence on election day makes it available and perhaps will encourage even more people to get out to the polls.

I would indicate – this is not an amendment – that in the Election Act there's a provision for a person to vote at the returning office any time during the writ period, I believe, after nominations have ceased. Again, the key here is to ensure that all Albertans have the opportunity to participate and are encouraged to participate in elections.

I wouldn't suggest that this is the final solution to that broader issue of encouraging a higher turnout of voters, but I think anything we can do to encourage Albertans to take advantage of their right to vote is a step in the right direction.

Along this line, the rules that govern the use of special ballots are also clarified under Bill 22. A new change to this area of the act will allow secure voting for those Albertans who feel that their personal safety may be at risk if they appear in person at the polls. Again, this will not necessarily be used by a wide number of people, but in keeping with the concept of protection of privacy and in keeping with the concept that there may be people who do not wish their location to be disclosed or do not wish to be accessible because they fear that they're at risk either from a family member or some other threat, this change will make it possible for them to participate without endangering themselves.

Special ballots that are cast by mail are requested throughout the election period in writing, by phone, fax, or in person and have traditionally been reserved for special circumstances such as physical incapacity. This amendment will extend these circumstances to those people who feel that their safety may be at risk. With our co-ordinated efforts, as I was talking about, to address family violence, including the work being done by the Minister of Children's Services, this is but another example of how we can help to ensure the safety of those people that feel that they are at risk.

3:20

With that, I'd move on to the other major act that's being amended by Bill 22. The Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act helps ensure the transparency and accountability of candidate fundraising and party finances. One amendment will allow the office of the Chief Electoral Officer to publish candidates' expenses on the Internet. Another amendment will clarify that donations raised at a fundraising function are considered contributions and are therefore subject to disclosure. Other changes will clarify that public institutions and their subsidiaries, such as municipalities, regional health authorities, school boards, are prohibited from making political contributions. Another amendment will allow the Chief Electoral Officer to cancel the registration of a political party if it fails to run a candidate in a general election or senatorial election.

Other changes are significant in that they increase the maximum contribution limits to a party's constituency associations and individual candidates for the first time since 1980. These amounts are being increased by 33 per cent, which I believe is significant. However, it's been nearly 25 years since the numbers were first put in place, so the increase is not, in my view, unreasonable.

Just for the record I'll go over each of the changes. The maximum contribution for individual candidates will be increased from \$1,500 to \$2,000 and from \$7,500 to \$10,000 in total for candidates of each of the registered parties. The maximum contribution to individual constituency associations will rise from \$750 to \$1,000 and from \$3,750 to \$5,000 in total for a party's constituency association.

One other item which I should've mentioned perhaps under the Election Act is the increase in the deposit. I believe the increase is to \$500 from currently \$200 or \$250. The purpose for the increase is to give the Chief Electoral Officer a tool to encourage candidates to file their financial statements on a timely basis under the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act.

Formerly a candidate would put up a deposit, and if they achieved 50 per cent of the winning number of votes, they'd be entitled to the return of their deposit. Now that the deposit is doubled, they still get the first 50 per cent, the first half, back if they meet the first test; that is, 50 per cent of the winning candidate's votes. They get the second half of the deposit back regardless of the number of votes they get if they file their financial statement on a timely basis. This is a tool that was asked for by the Chief Electoral Officer just to encourage candidates to make sure that those filings are made.

Obviously, the Alberta Income Tax Act and the Alberta Corporate Tax Act have to be amended in a corollary fashion with respect to the maximum contributions and donations. These amendments increase the political contribution tax credit for both individuals and corporations. Like the maximum contributions named above, the amount has been \$750 since 1980. Under Bill 22 it will be increased to \$1,000.

In conclusion, the changes under this bill are primarily those that were brought forward by the Chief Electoral Officer. Obviously, he didn't make comment on the amount of the contributions, but with respect to the operations of the Election Act those are primarily concerns that he's put forward to modernize and improve the act and improve his ability to work with his staff in running fair elections in the province. So I would encourage support from members of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with interest that I rise and participate in the debate this afternoon at second reading of Bill 22. I certainly was a keen listener to the hon.

Minister of Justice and Attorney General's remarks in regard to Bill 22.

We are looking at changes to four acts, 150 amendments. It is, as it was described by the hon. minister, an update and an improvement in some areas, but I don't know if it is an improvement in all areas. Certainly, there was a discussion with the Chief Electoral Officer of the province, but I wonder what other consultations went on in regard to this legislation. [interjection] Now, the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar seems interested in participating in debate, and I will be anxious to listen to his comments in regard to this bill as well.

If one were to look at this bill and think that if there was one purpose and one purpose only and it was to increase voter turnout rates in the province, then this bill would certainly be worthy of support. We need to improve voter participation in elections in this province; there's no doubt about that. It astonishes me. Some communities which have the most to gain and the most to lose from good or bad public policy have very low voter turnout rates, and anything we can do to improve that should be supported.

Now, I believe the hon. minister stated that Albertans should be given every opportunity to participate in elections, and I agree with that. But I do have some questions at this time in regard to this bill, and section 13 certainly comes to mind.

The Chief Electoral Officer may assign, in respect of each elector whose information is contained in the register, a unique and permanent identifier number consisting of numbers or letters, or a combination of numbers and letters, to be used to assist in distinguishing an elector from another elector or verifying the information about an elector.

On first glance this whole idea of having a UIN, or a unique identifier number, to me would be a form of branding. It is, in my view, at this time, unless there's further explanation from government, Orwellian, and it certainly would be unnecessary.

What is precisely the purpose of this unique identifier number? Why is it necessary to have a series of letters and numbers to identify each voter in this province on an electoral list? What's going on with this? Are there problems that we don't know about with the current system, where all the information is in the poll book? I don't think there is. Is this government at some time contemplating going to on-line voting or Internet voting? Is that why we're going to brand Albertans with one more number?

We have a driver's licence number; we have a social insurance number. Now we may be assigned by the Chief Electoral Officer this UIN. I think members of this House and certainly Albertans are owed an explanation as to why this branding may occur.

We can look at some of the attempts at Internet voting in other jurisdictions, and one would have to say that to have confidence in this process would be stretching it. I'm privileged, I believe, to have read in the recent past an editorial observation by Adam Cohen in the *New York Times* dated Sunday, February 29. Mr. Cohen writes an interesting piece on electronic voting. If we are setting up in this bill the foundation for future attempts at this in Alberta, then we have to have a much broader debate, and there has to be a much broader consultation than the one that was done in regard to this bill.

3:30

Certainly, there are both sides to the story in America. There are both sides to the story in Canada. Many organizations, including the political party that I'm a member of, have tried successfully and unsuccessfully various methods of voting. Mr. Cohen writes:

But modern technology is creating a whole new generation of conspiracy theories – easy to imagine and, unless we're careful, impossible to disprove. The nation is rushing to adopt electronic voting, but there is a disturbing amount of evidence that, at least in its current form, it is overly vulnerable to electoral mischief.

There are a growing number of electronic voting skeptics. There are a number of widely reported election results that some pundits have said have been a surprise.

Now, I would urge all members of this Assembly and all members of the public who have Internet access to check out www.blackboxvoting.org and see for themselves one side of this issue, because we have a lot of debate that has to occur if this is the intention of adding this UIN to the voters list. Is this what the future is? Or should we remain with our traditions, particularly in this democracy, where you go, you get your ballot, you mark it to the candidate of your choice, and you put it in the ballot box?

I don't think schemes such as this are going to increase voter participation. In fact, I think it would be the other way around. There would be fewer people interested in voting. Mr. Cohen has a lot to say about electronic voting, and I would urge all members of the Assembly to read his article. In fact, Mr. Speaker, perhaps I will table that for the benefit of the Assembly tomorrow.

Now, we're also looking in section 17 at adding the unique identifier number, and the same questions would apply there, Mr. Speaker.

We can go further on, and we can see where we're going to increase the amount that a candidate has to pay to enter the election, whether or not they are successful or whether or not they reach the threshold to have their money returned to them. We are increasing the amount from \$200 to \$500 to file papers.

I wonder why that is necessary. Why did we more than double that amount? Democracy is apparently getting expensive in Alberta. I don't think we can prevent candidates who want to enter an election or participate in an election campaign from doing so, and I'm afraid this fee will do exactly that. It will reduce the number of candidates in an election.

I think that in a parliament, in any parliament, the more voices and the more views that are expressed, the better government you have and the stronger democracy you have. There are some political parties – I'm not saying the one that I'm a member of; others would say that – that certainly would have a great deal of difficulty with the \$500. There may be a candidate or a person in any constituency across this province who may want to run as an independent and may not have that \$500 and may have some excellent views on some very important issues, and I think their voice should be heard. I don't think we should be putting a price on democracy and making it unaffordable with that amendment.

Now, further on here – and perhaps this question, Mr. Speaker, will be addressed during committee – in section 116 as amended, an application for a special ballot. We are now allowing that to occur by electronic mail, or e-mail. Is a signature going to be no longer required as a result of this to get a special ballot? Certainly, the hon. minister talked about this idea of having a special secure ballot. I believe that's how the hon. minister addressed that issue. How many special secure ballots does the minister estimate will be issued during an election? I think that's a good idea. I think that's a really good idea in case there are people who for one reason or another do not want to be identified at a polling station or do not want to come near a polling station for obvious reasons. That is one amendment that I certainly at this time would support.

I believe the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is going to have some questions or some concerns around the repealing of section 158 and the interference with the right to access. There's going to be a penalty if one is found guilty of an offence and "liable to a fine of not more than \$1000." I, too, have been limited or banned from certain premises.

Mr. Hancock: It's a small wonder.

Mr. MacDonald: The hon. minister says that it's a small wonder.

In a democracy during an election everyone should be allowed free and easy access to the voters, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is going to talk about that. But I think that in this case the fine should be increased. Everything else seems to be going up in these amendments. Why is that fine not going up?

An apartment manager, for instance, may not take particular pleasure to one party – let's say that it's the Progressive Conservative Party – and prevents that candidate from accessing that building and repeatedly throws out the candidate. So I think we need to have a look at this. This has to be enforced vigorously. Not only is it the responsibility of the respective campaign teams to know the law and present the proper documentation to building managers in this case, but I think the electoral office has to make more of an effort to ensure that managers of buildings know what the law is and that each and every candidate has the right to canvass there between the hours of 9 in the morning and I believe 9 in the evening.

Again, I'm sure there is good reason for this from the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, but in section 163 why are we instituting under this act that no prosecutions will take place without the consent of the Chief Electoral Officer? Now, the Chief Electoral Officer is going to have the final say in this matter. Would not in some cases perhaps a Crown prosecutor? Why is that amendment in there, "consent to prosecute"?

Now, the hon. minister spoke about this earlier. In my view, this is wrong because it's less public notice. It looks like we are attempting to repeal here

the amount of the expenses in total based on the financial statement submitted by each candidate pursuant to section 43 to be published in a newspaper circulated in the electoral division of that candidate within 30 days after the date on which the financial statement is approved by the Chief Electoral Officer.

Why are we repealing that? As I understand, this information will be published on the web site of the Chief Electoral Officer. Well, I would like to see, in fairness to those Albertans – and that's roughly half. This would be the repeal of section 4 under the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, part 2. Why could we not have both Internet access and have that published in a newspaper as well, particularly for seniors who don't have access to the Internet?

3:40

If we're going to put these fees up from \$200 to \$500 and we're going to collect other fees for distribution of information, surely it shouldn't be a matter of cost. If we're going to put these fees up, we can still afford to rent a little space in the *Edmonton Examiner*, for instance. I don't think that is in the interests of openness and transparency; I'm sorry.

We're going to increase donations to political parties. The federal government is changing their laws regarding campaign donations, changing their laws significantly, yet here we are increasing campaign donations. Certainly, there are those political wags who would say, "Well, that should benefit the Alberta Liberals," because we have a lot of outstanding debt. But what sort of presentations were made to the chief electoral office to urge the office, as I understand it, to recommend that we have these changes and that we increase significantly what can be donated to a respective political party?

Certainly, there are many issues, but in my first look at this bill, Bill 22, Mr. Speaker, I would have to say that there are improvements. But I'm not convinced that this update is going to improve Albertans' voting participation rate. I can't understand why we need this UIN, this unique identifier number. People are regulated enough in this society, and I can't understand it unless at some time

in the very near future there are plans to implement electronic voting.
Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased that I can put a couple of comments on the record in second reading on Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. I am glad to see this coming forward. There are a number of issues that have been long-standing problems, which, I believe, there is an attempt to address in this proposed legislation.

There are a couple of other, more global issues I want to address around this bill before I get to the specific issue of so-called free access. I've been saying for some time that we must as legislators bite the bullet, take the big step, do the right thing, all of those clichés. But what it boils down to is that we have an increasing distance between the electorate, between citizens, and the democratic process. They don't feel engaged in it. They don't feel that it's fair. They don't feel that their vote counts or that they're able to effect any change if that's, in fact, what they're seeking. That's problematic.

I mean, at the outset people laugh and say: oh, you know, come on; it's just because you're in the Official Opposition and you want everything to go your way. But I think there's a larger problem here. In Alberta we now accept as a given that we're dealing with a 50 per cent voter turnout. That's bad, and we know it's bad, but at what point do we say: can I get the government, can I get my colleagues in this Assembly to admit that there really is a problem? At 40 per cent voter turnout? At 35 per cent voter turnout? At 30 per cent voter turnout? How much moral sway, how much right to be there does a government have if they've been elected by only 30 per cent of the people that are eligible to vote?

I think at a certain point it's sort of the opposite of critical mass. In a critical mass situation you're trying to get enough people in place that they affect the outcome of what you're trying to do. We talked about the representation of women and getting enough women elected into political office to start to affect the policies and procedures of government. What I'm talking about is the opposite. At a certain point I think we lose the moral authority to be legislators when we can't attract enough people at some percentage to support us being elected into official office.

So we really need to address this. I think there needs to be wider change than what's anticipated in this bill, but I'm willing to say okay for the small detail stuff and in some cases for the larger detail stuff that is being looked after in this bill, and I am glad to see it.

We still need to go back and look at things like the first past the post system that we're using right now and the electoral boundary system that we have in place. It does make some votes more valuable. It particularly makes rural votes more valuable than urban votes, for example, and since we have two-thirds of Alberta's population now living in the metropolitan areas of Edmonton and Calgary, that becomes significant. When those people get angry enough that their vote isn't counting the same, we have a problem here.

So there is a need to address that larger democracy challenge here. I think we do need to be looking at things like probably a hybrid or mixed system of proportional representation and first past the post to sort of ease into it, but we have to make some major changes in what we're doing.

The second sort of overall contextual thing that I want to talk about is younger voting, youth voting. I think, again, this is about being able to attract a different generation of people to what we're doing. It's quite common that younger people don't vote. I mean,

I couldn't wait to get to my 18th birthday and be able to vote. It was important to me, but it wasn't to most of my colleagues at the time, and I think that's still true.

The difference is that up to now we knew that people would learn to vote. Maybe they weren't interested when they were 18 or 19 or 20, but when they started to get into their mid-20s or their later 20s, they started to realize the effect that government legislation has on their lives. They maybe get married; they start a family; they buy a house; they get a car loan; they get involved in the stock market. There are all kinds of other places where what we do in this Assembly affects people's lives. They start to realize that, so they would start to vote.

What we know now through the work that's being done by the council for unity in Canada and some other groups that are working on this kind of democratic reform is that the current generation of younger voters is not learning to vote. If we can't get them to vote now, they don't seem to be learning to vote. Whatever is happening in their lives, it's not convincing them to start voting as they get a little older. They're just not.

That is problematic for us. Refer back to where I started when I was talking about the 50 per cent voter turnout and what we are going to do when that starts sliding below 50 per cent towards 40 per cent. So just hearken back to all the things that happen there.

3:50

I believe that my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar raised a number of really good issues around electronic voting, and I support him in everything he's saying there. At the same time, I'm looking at the younger people that I'm working with, and they have an affinity with the Internet and with computers that we do not have. They get it; they are there; they think that way. Somehow there's a connection between them and that electronic machine. I think we do have to start looking at the idea of electronic voting and other citizen participation initiatives to start to capture those younger voters because they're not captured; they're not energized by what is in place right now.

Our voting system has changed. I mean, we tend to go: oh, no; it's always been the same for us. No, it hasn't. Come on. You know, women weren't allowed to vote at one point; aboriginal people weren't allowed to vote at one point. At one point it was only property owners that could vote in certain elections. So things have certainly changed and moved on, and for us to claim that no, no, it's always been this way, it's just flat-out wrong. There have been changes that have brought more voters into the system or made it more attractive for people to vote, so we need to think about stuff like that.

Now, I want to specifically talk about a couple of sections here, and that's about this concept of free access. As we get more and more security buildings in the province – that is, a multiple-unit building, whether it's a gated community, whether it's a security high-rise building that is either apartments or condominiums or any other building that you can't walk freely into – we now create two different levels of citizens as far as their access to information about political campaigns and candidates.

Generally speaking, most people can walk up to the front door of a single-family detached house. Yeah, there are things you've got to be careful of, the dogs in the front yard and all of that kind of thing, but essentially there's nothing barring you from being able to walk up and knock on that door. The person can come to the door, look out, and go, "Oh, it's a candidate. I'm not going to open the door and talk to them. No, thank you." That's fine. They are entirely within their rights to do that. But the candidate managed to get to the door and was able to present themselves, and the individual can

still make up their mind as to whether they wish to open the door or not.

The situation that's developed with security buildings and gated communities where there is a secure electronic barrier preventing candidates from being able to even get to the door is that we have two kinds of people: those that can open their door and engage with a candidate if they wish to and those that never even know that a candidate was trying to present themselves to them. That becomes problematic right now for those that are seeking political office in larger urban centres, but increasingly those security buildings are turning up in every centre in Alberta; therefore, it becomes a problem, eventually, for everyone.

So we need to make sure that there is the same level of access to the voter, that the candidates can present themselves equally to the voter. If the voter still chooses not to open their door, that's fine. My point is that you've got to be able to get the candidates to the door, and then the voter can decide if they're going to open their own door or not. That's what's important here.

People are allowing this in that they say, "Well, I moved into a security building, and I mean that I don't want anybody knocking at my door. I'm afraid when people do because this is a secured building. There shouldn't be anyone in here that I don't know who they are." Some of them are fearful, in fact, when you're in an election campaign and people start getting access into these security buildings and, in fact, knocking on the doors.

I think we were setting ourselves up for a whopping challenge, a court case where we end up with a challenge because one candidate was able to get access to a building and another candidate was not able to get access to a building. If we end up with a difference in a final vote of a couple of hundred votes, that could be that building. That's where we're likely to have court challenges happen.

In this bill we now see that two sections have been adjusted to make it clear that in multi-unit buildings the person that's in control of the building is responsible for ensuring that the candidate or the candidate's worker or the enumerator is able to get free access, unencumbered, uninterfered with, to every door in the unit. I'm hoping that that's going to help the problem that has arisen in the past where, in fact, somebody decides to take it upon themselves in these secure buildings and has been allowing one party's candidate access or the workers access to drop flyers or to door-knock but not another party's access. You cannot have that. It must be free and equal access for all candidates to the voter.

I still insist that it's important to be able to get to that voter, get to their door. The voter doesn't want to open it; fine. They don't want to open that door; okay. But they need to know that the candidate is standing on the other side of their door and they did make it that far, and that's the important part of this.

There's been some tussling from these very large rental owners, large companies that own a number of apartment buildings, thousands of rental units, in cities like Edmonton and Calgary, saying: no, we interpret what free access means as different. I actually got into a position where I was told by one very large company: "Sorry, but free access means that you can buzz the buzzer on the outside of this building. If the person lets you in, you can go into the building, go directly to their apartment, talk to them. When you're finished, you have to leave the building, go back outside again, and buzz the next door."

Well, at that rate, as any of us that have worked in apartment buildings or multi-unit buildings know, it would take you weeks to door-knock your way through one apartment building. I have apartment buildings that have 500 apartments in them. I mean, this is just simply not accessible for the candidate. In fact, those people in that building don't even know that they didn't get to see a candidate because it's been taken away from them.

So that's one area that I wanted to see addressed and that I felt could be very problematic for us in Alberta if it wasn't addressed. I'm glad to see that it has made it into this. I know that there are a number of other issues that we will be talking about that are of great interest to people. Therefore, at this point I would ask that we adjourn debate. [interjection] I'm sorry. Is he adjourning debate? I'm sorry. I take that all back. There are people eager right now to speak to this bill, and I'm going to take my seat and let them speak to it.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. It's a very important piece of legislation, one of the most important pieces of legislation to come before this House here in this Assembly in this session. At least, that's how I see it. In my judgment this is perhaps the most important bill. So I appreciate the opportunity to enter debate during the second reading of this bill.

The bill was introduced just a little while ago, a few days ago, perhaps yesterday. I haven't had, I must confess, the chance to give it a close reading, but I've got some general observations to make based on a quick perusal of this bill.

The election statutes deal, Mr. Speaker, with one of the most important elements in the democratic process which modern democracies have adopted to follow the will and reflect the will of the citizens, who are the constituents, who are the real masters of democratic politics. I see this as a major attempt to amend, to augment the democratic nature of the legislation dealing with elections. Elections are very, very important events. Participation in elections is an exceedingly important concern, the level of participation by voters, by citizens, and the ability of political parties to enter the electoral arena and have a fair chance of competing.

4:00

I think competitive political systems such as the one that we have should have election legislation which encourages competition. Competition is always I think helped and encouraged if there is a level playing field, so any election-related legislation should be judged on the basis of whether it meets the requirements of the basic principle of a level playing field for political actors, political candidates in elections, and political parties, which are key elements in an electoral system and the democratic process in the modern political system.

So I think that in order to judge this bill and its strengths and weaknesses, one of the principles that needs to be kept in mind, Mr. Speaker, is whether or not it furthers the principle of levelling the playing field, a term that is used in this Legislature quite often in different contexts. I would like to see us pay some attention while we're discussing this bill to this principle of levelling the playing field when it comes to election rules and election-related legislation that we debate and pass.

The second principle that I think needs, Mr. Speaker, to be kept in mind all the time when debating a bill such as this one, Bill 22, is whether or not it will encourage and enhance the interest of citizens at the time of an election to turn up at the polling booth and vote. We know that one of the patterns or trends that's a matter of concern to lots of Canadians, Albertans, citizens in our province and other provinces, is the sort of declining level of voter participation in elections.

In this province the rate of voter turnout has been in a steady decline over the last two or three elections. In the last provincial

election we had, I think, close to 55 per cent or less voters that decided to cast their votes. The other 45, 47 per cent stayed away from the polling booths. That's certainly a matter of great concern to the New Democrat opposition, and I think it's a matter of widespread concern to Albertans in general. So that's the second principle when debating the changes in the various statutes related to elections that are being proposed in Bill 22.

Bill 22, Mr. Speaker, attempts to amend existing pieces of legislation, existing statutes. The first statute that's proposed to be amended by this act is the Election Act, which is part 1 of this bill. The second piece of existing legislation, the second provincial statute, that will be amended by way of Bill 22 is the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. The third important existing provincial statute that will be amended by Bill 22 is – the tax statutes amendment has two parts: the Alberta Corporate Tax Act and the Alberta Personal Income Tax Act.

In the first part of the bill I think the changes proposed to the Election Act are intended to empower the administrative staff of the provincial Chief Electoral Officer to seek greater access both in terms of preparing voters lists and, once the election is called, greater access to various kinds of residential accommodations, buildings, be they apartments, be they condominiums or gated communities, which are beginning to become an instant feature of our urban landscape. So it's increasing access by candidates, political parties, their canvassers to the residents of these residences for the purposes of canvassing their support for the respective candidates and political parties and their programs.

There are some good features, I think, in the amendments being proposed with respect to the Election Act, those amendments that will facilitate such access. We'll have an opportunity to look at those proposed amendments to see if we can improve them during Committee of the Whole stage of the debate on this bill.

Other matters that this bill tries to address, of course, are the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act and the tax statutes amendments, which deal with changing the amount of the maximum limits of donations to political parties, to constituency associations, to individual members, and to political party campaigns. The changes that are proposed in this respect would seem to me to sort of not be addressing the concern that Albertans have with levelling the playing field for different political parties, many of them small, some fledgling and new, and others that have in the past not been able to compete in elections effectively because of their relative weakness in terms of ability to raise funds.

Federal legislation that's come into effect as of the 1st of January 2004 has addressed that issue and, in fact, has provided a minimum of public funding based on a formula agreed to by the political parties represented in the House of Commons and then legislated, of course, at the federal level, which I think is an important step forward in terms of levelling that playing field and encouraging citizens and voters to take elections more seriously and providing a more competitive arena for the election of Members of Parliament. I think similar sorts of steps need to be taken when we are changing the election statutes in this province to achieve very similar objectives.

4:10

I am not sure if I see any reference to making such changes in Bill 22. I haven't come across any such changes, changes that will commit this House and this province to at least partial public funding for registered political parties based on some reasonable formula that will help them take part in provincial elections. If we did that, I think we would increase voter interest in voting. We would certainly open up the system, make it more democratic for parties to be able to compete.

The other step that I think would help increase voter interest and

voter participation and voter turnout in elections would be some sort of a move towards proportional representation, Mr. Speaker. Alberta New Democrats have as a matter of policy supported proportional representation. Since we are in the business of debating and amending existing election statutes to improve the system, I think that to take this opportunity to take a close look at introducing proportional representation as a way of increasing and enhancing voter interest and voter participation and voter turnout would be another important issue that I hope we'll have the opportunity to debate.

The one feature of Bill 22 that I think will not encourage candidates to come forward to take part in elections is the increase in the election deposit, you know, from \$200 to \$500. I think that's something that I . . . My time is over?

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, your time has run out.

Dr. Pannu: So I would like to adjourn debate at this point.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 23 Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I stand today to move second reading of Bill 23, the Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004.

The main amendment in Bill 23 will align the legislation with government's recent decision to eliminate the 1 and a half cent per litre fuel tax on eligible international passenger and cargo flights including those to the United States. The purpose of this change is to enhance Alberta's aviation industry's ability to attract international service through a competitive tax environment.

When you look at surrounding areas, even Seattle and Vancouver still have better tax environments for international flights. To be competitive with those jurisdictions, we felt it was important that we ensure that we strive to see that we have transportation hubs, more direct connecting flights internationally. That will help substantially with industry and shipping and containers if they have more direct flights throughout the world and also will facilitate individuals both on personal and/or business travel if we can get more direct flights into our international airports in Calgary and Edmonton.

Furthermore, to accomplish this, the amendments provide for rebates of tax in situations where aviation fuel purchased in Alberta is transported to another jurisdiction and the applicable tax is paid in that jurisdiction.

Other amendments also provide the Minister of Revenue with the discretion to refuse, cancel, or suspend a registration if an individual or anyone related to that individual has contravened tax laws in any jurisdiction. This is to help facilitate and ensure good compliance with all of our tax laws, including the fuel tax collection.

There are a number of administrative concerns addressed in this bill. One is strengthening controls by requiring fuel exporters to register with tax and revenue administration, thereby permitting tracking of fuel movement. The second is to provide an expedient method of notifying persons by allowing demands for information to be served by fax. Third, provide legislation to support the tax and revenue administration policy to apply amounts payable under the act, any amount owing to that person, to the Crown so that we can offset them if there are amounts owing under other legislation. Fourth, extend liability when corporations have made assignment under the insolvency act, the federal act, to the Companies' Creditors

Arrangement Act. Fifth, provide for the waiver of interest in penalties in situations where the circumstances warrant relief. This is similar to provisions that we already have in the Alberta Corporate Tax Act and the Tobacco Tax Act. Sixth, safeguard taxes in situations where collectors are at risk of becoming insolvent by requiring trust accounts to be established. Finally, it provides for extending liability for tax collected to corporate representatives where they have drained the tax funds from business.

Mr. Speaker, those are the main elements of Bill 23, and I'd urge all members to support it. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. This bill and the timing of it has presented a conundrum to me. What we had was that the announcement of the elimination of this 1 and a half cent per litre aviation fuel tax was made in Calgary, I believe, on February 13, 2004, to be effective on March 1, 2004, and here we are on the 16th of March with the first introduction of the bill before the Legislative Assembly which would actually change the act, which would allow all of this to happen.

Seeing as the government is completely in control of this legislative agenda – when we sit, what bills come forward and in what order, and drawing all of its many backbenchers into place here – I'm having a bit of trouble with having that kind of announcement and having the effect of the program put in place before it's even been brought before this august Assembly to debate and in fact pass it. Although I'm sure that with the enormous numbers that the government has, they had every expectation that they would pass it. [interjection] Once again we have the Minister of Environment chirp, chirp, chirping away back there. He loves to heckle but never gets up and gets on the record.

Dr. Taylor: I'm trying to help you.

Ms Blakeman: Perhaps he could get up and get on the record if he wants to help me. Then he can go on the speaking list. I'm sure the Speaker will keep one for him.

The point is: what is the situation that we're at in this province, Mr. Speaker, when we have these announcements being made? Once again, the government is in total control of when they make the announcement, where they make the announcement, when they make the program come into place, when they put it on the legislative agenda, how they run it through, how their backbenchers are all going to vote for it. So what does that say about this government's attitude towards this Assembly when it so blatantly disregards the legislative process and six weeks ago makes the announcement not even in Edmonton, the seat of the Legislative Assembly, but in Calgary? I just wanted to raise that before I got into the other points that I think are significant about this bill. [interjections]

Dr. Massey: The Minister of Environment agrees with you.

Ms Blakeman: And I'm pleased to have the support of the Minister of Environment. Even if he is heckling me, I'm still pleased to have it.

Dr. Massey: Maybe he'll raise it in caucus.

Ms Blakeman: Perhaps he'll raise it in caucus with his colleagues and maybe get a bit more support about this because I think this timing is very suspect and frankly quite naughty on behalf of the government. Seeing as they've got all this power and control, you'd think they would use it for good and not for evil, Mr. Speaker.

4:20

Dr. Massey: The evil empire.

Ms Blakeman: That's right. The evil empire. Okay.

You know what? I don't really have any significant problems with this bill, except for one section, because it seems to be a reasonable business decision to make to align us with other areas so that our carriers are not at an unfair disadvantage in competition, particularly for cargo, I understand, but also for passenger flights. So a fairly simple adjustment. It looks like it's costing the government \$3 million a year. What I'd be interested in hearing is what they expect will be the ancillary dollars. What do they expect will be the amount of payback that is gained by the province from this forgoing of \$3 million worth of revenue.

The minister and I have had too many conversations in this Assembly now about forgone revenue and measurement of forgone revenue, and here's another one. It must be another spring session. What is the measurement that the sponsoring minister has in place here for this forgone revenue? Essentially, he's saying: I'm not going to get this \$3 million. Okay. What benefits do you expect to get, then, when you forgo that \$3 million? It's very similar to saying: I'm going to pay out \$3 million, and I expect to have a program that gives me thus and so, and it will benefit X number of people, or it will put money into so many people's pockets, or whatever. So what is the expectation from this forgone revenue?

I note at the same time that there was some musing out loud about reducing the domestic fuel tax on aviation fuel, which is worth another \$9 million a year. One, I would ask that the government with all of its power and control please manage to get that before the Legislative Assembly prior to making the announcement and having the program go into place. Since you do have the power of good and evil here, use it for good. Secondly, under what circumstances would the minister be doing this? Thirdly, what does he expect to get from that forgone revenue? What is the flow through or the flow out or the trickle-down that he's expecting to see? He must have crunched the numbers. Please share them with the Assembly.

The other thing that I noticed about this is that it is intended to attract more air traffic to Alberta but also to assist our local carriers in competing, so overall creating beneficial economic activity. If that's the case, the Official Opposition is standing ready to support the initiative.

An Hon. Member: How much money are they going to save?

Ms Blakeman: I asked that one already.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I know that the Calgary airport was very vigorous in lobbying for this, and I can understand. That's the base of this government's power, and that's where most of them live, and they all like it very much. But, you know, there are two major cities in this province, and I'd like to know what the government is going to do to promote the Edmonton International Airport. What concrete plans does the government have to promote Edmonton and increase air traffic in and out of the Edmonton International Airport?

It's not that I begrudge anything happening for the Calgary International Airport. I wish them well. But I'd like to press this government on being a bit more fair and understanding.

Dr. Massey: More balanced.

Ms Blakeman: More balanced. Thank you.

What plans do they have for working with the enhancement and

increasing air traffic and cargo traffic in and out of the Edmonton International Airport?

Now, the section that the minister was talking about where the minister can withhold making a payment which would otherwise be made under the act to a person who owes a debt to the Crown: I'm going to ask him to expand on this. Exactly what other programs is he thinking of here. I, of course, am wondering about maintenance enforcement, and I'm wondering if he's intending on capturing that kind of program in what he's saying here. He's probably not, but let me try. I just want to find out how he's doing this.

How does that bookkeeping process work? I mean, if he has money that he would be remitting, a rebate or a refund that he could be remitting to someone, if he has money that he's withholding because there is a debt owed to the Crown, under what programs is this debt owed? Are we only talking fuel tax? Are we only talking about a program that comes under the Minister of Revenue's department? Are we anticipating tax payments? Are we anticipating maintenance enforcement payments? Hunting licences? What? Under what circumstances? Also, how exactly does the bookkeeping work on this? Where do we see it turn up in the government books? If he could just give me some clear answers about that.

Finally, the primary concern that I have about this bill. Section 11, I think, is even worse than the usual: let's have a shell bill and give everything to the minister here. Oh, I love this. It's always done in so few words, with such clean economy. We hand everything over to the minister to do whatever he needs to do behind closed doors. Once again, that power of good and evil. Oh, here we have it. Well, this always concerns me. It's placing too much power in the hands of a minister, and this clause is letting a minister "at any time waive or cancel the imposition of or liability for any penalty or interest payable under this Act." Whoa, that's covering a whole lot of possibilities there. So it's allowing the minister absolute discretion over the payment of penalties.

It's also insulating the minister's decisions from review or appeal. There always needs to be an appeal process or at least some reasonable appeal process, but that is not being considered here. Why is the control over the penalty and interest payments being concentrated in just one person, in the minister. Now, the minister here anticipates that there's support staff and things like that, thinking of it as an entity. [interjection] Well, the Member for Calgary-Shaw is suggesting that somehow all ministers would be good guys.

Certainly, I know that that's where the government starts out thinking, but we have examples in other provinces, probably in our own history – in fact, I know in our own history – where people have not always been good guys. You've invested a lot of power in someone that you're hoping is a good guy here.

An Hon. Member: Or a good gal.

Ms Blakeman: Or a good woman. Exactly. Now, perhaps that would solve all the problems. Anyway. I'm focusing here, Mr. Speaker.

What I'm looking for are the checks and balances, and that's what I'm not seeing here. It's concentrating the decision-making power in the hands of the minister. There is no avenue of appeal. So where are the check and balance? If something goes wrong, where's the responsibility of the government here? They abdicated it, and I think that's problematic. I know that this government sees itself as superior in administration, but they make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes, and you've got to have a fail-safe, and that's not being built in here.

When we're looking at a waiver or a cancellation of penalties or interests, is there any public body that the minister is forced to

consult with or air this in any public way? No, it's not being anticipated in the changes that are brought forward under section 11. No other party is able to review or appeal these ministerial decisions. Very problematic. It places the minister in a very uncomfortable position and doesn't give him or her a lot of protection, and I think that's unwise.

4:30

The question I would like an answer to is: will the decisions be made through orders in council? How, specifically, will they be documented, and how will they be published? How are we going to find out when these decisions have been made? Or are we once again in FOIP purgatory, where we don't know how a decision was made, we don't know who made it, we don't know under what auspices, and there's no paperwork? How is anyone, whether it's an Official Opposition member or a member of the public, to find out where this happened? So I'm making a specific request. I'm sure there are staff somewhere reviewing the *Hansard* that are going to pull this out and help the minister answer the question I'm putting to him. So where will this decision be documented and published? I need to know that.

You know, overall when I look at this, it's not a bad idea. I'm certainly willing to support it for all of the good things that it does. I really don't like that section 11 and everything that is entailed there. I really don't like the fact that there's no appeal and that it, once again, can be secret, behind closed doors, that nobody can find it. I really don't like that.

I have problems with this government flaunting its power and being so arrogant about what we are doing in this Assembly. I know that they've managed to move most of the decision-making outside of this Assembly, but I don't think that's right, and I don't think they should flaunt it so blatantly by, you know, making announcements six weeks ago and putting a program into effect two weeks ago and we haven't even debated the darn bill here.

So with those comments, I appreciate the opportunity to speak freely in this Assembly, and I will let others speak to the bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Seeing no further speakers, the hon. Minister of Revenue to close debate?

Mr. Melchin: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 23 read a second time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

**Bill 16
Residential Tenancies Act**

Mr. Graydon: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise and move third reading of Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act, this afternoon.

History has shown that relations between landlords and tenants can become strained at times. This bill will hopefully reduce the number of issues that arise, and it will certainly simplify the process for resolving a lot of those issues. This bill treats landlords and tenants fairly and clearly outlines the responsibilities of both parties. It's for this reason that I support third reading and ask for the support of the members of the Legislature.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Bill 16, the Residential Tenancies Act, at third reading is, I think, in need of

further discussion, certainly from the correspondence by e-mail and also by fax that we on this side of the House have received. Last week it was noted by the Speaker in the Assembly that a large number of bills had passed in record time, but it was not the single-session record. This bill, I think, is a case of moving too far too fast in this Assembly. I will leave this at the discretion of the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, but I think this needs further discussion, and it almost warrants at this time a hoist amendment back to committee because some things may have been missed.

Now, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods and myself have received an e-mail from a property manager from Cambridge Investments in Medicine Hat, and this is an alert in regard to the revisions of the Residential Tenancies Act, Mr. Speaker. This property manager has concern in regard to the cost, the new cost, of returning the security deposit and goes on to say:

Apparently delivery will now mean that it is delivered by personal service or by registered or certified mail. It is my opinion that this is an unnecessary addition to the Tenancies Act. This change would cost the landlord approximately \$6.50 per item returned along with the additional time and inconvenience caused and if anything this might have a negative effect on the timely return of security deposits to tenants. These costs will, in turn, be passed on to the tenant bringing about a small overall increase in rents and in an already stressed market this would not be good.

This is another example of the nickel and dime increases in cost to both the landlord and the tenant that are eating away at the fabric of our economy and slowly making it harder and harder for individuals to survive. It is happening in every sector of the economy – from a postage stamp to bank fees, a dollar here and a dollar there, and it is an increase usually done by a government or government related department/business from which there is no shelter. This forces us to cut back somewhere else in order to cover all the “fixed” costs that living in this day and age entails.

I would [encourage] you to reconsider this addition to the Residential Tenancies Act.

Now, I don't know how many rental units Cambridge Investments Ltd. would have in Medicine Hat or anywhere else in the province, but certainly at this time I think this Assembly should take notice of that. I don't recall – and I stand to be corrected, Mr. Speaker – any discussion of this matter in committee or at second reading, and I would like to know if this matter was brought up in the consultation process that occurred.

Also, in regard to the Residential Tenancies Act, Mr. Speaker, we have been contacted on this side of the House again by an individual from the Medicine Hat landlord association, and this group represents about 2,500 rental units in Medicine Hat. Now, I think we need to take this group's view before we go any further with this bill. This group has reviewed the proposed Bill 16, and they state this.

I am compelled to write and ask you to make some changes in the Committee of the Whole, before some big mistakes are made. While stake holders were consulted before the draft, none have been consulted or asked to review Bill 16 as presented in the Legislature. You need to ensure that this legislation is thoroughly reviewed before it becomes “bad” law. Here are a couple of serious problems that we have found after only a brief review. They will be very embarrassing for the government and damaging to the industry if Bill 16 is passed in the current form.

1. Section 29 of the new RTA (It was Section 26 in the current RTA) titled Termination for Substantial breach by tenant Subsection (4) A notice to terminate under this section is ineffective if before the termination date given in the notice, the tenant

- (a) pays all the rent as of the due date of the payment, if the alleged breach is a failure to pay rent, or
- (b) serves the landlord with a notice in writing objecting to the termination that sets out the tenant's reason for objecting.

Note: the current RTA finishes (4)b with “, if the alleged grounds is for other than failure to pay rent.”

4:40

This group goes on to say, Mr. Speaker:

The proposed Bill 16, the new RTA removes this very important clause. This is a fundamental and dangerous change. It has always been clearly stated that a tenant may not object to an eviction for non-payment of rent. Removing this clause in the new RTA, seems to indicate that a tenant may now file a notice of objection to a notice of termination for non-payment of rent. This represents a huge change in the philosophy of landlord tenant relationships. A landlord has always clearly had the right to receive the rent agreed to on the due date. This change seriously erodes that concept and this clause must be replaced in this section to confirm this principle.

2. Section 46 of the new RTA Bill 16 . . . titled Return of security deposit.

That's the end of the quote. This group also has concerns about the changes and the added cost to returning the security deposit.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, I was of the impression that an extensive consultation process had gone on, but obviously that process missed out in the southeast corner of the province or somehow was overlooked. In light of this correspondence from this group – and it's a large group – I think that an explanation is due not only to hon. members of this Assembly but also to the people who have brought forward these concerns. If there is a reason why section 29 has been drafted in this manner, certainly I would appreciate an explanation from the hon. member in regard to this notice of objection which was sent to this member.

Now, until I get answers to these questions or an explanation as to why we're going ahead in this fashion, I at this time cannot support this bill. I would urge the hon. member that if there has been something overlooked, let's use the parliamentary technique of a hoist and place this bill back in Committee of the Whole and see if we can repair this legislation and make it suitable for everyone.

In conclusion, this group has reviewed these sections of the bill that I talked about and are concerned about what other improvements could be made. Now, there's no need speeding this through the Assembly, and I would urge caution to all members in regard to these matters that I have presented to the House. Let's contact these individuals and see what improvements can be made and what we can do to alleviate their concerns.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Sometimes I assume things, and I shouldn't. I assumed something around something I read in this bill, and I suspect now that I shouldn't have. So here we are in third reading, in which I'm to be talking about the anticipated effect of the bill once it's passed, and I'm still raising some questions. I'm coming closer to agreeing with my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar that perhaps we should be recommitting this bill back to Committee of the Whole to deal with some of the issues that have been raised. But I would like an answer from the sponsoring member, and he is able to do that as he closes off debate in third reading, or barring that, perhaps he could send me a response in writing, which I would appreciate.

One of the new things that this bill is doing that was in fact offered up by the sponsoring Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti when he introduced the bill is this whole alternative dispute resolution mechanism that is considered under section 70, Ministerial Regulations. Once again, all of these regulations being made by ministers behind closed doors, but I won't go into that debate. You can just

quietly repeat the one I did earlier today in your head but substitute Bill 16 instead of Bill 22.

What I'm more concerned about here is the assumption that I made. This is specific to section (k), and then there are a number of subclauses inside that, 10 of them actually, and it's "respecting the establishment of an alternative dispute resolution mechanism for the purpose of resolving disputes in respect of matters under this Act including, without limitation . . ." and on we go into the regulations.

Now, we have a system that's long been in place around landlord and tenant concerns, and if they are not resolvable given the various processes that are already available, people end up in small claims court, now called civil something. I'm sorry; I'm just not getting the words right. But often we have mediators involved in this process now, who are paid very badly, I might add. I think what happens is that first of all they have to prove themselves by working for free for 10 cases or something, and then they get paid \$50 for a two-hour mediation, and that has problems in itself. I'll come back to that, the two-hour mediation.

What I'm concerned about here is that, in fact, as I reread this section, it's not really talking about mediation or even a restorative justice model. It seems to be talking more about arbitration, and that's what I'm trying to check. If what's being anticipated here – and why would we move from a system where we've been able to bring in and use community mediators in a civil sense in what we used to call small claims court when there are landlord and tenant disputes, especially over money obviously? That system is working not too badly except the mediators are paid so badly. Why are we now anticipating putting in place an entirely different dispute resolution mechanism that seems much more focused on arbitration, not mediation? This could be a whole bunch of other money that's set up and, in fact, a whole quasi-judicial process being set up.

Now the Minister of Justice and Attorney General is looking unconcerned as I speak these words. I'm not really getting a reaction from the sponsor of the bill, but I'm wondering: why is this here? Perhaps it wasn't going to be used until many years in the future if the current mediation system and small claims court didn't work, I suppose. But I would like to know why it's here. When we look at a whole new system that could be quasi-judicial, that seems to be setting up essentially an arbitration process right down to the fees people are paid.

We start talking about how the members are going to be appointed to a dispute resolution body, the kinds of disputes that it can deal with, the proceedings before it, what matters it would consider when dealing with a dispute or a class of disputes, authorizing the dispute body to make rules governing its proceedings, respecting the kinds of orders that this dispute resolution body is authorized to make to resolve a dispute, and that includes making an order that a court would be authorized to make in the same circumstances.

This is what's starting to make me think quasi-judicial, Mr. Speaker: "Respecting the effect of an order of a dispute resolution body and how it may be enforced," again "including . . . regulations authorizing an order to be filed in a court." Hmm, sounding even more like a quasi-judicial process here.

So we're starting to sound more like the Labour Relations Board or possibly the Human Rights Commission, which are not inconsequential bodies and not an inconsequential budget to support them. Now, they're very effective in their own way and not one that I'm recommending getting rid of in any way, but that's not what was contemplated here.

We're down to things like "providing for the appeal of a decision of a dispute resolution body to the Court of Queen's Bench and governing the manner in which the appeal is to be taken."

4:50

Finally, governing the fees. Now, if you could manage to get the fees up to the Queen's Bench level, that would make me a bit happier. Let me talk about that a little bit here. You know, we've been very keen and this minister in particular has been very forward thinking in bringing in alternative methods of dealing with people's disputes and trying to get it out of the court system so it isn't so adversarial, especially with models like restorative justice, where we really are trying to say: everybody take responsibility for what you're doing, and work this out with trained people helping you.

My problem is that we're not adequately compensating the trained people that we're now putting in place around this. I know that we were looking for sort of cheaper ways of having things move through the court system or, alternatively, not move through the court system, but we really, really, really are underpaying these mediators. I think you have a whole body of experienced people out there that won't even bring themselves forward and offer themselves into, like, the civil mediation process because the pay is so bad that they just don't want to get themselves involved in lowering that standard to that level.

I think that has to be addressed on behalf of all of these different systems that we're now putting in place: restorative justice and mediation and, I suppose, even arbitration. We want to make sure that people are adequately paid. There's no point in setting up an alternative system from which eventually people withdraw because they're just paid so badly to do it. That doesn't get the government anywhere.

What kind of money are we saving here? Substantial money. When we talk about having a court and a judge and the lights on and CAPS officers in the hallways and all the rest of that, that's a significant amount of money. So it just seems really short-sighted – and I'm being polite there – in offering to pay, for example, the mediators in the civil system \$50 for a two-hour mediation. That in itself is saying: get the mediation settled in two hours. The mediation may not settle itself naturally in two hours, so once again you're forcing the process there that you don't need to be forcing. The mediators will happily invest more time in it to get to the resolution, but, for heaven's sake, don't put that kind of short time limit on it and really cheesy pay.

So I'm wondering why this whole process has been tacked onto the end, and I do want to hear from the sponsoring member about it because it's really causing me some concerns that we've now set up essentially a duplicate process that is a lot more expensive than what we have in place here even given an increase in the mediator fees that I'm advocating. Why are we doing this, and what's being anticipated here, and who would be expected to pay for it?

If this gets downloaded onto the municipalities again, I'm going to be right irate about it because right now the municipalities, for the most part, pay for the landlord and tenant advisory boards, that people make such use of. If this gets downloaded on them and they have to pick up the full freight on it, that's really unfair and not anticipated, by what I've heard in the discussion so far around this bill.

You know, there are lots of great possibilities in this bill – it's something that I think we all really wanted to see – and lots of great possibilities for making people's lives better. Maybe we have to see amending acts brought back again, but I would prefer not to. So maybe we do have to agree with Edmonton-Gold Bar and recommit the whole bill back to Committee of the Whole later and resolve some of these issues that have been raised.

I mean, these bills are progressing through the House at an astonishing rate, but we don't get participation from the government members, so we have no idea how the government members feel

about this. In fact, this concern came from southern Alberta, and it wasn't brought forward by one of the MLAs from there. So things are proceeding very quickly here, hardly giving people time to react. Maybe we do need to consider that recommit, but I'm interested in what the sponsoring member can answer.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions?

There being none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make brief comments on Bill 16 in its third and final reading. This bill is a sort of mixed bag. It has some changes that it makes, welcome changes which will certainly help both tenants and landlords in negotiating their relationships.

It provides certain protections, and those proposed changes are of course welcome, and I'll give a few examples here. It certainly gives greater clarity to the awards a court can provide when there's been a breach of the contract between a landlord and tenant. It also will require a longer period of advance notice for tenants when the rental property is being changed into a condominium. That certainly is very helpful.

In section 5 it provides some sort of protection for tenants who wish to make a complaint against a landlord either for reasons of concern that they may have about safety and security or public health concerns. Given that rental housing has been fairly scarce – the vacancy rates have been rather low in many urban areas in particular, big and small – this provision will reduce the concerns that Albertans have and the fearful sort of stance that they take when they have to make a decision about whether or not to lodge a complaint with respect to a landlord who's running a rental accommodation in ways which raise either concerns about the public health side of the issue or concerns with respect to the tenant's personal security and safety.

Those are some good features of the act, but there also are some problem areas in the legislation which are difficult to support. Section 19, for example, allows the landlord to provide only two options of times when an outgoing inspection for damages can be completed. If the tenant is not able to make either of these appointments, then the report will be completed by the landlord alone. This puts the tenant's security deposit at risk because they will not be present to challenge damage claims made by the landlord based on assessment in the absence of one of the two parties to the contract. So that remains a problem with the bill.

Again, under section 31 the landlord is given the power to dispose of property or goods that the landlord believes are abandoned and are worth less than a certain prescribed amount. However, the prescribed amount is not stated in the bill itself. It's left up to the regulations, and I feel very uncomfortable leaving these definitions, such as the prescribed amount, to regulations yet to be drawn up and to have no opportunity to examine what this prescribed amount is.

Similarly and related to this, a fair number of tenants, you know, who live in rental accommodations move fairly frequently, have to move away sometimes from where they live for reasons of work, may be away for a week, 10 days, and so on and so forth, and may not have many valuable possessions. Nevertheless, what they do have is very valuable to them because that's all they can afford. To put these goods, abandoned possessions, which are of great value to low-income tenants, in jeopardy by giving this power to the landlord to dispose of them, I think, is a step backwards. It doesn't give much comfort to tenants who already live on the edge in terms of their incomes and their work situations, and then they are put in a position where they worry about the security of their possessions which can be deemed abandoned for whatever reason.

5:00

What happens, for example, if a tenant gets hospitalized? If a single person gets hospitalized and is not able to communicate to the landlord about the reasons for her or his absence, I think this bill makes it easier for the landlord to label these possessions as abandoned and throw them in the trash or send them to an auction house or whatever. So that's not very good. People to whom it could happen are people who by definition are not likely to have the economic resources to replace the goods lost in this way or to fight for compensation through the courts.

So these are some of the relatively minor concerns that I have with the bill. The most important one is the one that the minister is seeking by way of this bill having to do with the authority to make regulations with respect to the alternative dispute resolution mechanism. As I said before in an earlier reading and debate on the bill, this bringing in of this alternative dispute resolution mechanism is an important step forward, yet how this is going to be implemented is simply beyond our ability to debate those arrangements because they're not outlined here. They'll be outlined by the minister in the privacy of his office or by the deputy minister who works for the minister, but it certainly will not be open for examination by this Assembly.

There's no explanation of how the alternative dispute resolution mechanism will be triggered, no indication of scope, no indication of timelines within the resolution process. There is no indication of the overall authority to run the system and no indication of who will oversee the process and by whom this oversight will be funded. Without some answers to these questions related to the most important element of what the bill is proposing to do, I think it's very difficult for the New Democratic opposition to simply write a blank cheque to the minister to go ahead and do what rightly should be done by this Assembly; that is, examine carefully the arrangements surrounding the alternative dispute resolution mechanism that will be put in place.

I regret to say, Mr. Speaker, that because of the problems that I've outlined and especially the concerns I've expressed about there being no details, no information about the alternative dispute resolution mechanism implementation, we will not be able to support the bill. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29?

Anybody else wish to speak on the bill? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti to close debate?

Mr. Graydon: No. Thanks.

[Motion carried; Bill 16 read a third time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 20 Minors' Property Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. I'm actually pleased to be able to rise in Committee of Whole and say that I have heard nothing

further from the stakeholder groups that I've consulted with raising any concerns with the details of what's being contemplated with the Minors' Property Act.

Of course, this bill is not new, but there are some updates to it and a few new sections. I did go through them in a bit more detail yesterday when I spoke in principle in support of the bill in second reading. The bill needs to be considered with its companion bill, the Public Trustee Act, which is also being updated and a number of sections changed for clarification. But at this point I've heard no additional concerns raised, and I don't have any additional concerns from my reading of the bill, so I'm happy to support the bill in Committee of the Whole.

[The clauses of Bill 20 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report Bill 20.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 20.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we'll reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:08 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 16, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/16

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

For our first item this evening I wonder if we might have consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to introduce tonight in the members' gallery a former member of this Assembly that you all know. She used to be the Member for Calgary-Currie, and she is now the special adviser for public affairs for the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. She spent many a night in here with us. I think many of you recognize her: Jocelyn Burgener. As well, we have Tom Palak. He is the policy analyst for the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. Would you both please rise. Last but not least is Cassandra Litke, who grew up in Calgary-Shaw, and actually her younger brother ran around with my older son. They were friends. Her name is Cassandra Litke, and she's the senior policy analyst for the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. Give them the warm and wonderful welcome of the night crew. I mean the House.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce to you and through you, actually, five people that are sitting in the members' gallery. They're having a little tour this evening. They are a group of folks that get together. They're the class of '75 from Ross Sheppard high school. I went to Jasper Place composite high school and used to go to their football games and give them a hard time.

Mr. Snelgrove: You were from the class of '65.

Mr. Hutton: Yeah. Much, much older. But I married a girl from Ross Shep.

I would just like to introduce this crew that are sitting up in the members' gallery. We've got Darcey-Lynn Marc. We have Chris Bradbury, Leslie Ellis, and David McKay. We also have Diane Thomas, who is their guide and coconspirator this evening. I'd ask you all to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to introduce to you and through you Mr. Ken Chapman, seated in the public gallery. Besides other things he is involved with the workshops happening right now on family violence leading up to the round-table on family violence in Calgary on May 7. If you would please stand and receive the warm welcome of this House.

The Chair: Okay. For the benefit of those who have been introduced and those who have not been introduced in the gallery, I want to explain that this is a less formal part, and hopefully we can keep

the exuberance down to a level such that we can all hear the one and only person that's allowed to speak out loud at a time in the House. If you have a guide for the floor plan of where the members sit, only the member that is standing and speaking is likely to be in their position. The others can move around, hopefully quietly, in this informal session of the Legislature, the committee session.

head: **Interim Supply Estimates 2004-05
Offices of the Legislative Assembly,
Government, and Lottery Fund**

The Chair: The first question really would be as to the method of procedure. Do you want to go department by department, or do you want to talk in generalities about all of them. What is your agreed wish?

Mr. Hancock: I will give a brief introduction to it, and then members of the House can go wherever they wish with respect to questions or discussion.

The Chair: Okay. Let us proceed. Are you the first minister up? The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just briefly the overview. For the benefit of members the Minister of Finance introduced the interim supply this afternoon. It really is just in the nature of making sure that government continues to operate while we debate thoroughly in Committee of Supply and appropriations the budget, which is scheduled to come down on March 24. I think the hon. minister this afternoon put it into a context that for the most part, when you're looking at supply, you're really looking at a portion of the year's expenditures to be voted.

We can expect, of course, under our Standing Orders that 20 days will be spent in Committee of Supply, so if the budget comes down on March 24, presumably one could foresee that we might have completed the budget process by mid-May. Obviously, employees of the government wish to be paid for the month of April and for the month of May, so one would assume that we should make provision for that. As well, there are other grants that go out to organizations which go out at the beginning of the year and should not be held up waiting for the vote on full supply.

The interim supply numbers for each department are not an exact science but rather an estimation of the first quarter or so of expenditure plus whatever grants are normally paid out in that first quarter. So it's not exactly a quarter of the budget or half of the budget but really a number which is determined to cover the first few months of expenditure for each department plus the expenditures that might be expected to be made on grant programs or to other organizations or in some other manner paid out in the first six months of the year.

Speaking specifically to the Justice estimates, there's nothing in the Justice estimates of \$70,500,000 that stands out in particular. It meets exactly the formulas that I was just mentioning.

So that's just a brief overview of the rationale for the numbers as is, and we're looking forward to the real discussion on a department by department basis as we go into Committee of Supply following the budget on March 24.

The Chair: I wonder if the committee would agree to a brief reversion to Introduction of Guests. The chair apologizes; I missed one hon. member.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you for consideration there. I'm rising on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to introduce a group of women who are here as part of a group called Women Supporting Women. I would ask them to rise as I read their names: Fay Stalker, Gladys Honey, Bea Berke, Doris Pettit, Rae Ehrman, June Dixon, Coral Bellerose, and Mert Shapka. They are here to see what happens in the Legislature in the evening as I'm sure we're all curious about. I'd ask everyone to give them a warm welcome. Thank you for coming out.

head: **8:10 Interim Supply Estimates 2004-05**
Offices of the Legislative Assembly,
Government, and Lottery Fund
(*continued*)

The Chair: Okay. Now the hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Here we are again with interim supply estimates for 2004-2005. I'll start, as I think I've started almost every year that this comes before the House, with the question: why?

Dr. Taylor: Because my staff wants to get paid, Don, to pay their mortgages and buy groceries.

Dr. Massey: Well, then, why don't you plan better?

The Chair: Hon. minister, you will have your chance as soon as the hon. leader steps down. I'll put your name on the list, but in the meantime, hon. leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The question that's asked is, you know: why does this happen? Those of us who come from municipal politics will remember the pressure that was put on us by government to have our budgets in place and passed before we started spending the money. It seems to me that's still a requirement that was a sound requirement fiscally. It was the responsible position to take. If it's good for the goose, it should be good for the gander.

The government has complete control over the sitting of this Legislature. We could sit earlier in the year if timing is the problem. There's no reason why we should be going through this exercise and then really talking about a third of the money in the coming month, after it's already been spent. So it's again a matter of process and a questioning of the government as to why they haven't seen cause to change the process so that they, too, are not spending money before they have the approval of the Legislature.

Mr. Chairman, it's a lot of money. If you look at the departments, the Department of Learning is asking to spend close to a billion dollars before this Legislature takes a look at even one budget line. You have to ask how responsible it is of this House to engage in that kind of a procedure. It just does not make sense.

A number of the departments, Mr. Chairman, obviously are doing some work to try to reduce their reliance on interim supply. If you look at the Sustainable Resource Development budget in 2002-2003, the interim supply request was \$101.915 million, and this year it's down to \$52.3 million. It seems to me that it's a department that is

moving in the right direction. Fifty-two million is still a lot of money to ask for when the Legislature doesn't know how you're going to spend it, but I think it shows some effort to address the problem and to decrease the reliance on interim supply.

On the other hand, there are departments, as I said, where it just seems to be more and more the way they operate. Learning moving from \$615.5 million in fiscal year 2002-2003 to this year, when the department is asking for almost a billion dollars, seems to be, as I say, a move in the wrong direction. A number of other departments have similar large increases. If you look at Children's Services, from \$121.9 million to \$184 million this year, a \$60 million increase in the request for interim supply. Some of the other departments are much more modest but, again, moving in what I think is the wrong direction, Mr. Chairman. Aboriginal Affairs from \$11.005 million in 2002-2003 to \$13.8 million this year. Better but still growing.

So those are some initial comments I have about the budget. There are a number of departments represented. The document raises a number of questions about the kinds of controls that the government has on spending, and I'd be interested in hearing some of the ministers' defences for having this item in front of us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I feel compelled to rise and speak to these issues. As you're aware, I might not be the most expert here on parliamentary procedure, because you often correct me, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hancock: That's the chairman.

Dr. Taylor: Oh, chairman. The House leader has already pointed out that I've made a mistake here. You're not the Speaker tonight; you're Mr. Chairman. And occasionally you point out my faux pas.

But I do feel compelled to speak because, you know, we have a budget coming down next Wednesday, and after that budget the way the process works – and that member knows – we have 24 days of budget discussion. I think that is the correct number: 24 days of budget discussion, Mr. Chairman. As you know, we sit four days a week, so you can figure out how many weeks that is, and the budget will not be passed and approved by this House until those 24 days of budget discussion are done.

So I want to ask this member: over that time period does he want the schools to close? Does he want teachers not to be paid? Does he want his colleagues at the university not to be paid? Because without these supplementary estimates those teachers will not be paid. Without this supplementary estimate his colleagues at the university will not be paid. Without the supplementary estimate my staff, approximately 900 people, will not be paid. Mr. Chairman, all of those people at the university, the teachers, my staff all have families. They've got mortgages to pay. On top of that, I would just point out: I won't get paid, you see. The member won't get paid.

Now, the member can afford not to be paid because he's a double-dipper, Mr. Chairman. He's collecting a big academic pension as well.

Mr. Bonner: And you wish you were.

Dr. Taylor: I wish I was as well. But collecting an academic pension as well as sitting here and making money, Mr. Chairman.

So the issue is that we have to do this. All of these items in here, including my budget of \$30 million, will be discussed after the budget of next Wednesday. In fact, the Liberals have put me on

notice that my budget will be discussed next Thursday afternoon. They've called the Department of Environment to sit here in this House and have them question me about my budget next Thursday for hours and hours, Mr. Chairman.

Now, does that make sense that they're up in this hypocritical manner and saying . . . I agree with you. You're right, Mr. Chairman. It does not. I'm glad to see that you're shaking your head in agreement with me.

It makes no difference, Mr. Chairman, whether this is discussed tonight or it's discussed next Thursday. I think, Mr. Chairman, it's high time that these people realized that these people – teachers, MLAs, university professors – need to be paid and quit trying to play politics with something as significant as this.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. Interim Leader of the Opposition.

8:20

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've never heard such garbage. That minister sits in a cabinet that could fully call this Legislature back into session January 15. Count the time from January 15 to the end of March 30, and how much time do we have for a budget? Plenty of time. This budget could be passed before a dollar of it is spent. And to turn around and try to indicate that people aren't going to be paid is just . . .

An Hon. Member: They won't be if we don't pass it, Don.

Dr. Massey: This one. But you've had how many years – 10 years – to change the process?

The Chair: Through the chair, hon. member.

Dr. Massey: I'm sorry.

They've had 10 years to change the process, and every year they come with exactly the same excuse: you've got to pass this or people aren't going to be paid. That is ludicrous, Mr. Chairman. We could have in place a process where we did look at the items and have the entire budget scrutinized. It could be scrutinized in a meaningful manner, knowing that not a dollar of it was going to be spent until it was passed. So for the minister to get on his high horse and to accuse us of politicking is deception of the first order, Mr. Chairman, and I don't accept it for a moment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to rise this evening and speak to interim supply in the Committee of Supply. I think one of the things we have to look at here is, first of all, that we have to start with comments by the Premier where he's in charge of a somewhat \$20 billion-plus budget every year. Now, if we were to compare that to any business that operates with a \$20 billion budget per year, then certainly I think we can make some very valuable comparisons.

One of those comparisons would be that nobody, absolutely no business, would vote this amount of money based on a single line requesting so many millions. And this is not a one-time occurrence. This is an occurrence that happens year in and year out in this Assembly. When we look at \$5.56 billion being voted on here in the next few days, that's enormous compared to our budget. This represents over 20 per cent of the budget that we are being asked to vote on.

We're being asked to make some sort of analysis based on one

line. There is no breakdown at all for where these dollars are to be spent. Certainly, Albertans deserve better, Mr. Chairman. We realize that, yes, we do need money to operate, but as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has pointed out, we have every opportunity to meet in this Assembly long before we get to this point, long before we get to a year-end, to request those monies, to study those monies, and, if we as an Assembly desire to, to pass the allocation of those monies.

I look at these expenses, and they are to cover three major areas: operating expenses, capital investment, and nonbudgetary disbursements. The total amount of interim supply, as I said earlier, is \$5.56 billion. Now, this \$5.56 billion is broken down in the following way. We have \$5.05 billion for operating expenses and equipment and inventory purchases. We have another \$133.5 million for capital investment. Of that \$5.56 billion, we have \$66.4 million for nonbudgetary disbursements, and we also have \$313.6 million in payments through the lottery fund.

Mr. Chairman, the \$5.05 billion to be spent on operating expenses can further be broken down in the following manner. We have \$19.2 million which will be spent by the Leg. Assembly, and the bulk of that, \$5.029 billion, will be spent on the various government ministries where they have indicated, with one line, what the comparison is going to be. This comparison is for the fiscal year 2002-2003, for the fiscal year 2003-2004, and for the fiscal year 2004-2005. So we do get to see, in the various departments, which departments have increased their requested amounts for interim supply, which have basically remained stable, and which of those have decreased.

There obviously are some flaws in this process, and I think one of the major flaws in this whole process is that there is a serious lack of disclosure within the supply votes. In other words, how can we question huge increases when we have no breakdown of where those huge increases are going?

This troubles me because we continually hear this government through its Executive Council members talking about openness and accountability. We hear the word thrown around here quite often, that it is a transparent operation. But this certainly isn't transparent. It is one lump sum, and we don't have transparency here, we don't have accountability, and we certainly don't have openness. We've heard these same arguments used quite often in question period in recent weeks regarding government programs for BSE and, certainly, how we're going to have a full accounting of those. Yet here we are asked to allocate over 20 per cent of this year's budget based on one line.

Again, it makes the taxpayers of this province wonder what is happening to their money. Here we have a situation where contrary to any measures of openness and accountability we see something collapse together that can only obscure clarity and can only hide transparency. Providing a global figure for each department under the interim supply vote as requested here this evening without a breakdown by program and subprogram I believe shows this government's utter contempt for the process of accountability.

In the interest of ensuring openness, accountability, and transparency and imposing rigorous fiscal discipline, it is necessary, Mr. Chairman, to ask all ministers during appropriation on interim supply to provide to this House a breakdown of the interim supply by individual program within each department and then relate that appropriation by individual program to the performance and outcome targets established in their own business plans.

I have further concerns on the size of the request that we are being asked to approve in interim supply. The \$5.56 billion requested here is more than some provinces have for a budget for the entire year, and to do it in this fashion certainly doesn't follow best practices for

business or for government as far as the transparent and open spending and accountability of taxpayer dollars.

I certainly have enjoyed the opportunity to put some of my concerns on the record tonight regarding interim supply, Mr. Chairman. In conclusion, I look forward to the comments of many members in this House because this is a huge amount of money. I know that every constituency in this province has constituents who are deeply concerned about spending and how we have increased the amount of our budget each year in this province, yet we don't after 10 years of going through this process seem to have improved upon it. It is still a very flawed system.

So I would hope not only that other members will speak regarding the interim supply, but I would also like them to question and provide answers to their constituents on how we as the Legislative Assembly of Alberta can spend over \$5 billion of taxpayer money and do it only on the basis of a one-line request.

8:30

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I will take my seat and certainly listen to the comments by other members of the Assembly. Hopefully, we can through our discussions here this evening not only get more answers in regard to \$5.56 billion but, as well, certainly improve this process, which is flawed.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. These debates on interim supply have a special place in my heart because the first point of order that was ever called on me was called on me as a rookie MLA by the Government House Leader during these debates. We were debating billions of dollars in expenditures, and there was nobody from the government side speaking a word to it, and I was frustrated and made some unparliamentary comment about how remarkable it was that we could pass billions of dollars in spending and nobody on the government side seemed to have any questions or points to make or any statements to make at all. So when I said something unparliamentary, a point of order was called, and I was reprimanded.

However, the point I was making then remains the same today. This is 5 and a half billion dollars.

Mr. Dunford: So you haven't learned a thing.

Dr. Taft: I'll just choose more parliamentary words.

Five and a half billion dollars is a staggering amount of money. I don't suppose we'll have any discussion at all about it from the government members, and that really disappoints me. I think that if their constituents realized it, they'd be a bit surprised as well.

I also concur with the comments of my colleagues that if we had a budgeting process that worked on a normal schedule, we wouldn't be in this situation. There's no reason in the world that the budget can't be introduced in January, debated fully, and be voted on and settled by the time we start spending money on April 1. The way we handle it now seems completely out of sync. We introduce the budget so late that we'll be debating the budget well into the next fiscal year and spending money by the billions before the budget is even approved. This should not happen. You know, in a proper budgeting process there's just no excuse for this to occur. I take this as a real sign, frankly, of weak management, and I see weak management spreading throughout this government.

As far as I'm aware, the most extreme example of budget cycles getting out of whack in this government occurs in the Department of Health and Wellness, where the department in turn passes on money,

as it will in this bill, to regional health authorities. The regional health authority fiscal year starts April 1, and I had it on excellent source and was able more or less to confirm it with the minister that the regional health authority business plans and budgets were not signed until the fiscal year was nine months old.

So we were nine months into the spending year for the regional health authorities and they still hadn't had the budgets for that year signed off. Now, that's terrible management. How do you hold your regional health authorities accountable? How do you manage your money when you're that far out of sync?

So I just find the entire budget process of this government to be undisciplined in the extreme. Of course, given that we only have a few words on each line of the budget, it's virtually impossible to know what value we're getting for the money at this point. We're expected to cross our fingers or hold our breath in hope that this money is going to be well spent. There's no plan that we see. It's just voting in the dark. That's pretty frustrating.

So I think it's time that we tried to take some action on this legislation, Mr. Chairman, and I have an amendment I would like to propose at this stage—I've got the appropriate number of copies here—approved by Parliamentary Counsel. Do you want me to read it now?

The Chair: Move it, and then we'll continue.

Dr. Taft: Yes, I'll read it and move it. Thank you. I'll just wait for the pages to distribute it. I'll wait for a minute.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to move that "the Executive Council estimates for 2004-2005 interim supply estimates be reduced by \$3 million so that the operating expense to be voted is \$3 million." As you can see, that's approved by Parliamentary Counsel.

The Chair: Many of the members now have it. This amendment, Edmonton-Riverview, will be known as amendment A1. You may proceed.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am through this motion proposing to reduce the budget allocated to Executive Council, and there's a specific reason for this. Under the office of Executive Council, which is basically the Premier's office and the cabinet, there is an allocation in this legislation for \$6 million, and we are wanting to reduce that by half. The objective here is in fact to propose a reduction in the size of the Public Affairs Bureau.

Now, many people don't realize that the Premier is not only the Premier, but in the case of this government he's also the minister responsible for the Public Affairs Bureau. His actual title is Premier of Alberta, minister responsible for the Public Affairs Bureau. The Public Affairs Bureau is a very substantial branch of the government. It's not well known, but it's basically the propaganda wing of this government. I've been able to obtain a staff list for the Public Affairs Bureau, which is really quite remarkable.

Mr. McClelland: Point of order.

The Chair: You have a citation, hon. member?

Point of Order
Parliamentary Language

Mr. McClelland: I think it's under Standing Order 23. It's the use of the term "propaganda." I don't think that the use of the term "propaganda" is parliamentary, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Standing Order 23 is close. There are a whole bunch of subsections that we usually quote from.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview on the purported point of order.

Dr. Taft: Well, if the term “propaganda” offends the member, I will substitute “spin.” Would that be okay? Would that offend the member if I called it the department of government that does the public relations spin doctoring?

8:40

The Chair: The chair would observe that the word “propaganda” in some contexts can be considered a pejorative term and in others a descriptive term, so it really becomes very subjective. I guess if we’re talking in terms of Dr. Goebbels of 60 years ago, then “propaganda” had a hateful turn to it, but many people refer to the publication of government or opposition platforms as propaganda, and it’s not deemed in that sense to be offensive. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has already afforded us another word that, hopefully, is less offending, should it be offending.

So, hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, I would invite you to continue.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your always wise comments. The thin skin of the backbenchers will have to thicken up here. Or is that offensive too?

Debate Continued

Dr. Taft: What’s remarkable about the Public Affairs Bureau is its size and its budget. When you go through the staff list for the Public Affairs Bureau, you learn that the Premier has working for him about 260 people, spin doctors of one kind or another. Actually, that’s not fair. There are 260 staff in the Public Affairs Bureau.

Now, that includes a number in the Queen’s Printer, so we can take them out, and it includes a number in the government’s telephone system, what I call the RITE system or whatever it’s called today. Take them out, and you’re left with about 230 public relations spin doctors working for the Premier. Two hundred and thirty. Now, that’s remarkable. That includes a large number of directors, public affairs officers, web site managers, graphic designers, secretaries, and support staff. It is, I’m sure, the largest public relations organization in Alberta, and its got a huge budget.

My ambition here is to reduce the size of this Premier’s Public Affairs Bureau to something equivalent to what I understand is the size of that for the President of the United States. A recent *New Yorker* magazine article wrote at length about public relations out of the White House and identified the President of the United States as having 55 public relations staff. Now, in Alberta, a much smaller jurisdiction, we have 230, and in fact, of course, that’s not the full story, because as many members of cabinet will know, their departments have communication staff of their own.

So the ambition of this little amendment here is to bring the size of the Public Affairs Bureau in closer line with what we might find in other governments and in the process save the taxpayer a bit of money and perhaps even improve the direct accountability between the citizens and this government.

Mr. Chairman, I can see some people flipping through, looking for responses to prepare, and I look forward to the debate on this. I mean, here we are trying to reduce the size of government, increase accountability, save taxpayers money. So why not do it? I look forward to the reasons.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I had a moment there when I was really exhilarated, and that was when the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview indicated that his ambition was to reduce the size of the Public Affairs Bureau. I thought his ambition was much larger than that and, indeed, even to be leader of the Liberal opposition, but actually perhaps the ambition of getting an amendment passed in Committee of Supply might be ambition enough. I’m not sure.

I listened intently to some of the earlier comments about Committee of Supply and interim supply and whether or not interim supply should be a necessary procedure – and, yes, I will be speaking to the amendment with respect to this, Mr. Chairman – whether interim supply was an appropriate tool in a parliamentary process, and of course I would indicate that interim supply is clearly provided for in the rules and is clearly a part of parliamentary tradition not only in this province but in this country and in parliamentary systems around the world. It’s clearly contemplated that there will be provisions for interim supply, and it’s clearly contemplated that budgets and appropriation acts will be brought down at appropriate times. It’s not just a question of when the Legislature opens; it’s how you determine appropriate times.

Mr. Chairman, I see you wondering and puzzling how this relates to the amendment itself. It relates to the amendment itself in this way. By making an amendment to cut interim supply in half for the Public Affairs Bureau, it doesn’t achieve any of the lofty ambitions that the hon. member opposite has put forward for it. It doesn’t in fact reduce the Public Affairs Bureau at all. It just means that you pay them for a month less or two months less in time.

The question about cutting down the size of government is one appropriately addressed when you’re actually dealing with Committee of Supply and the estimates. Passing this amendment, as lofty as the ambition is that the hon. member has put forward, doesn’t achieve the objectives he is trying to attain. So I would suggest that he save his ammunition for a week or two.

The Chair: The hon. Interim Leader of her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Speaking in support of the amendment, I guess I have another reason for supporting the amendment, and that’s because Executive Council has to bear the responsibility for continuing the completely unacceptable budgeting process that we’re involved in tonight. So I think that for that reason alone the budget should be cut as, if nothing else, a signal to them that the budget arrangements are not acceptable.

I think it’s also germane to the amendment that there is a huge increase in the Executive Council budget, because one of the first things that the Premier did was to move the Public Affairs Bureau into his purview under Executive Council. It’s part of what’s caused this huge increase in Executive Council over the years.

With respect to the Government House Leader’s comments about parliamentary tradition, I don’t understand how the because-they’re-doing-it-elsewhere argument means that we should do it here.

So I think it’s a good amendment and should be passed, Mr. Chairman.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment A1 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:49 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

For the motion:

Bonner	Massey	Taft
Mason		

9:00

Against the motion:

Abbott	Goudreau	McFarland
Ady	Hancock	Melchin
Amery	Hutton	Rathgeber
Broda	Jacobs	Renner
Calahasen	Johnson	Snelgrove
Cao	Jonson	Stelmach
Cenaiko	Knight	Stevens
Danyluk	Kryczka	Strang
DeLong	Magnus	Taylor
Doerksen	Maskell	VanderBurg
Dunford	McClelland	Yankowsky
Evans		

Totals:	For – 4	Against – 34
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[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is indeed an honour to stand and speak to the question of the interim supply. I want to indicate just for the record that I do believe that the Public Affairs Bureau is in effect the propaganda arm of this government.

An Hon. Member: Are you reading the same speech?

Mr. Mason: No. Actually, Mr. Chairman, it's not. It is not the same speech. It is just self-evident to any objective observer that this is so. It is no surprise, really, that any fair-minded person would come to this conclusion. I think it is absolutely important that we take account that this area . . .

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. McClelland: To be fair, Mr. Chairman, after having risen earlier and asked the chairman's indulgence that perhaps the term "propaganda" is not parliamentary, again I would cite our Standing Order 23(j) or (i) perhaps. The fact is that the term "propaganda" imputes motive, which is certainly not appropriate. Having raised the issue with the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, it's only in keeping to raise the issue with my honoured friend from Edmonton-Highlands.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Edmonton-Highlands on the purported point of order.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Well, Mr. Chairman, I think the purported point of order is invalid. In fact, it is quite silly in my view. Propaganda is simply the propagation of ideas and concepts by government, and all governments engage in it. It's just that most governments in Canada do not engage in it quite so much as this one.

But, you know, to suggest that it is an improper term or is in some way unparliamentary is to try and take a legitimate criticism of government, which this is – this is a legitimate criticism of this government, and it would be legitimate in any province or in the

federal government. All governments have been known to engage in propaganda from time to time and saying so ought not to be considered unparliamentary.

Pending your ruling, Mr. Chairman, I will indicate that I use the term advisedly and would continue to use it unless it were ruled out of order. I think it is a legitimate criticism by members of this Assembly against this government. It is, in fact, true.

The Chair: Okay.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thought that as I had a dictionary handy, I might bring to the House's attention what propaganda means, not what the hon. member thinks it means. It has, in fact, two meanings. The second is "a committee of Roman Catholic cardinals responsible for foreign missions." I'm sure that if that's what he meant in using the term, he clearly was misusing it and abusing it, and it wouldn't be in context.

But the other definition is "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature." Biased or misleading nature. And to suggest that there are public servants in the Public Affairs Bureau who work every day as hard as they do to make sure that Albertans get good information about what's happening in their province and what the government is doing for them – to suggest that that is propaganda and is biased and misleading surely must be unparliamentary.

The Chair: The chair is unable to locate anywhere in our references that propaganda as such is unparliamentary, because there are words in *Beauschesne* and elsewhere where a given word (a) is against the rules in this setting and the same word (b) is granted as being parliamentary.

The chair is also in charge of a dictionary not quite as large as the hon. Government House Leader's. Very often a good quality dictionary will have four or five or six popular definitions. But the first one in the *Oxford* dictionary to which I refer says, "Propaganda . . . association or organized scheme for propagation of a doctrine or practice; . . . doctrines, information, etc., thus propagated." Surely it's part of all political parties to enunciate that, hopefully not just the government.

So does it meet the test that is referenced by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder"? It doesn't say controversy, which we've had, but disorder. I don't think that this one under the context as used by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands would, in fact.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is probably cautioned to not use the language that he was drawn up to question on, and that would seem to the chair to be reasonable.

Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate your fair and unbiased ruling. It certainly would not meet the test of the hon. Government House Leader's definition, which would be to be unfair or biased.

Debate Continued

Mr. Mason: I just want to indicate that when I used the term "propaganda," I did not mean that the government was always misleading in its statements through the Public Affairs Bureau or was biased at all times, but I do believe that sometimes the releases that are issued through this particular branch of government are misleading in the sense that they would have Albertans believe that they have a good government, and in my view that is not the case.

So I think that it is an interesting apparatus that this government has set up and one that seems to grow with each passing year.

9:10

You know, I have noticed, while I'm on the subject, Mr. Chairman, in some of my travels around the province at some of the meetings involving hundreds of very hard-pressed Alberta beef farmers that there are government officials present in the panel. There are a number of people at these meetings. There's the National Farmers' Union. There is the Alberta Beef Producers, which is a state-sponsored union of beef farmers where membership is required and dues are mandatory, compelled by the state. Also present at these meetings are representatives of Alberta Agriculture, and I'm very surprised just how far they will go in terms of a political defence of the government and the government's record in this matter.

It brings me to another concern that I have, which is related to this one, and that is the politicization of our civil service by the Progressive Conservative government. The ideal, in my view, has always been a neutral and professional public service, one that is not political and does not venture to defend the political actions of the government but, rather, just to simply give statements of fact with respect to policy. So I want to place on the record my concern that officials of Alberta Agriculture have crossed the line, in my view, at these public meetings in terms of making what I would consider to be political comments in defence of the government's record in the matter of BSE.

Getting back to Public Affairs, recently one of the newspaper columnists reported on a document which they had obtained from the Public Affairs Bureau relative to statements to be made about the New Democratic Party caucus on the BSE issue, and, Mr. Chairman, I might say that that document was highly political. It advised politicians, the minister and so on, to make comments sharply critical of the New Democrats on this issue and to make what were essentially political statements. So it's clear to me that the Public Affairs Bureau operates in a highly political and partisan fashion on behalf of the government. The documents are available that would give some evidence of this, so any suggestion that it is not a propaganda bureau I think is misplaced.

I want to ask, I guess, a number of questions aside from the Public Affairs Bureau. First of all, I want to indicate that the fiscal plan outlined in Budget 2003, which was last year's budget, indicates that the general corporate tax rate will go down from 12.5 per cent to 11.5 per cent, which would be a 9 per cent reduction which is going to permanently reduce provincial revenues by \$161 million. The question I have for the government on this matter is why this would be a higher priority, for example, than eliminating health care premiums for Alberta seniors, which only reduces revenue by \$90 million.

The question with the government, as with all governments, is: what do you do with almost infinite demands for services and very finite finances? It may be that Alberta has much greater financial capacity than some other provinces, but it is nonetheless true that this province has still a finite amount of revenue, and the revenue does not meet every demand which is placed on the provincial treasury. So you have to make choices, Mr. Chairman, and in this particular case I think the choice has been to reduce corporate income tax while permitting the continuation of a substantially increased health care user fee.

I know that when this issue is asked in question period, government ministers, including the Premier, are wont to quote back at us the words of Tommy Douglas, something to the effect that everybody has to pay a little bit or they won't quite understand that health

care actually has a cost. That is no doubt a correct quotation of Tommy Douglas, but it is taken completely out of context and used to justify something that the former Premier of Saskatchewan and the father of medicare in this country would never have accepted. It is about the only quotation from a New Democrat Premier or any other New Democrat politician that this government seems to have, and it is completely misleading to suggest that the policies of this government would in any way have been endorsed by Tommy Douglas or other New Democrat Premiers, who have always acted as staunch defenders of our medicare system.

So that's a question that I have for the government: why would they want to reduce corporate taxes and at the same time jack up health care premiums?

Another question that comes to mind, Mr. Chairman, is that in the last couple of budgets school property taxes have been allowed to increase alongside the increase in Alberta's property tax base, thereby breaking a promise made by the Finance minister in April 2001 to freeze school property taxes at a constant \$1.2 billion.

Again, when we've asked this question, the minister has dodged and ducked the real issue by saying that the rate has remained frozen, except that her promise was that the total amount accruing to the government from this source would be frozen at \$1.2 billion, and allowing an increase in the total amount taken because of an increase in the value of the total property in the province at the fixed rate is not in keeping with her own commitment. The objective, as I understood it, was that the education property tax would gradually be allowed to wither away because the total amount would be frozen and against inflation it would be a declining amount in real dollars.

So a question really needs to be answered from the government side: why did they break the promise, and are they going to continue to allow increases in property taxes? Are they going to continue to be invading this level of municipal taxation, and why don't they think they have enough revenue, given all of the resource revenue, the taxes that they collect, and, of course, the massive amount of money they now collect from people who are addicted to gambling? So those are important questions.

We'd like to know whether the government intends to break this promise a third time in this spring, and we would like to know how the government intends to respond to the motion which was passed last week phasing out school property taxes.

Another question we have, Mr. Chairman, is how much more gambling revenues are expected to rise next year. This has become a serious problem for the government. They've become in fact as addicted to this source of revenue as any gambling addict, and they can't get out of it. They need to bite the bullet and find some way, get some help if they need to, to get away from the dependence on gambling revenues. They are creating havoc among a significant number of families in this province, and it's just not right. The government needs to have the political will to find a way out of the problem that they're in.

9:20

Another question that we have is the horse racing subsidies. Now, the government promised many times, particularly early on in its tenure, that it was going to get the government out of the business of being in business. That was a constant refrain we heard, Mr. Chairman, in the early days of the revolution of he whose name starts with a K, yet they're still in subsidizing one particular industry, and I don't understand it.

Why is this particular industry more important than the taxi industry, for example? Why is it more important than the forestry industry or the beef industry or whatever it is to have a constant, ongoing, unjustified, and unjustifiable subsidy for horse racing in

this province? This, of course, is money that comes at the expense of other priorities, as it always does.

The next question I'd like to raise is just how the government plans to allocate the \$500 million in additional oil and gas revenue that is being transferred to program spending this year. As we know, the Assembly has been asked to pass a bill which increases the amount of natural gas and oil royalty revenue that can be transferred out of the stability fund and into program spending. I've spoken on that bill a couple of times now in this Assembly, but what hasn't been answered is just how the government plans to allocate that additional \$500 million a year.

When the opposition raises this question, the normal response from the government is: we thought you wanted to spend more on all of these different things, and now that we're transferring the money to do it, you're kicking and screaming, and isn't that just like the opposition. The question here is: is it the most appropriate source of the \$500 million? I guess that's the question for the debate on the bill, but the question for here is: what exactly is it going to be used for? I think it's important that the government give us an indication whether or not it's going to go to schools or hospitals and other priorities and in what amounts.

I want to indicate as well, Mr. Chairman, that the allocation of \$500 million at this time is not the little adjustment in the fiscal stability plan that the government talks about. It is in fact a part of the ongoing theme of this government's financial management of the affairs of the province, and that is that the real cycle in revenues and spending in this province has nothing to do with oil and gas prices, which have remained fairly steady. Except for one year, they've remained higher than budgeted in almost every year. In fact, I think there's been about a \$2 billion unanticipated surplus on average over the last eight years. The real cycle in government spending, Mr. Chairman, is election cycle spending, and this government is famous for that.

We know that before the last election year after year there were cries of poverty, and we can't afford it, and the opposition wants to bankrupt us, and so on. Then, lo and behold, just before the last election there was a significant increase in spending, and in particular there was an enormous torrent of money that was poured into various subsidy programs for electricity and for natural gas. In fact, Mr. Chairman, believe it or not, the government spent, according to its own figures, approximately \$4.2 billion on natural gas and electricity rebate and subsidy programs before the last election and, until just the last few months in the case of natural gas, has not spent a penny since.

Nothing could be clearer than that this government has decided on a policy of spending enormous amounts of public money just before election time only to promptly turn off the tap as soon as the election has passed. That does not meet the smell test, Mr. Chairman. We have seen some natural gas subsidies in the last few months as the continuing high price of natural gas has actually finally hit the government's trigger. So there has been a little bit of subsidy for gas since then, but by and large the whole thing was a cynical election scheme to spend enormous amounts of money directly on problems that the government had itself created, and the prime example of that is, of course, the electricity deregulation issue.

Now, I want to ask a little bit about P3s. We would like to know whether or not the capital cost of the P3 projects, such as the Calgary courthouse and the southeast Edmonton ring road, will be included in the capital estimates, or does the government plan to hide the debt from these projects to keep it off the balance sheet? This is an important question, because the government has again set this policy that it is going to try and be debt free by the centennial of our province. [Mr. Mason's speaking time expired] If no one else wants to speak, Mr. Chairman, then I will continue.

The Chair: Actually, hon. member, it is a thought, though you could only continue after receiving unanimous consent from the committee or after someone else has spoken and then sat down. Then if no one else speaks, you could go. So if you wish to ask for unanimous consent, feel free.

The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There's a great deal to be said and question in the interim supply estimates, but unfortunately we don't have the details that would allow us to ask those questions and to make judgments about the soundness of the requests before us.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for your most excellent guidance on the matters at hand. [interjections]

The Chair: Hon. members, one person speaking at a time. Thank you.

Through the chair, hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

An Hon. Member: Remember that you don't get paid by the word though.

Mr. Mason: No, I don't, and lucky for you.

Mr. Chairman, the question of P3s is a very interesting one because there hasn't been, really, a case made that P3s are effective, and usually what happens is that P3s end up costing more and producing poorer results than if the government had done it itself.

9:30

That is for several important reasons. First of all, usually the government department involved has the expertise that the private sector needs in order to construct a particular project. That's one thing. Secondly, government can usually access money at a cheaper rate than the private sector can. Thirdly, there's no incentive to cut corners and otherwise produce less of a quality product. So as a general rule P3s cost more and produce a lower quality product than if the government had just carried on and built the project itself. So why, then, do you want to get into P3s other than that it is a popular conservative panacea for government spending albeit about 10 years past its prime?

Does this help, then, in the government's objective of eliminating all of the debt? There's a huge infrastructure gap. There's a tremendous demand for new infrastructure, and with the election coming, it's just perfect timing for the government to meet that demand. So they want to spend a lot on infrastructure, but they've also committed themselves to making Alberta debt free by the year 2005. If they spend billions of dollars on infrastructure, then the provincial debt will rise again, and they'll never reach their objective.

So how, then, is the government going to solve this conundrum, Mr. Chairman? Well, one of the ways that they're going to do that is to go into the question of P3s, build expensive projects worth billions of dollars, and make sure that the debt appears on someone else's balance sheet. So the question I have then is: is there a responsibility on the part of government to indicate how they are going to meet their obligations under the P3s? Because as surely as the sun rises in the morning, the government will have to repay these

private companies, and they will have to pay for these projects with a little extra added in so that the companies can make a profit.

So it's more expensive, but the question I would like answered is whether or not the P3 projects are going to appear as debt on the government balance sheet or not. I would also like to know why the government is not being in any way transparent about the tendering process for this.

Now, on Energy I'd like to ask a little bit about the natural gas rebates for next winter. Is the government going to put upfront money into gas rebates into the budget next year, or will they assess their political needs first and wait until the election is closer before deciding just how big the rebates will be? This could be a multiple-choice question, Mr. Chairman, or a true or false – I don't know – but it would be nice to get an answer on that.

Now, with respect to the Learning budget I'd like to know how much more funding school boards can reasonably expect. How will the funds be allocated to implement the Learning Commission recommendations?

In the Department of Health and Wellness I'd like to know how much is going to be spent on the government's upcoming two-tier campaign. How much is going to be spent on the public consultation that we heard so much about today? How much is going to be spent on propaganda on behalf of the government with respect to that? How does the government plan to address the looming budget deficits by a number of health regions, Mr. Chairman? How will the government address gaps in mental health services?

I could go on at some length about these matters. In the interests of time I'm just going to run through the questions only.

In Human Resources and Employment will the government adjust social assistance, shelter, and AISH rates, which have only gone up once in the last 10 years? Does the government plan to tie rates to the cost of living, and if not, why not?

In the Department of Seniors, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to know what government initiatives to fight homelessness might be contained in upcoming spending. Why has the government seemingly backed away from earlier promises to eliminate health care premiums, which I talked about a little bit at the beginning?

Those are my questions, Mr. Chairman. I would appreciate answers in whatever form the government finds convenient.

I just want to say in closing that it ought to be unacceptable to members of this House to be voting interim supply at this time. It is not beyond the capacity of even this government to produce a budget in a timely fashion and allow us to debate a full and complete budget at this time of year. The fact that the budget is again late indicates serious problems. I don't exactly know what those problems are, Mr. Chairman, but it certainly indicates that there is some failure in the government as a whole or in the Finance department or with the minister.

In no way ought this Assembly to allow the government to continue to get away with these interim supply bills when their own budget is just a matter of being brought forward within a few weeks. It just doesn't strike me as evidence of a government that is fully competent in its management of the public funds and public affairs, Mr. Chairman, and I find it, at least for myself, a completely unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: In the momentary silence I would remind all hon.

members – and if you would take responsibility for your seatmates who may not be here or may be in the outer precincts – that tomorrow morning the MLA for a Day students will be here in the Assembly. So tonight after we leave, whenever that might be, if you could have your desktops cleared and whatever you want to place in the drawers placed in there. The other material that's normally left underneath can be left there, but if you'd have the desktops cleared and your drawer ready for locking, it'll be locked tonight but will be reopened before the Assembly starts at 1:30 tomorrow afternoon. I think probably even the chair needs to go to his own desk and do some tidying.

We are in Committee of Supply.

Some Hon. Members: Question.

The Chair: There actually isn't a question in front of us; it's not until tomorrow.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, if you were to confirm that there were no additional members wishing to speak at this time, I would move that we call it a day and adjourn debate.

The Chair: Okay. I think there are two parts to that. Is there anyone, then, who wishes to speak further to the interim supply estimates? There being none, then we'll take the second part of your instruction.

The hon. Government House Leader has moved that the committee do now rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

9:40

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has a number of considerations pertaining to interim supply resolutions for the 2004-2005 interim supply estimates of the offices of the Legislative Assembly, the government, and the lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, reports progress thereon, and requests leave to sit again.

I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of Supply on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:42 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 17, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/17

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome.

Let us pray. We give thanks for the bounty of our province: our land, our resources, and our people. We pledge ourselves to act as good stewards on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Georges Farrah. He's the parliamentary secretary responsible for rural development. Mr. Farrah is very well aware of the changing needs of rural Canada as he represents a very rural Quebec constituency that has some particularly unique challenges. I know that he is a very strong champion in the federal government for a strong rural Canada.

Mr. Speaker, it is very appropriate and timely that I introduce Mr. Farrah to the Assembly today because earlier this afternoon we released the MLA steering committee report Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity along with our report coauthors, the members for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and Wainwright. We know that a strong rural Alberta is essential to the economic picture, to the culture and environment of our province, and we know that the province of Alberta will lead the way in finding solutions for our rural areas. So we are very pleased that Mr. Farrah is here to see how highly we regard the sustainability of rural Alberta and to discuss opportunities for co-operation between the federal and provincial governments and our rural communities.

Mr. Farrah is accompanied by Donna Mitchell, who is the executive director for Rural and Cooperatives Secretariats, as well as a number of staff. I would ask that our honoured guests rise and receive the very warm welcome of our Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Royal Canadian Legion's Alberta Northwest-Territories Command takes a keen interest in promoting the values of good citizenship among young people throughout the province and the Territories. The Legion is in partnership with the Legislative Assembly Office in a program that reflects that good work. It is Mr. Speaker's MLA for a Day program. We are very appreciative of both the Legion's financial support and their involvement in this annual event. In your gallery are Mr. Bob Hannah, the Legion's command president, who is accompanied by Jean Clark and Lenore Schwabe, command vice-president. I would now invite our guests to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

I'm also pleased, Mr. Speaker, to introduce to you and through you to all members the 30 student participants in your MLA for a Day program. Our shadow colleagues are seated in both galleries. They are accompanied by their Legion chaperones, Dutchy and Diane Enders, Cecile Boyer, and Gord McDonald. I would ask them now all to rise and receive, again, the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Part of our activities within the personnel administration office is the attraction and retention of employees to work in the Alberta civil service. I'm pleased to report to all members today that our civil service has won, in the past, national awards. One of the things that we do to enhance our recruitment prospects is run an intern program. So today we have with us 35 interns. They are from all parts of our government. These 35 interns have just recently graduated from postsecondary education. The interns are in their first and second years of employment here with the Alberta government, and of course, as mentioned, this has been co-ordinated through the personnel administration office. So I would ask them to rise and receive the warm greetings of the members of the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure and privilege to introduce some special guests today. I have 45 visitors from the Peace River high school attending at the Assembly today. They're down for a field trip to the Legislature and to other points in Edmonton. They're accompanied by teachers Dania Hill and Aaron Dublenko and a parent, Jerrold Lundgard. Mr. Speaker, I appreciated the fact that you invited them to join your MLA for a Day event this morning. I'm sure they enjoyed it. They're seated both in the members' and the public galleries, and I'd ask them to rise now and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted to introduce to you and through you to the rest of the Assembly our guests from the Covenant Christian School near Leduc in my constituency. We have teacher Michelle Fisher, parent helpers Linda Goltz, Elly McGowan, Bruce Moore, Nynke Miedema, and Grace Deunk, and 18 students. So I'd ask the Assembly to extend to them the warm traditional welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Ms Tara DeLeeuw, who lives in the farthest northeastern part of the Lacombe-Stettler constituency bordering on Ponoka-Rimbey. Tara tells me that she is a strong advocate in rural Alberta, particularly for women and youth, focusing her time and energy on the need for equal access for all to law and justice. I would ask Tara to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Marilyn Corbett, who is sitting in the public gallery. She is a member of Education Watch. She's also a recently retired librarian and a grandparent who's very concerned about education funding of K to 12 and the postsecondary system. I would ask Marilyn to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and a happy St. Patrick's Day to you and all the Irish in the building and everybody else. It is a great day for the Irish, and it's also a great day for rural Alberta

because today in our midst we have the mayor of Breton, where I lived for 11 and a half years. His name is Darren Aldous. He's also the vice-president of the rural municipalities, small towns, and villages on the AUMA. I've introduced him before, but I know he was meeting today with the rural secretariat, so I'd like him to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Junior Hockey League, of course, are experiencing playoffs right now. Many members in this House, in fact, are cheering for their teams. It's my pleasure today to introduce the voice of the Fort McMurray Oil Barons, which I had the pleasure last night to provide colour commentary with for three hours on radio. He's seated in the members' gallery. It's Jeff Henson. He's with KYX 98, the home of the Barons. I'd like to ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly five members of my department that make up the fire weather team: Nick Nimchuk, Paul Kruger, Lisa Avis, Zygmunt Misztal, and Betty Herzog. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to the House a parent who's an active member of the Education Watch initiative, a parent organization which is very concerned about and advocates for adequate and stable funding for public education. Ms Marilyn Covello has a daughter in grade 3 at McKernan elementary junior high school. She's seated in the public gallery. I would now ask her to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a long-time constituent of Whitecourt-St. Anne, Mrs. Vera Michalchuk. Vera is a lifelong educator who grew up on a homestead near Drayton Valley and taught in many towns west of Edmonton for 40 years before retiring from the Wildwood school. Vera is not only a mother of five and a great long-time Conservative, but she's had so much positive influence on each and every one of us through her wise son David Michalchuk, our caucus director and, I'm told, her favourite. She's very proud of him. She's sitting in the members' gallery, and I'd ask her to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'd like to introduce to you and to all of the people who may be listening and watching seven members of the Alberta Legislative Assembly who 15 years ago this week, on March 20, 1989, were elected to the Alberta Legislative Assembly for the first time. I'm going to ask the head page, as I mention their names and introduce them to you, to deliver to each one of them a special 15th anniversary Mace pin of the province of Alberta.

So, first of all, to the hon. Member for Highwood, the Deputy

Speaker, 15th anniversary; the hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, the MLA for Lesser Slave Lake; the hon. Member for Athabasca-Wabasca, the hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development; the hon. Member for Stony Plain, the Minister of Seniors; the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House, the Minister of Infrastructure; the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills, the Minister of Finance; and, 15 years ago, the hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow, the hon. the Premier.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While the government fiddles, auto insurance rage continues to burn. Drivers from across the country and in this province are outraged by a net profit of \$2.6 billion dollars from an industry that has been just recently pleading poverty. Shamefully, the Premier defends this 673 per cent increase in profits. To the Premier: how can you defend these obscene profits?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, we don't involve ourselves with the profits of insurance companies. What we do is involve ourselves with the protection of the consumer. The hon. member should be pleased with the program we put in place because, actually, we took profits out of the insurance industry. We took about \$250 million – million dollars – out of the insurance industry so that young, safe drivers can be rewarded through lower insurance premiums and older, safe drivers can be rewarded through lower insurance premiums and those in between won't experience extreme rate increases. The program is a good program. Again, I have to commend the hon. Minister of Finance and the hon. Member for Medicine Hat for the outstanding work that they have done to stabilize insurance rates in this province.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: when will you stop tinkering, put people before the profits, and consider the plan for public auto insurance on www.liberalopposition.com?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, relative to the first part of the preamble we have put people before profits as I outlined. We have taken about \$250 million out of the insurance industry to make sure that insured drivers in this province are treated fairly regardless of age or gender.

Relative to going to a socialist system, I don't think so. That may be fine for the NDs and the Liberals, who are socialist thinking people, but the majority of people in this province are free thinkers, really respect and understand the entrepreneurial and the free enterprise system and want to see it stay that way.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: how can you reject a plan for public auto insurance when that plan would reinvest profits into road safety, programs that reduce accidents, and further reduce drivers' premiums? How can you reject that plan?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, we don't reject a plan that reinvests money into road safety. I'll have the hon. Minister of Transportation speak to that issue.

Our main concern relative to the insurance legislation that we

passed – and we're now working on the regulations associated with that legislation – is to make sure that people in this province are treated fairly. That is the main point. That is the point that we wanted to emphasize and the point that we wanted to address, and we have addressed it very successfully indeed.

Relative to the amount of money that goes into road safety, whether that comes from insurance or whether it comes from general revenues, it is significant. I'll have the hon. minister comment.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the province of Alberta invests in excess of \$2 million annually in road safety programs. Together with what the government invests in road safety, other participants like regional health authorities, enforcement agencies, the centre for injury prevention, the Alberta Motor Association, and including insurance companies, all pool their resources and look towards focusing on safety on provincial highways.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Complaints to Utilities Consumer Advocate

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's credibility continues to decline. The Utilities Consumer Advocate received over 800 complaints from angry Albertans in his first four months on the job, mostly about high bills and confusing bills and high prices, but this disaster of energy deregulation continues. These concerns are being ignored according to the so-called utilities watchdog, who said, quote, 800 calls in four months is not a huge number, end of quote. Yet just last month the Minister of Government Services, who is also in charge of the Utilities Consumer Advocate, terminated a contract with Imperial Parking after receiving the same number of complaints over 18 months. My first question is to the Premier. Why won't this government take the concerns of Albertans seriously and admit that the only solution to high prices and confusing energy bills is unplugging energy deregulation?

1:50

Mr. Klein: We will not unplug energy deregulation, because insofar as electricity is concerned, it is working, with the generation of about 3,000 megawatts more of power each and every year. Relative to gas, Mr. Speaker, gas was regulated long before the hon. member was a Member of this Legislative Assembly and long before I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly.

What the hon. member fails to point out and purposely fails – because it is their intention to mislead and misrepresent. What he intentionally – intentionally – fails to point out is that 37 per cent of those complaints to the consumer advocate were on natural gas bills, had nothing to do whatsoever with electricity. Now, Mr. Speaker, he intentionally left that out of his preamble because intentionally he wants to mislead and misrepresent the case to Albertans.

Mr. Mason: Point of order.

The Speaker: I gather that there's an intervention on a point of order. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on a point of order, and to the Government House Leader, be prepared.

Let's remember: parliamentary language. And it applies to everybody in this House.

The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier:

given that 18 per cent of the complaints received by the Utilities Consumer Advocate were from Albertans who could not afford to pay their utility bills, why won't this government guarantee lower bills by unplugging this \$8 billion boondoggle?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know any other phrase to use other than "intentionally mislead" because again we heard this hon. member allude to a figure that is not correct. We heard him allude to an adjective that is certainly not correct. Boondoggle is not correct. A good program would be a correct definition. It is not an \$8 billion boondoggle. It is a program that has brought 3,000 megawatts of new energy on the market. It is a program that has stabilized electricity prices, and by the way it is a program that has brought about a consumer advocate.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I would like to put on my hat as a journalist again and ask this hon. member as a journalist: how can he one week criticize the whole notion of a consumer advocate, saying that this person is just a puppet, or something to that effect, of the utility industry because he's paid by the utilities, then get up and quote eloquently and wax eloquently about what the consumers' advocate says?

It's unparliamentary to use the word "hypocrisy," but I can't think of another word. Maybe "unprincipled." I don't know if that's unparliamentary or not . . .

Speaker's Ruling Parliamentary Language

The Speaker: But in this Assembly the hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow is not a journalist. He's the leader of the governing party and the Premier. And parliamentary language is the decorum that will be used in this House.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Complaints to Utilities Consumer Advocate (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that energy deregulation is not correct, did the government appoint an industry-funded consumer advocate in order to silence other consumer advocates who have stood up and spoken out in opposition to this government's failed energy deregulation scheme?

Mr. Klein: It's not a failed deregulation scheme, and I would remind the hon. member again that 37 per cent of the complaints that the consumer advocate dealt with were related to gas prices and not electricity prices – 37 per cent – something the hon. member fails to mention. But he does mention a lot the unplugging of electricity deregulation. Well, Mr. Speaker, if I could make a suggestion – it would be helpful to all Albertans – that would be to unplug www.liberalopposition.com.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Long-term Care Beds

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Currently almost 4,000 of Alberta's long-term care beds are in private rooms, 8,800 are semiprivate, and almost 750 are in wards. Subsidies for low-income seniors and AISH recipients only cover the cost of semiprivate and ward long-term care beds, but it appears that new long-term care facilities will consist primarily of private rooms. My first question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Is the minister allowing

a situation to develop where the already limited stock of semiprivate and ward rooms is depleted even further?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that there have been changes over many years with respect to long-term care, and what seniors are telling us is that they actually prefer to get away from the idea of wards and semiprivate rooms. They prefer private rooms, so we let the marketplace operate as it does to respond to the needs of what seniors actually want.

Ms Blakeman: My next question is to the Premier. Is this some misguided circular logic where the government stops building the only kind of long-term care beds for low-income seniors that it's willing to subsidize?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we are committed to building as many seniors' units as we possibly can, both for long-term care and for assisted living and also lodge accommodation for those who can care for themselves.

But relative to the situation I'll have either the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness or the hon. Minister of Seniors respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to clarify a misconception. The support that we're giving to seniors in long-term care goes up to, in dollars, the semiprivate rate. That is correct. However, we have taken upon ourselves to advocate on behalf of seniors who are under our program to ensure that they get the private room at the semiprivate rate, which is a darn good bargain. We advocate for them by putting the families together with the individual facilities. In addition to that, any senior who was in a private room on our program would not be moved out of that room unless it was within the same facility and to a semiprivate.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to point out very strongly that we did look after all of the people on our program, that they're not suffering unduly, and, in fact, that we did insist that the people in our program do for the most part receive the same kind of residual income of \$265 that the lodge people do.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Then to the Minister of Seniors: if the seniors or their families are not able to convince the owners or operators of long-term care facilities to give them the private room at a semiprivate room rate, where exactly are these seniors to go? Is the government going to cover the additional cost or not?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, very specifically, like I indicated, the people who were in the private rooms would not be moved out against their will, would not be forced to pay more. Quite frankly, we have been able to resolve through consultation on behalf of the residents virtually every case that they presented as hardship, and the operators have been very co-operative.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Special Duty Audit by Auditor General

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Albertans have been flooding our offices with calls, demanding to know if the \$400 million in BSE aid was well spent or if it all ended up in the hands

of U.S.-owned packing houses. The government has insisted that the Auditor General would investigate, but yesterday we learned that this investigation would be as deep as a slough in a drought. The Auditor General now says that he will not follow the money beyond who got the initial cheques and that he will not table the terms of reference or an audit plan. My question is to the Premier. Will the Premier now admit that the routine audit asked for by the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development is insufficient to answer the questions that Albertans are asking and, instead, use cabinet's authority under the act to request a special duty audit, which can follow the money?

2:00

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it's my understanding and it should be the hon. member's understanding as well that the Auditor General is an independent individual who is appointed by this Legislature. He doesn't take direction from government. To have him take direction from government or any other member of the Legislature, for that matter, could be dangerous, very dangerous indeed. If one were to direct the Auditor General, for instance, to ignore something, that would be dangerous.

The Auditor General, as I understand it, works with his legislative mandate and conducts his work as he sees fit. That's why we recently amended the legislation with the support of at least the Liberal opposition to give him wide-ranging powers. As always, this side and that side of the government will co-operate with the Auditor General as fully as we possibly can as he conducts his work.

I tend to put more faith in the Auditor General and his assessment of what he needs to do than the NDs' opinion of what they think he needs to do.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the Premier is unfamiliar with the provisions of the Auditor General Act that clearly give cabinet the power to order a special duty audit, how can he claim that the Auditor General will get an answer to the question of why packer margins have increased by 200 per cent, when the Auditor General writes that the flow of money after it is in the hands of those entitled to receive it . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, it's a question. There's no way a 45-second question is a question.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Auditor General has ruled out following the audit and given that the government is refusing to get to the bottom of this, when will the Premier stand up and ask Executive Council to order a special duty audit so that we can follow the money?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, as I pointed out, I don't think that it's appropriate or wise for any member of Executive Council to order the Auditor General to do anything. Now, if the hon. member or if this legislative body wants the Auditor General to do what he probably is doing anyway, then I have no problems with that being a legislative motion or anything else.

Mr. Mason: Will you vote for it?

Mr. Klein: Fine. I don't care one way or the other. It's just that I don't feel comfortable as an individual and as the Premier asking Executive Council to order the Auditor General to do anything, because if you can order him to do something that the opposition

wants, then it stands to reason that you can order him to do something that the opposition doesn't want.

Mr. Speaker, he is an officer of the Legislature; therefore, it should be the Legislature that directs him. Having said that, I do believe that the Auditor General has the powers to investigate whatever he wants, whenever he wants, notwithstanding the direction of the opposition or this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Oh, I get a third one. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. member, you always had a third one. It's just that you abused the second one. So please proceed carefully with the third one.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that Albertans will not see terms of reference or an audit plan from the Auditor General, how is this government going to assure Albertans that his investigation will be a thorough analysis of the program and who received the money from it?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, if I were the hon. member, I'd be very careful, because what he is doing is questioning the investigative authority and, indeed, the integrity of the Auditor General. The Auditor General has said that he will conduct – and I don't know if I'm quoting him correctly – a thorough investigation of this matter relative to BSE. I would suspect that that matter relates to whether the money under the assistance program that we launched, the \$400 million, was spent properly, whether the packers made excessive profits, a matter that is already being investigated by a parliamentary committee and, as I understand it, the Competition Bureau.

The Auditor General I believe has indicated that he will submit his report by the end of June, and it remains to be seen at that time whether or not he has done a thorough job. But I have every confidence in the Auditor General to do a thorough job because that's what he is mandated to do.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Cheviot Creek Coal Pit

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There was an announcement yesterday by the Elk Valley Coal Partnership that they plan to go ahead with a \$50 million development at the Cheviot Creek coal pit near Hinton. As the Member for West Yellowhead, where the development will take place, I have been asked by my constituents about its economic impact. My main question is to the Minister of Economic Development. Could the minister tell the Legislature what the economic impact of this development is expected to be?

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Speaker, before I answer the hon. member's question, a couple of things have to be said. In light of the continued questions that come from the opposition that point to nothing but an economy that's on a downward spiral, this particular piece of news along with hundreds around the province every day clearly prove that that's incorrect and that it's been what we've said all along: the Alberta advantage is alive and well.

I would also like to offer compliments to the MLA for West Yellowhead. He and I have been working on this for quite some

time. The bottom line about this particular project is that this region has been very hard hit, Mr. Speaker, in a number of different industries, not only forestry and coal and agriculture but in tourism, and this member and I have been working together to try and secure new opportunities, of which this is one.

This plant, obviously, will generate an initial introduction of about \$50 million of new business into the community in the retrofit. Mr. Speaker, 120 new jobs, that were slated to be lost when Cardinal River Coals shuts down, will be saved. More importantly, it's an ongoing opportunity for the West Yellowhead region, and I think all members of this House, including the opposition members, should be grateful to the Member for West Yellowhead for trying so hard to build a better Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first and last supplemental question is to the Minister of Energy. What process and approval are needed before the Cheviot Creek coal pit can be producing its coal resource?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the bringing into play of a mine of this calibre is going to be a significant achievement in Alberta. Importantly, this Cheviot mine has already been approved by a joint federal/provincial panel, so much of the legwork and the bull work has already been done, and that's important. Now we're going into individual licensing processes with the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board and with Alberta Environment.

Mr. Speaker, I can point out that the Member for West Yellowhead is in charge of a committee that works with royalty review. He's updating the 1976 coal policy in this province and looking for a long-term vision so that, in fact, not only will the Cheviot mine open, but we will start to exploit and develop these resources, this coal that allows us to build new, better burning, more environmentally acceptable coal-fired generators and allows us to move into new markets.

2:10

Mr. Speaker, I think it's important that we note that a lot of this credit actually goes to China. China today, in fact, uses 50 per cent of the world's consumption of cement, which they use coal to fire with. They use 30 per cent of the world's supply of coal and 36 per cent of the steel. China is our third largest trading partner and one that will be extremely important to the Member for West Yellowhead as well as to this economy and to the creation of new jobs in Alberta.

Private/Public Partnerships for Hospital Construction

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health and Wellness has recently indicated that this government is open to learning from the practices of other countries and provinces. I hope this is true because if this government paid attention to the evidence and learned from other jurisdictions, they would know that using alternative financing, like P3 hospitals, doesn't work. To the Premier: given the example set by Australia's P3 Port Macquarie base hospital, that cost taxpayers three times what a public hospital would have cost, will the government rule out P3s as a way to build and maintain health care facilities in Alberta?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the answer to that is no. We will not rule it out. It will be ruled out, however, if it doesn't make economic sense. That's why there is a very thorough process that has been put in place to adjudicate a P3 proposal, whether it's for a hospital, a

roadway, a school, or any other public institution. Basically, that process involves a thorough review of the initial proposals, then a separate request for qualifications, then a request for proposals. At each stage of the process there is a thorough review of the proposals not only in terms of the physical qualities relative to the project but the finances and whether the taxpayer will benefit in the long run. So we will not rule out P3s, but as I said previously, we will rule out a P3 if it doesn't make sense.

Mr. Bonner: To the Premier, Mr. Speaker: given the example set by England's P3 Cumberland hospital, where an independent commission found that management problems led to poor patient care, will the government rule out P3s for Alberta's health care facilities?

Mr. Klein: No, Mr. Speaker. We will not. I think it would be folly to rule out a P3. For instance, I know that the Calgary health authority is now considering a P3 proposal for a south hospital. Now, that will have to go through the process.

There have been some failures relative to P3s, and there have been some successes. You know, we want to focus on the successful projects. Hopefully, they can work and work for us and work for the taxpayers of this province, but if they don't work, they simply won't happen. I've been to the U.K., and I visited a P3 project where the proponents and the United Kingdom National Health Service say that it's working quite fine, thank you. Now, there may be other projects in the U.K. that were built under P3 that are not working as well.

You know, it's so common for the Liberals to cherry-pick, and usually the cherries they pick are the bad cherries.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: can the Premier explain why his government is refusing to learn a clear lesson from other jurisdictions that P3 hospitals are a failure?

Mr. Klein: Quite the opposite, Mr. Speaker. We are learning from other jurisdictions, but we're learning from their successes, because we believe in looking at what works well in other jurisdictions and why it works well and implementing those policies. So relative to health reform generally, for instance, it's our plan to look at those jurisdictions, those countries where the health system is deemed to be better than it is in Canada. We're saying: let's look at what works, and perhaps we can incorporate what works into our health system, and let's reject what doesn't work. The same with P3s: reject what doesn't work and take the best of the components and put that into our process. In that way, we come out with a quality project at a price that taxpayers can afford and something that may in the long run or probably will in the long run benefit the taxpayers of this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Portable Classrooms

Mr. Shariff: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Most of the elementary schools in my riding use portables for classrooms, and many of these portables have been designed for 24-student capacity. However, it is very common to find 30 to 31 students in these classrooms, which means there are 31 winter coats, boots, jackets, and so on. Quite often teachers have to move desks and chairs around to accommodate student activities, making the rooms very, very congested and unsafe. My questions today are to the Minister of Infrastructure. Could the minister please explain what his department's guidelines are for portable size and capacity?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure which portables the hon. member is referring to. Of course, in the past the construction of the portables has been at the discretion of the school board, so you could get varying sizes. For our standard, as far as the department is concerned, we've now moved to an area per student as opposed to the old class of 25. Under that, the situation is that in a permanent structure it averages because it changes with a number of factors: the age, the grade level, the number of students that have special needs, and a couple of other smaller factors that figure into it. Normally the average would be about 80 metres square. Portables normally are about a hundred metres square, so they, in fact, are usually bigger than the old 25-student class size.

Now, with the policy, as far as into the future, we are looking at trying to standardize and to try perhaps even the government building and then leasing to school boards as opposed to the school boards doing it. However, we are going to look at the standard construction as well so that there is a more uniform standard throughout the province.

When it comes to health and safety, Mr. Speaker, as far as air quality is concerned, we do have in place the standards that must be met in all classes. Of course, as far as health and safety the school board working with the school would deal with things like the exits.

Mr. Shariff: My first and only supplementary is again to the same minister. Given the safety of our children in such situations, what is the departmental safety policy, and when was it last reviewed?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, for the safety as far as air quality is concerned, we have those standards. The size of the portable, the amount of room, is governed under the area utilization formula. That formula is extremely important to us not only in situations like the hon. member has mentioned but also when we are building new schools and to size the classes and to size the overall school to fit with what is necessary in that area.

Also, when we look at the utilization factor – and this is really important. As we move forward, we have a policy that we will not – we will not – build new schools in a jurisdiction until the utilization is up to 85 per cent. That is really critical, because if you go below that, you end up then having difficulty with the operating and maintenance side, and you end up with a lot of space that is not necessary. We can't afford to continue to do that.

However, having said that, we do recognize – and the Minister of Learning and I have talked about it on many occasions – that where you have K to 4 children that are being bused for a long distance, we must take another look at that, but we've got to stick with the 85 per cent utilization.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

2:20

SuperNet

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta taxpayers have paid almost \$200 million for SuperNet, but with the downloading of costs, for many communities it's going to become NoNet. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Why is the government allowing companies involved with SuperNet to charge struggling communities, like the village of Heisler, a \$4,000 hookup fee and \$3,000 a year just to maintain one connection to the system?

Mr. Doerksen: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta SuperNet will in fact connect almost every community in Alberta. Any community that has a library, a school, a hospital, or government building will have SuperNet access located in that town.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the minister. SuperNet is in the village. Hooking it up is going to cost them \$4,000 and another \$3,000 a year. How are they going to incorporate that into their budget year after year?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Municipal Affairs may wish to supplement. When we started this process, it was quite clear to the municipalities that our obligation was to take the point of presence for this high-speed optical network into that community. That, in fact, gave the opportunity for the municipalities to connect to the SuperNet because the base network or the main connection across Alberta was being put in place to let them access that high-speed optical network. So, in fact, it is an advantage to them.

The Minister of Municipal Affairs may wish to talk about some discussions that he has been having with the municipalities.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, and I would like to supplement, Mr. Speaker. As the minister of innovation has indicated, we've been working very closely with our municipal partners, both rural and urban. I want to say that the annual convention for the Association of Municipal Districts and Counties is coming up within the next two weeks, which, I know, many members from this Assembly are going to be attending. I'd ask the member to stay tuned, because we've been working very closely with this ministry in terms of how every single municipality in this entire province will be hooked up. SuperNet is a program that is unmatched. No other province in Canada has anything even close to it.

Dr. Massey: My question is again to the Minister of Innovation and Science. What solution does the minister have for cash-starved communities like Heisler who simply can't afford SuperNet? Downloading the costs onto them isn't the solution.

Mr. Doerksen: Well, Mr. Speaker, again I might ask the Minister of Municipal Affairs to supplement the answer. I know of no other jurisdiction, frankly, in the world that makes this opportunity available to all Alberta citizens. It is unparalleled, and in fact a recent article out of IEEE magazine, which is a highly respected technical magazine, gave the Alberta SuperNet an innovation award for the vision of that network.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, to follow up from the minister of innovation, every single village, small town, municipality, all 360 of them – I don't want to scoop myself here, but I can say that we have some very important news, because we're working with our partners within municipalities.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Employment Training

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Mr. Minister, it was reported in Red Deer that you said that there is a fierce demand for skilled workers in northern Alberta's resource industry and that employers are made to think that they have to hire high school graduates for every job. Are you suggesting that it is not necessary to graduate from grade 12 or to finish high school and that students can drop out of school to get a job? [interjections]

Mr. Dunford: Pretty spicy stuff, eh?

Let's be clear. If the people that are listening to us now and the people that will be reading *Hansard* are in school, stay in school. If you are about to graduate, get yourself into our excellent postsecondary system right now or just as soon as you possibly can. If you're under I'm going to say the age of 25, get yourself back into school.

But there's a time for clear talk, and I think this is it. What I'm meaning is that we have a whole generation of folks out there that are older than 30 and have not completed high school, and if we have employers and if we have governments myopically saying that you have to have grade 12 in order to enter the workforce, then we are subjecting a whole generation of people to poverty.

What I was suggesting in the public meeting where I was quoted – and it appears almost misquoted – is that we have to look at the individual person, and we have to determine what is best for them in terms getting them into the workforce. We need flexibility on the part of the training institutions. We need flexibility on the part of the employers. With that flexibility we can get everybody productive in Alberta, and that's what we want.

Mrs. Jablonski: Mr. Speaker, my final question to the same minister: what jobs can people who don't have a high school diploma get?

Mr. Dunford: Yeah, there are lots of them there. There'll be a string. The thing that we need to know and understand is that we have people over 30, we have people that have not completed high school that are trainable and can work into our workforce.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Electronic Health Records

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The main problem facing Alberta's health care system is not out-of-control costs; it's mismanagement of the money we have. Yesterday I asked reasonable questions of the Minister of Health and Wellness about whether his department did due diligence on the electronic health record system. The answer I got didn't address the question, so I'll give the minister another chance today. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that the minister announced \$59 million in October for health information systems, then provided the AMA with \$65 million in November, and RHAs are spending untold millions more, will the minister tell us the total expected cost of establishing the electronic health record system?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, in the spirit of St. Patrick's Day I feel compelled to answer in the following manner.

There once was a man from Riverview
Whose opinions were respected by few.
He said: it's so grand to have your head in the sand;
Our health system we need not renew.

Mr. Speaker, I would be happy to sit down with the hon. member at any time that he'd like to educate and edify him on the subject of the importance of Wellnet. We have invested over \$130 million from 1997 through to March 31, 2003, on information technology. It has been for the following purposes. It has been to improve patient safety, and it is to improve quality of care. The electronic health record, pilot programs leading up to the EHR, the seniors' drug profile program, the pharmaceutical information network, and the newborn metabolic screening system are only to name a few. I would like to point out that that last program recently won a prestigious national award.

Mr. Speaker, \$59 million was allocated to develop the EHR, including its implementation up to 2004. The Department of Health and Wellness is pursuing other sources of funding, including the federal government's program under Canada Health Infoway. So far Wellnet has received \$16 million in funding from CHI, Canada Health Infoway, to implement the pharmaceutical information network.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given the staggering amount of health information generated every day in clinics and labs, in hospitals and doctors' offices, what cost controls are in place to ensure that the costs of the health information system don't soar?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, Albertans can be assured that there are sophisticated financial systems in place and controls within the Department of Health and Wellness including Alberta Wellnet. Also, of course, the Department of Health and Wellness is subject to the financial scrutiny of the Department of Finance, and all of Alberta Wellnet's reporting controls include documentation providing specific details before a project begins. This includes issues of deliverables, milestone dates, details on resources needed to complete the work, and, finally, monthly status reports on the work that's been completed. Alberta Wellnet is audited by the provincial Auditor General. The contracting process adheres to the policies and the procedures set out by Alberta Finance.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Will the minister, instead of waiting for a written question, table for us any cost-benefit analysis that was done to justify spending \$124 million on the new health information system?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member wishes to send me a letter on that, I would be happy to prepare him a written response accordingly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On January 22, 2004, the Minister of Health and Wellness said loudly and clearly that the government had decided not to accept the Graydon report recommendations because Albertans do not support user-pay schemes. After no doubt being read the riot act, the minister is now falling in line behind the Premier and Steve West in advocating snake oil remedies that will inevitably lead to a two-tiered health care system in this province. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why is the minister championing the very two-tiered health care system that the Graydon report recommends after categorically rejecting the same report's recommendations?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there is no such report, that I'm aware of, that recommends a two-tiered health care system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is the government

misleading Albertans with spin about the nonsustainability of the health care system when the minister knows and the government knows from the government's own public accounts that health spending in Alberta has been stable over the last dozen or more years once inflation and population are factored in?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the sand that is running in the ears of the Member for Edmonton-Riverview seems to be running in the ears of the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona as well.

I refer the hon. member to the report that was tabled earlier this week done by the Conference Board of Canada. This is the most important public policy issue, not just in Alberta but across Canada. There is a remorselessness to the arithmetic that you cannot have health care spending growing at 8, 9, 10, or 11 per cent a year when government revenues are only growing at 2, 3, or 4 per cent a year. Mr. Speaker, that is the remorselessness of the arithmetic.

It matters not whether you're a Conservative in Alberta, an ND in Saskatchewan, a Liberal in British Columbia; this is the reality across Canada. It's the reason why it's the subject matter of important debates currently going on among ministers of health across this country, the reason why first ministers have asked ministers of health and ministers of finance to get together this summer. It's the reason why this is the most important public policy issue that we will deal with in the next 10 years.

It's not just us that are saying it, Mr. Speaker. Premier Lord from New Brunswick would say that on the current cost tracking that we're undergoing right now, the Canadian health care system will not be here in 10 years' time. We are taking active steps to avoid that consequence.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Among all the provinces of Canada why does Alberta stand alone in advocating the two-tiered approach of the Graydon report, which the minister less than two months ago said would not be accepted by most Albertans?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, this Assembly is filled with people who know what they know, it's filled with people who know that they don't know, but it also has a few members that don't know that they don't know.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: In 30 seconds I'll call upon the first member.

Hon. members, I have seven hon. members who want to participate in Recognitions today, and I'm not sure that any of the seven are of Irish heritage. Well, if the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is of Irish heritage and if there's something about St. Paddy's Day, you're first.

Mr. Mason: It's not about St. Patrick's Day; I'm sorry.

The Speaker: You're not Irish?

Mr. Mason: Half.

The Speaker: Well, that's not good enough.

All right then. Okay. The closest that I can see to an Irishman in the Assembly, the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you. I'm wearing some green here today.

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Mr. Cao: Mr. Speaker, March 21 is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, proclaimed in 1966 by the United Nations, calling on all nations to redouble their efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination such as xenophobia and related intolerance; discrimination based on culture, nationality, religion, or language; and racism resulting from official doctrines of racial superiority or exclusivity such as ethnic cleansing.

To me, eliminating discrimination must also come from individuals at home. Individuals must reach outside their own ethnic and cultural zones of comfort. I challenge every Albertan, every Canadian to make it their living routine to invite a person of different ethnic and cultural heritage into their own homes.

Mr. Speaker, in Alberta the human rights, citizenship, and multiculturalism law recognizes that

all persons are equal in: dignity, rights and responsibilities without regard to [the protected grounds of] race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income or family status.

I feel blessed to live and raise our family in Alberta, in Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

U of A Pandas Hockey Team

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 14, 2004, the number one ranked University of Alberta Pandas hockey team claimed their third consecutive national championship and fourth in the last five years with a 2-nothing victory over the Ottawa Gee-Gees in Montreal, Quebec. The Pandas got two goals from CIS player of the year Danielle Bourgeois for the second consecutive game as Alberta dominated the game throughout, outshooting Ottawa 28 to 5 through two periods and 49-11 overall. CIS coach of the year Howie Draper suggested that March 14 culminated a stunning season for the Pandas, who ran their undefeated streak against CIS opponents to an unbelievable 81 games.

Congratulations to the U of A Pandas hockey team.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Alberta Rocky Mountain Parks

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I stand to recognize the Alberta Rocky Mountains. Recently Alberta Rocky Mountain parks were acknowledged as a premier world destination for sustainable tourism. National Geographic surveyed 200 specialists in sustainable tourism, destination stewardship, and related fields, and the results reported in the March 2004 issue of *National Geographic Traveler* ranked Alberta's Rocky Mountains sixth out of 115 locations around the world. It is notable that Alberta's parks ranked ahead of the Bavarian Alps, the alpine regions of Switzerland, and even my Scottish highlands.

Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the tourism operators in Banff, Jasper, and Lake Louise on their excellent work to earn this tremendous recognition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

2:40

Art Smith

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On February 19 of this year the hon. Minister of Seniors and myself attended the grand opening

of a transitional residence in my constituency that will provide a safe and comfortable home to eight people requiring housing assistance. This project was the result of a partnership among Horizon Homes, the community facility enhancement program, Calgary Homeless Foundation, Alberta Seniors' homelessness initiatives, and Human Resources Canada.

This house, Mr. Speaker, was dedicated to an outstanding Canadian who devoted most of his life to serving his fellow citizens as an alderman, a member of this Assembly, a Member of Parliament. In 1998 he founded the Calgary Homeless Foundation. This gentleman is the hon. Art Smith. I would like to ask all of my colleagues to recognize Art Smith for his commitment and dedication to those most in need.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Alberta Schools' Athletic Association Curling Championship

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to recognize the girls, boys, and mixed division winners and all of the teams who competed in this year's Alberta Schools' Athletic Association provincial curling championships, which took place in Drayton Valley this month. The winning rinks included in the mixed division Beaumont composite high school, in the girls' division Stony Plain's Memorial composite school, and in the boys' division Lamont high school. As well, Frank Maddock high school, the host team from Drayton Valley, finished third in the mixed division.

Mr. Speaker, curling is a sport that captivates the Canadian imagination. Everyone knows great competitors like Alberta's own world champions Randy Ferbey and Kevin Martin as well as Canadian champions such as Colleen Jones and Sandra Schmirler.

It is at high school competitions where the next Alberta champion and the next Brier, Scott, and world champion makes his or her mark. It's also at these competitions where new friendships are forged, many of whom will continue to compete against each other as they move up the curling ranks.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, let me say a huge congratulations to all of the volunteers from Frank Maddock high school and the Drayton Valley community. Many students, staff, and volunteers worked very hard to make the Alberta provincial high school curling championships a huge success, and each volunteer deserves a warm round of applause.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Great Kids Awards

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Sunday, March 14, 2004, the Premier, the Minister of Children's Services, and Mrs. Colleen Klein presented 16 children and youth with the Great Kids award. These young people between the ages of five and 18 have made great contributions to their communities, their schools, and their families. From collecting books for children to raising \$76,000 for cancer research, these Great Kids have already made a difference in this world.

With thanks to the corporate sponsors each Great Kid will receive a computer from IBM, an education bursary from TransCanada, accommodation at Fantasyland Hotel, and attraction passes to West Edmonton Mall.

Mr. Speaker, the 16 Great Kids that were selected from 257 outstanding nominations are Jazlyn Wiebe, Sherwood Park; Helen Cashman, Edmonton; Mikyla Sherlow, Jasper; Keiran Sawatzky,

Okotoks; Paul Zimmerman, Wetaskiwin; Katy White, Banff; Candy Squire, Vulcan; Jacqueline Luhoway, Edmonton; Rodrick Mwemera, Youngstown; Jaylene Norris, Red Deer; Nolan Sleeva, Medicine Hat; Carlia Schwab, Sylvan Lake; Kelsey Trach, Vermilion; Jayden Madsen, Hinton; Taryn Penrice, Red Deer; Megan Fester, Calgary.

I ask that all members of this Legislature join me in congratulating Alberta's Great Kids 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Tooker Gomberg

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On March 4 Albertans lost a true champion for social justice and the environment. With the passing of Tooker Gomberg we have lost a formidable environmental advocate and a visionary activist who inspired many. No one walked the talk like Tooker. It takes a unique personality to do so in everyday life and far more so to do so in political life. He was a straight talker who always told us what he thought we needed to hear even if it wasn't what we wanted to hear.

Tooker saw the environment as necessary to the world's life and to our own. He placed huge value on that life. He didn't only want to preserve our natural environment; he wanted it to thrive. In trying always to think of better ways to do things, his uncompromising approach sometimes led to strong opposition, but his values never wavered. Tooker took on the toughest job of them all: trying to change the world.

Losing Tooker is a loss for me, for our province, and for all Canadians. In fact, it's a loss for our planet. I would like to express my condolences to his wife, Angela, and to his family.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am presenting a petition signed by 137 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta "to return to a regulated electricity system, reduce power bills and develop a program to assist Albertans in improving energy efficiency."

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to give oral notice that the following bill will be introduced on Thursday, March 18, 2004: Pr. 1, St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, I would like to give oral notice that the following bill will be introduced on Thursday, March 18, 2004: Pr. 2, Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to give oral notice that the following bill will be introduced on Thursday, March 18, 2004: Pr. 3, Living Faith Bible College Act.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the requisite number of copies of two reports. The first one is the 2002-2003 annual report of the Alberta Securities Commission.

The second is the first report of Alberta Revenue, the 2002-2003 annual report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the appropriate number of copies of two letters from the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association expressing support for Motion 501, which called for the gradual elimination of the education portion of property taxes.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. I'm tabling five copies of a letter dated March 16, 2004, from the Auditor General to me saying that he will not be able to follow the BSE compensation money.

Secondly, I am tabling five copies of a document called Key Messages: NDs Public Accounts Motion from the Public Affairs Bureau in the agriculture department advising negative remarks with respect to the New Democrat caucus.

The Speaker: The hon. Member from Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling the appropriate number of copies of the National Geographic Traveler Destination Scorecard that I mentioned in my recognition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to file today with the Assembly copies of the report Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity, the MLA steering committee report on rural development. Early this afternoon with coauthors, the members for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and Wainwright, in attendance the report was released. Copies of the release are filed.

Mr. Speaker, we know that a strong rural Alberta is essential to the economy, culture, and environment of this province. Alberta will lead the way in finding solutions for our rural areas, and this report from the communities will help us find those solutions.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table on behalf of the Official Opposition our policy: public insurance which is fair, affordable, and accessible.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on a point of order.

Point of Order Parliamentary Language

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would refer you to the list of expressions which are considered unparliamentary, and it included statements made by the Premier today in question period that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar was deliberately misleading the public and the Assembly on certain matters in his question. In the expressions ruled unparliamentary by Speakers and chairmen of the Alberta Legislative Assembly, on page 9 it says that

mislead deliberately or deliberately meant to mislead the House and misleading intentionally were ruled to be unparliamentary.

I would request that the hon. Premier withdraw the remarks and apologize to the House.

2:50

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on this point of order.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, one of the things which we must aspire to in this House is to use parliamentary language at all times and to treat each other with the utmost respect. There are, in fact, in *Beauchesne's* pages and pages of words that have been used in houses of parliament which have been either ruled to be in certain circumstances allowable and parliamentary and in other circumstances to be ruled out of order.

The measure of whether a word or use of words or context of words is parliamentary or not parliamentary, of course, comes out of *Beauchesne's* 491.

The Speaker has consistently ruled that language used in the House should be temperate and worthy of the place in which it is spoken. No language is, by virtue of any list, acceptable or unacceptable. A word which is parliamentary in one context may cause disorder in another context, and therefore be unparliamentary.

Mr. Speaker, I of course, knowing full well that you've meant us to memorize your memo of February 12 and attachments, would refer to page 2, where again you deal with the question of unparliamentary language: "The Speaker takes into account the tone, manner and intention of . . . the person to whom the words were directed; the degree of provocation; and most importantly, whether or not the remarks created disorder in the Chamber."

So it's clear that in terms of language spoken in the House and words used in the House, the question really is: have they created disorder? That seems to be the common theme in both of them: "May cause disorder in another context, and therefore be unparliamentary" according to *Beauchesne's* or "whether or not the remarks created disorder in the Chamber" in the context of your own remarks in your memo.

Clearly, first and foremost, the member to whom the response from the hon. Premier was directed made no comment, raised no issue with respect to the question of whether or not it was unparliamentary. Members of his own caucus didn't raise any objection, and in fact as I recall the circumstances at the time, it was one of the quieter times in the House. So disorder was clearly not provoked by use of the word.

Then to go further, of course in the 11th question in the House this afternoon the leader of the third party used the word "misleading" himself in the context of his question. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader has the floor.

Mr. Hancock: The question of whether one can use the word "misleading" in the context of debate in the House or in answering questions in the House in this context, whether one can use even the term "deliberately misleading" clearly has to come from the context. In the context in which it was being used and in answer to the question where the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar had used certain information but had left out certain other information, the words "misleading" and "deliberately misleading" apply to the description of what was actually happening and, in fact, caused no uproar in the House. As I recall and I think other members recall, it was a very quiet time in the House. The only person who jumped up somewhat belatedly was the Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would request that you take into account the

context of the question and the answer, the context of the word used, the context that "misleading" has been determined both parliamentary and unparliamentary, the fact that subsequent to that you clearly admonished the House to utilize parliamentary language, and, I think, the fact that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona thereafter used the word "misleading." Surely he took it to mean that that was not something which had caused such a degree of uproar in the House as to be unparliamentary.

I think we have a clear understanding of what happened and what ought to happen in the future, and we should leave it there.

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, there have been some interesting points raised, and if I may be allowed to join in the debate that is occurring right now over the comments, I too would also refer to the document provided by the Speaker on February 12, 2004.

The Government House Leader refers to something on page 2, but when I actually look through those phrases which the Speaker has asked us to please have a look at – in fact, we are cautioned to be careful in their use – in fact, "mislead" is quite clearly spelled out a number of times, whether you wish to take it in the context of continue to mislead, mislead the House, deliberately mislead the House, deliberately meant to mislead the House. There are three different citations there, three different examples. A "deliberate attempt to" mislead the people, "misleading": four different examples of that. A "misleading statement," "misleading the Assembly," misleading the House, misleading Albertans: there are half a dozen examples of where that was not acceptable. "Misleading information," intentionally misleading.

I think it's quite clear based on the document the Speaker provided that he intended that we understand that the word "mislead" in any of its many possible combinations was not a word that was particularly considered parliamentary in this Assembly.

An interesting point raised by the Government House Leader seems to be trying to establish precedent, saying that if the member who it could be argued had the insult upon them doesn't raise the point of order, somehow that's not worthy of being considered for comment or for citation. I would argue that any member of the Assembly has the right, indeed the responsibility to rise in the House if they feel that decorum is being breached, that there is unparliamentary behaviour taking place in the House, or even that the tone that we're all working on is being deliberately lowered in the House. I would think it incumbent upon any member of the Assembly to rise and to bring that to the attention of the Speaker and, in fact, to ask for the House to be brought to order.

I would also argue against the Government House Leader's assertion that an uproar needs to be demonstrated in order for the words to be considered unparliamentary. I don't believe that's the case at all. I think, again, that the whole tone of the House can be lowered if comments are made repeatedly and left to go unchallenged. I don't think that there needs to be people rising up in arms or taking to arms for something to be pointed out to the Speaker and brought before this Assembly as being unparliamentary, unprofessional, and frankly disrespectful.

Those few comments I may offer up mostly in response to those raised by the Government House Leader. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I want to make this very clear at the outset. Question period and the functioning of question period I really truly believe should have the fewest possible interventions by

the chair to be most successful and effective, and I decline as much as I possibly can to interrupt question period. There were two times I intervened today with comments, and they're in *Hansard*, and all members can refer to it.

Now, here today we have a point of order. First of all, let me make it very, very clear that any member has the right to rise when they feel that unprincipled parliamentary conduct is underway in the Assembly. That is not only their right; more importantly, it is their responsibility to do that. So just because a particular member does not, does not mean that there isn't an opportunity for others to do it.

3:00

In the case of what we're dealing with today in the point of order from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, basically it has to do with language. Well, here is what was said, and I quote directly from *Hansard*. This is part of the response given by the hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow, who happens to be the president of Executive Council, who happens to be the Premier of the province of Alberta.

What the hon. member fails to point out – and purposely fails, because it is their intention to mislead and misrepresent. But what he intentionally – intentionally – fails to point out is that 37 per cent of those complaints to the consumer advocate were on natural gas bills, had nothing to do whatsoever with electricity. Now, Mr. Speaker, he intentionally left that out of his preamble because intentionally he wants to mislead and misrepresent the case to Albertans.

Now, we have documents, that we have circulated in the past, from me about when it is unparliamentary to use such phrases, such words, and what have you, and they have been quoted too. I need not go through them again because I've dealt with them in *Hansard* before, but clearly anything like "mislead," "misleading," "misleading statement," "misinformation," "intentionally" had been ruled unparliamentary. The document I've circulated before gives you the time, the dates when the interventions were. I also provided to all hon. members occasions and dates when such words as "misleading," "misleading statements," "misleading the House," "misled," "misrepresentation" were ruled not unparliamentary. That is part of the dilemma, and that is part of the difficulty in hearing some of the arguments.

What is not part of the difficulty in understanding this, however, is the intent of accusing someone else of uttering a deliberate falsehood, and that is unparliamentary. That is not a debatable point, and there is no context. The member stands up. There are opportunities for members to have different views, different opinions, and that's part of what debate is all about. To suggest that another member is dishonest is not an appropriate policy for any member in this particular House.

One can deal with a whole series of authorities and go from *Erskine May*, the 22nd edition, page 387, *Marleau and Montpetit*, page 525, and *Beauchesne's* sixth edition, section 492, listing the words that I've provided, listing the words *Beauchesne* has in it, and on and on and on. Then we can go to our own Standing Orders 23(h), (i), and (j).

Members should simply not accuse other members of being less than honest. This is a place of integrity. It should be a place of integrity. Members can have different views on certain things. We have led ourselves to believe, in fact, that we can hear one statement that says it's this and another statement that says it's that, and we know what the statement really is. But we've been conditioned to believe in the integrity of members, that when they speak, they speak with integrity.

So I don't like what happened here today at all, and I don't think that it keeps with the tradition at all. I did make two interventions

in the Assembly when this was done. I'm concluding that this is a point of order. It's a recognized and a legitimate point of order. I did make some comments to the Member for Calgary-Elbow about tempered language in the House before.

Now, the other day I ruled on a point of order against the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and a number of members sent me notes and said: well, you ruled on a point of order against the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, but you didn't make him apologize. I said: well, I think that I used enough language in giving the ruling that that probably wasn't required.

I'm going to maintain the same policy with respect to this matter today in the case of this particular point of order because it is tainted by one other thing that is true. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in his second question in his set used similar language. You know, what's good for the pot should be good for the kettle or something to that effect, whatever the heck it is. But the point of all of this is that we can all be better than we are at some time, and I encourage all of us to please remember that.

There are a lot of young people up here today. Certain people are going to get e-mails and memos and letters from people across the province who saw question period again, and they're going to be making accusations against hon. members who utter disrespectful statements. They often send me copies. My list is getting pretty thick, in fact. Pretty thick.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 17 Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise once again to speak to Bill 17, the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act. After second reading of this bill I was pleased to hear that there was general support for the amendments, and I appreciate the comments that were made. This gives me further confidence in the fact that these amendments will provide further clarity for the Natural Resources Conservation Board, which administers confined feeding operations in Alberta, for the livestock industry, and for other stakeholders. I am confident that these amendments provide the clarity needed by all stakeholders as they are based on consultations with them last year.

I would like to respond to the questions and comments that some hon. members raised during second reading to clarify the intent of the proposed amendments. As I have stated on many occasions, further clarity is what these amendments are all about.

I agree with the comments from the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills that prior to the amendments to AOPA in January of 2002 there was a patchwork of municipal land-use bylaws and rules across the province related to confined feeding operations. This patchwork and uncertainty caused many problems within neighbourhoods and between neighbours. I would like to thank the

hon. member for his comments that since the NRCB was given responsibility for regulating CFOs in Alberta, there is more consistency across the province, and the standards for these operations will allow the livestock industry to move forward in a responsible manner.

Further to my original response last Thursday the NRCB is being given further discretion to determine the minimum distance separation from an existing residence when an operation is applying to expand. The amendments are intended to give the NRCB the ability to look at the specific circumstances surrounding the proposed expansion and make a decision based on the facts of the matter and common sense or judgment.

As I mentioned in my response last week, the site-specific topography, prevailing winds, and other factors need to be part of the decision on appropriate MDS rather than an inflexible line on a map. As the hon. member knows, the NRCB has been given a lot of discretion in administering AOPA to make the right decisions based on the unique situations surrounding each operation. We need to continue to trust that they will make the right decisions.

Over the past two years the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development has established two practice review committees. One of these committees has completed its review, and the other is ongoing. In regard to the member's concern with giving the minister more discretion to deny the establishment of a practice review committee, this discretion is limited in that it only gives her additional discretion to deny a request if a practice review committee has already dealt with the issue or if the request does not have merit or the NRCB is already dealing with the concern.

3:10

We do not want to re-create the tactics that some opponents used in the past by requiring the CFO operator to spend considerable time and money defending an unsubstantiated claim. For that reason I would also not support the suggestion of a refundable deposit. The establishment of a committee should be based on the merit of the request, not the ability of someone to force an operator to defend an allocation because someone is prepared to lose a small deposit.

The hon. member also expressed concerns with removing the affected-party status from neighbours of lands on which manure from the operation is intended to go. From our experience over the past two years these manure spreading lands often change, in some cases the day after the application is approved. As well, manure application usually only occurs once or twice a year, and in some cases manure is not applied on the same land for several years.

As I mentioned during second reading, we'll be adding more stringent restrictions to the regulations with how close to a residence or public building like a community hall you can spread manure if it is not incorporated. The example that the hon. member used of manure being spread across the road and hitting cars is an issue of improper manure spreading. It is not an issue of a neighbour not being an affected party. The NRCB currently has authority through AOPA to deal with problems of the improper application of manure.

As well, proposed amendments to AOPA will give affected-party status to neighbours of new and expanding registration-sized operations. These are smaller operations. Previously this status was limited to the municipality and the applicant.

I thank the hon. member for his support in changing the term for short-term storage of manure from six to seven months. This will help avoid the need for the spreading of manure on frozen or snow-covered ground. The regulations deal with the spreading of manure on snow or frozen ground. I am proposing that operations that have nine months of permanent manure storage not be allowed to spread manure on snow or frozen ground without the NRCB approving a

manure handling plan. There are unique circumstances, such as prevention of wind erosion in southern Alberta, that may benefit from a winter application of manure.

As far as the NRCB having discretion to not require nine months of permanent storage, as I mentioned during second reading, the NRCB would have to approve a manure handling plan that identified why nine months of permanent storage would not be required. The example that I used was selling manure to a mushroom grower so that he would not need to store manure on his own operation. If the situation changed and the operator needed to store manure on his operation, they would be required to have adequate storage.

Regarding the hon. member's comments about the use of manure as a soil amendment for saline soils, a recent study completed by Alberta Agriculture showed that saline levels in soil would only be increased with large additions of manure being applied on a continual basis. These application rates would far exceed the limit specified in AOPA. The use of manure to improve the organic matter and structure of these soils is meant to encourage plant growth and improve these soils. A management plan would be required by the NRCB to ensure that application did not create a risk to the environment.

Regarding the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry, the minister will determine the merit of an application when considering the establishment of a practice review committee based on the facts included in the request. The determination of what is a minor alteration to an existing building or structure that will not require notification of neighbours will be at the discretion of the approval officer. This discretion will be limited to those minor modifications that will result in improvements or minimal change in the risk to the environment or disturbance from the operation. Any increase in the capacity of the operation to house animals is not considered a minor change. An example would be a change to a manure storage lagoon from top to bottom loading, which would reduce odour.

Regarding the hon. member's concerns with approval officers not being bound by all provisions that municipalities include in their municipal development plan, the original intent of AOPA was to encourage municipalities to identify where they did not want CFOs to be located. Approval officers will continue to be bound by these provisions. However, some municipalities have started to include technical requirements in their municipal development plans that are over and above or contrary to the provisions of AOPA. Previously an approval officer had to automatically deny an application simply because these provisions were included in the plan. This would require an appeal to the NRCB by the applicant, creating unnecessary costs and delays. Again, this is a clarification of the original intent of AOPA amendments two years ago.

There are many issues that have to be evaluated and dealt with in considering establishing or expanding a CFO, just like the establishment or expansion of an operation in any other industry. It would not be prudent to deal with one issue at a time as in most cases they are linked to others and, therefore, need to be addressed collectively in order to make the best decision.

I appreciate the hon. member's support for the proposed emergency order provisions. It is also encouraging to hear that the environmental groups we consulted with through our process last year support the direction we are taking regarding the definition of a CFO.

Regarding the comments made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, I certainly agree that the environmental principles of AOPA are sound. One of the fundamentals of AOPA continues to be that the neighbours of these operations are protected and their well-being considered when these operations are estab-

lished or expanded. The main purpose of the minimum distance separation in AOPA is to provide some distance between these operations and their neighbours to reduce their impact. These distances increase as the number of animals on the operation increases. The NRCB works closely with the regional health authorities when considering an application for a new or an expanding CFO.

Regarding the comments made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, the intentions of these amendments are not to relax standards in the legislation. Although AOPA does not require existing operations to meet all the standards in AOPA, if these operations are causing a risk to the environment or an inappropriate disturbance, the NRCB can require them to fix the problem. The same principle applies when the building code changes. The province does not require all homeowners in the province to upgrade their homes to the new standard. This principle also applies to operations that were previously approved through the municipal development permit process.

There is certainly intent to look at the specific circumstances surrounding a CFO and balance the needs of the operation, protect the environment, and minimize the impact on neighbours. There are no provisions in AOPA or in the proposed amendments that allow the NRCB to override the Public Health Act. As I mentioned a moment ago, the NRCB works closely with the regional health authorities.

In regard to the questions from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar two examples of size of operations that would produce 500 tonnes of manure per year are a 35-sow farrow-to-finish operation or a 21-head herd of dairy cows. In AOPA manure also includes associated bedding and feed spillage. As one can see, these are very small operations.

Regarding the hon. member's concerns with amendments to allow neighbours of CFOs to waive the requirements for MDS, experience has shown us over the past two years that an operation could not expand because a neighbour was within the MDS, even though they supported the expansion of the operation. This amendment would allow these supporters to waive the requirement and allow the operation to expand.

Mr. Chairman, this government recognizes that by making these changes to the Agricultural Operation Practices Act, the original intent of the legislation will be clarified for all those concerned: confined feeding operators, municipalities, the public, and the Natural Resources Conservation Board, which administers the act. Passing Bill 17 will clarify a number of technical and policy changes that were brought up in a review of the act during the stakeholder consultation last year. The amendments enhance the province's ability to deal with nuisances such as odour, noise, dust, smoke, or other disturbances resulting from an agricultural operation. They also continue to provide producers and other stakeholders with a one-window process for siting of new or expanding confined feeding operations.

With those comments, Mr. Chair, I will conclude by encouraging all members of this Assembly to support this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

3:20

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 17, the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004. We've been waiting for this piece of legislation for quite a long time. Over the years that I've been in this House, I've had the opportunity to visit many intensive livestock operations and hear about their concerns and visit many of the

communities that they reside in and hear about those concerns.

So we've been looking forward to some of the necessary amendments. For the most part this bill addresses the easy ones; let me put it that way, Mr. Chairman. What we see it not addressing are the health impact assessments that we expected to be in this legislation. I don't see any serious addressing of environmental concerns. What we don't see here, I don't think, is help for area farmers surrounding the operations considered to be directly affected persons. Well, the health impact and the environmental impacts are very important issues to be dealt with, but what is most pressing to people who live in these communities is the decision of who is and who is not directly affected because, of course, there are some real impacts for people who live in these areas in terms of smell and quality of life.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll be introducing an amendment that deals with that particular concern.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, you may proceed now. We shall refer to this as amendment A1.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. As members can see before them, what this amendment does is amend section 12 in the proposed section 21(a) by striking out "of ½ mile or the minimum distance separation, as determined in the regulations," and substituting "2 miles."

So if you were to go to page 8 in the bill and take a look at point 12, section 21 is amending what is now designated to be an appropriate area to deem people to be directly affected. It says by adding and in the case of an application for a registration or an amendment of a registration must notify the owners or occupants of land within the greater of ½ mile or the minimum distance separation, as determined in accordance with the regulations, of the parcel of land on which the confined feeding operation is located or is to be located before "within the time period."

For anyone who's visited these areas, you can clearly see that a half a mile is not enough space, that people farther away than half a mile are significantly directly affected by the confined feeding operations, particularly by smell and by the impact on their road system of the trucks travelling back and forth, also the impact when manure is spread, whether it's composted or spread as a liquid. For anyone upwind or downwind of these particular locations it can have a significant impact. There's no doubt that at certain times of the year the last thing you'd be doing if you were within even a two-mile radius of a confined feeding operation is having a barbeque on the outside patio of your home because the smell is such that it will certainly put you off your food and impacts everything in your life, including the smell being pervasive and getting in your clothing.

We're saying that as laid out in this legislation a half a mile is just not enough space. Certainly, people at a further distance than that are directly affected, and we've chosen two miles because that seems to be a reasonable compromise. We know that in some of the areas I visited, people feel that they are directly affected within a five- or 10-mile radius. All this is asking for is to expand that particular distance so that more people can have some say, pro or con, on any changes in the area.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll cede the floor to anyone else who wants to comment on this amendment.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak in favour of the amendment. This is basically an amendment that is going to in some ways achieve some of the things that were requested in the rural development strategy that was released today by the government, in

the sense that it talks in there about the stronger rural community voice. They talk about the fact that the lifestyle, the commitment of the community, the sense of community that's so relevant in rural areas is one of the things that's attractive about the development potential of our rural communities. If we have an opportunity for individuals to get more involved in discussions about what's going to happen to their communities, what the ambience of their community is, then they, in effect, will achieve some of the things that are being asked for in the rural strategy.

The other thing is that by increasing this separation a little bit, what it does is it really brings in an opportunity for a lot of the residents in those rural areas that are going to be impacted, not so much by the direct facility but by the waste management activities associated with that facility.

There have been a number of times this winter as I've driven around southern Alberta and through central Alberta when you would see manure being spread that can't be worked in because the ground is frozen, and people are saying: "How long is that going to sit there? Is it going to sit there now till spring thaw? Is it going to sit there till something else happens, till they get another snow to cover it up?" And in most cases, Mr. Chairman, that's what has happened. We've had a little bit more snow, and it has covered it up, and it looks nice and white again.

But if we open up and allow for people to have a say, it gives them buy-in. It gives them a sense of ownership. It gives them a sense of community. I think that's one of the things that we really need to start looking at and talking about as we go through this whole process of what is appropriate discussion when activities are going to go on in a community that have a direct effect on that community.

I think that having two miles instead of the half mile or the minimum distance separation gives us a much better approach to looking at how the whole thing fits into the sense of community that we're trying to create in Alberta and that comes out with the philosophy that was behind the rural development strategy report that was released today. I think that if we're going to really make a statement that we're buying into that report, that we believe that the focus of that report is important, in effect, we will support this amendment and give more people a chance to have input. You know, this is one of the things that we need to look at in terms of making sure that communities feel that they have some control and some say, not necessarily absolute but input to the direction their community takes. So I would encourage everybody to look at this and accept the two-mile amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to briefly comment on the amendment. I'm going to speak in support of the amendment, but before I do that, I also want to compliment the hon. Member for Leduc for taking the trouble to systematically address the concerns and points that were made by somebody on this side, by some members of the House, including some comments that I made. So I want to thank him for paying attention to the concerns. We may or may not agree on the matters that are under debate, but at least to pay attention to and take seriously in debate those points made I think is a very refreshing sort of thing.

3:30

As to the amendment I think it does try to address one of the flaws in Bill 17. I think it is important to increase the distance between the nearest communities and the CFO location. Half a mile is not enough. Some of the smells have strong odour. Malodorous

conditions prevail in and around those operations, so half a mile limit is not good enough. To increase at least by two miles would help at least in part to alleviate some of the concerns surrounding the problems that residents or communities surrounding these operations face on a day-to-day basis.

I would certainly be happy to support this amendment and urge all other members in the House to support this amendment as well.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else?

Mr. Klapstein: Well, we did go through a lot of consultation, and I think we made a fair judgment call. I don't think it's the time to make it more onerous for producers at this time.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of comments on this amendment. I'm not certain what is the exact right number of miles because that can be tremendously affected by the management practices of the individual operation. It can be affected by topography. It can be totally out of view because it would be separated by a hill.

Certainly, there have been some things that have happened in the last year in my constituency that would provide a little bit of insight into what effect some of these operations do have. It's been argued, and argued successfully, that there is a negative impact on the values of neighbouring properties, especially residences. The owners of these properties appealed their assessment to the Municipal Government Board, and their appeal was upheld. They had their assessments reduced because it was recognized that their assets had actually decreased as a result of someone else developing a confined feeding operation within that area.

So whether it's a half mile or one mile or two miles, I'm not certain. I think the management practices have a lot to do with the individual operation. I would like to repeat again that those management practices make the difference between how easy it is for a new development to take place somewhere in the province or not. I submit to you, Mr. Chairman, that these things are judged by the poorest operators and what the poorest operators are allowed to do through the standards rather than what 90-plus per cent of the operations actually are, which are very good operations.

I think it behooves us all in here to make sure that these standards that are put in place are to ensure that the poorest amongst them are brought up to a standard that people can be comfortable with and trust that it's not going to have an adverse effect on their property values.

Thank you.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Chairman, I would just like to add a couple of comments to this. I appreciate the hon. member's input. No question; it's been an area that we've been interested in for some time and we've had a number of conversations about. However, I think that the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills made the comment that is really germane to this discussion. We introduced the Agricultural Operation Practices Act a year ago and committed at that time to do a review of it when it had been in place for a year. The hon. Member for Leduc has conducted that review and spent a fair amount of time with industry, with communities. The crux of the matter is that management practices are really the key to this.

Like any industry the majority of the people who are in this industry practise very good management practice, do their best to be good neighbours, good corporate citizens. But you will have – and

members opposite know because we've worked on a couple – instances where the rules were right; the practices were wrong.

Maybe rather than making it so onerous for the 90-some per cent of good operators, we make it a heck of a lot tougher for those who aren't. I will give you my commitment that we will do that. We will enforce this act through the proper channel, which is the NRCB. This act gives them the authority to go in and do it, and sometimes it takes a little longer than we want, but eventually we get there. So I would recommend that we don't accept this amendment in the letter that it was written. But in the spirit of what I believe was intended by the member who submitted it, we'll make that commitment that we will do everything that we can to ensure that those rules are enforced and good management practices are practised.

There are so many good projects out there now, and there are so many advances in technology. I give the example of the Iron Creek colony with their biogas project that has reduced odour, emissions so significantly. We have other examples of that occurring in the province.

This industry does for the whole want to be a good community partner and wants to contribute to their communities through the jobs and opportunities that are there. Let's deal with the ones who don't under the rules and regulations that we do have in place and the legislation that we have in place and let this industry grow appropriately, not unfettered, but appropriately, and make sure that those who are in the industry follow the good legislation and regulations that are in place.

So, Mr. Chairman, as I say, I don't accept or recommend that we endorse this amendment in the letter of it, but certainly I will take the spirit of it and ensure that our authorities uphold that spirit.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the comments from the minister of agriculture and certainly also support, as she does, those operators who are taking a look at biomass operations, where they're using the gasses for other purposes rather than just having them exposed to the air. Those are areas that we've looked at extensively over the years, particularly as they have developed in Europe, and are very much supportive of them.

I also agree with her that the big concern is for those few operators in this province that are poor operators. I agree that most of the operators do an excellent job, but it's particularly because of those poor operators that we scrutinize this kind of legislation carefully and bring in amendments to try and improve it wherever necessary.

In that light, I have another amendment, Mr. Chairman, that I would like to bring forward at this time.

3:40

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the amendment is being distributed. For the record we shall refer to this amendment as amendment A2.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, you may proceed now.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This amendment reads that this particular bill, Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004, be amended by striking out section 10. So if people will go to page 7 in this piece of legislation, and we go to 10:

Section 19 is amended by adding the following after subsection (1):

(1.1) Despite subsection (1), if in the opinion of the approval officer the proposed amendment is related to a minor alteration to an existing building or structure at a confined feeding operation or manure storage facility that will result in a minimal

change to its risk, if any, to the environment and a minimal change to a disturbance, if any, notification is not required under subsection (1).

So this amendment proposes to strike out that section. As we see it, the problem is that the section allows an approving officer to waive notice about amendments, and we want to know what is being considered as a minor alteration. It's not defined anywhere, and our concern is that it may be misused and that if anyone is amending an operation, people close by and affected parties should know about it. This is primarily a concern when we're talking about poor operators and the number of approval officers that are out there available to inspect these facilities.

We have seen in other departments where the number of people actually on the road inspecting has been greatly reduced over years. This can be such a critical function that we really believe that this leaves the ability of operators to change or make alterations to their structures or buildings too open. We just believe that this should be deleted and that those alterations should go through the regular approval process.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

Mr. Klapstein: Well, there is a lot of discretion left with the officer. Can you imagine what would happen if somebody wanted to change a gate on a feedlot, if somebody wanted to repair a wall or change a wall inside a building and you had to go through the whole application process for something that common sense would tell you is minor?

That was the intention of it: that if it's going to make a significant change or have a significant impact, yes, go through the application process, but if it's something minor, then give somebody some discretion to deal with it. That was the intent of it. If an officer is not exercising the proper discretion or judgment, that can soon be dealt with. But to make a minor change in an operation and have to go through a lengthy, costly application process, I can't support that.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Chairman, I just rise to ask for clarification, then, on what constitutes minor. We dealt with a case with the minister – both ministers, in fact – where minor was a matter of interpretation as well. It was a matter of whether or not going out with a shovel and digging a little ditch to drain water was minor versus using a BobCat or using a tractor. Those three different levels of activity eventually occurred within that facility, and, you know, once you start and say, "Well, it's just a minor drainage problem," it ends up being a major earthmoving activity by the time you get to the end of it. This is the kind of clarification that needs to be put into this section.

If we're going to deal with minor alterations, I fully support the idea that changing a gate, changing a wall, moving this or that for better animal movement, that kind of thing, is quite all right.

One of the operational aspects of section 19(1.1) says: "a minor alteration" – and I'll skip down – to a "manure storage facility that will result in a minimal change to its risk." That becomes too subjective. You know, back to the example that I was talking about, everybody in the community looked at it and said that that was significant, yet the operator said that it was minor, and the inspector who was there said: well, the operator says that it's minor, so it is minor. Who gets to judge that?

Let's have this clarified; that's the intent. Let's not allow these things to go on before we can clarify how much of a change is a minor change. That's why this amendment needs to be supported.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm speaking to amendment A2. To preface my brief remarks in support of amendment A2, I just want to draw the attention of the House and remind the House that a couple of years ago – well, three years ago maybe, in 2001 – when the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2001 was debated, the New Democrat opposition heard a great deal from concerned residents of rural communities and small towns about what was wrong with what was being proposed in that bill at that time. The bill passed in spite of widespread opposition to this and concerns expressed across the province and particularly in rural areas. We certainly were most sympathetic to those concerns, but the changes weren't made in the bill to fully address those concerns at the time.

Two years since the proclamation of the bill we are now seeing amendments being proposed to the bill from the government's side, but I think the amendments as proposed in this 2004 version of the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act don't go far enough to address even the minor concerns that have remained on the table during the last two years.

This amendment which proposes to strike out section 10 on page 7 dealing with the amendment of section 19 I think is a good amendment. It will go at least some ways in improving the legislation, which is flawed in other ways as well. Certainly, if this amendment A2 is accepted, it will help address some of the concerns with the proposed bill and with the existing legislation which this bill tries to amend.

I speak in favour of the amendment, and I urge other members to do the same.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have another amendment, and I'll just start talking about this one as it's being distributed because it's very similar to the last amendment. This time if you go to page 8 of the bill, you'll see that what we're asking to be struck out is in section . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, let the amendment at least arrive at this desk first.

Ms Carlson: Okay.

The Deputy Chair: It's my job just to make sure that I have the right copies.

Okay. You may proceed now.

3:50

Ms Carlson: Thank you. This is a very similar amendment to the last one. If you go to page 8 of the bill, we're taking a look at section 21 and striking out clause (b), which is the same wording as the last amendment that we dealt with. Once again, given the debate on the last amendment, I'm still not satisfied that we have defined the difference between significant and minor changes. The discretion is left too much in the hands of the landowner as compared to the approval officer, particularly when we're dealing with environmental impact issues.

I agree with the sponsor of the bill when he says that minor changes to gates or doorways or minor structural changes aren't significant, but when you deal with any of the environmental impact issues like the processing or moving or handling of the manure or the water contained within the operation and that which needs to be

drained or added to the facility, we start to talk about significant impacts that really need to be considered within the environmental impact of the operation and the region.

So I would suggest that those are not ever minor in nature. I don't see them defined elsewhere within the act, so this looks to me like the only place where we can make an amendment that those kinds of issues will be dealt with with the weight that they need to be dealt with for the long-term viability of the operation and the community.

So I would ask all members to please support this amendment.

Mr. Klapstein: Well, once again I'm not going to support the amendment. I know it's putting some trust in the approval officer in specifying a minimal change. I think that an approval officer that's experienced and has been on the job and understands what his responsibilities are is going to know when something exceeds what is minimal.

Mr. Marz: I'd just like to make some brief comments on this. One of the concerns I raised in second reading that's relative to this is giving the NRCB more discretion than they currently have. It's been my experience in my own constituency that it's that discretion and how it was handled that has caused a lot of problems in my particular area and provided for a lot of increased complaints to the field officer, and the field officer's responses – I have copies of them here, how they claim to have responded to their concerns. The record hasn't been good.

I'm not going to go through them, but when the complaints stopped going to the approval officer and started coming to me, I went out and checked for myself and called the field inspector. I didn't get the same response because it was a different question, but I got a similar type of response, that water doesn't run off that quarter. Well, I was out last weekend, and water was running off my quarter, that was a lot flatter than this one, and filled up the dugout and ran over.

There are communities and there are probably field inspectors that do different things in different ways and interpret the act differently. In the particular case I'm dealing with, I've had nothing but problems since the development, as far as complaints go, and people stopped complaining to the NRCB because they're not getting any response.

So I think that this particular amendment has some merit, not necessarily eliminating the whole thing but providing some clarity to what is minimal risk. How many minimal risks can you tolerate before you have a major risk? How many minimal or minor changes can you have approved before you end up with a major change?

So if the mover would like to address how you would otherwise go about addressing this particular issue other than accepting this particular amendment, I would be happy to hear it.

Mr. Klapstein: The choices really are to force an operator through the entire approval process over something that is minimal or having some trust or some confidence in an officer of the NRCB that he will exercise some sound judgment on small things. If I have to choose between the two, I will choose to not put that operator through a full-blown application or approval process over something that's minor. I will trust the officer to do what's right, and if he doesn't, we have ways of addressing that.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, then my question to the sponsor of this bill is this. Why didn't you define "minimal" within the act? As we have heard first-hand, there have been some experiences where the judgment of that person out there in the field wouldn't pass scrutiny in other areas or in other circumstances. So tell us exactly why there

were no definitions provided in these changes for that issue, particularly where it deals with the environmental issues of manure handling and water management.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Yeah. Well, what is minimal can be a whole range of things that might happen or that a person wants to do on their operation. The spreading of manure, the environmental risk, that applies to everybody. Regardless of the size or regardless of the changes they want to make, they have to comply with what the rules are in terms of protecting the environment. Even the small operations, that we try to treat differently and in a less demanding process, still have to comply with all the environmental rules and regulations. So I don't think that changes.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I just want to put on the record that I find that answer completely unsatisfactory.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? Is the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands drawing my attention, wanting to speak?

Mr. Mason: No, I did want to speak on the bill, but I'm not yet familiar with the amendment.

[Motion on amendment A3 lost]

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I have one more amendment on this bill, and I'll have it distributed now.

The Deputy Chair: We shall record this next amendment as amendment A4. Please give a few minutes for distribution.

Hon. member, you may proceed now.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This particular amendment amends section 9 by adding the following after the proposed section 18.1(5). I would refer people to page 6 of the bill if they want to follow along. We're adding here:

18.2(1) In this section "health impact assessment" means an assessment conducted by the medical officer of health, or designate, of the health unit or health region under the Regional Health Authorities Act in which the proposed or operating confined feeding operation or the proposed amendment to an approval, registration or authorization is located on the potential impact of the operation to the health of humans.

(2) Any approval, registration or authorization that is deemed to be provided under section 18.1 must, within 6 months of the coming into force of this section, be submitted for a health impact assessment and must comply with Part 2, Division 1 of the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act.

Mr. Chairman, this amendment speaks directly to the comments made by the mover of this bill to the previous amendment when he said that issues must comply with current legislation around environmental impact. In fact, for the most part, these operations are not required to either have health impact assessments or environmental assessments. That is something that has been missing in this legislation and is missing in the amendments to this particular act. We're trying to put some definitions and some clarity into this amending act, which are missing and which the mover of this particular bill seems to be unable to specify directly in terms of what definitions should be.

4:00

We truly believe that the future of this industry is contingent upon these operators being operators that will pass inspection for health

impacts and environmental impacts. For those operators who operate efficiently and effectively, this will be very minor in terms of consequence, but for those who do not, then it has a major impact not just on the operators and those people working within that facility but all their surrounding neighbours.

As we look at this province opening up its borders to more operators in this industry, we must significantly look at how we assess the impact on the environment and the health of anybody affected. This is the step that we need to go for these operators and for all Albertans. It's a necessary, critical step to put in place in this legislation. If we don't do this, when we think about the volume of manure created yearly by these pigs – it's significantly greater than anything that humans could contribute to in a year – the health impacts and the environmental impacts are significant and serious.

We've seen all kinds of issues develop over the years with regard to this in terms of heavy metal deposits when manure is being spread, in terms of what it does to the soil if not properly processed, particularly with regard to waterways. We heard one story about dugouts running over. It happens. It happens frequently in this province when we have operations not far enough back from waterways, when we see that the containers that they have are not properly sealed and we get contamination into groundwater. All of those are instances that have happened. We must stop those kinds of processes immediately.

Also in terms of the impact on those people employed in these confined feeding operations – we have to take that into consideration. That's what this particular amendment puts forward and takes a look at doing.

I sincerely hope that the mover of this bill will have just seen this as a minor oversight on his part when putting this legislation together and will support this amendment, which will make this bill much stronger. Thank you.

Mr. Klapstein: Well, once again, I'm not going to support the amendment. When AOPA was done a couple of years back, it was designed to have a one-window approach so that you went to one place to file an application to have it dealt with. Along with that, provisions were made for consultation with the health authorities, and to the best of my knowledge that's working pretty well.

We were in the Lethbridge area. You talk to the health authority people there, and they seem to be very pleased with how it is working. As far as I know, the consultation with the health authorities and NRCB has worked very well, and those recommendations are taken into account when the decision is made, similarly with the environment. There's a linkage that was designed into it when the act was brought in in 2002.

I still support the one-window approach. I agree that health and environmental considerations have to be taken into account when that decision is made, and the provisions are there for it to be done.

[Motion on amendment A4 lost]

Mr. Mason: Well, Mr. Chairman, I do want to enter a few general comments with respect to this bill and to raise a few other specifics, and I just want to talk a little bit about the direction of the government with respect to this industry. This morning there was an MLA committee who, together with the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, released a report on rural Alberta and what needed to be done.

You know, it was interesting that the report painted I guess by implication a rather gloomy picture of rural Alberta and came forward with a number of very general strategies for dealing with the problem. The problem, I think, is simply stated as a continuing

decline in population in rural Alberta and a decline in the population of many towns and villages in Alberta and serious problems that arise for municipalities as a result, financial problems, problems with a declining tax base, potential bankruptcy of towns, and so on.

I guess the concern I have is that rural Alberta is in decline partly due to the policies of the government itself. I would say that the shrinking of population in rural western Canada is a historical trend that has gone on for decades, in fact probably over an entire century. That is not something that one could hold this government or any government accountable for, but it's my view that government policies in terms of agriculture have accelerated the decline. They've done that specifically by encouraging the concept that bigger is always better.

Going back a number of years, the Conservative government of Alberta provided incentives for large meat-packing plants to come into Alberta and as a matter of policy helped create the situation we now have in this province where two large meat-packing plants dominate the beef industry, in fact have 90 per cent of the capacity in Alberta, and in Canada as a whole they still have about 70 per cent of the capacity. Those plants were enticed here by the government, and what happened is that they put a lot of existing plants out of business, and they shut down.

This has certainly affected my constituency of Edmonton-Highlands, where the Maple Leaf plant was shut down just a few years ago – before that it was the Gainers plant – and has been vacant for a considerable amount of time. So these plants, which were considered inefficient and small scale, closed down, laying off thousands of people, and they have a similar effect in rural areas.

The government has encouraged ILOs and large ones to boot, and this legislation is about the rules that will be placed around the operation of these plants. This direction in agriculture will kill small farms. It will put them out of business, and it will lead to a further decline in the rural economy and in the rural population base.

So at the same time that the minister is releasing a report full of vague strategies for dealing with the crisis in rural Alberta, we're dealing with a bill here that is part and parcel of a government policy in rural Alberta that bigger is better. Bigger is better is a very dangerous doctrine for our rural communities because it means the loss of the family farm; it means the loss of the small town. The bank closes, and the grain elevator closes. And it's all a result of the same policy.

4:10

Similarly, the government's opposition to the single-desk selling of the Canadian Wheat Board is something that favours larger grain farmers who hope to be able to sell their grain directly and benefit by eliminating the single desk, but it's the small grain farmer who will be disadvantaged. And the margins in farming are paper thin and have been since the middle '70s in almost all areas. So small farmers need every advantage they can possibly have just to survive, but I would submit, Mr. Chairman, that it's the government's policy to accelerate the bankruptcy of small business and small farmers in rural Alberta because they believe that large-scale and possibly massive-scale operations are superior and are more competitive, and they don't care if they're owned by foreigners. They don't care if Albertans lose their own land and have to work for low wages for some of these foreign companies. We become tenants in our own province.

So I have opposed the direction of the government on ILOs for that reason and also for health and environmental concerns. We did some calculations when the last bill went through this Assembly about the amount of manure that would be produced if the Premier had his wish and we went up to 17 million hogs in this province. I

don't have the actual calculations, Mr. Chairman, but the amount of pig manure that will be produced will be absolutely enormous, and it is a particularly difficult manure to deal with in terms of its ability to create health problems, nuisances such as odours, and pollution. In those volumes I believe that the provincial ecology and public health will be threatened.

Now, I'd like to know what would be done to ensure that all facilities which do process manure as part of their operations are legally required to ensure that their activities are not damaging the health of people in nearby communities. I think, Mr. Chairman, that that needs to be in place regardless of how long the operation has existed.

I'd like to ask the question: why are operators such as racetracks explicitly excluded from the bill? Are they not capable of causing health risks to the nearby communities? I'd like to know how the peer review will ensure that fair hearings take place to the complainants, and I'd like to know how committee members would be chosen under the bill.

Mr. Chairman, I have heard from a number of Albertans who have very strong concerns about the questions that we've raised. There was a situation in the town of Bentley which was reported to us. An expansion went ahead there, and there has been a serious problem with odours, and it has been a contentious issue in the community. There have been reports of respiratory problems that need to be dealt with. One person contacted our office and said that the people of Bentley are being bombarded with these toxic chemicals. There's nothing in the act to cover this other than that the odour is a nuisance. It's the only way that it's looked at.

We have other concerns that have been raised about the impact on surface water from these lagoons and so on, and there remain questions that I don't think the government has adequately answered about the potential threat to our aquifers. I'd just like to indicate, Mr. Chairman, that we do have a lot of concern with this bill and would like to hear a lot more from the member who has proposed this and from the minister in order to allay our concerns.

Generally, however, the direction of having large-scale industrial agriculture operations involving livestock is not a direction that we would endorse, and we don't believe that there are sufficient protections in terms of nuisance odours and public health to continue with this policy. We believe that the policy of large-scale operations in general, industrial operations, is transforming the countryside and is a key factor in the continuing crisis in Alberta's rural communities. These need to be addressed at the source, not with a bunch of vague strategies as we saw in the MLA report that was released this morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. How appropriate that we're dealing with manure management after that speech.

I come from a family farm, a small farm, the kind that apparently the hon. member thinks the government is out to do in. I can tell you that my neighbours just down the road in Saskatchewan would love to have that attitude from their government surrounding farms that this government has looked after.

There are so many inaccuracies. I just have to put this: it is a huge investment now in any type of farm. There's no question – the member is absolutely right – the margins are extremely tough. To make an investment, whether it's in a feedlot or a cow-calf operation, can literally run into the millions of dollars, and as a businessman that farms, I have to know the rules around the investments I'm going to make. I can't even pretend to think it's a wise investment

if someone who pretends to understand agriculture, who knows what's right for me, moves in down the road and says, "I don't like that smell. I moved to the country for some fresh air, and now I have to smell that cattle farm or that hog barn."

So I have to be protected, and as much as I'm certainly not a promoter of legislation, I also need protection from people who don't understand agriculture, and it's quite obviously what's come out of that speech.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I, too, am utterly amazed at the self-proclaimed expertise of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. Perhaps he would gain a far broader, useful knowledge of farming if he started farming some of those highlands.

You'd think that this government was responsible for the small margins. The fact of the matter is that the small margins that farmers do have in agriculture are based on world markets. A lot of that is based on the subsidies: our neighbours to the south and our European neighbours constantly are competing against us with larger subsidies.

This government has been there for the Alberta farmers more than any other government in any other jurisdiction in Canada, not just once, not just twice, but every time there's a crisis, absolutely every time. I know because I am a farmer. I have farmed all of my life, and I talk the talk, and I know how to walk the walk. I can walk it in high boots, as the former leader of the Liberals wears quite often. There's a reason that sometimes you have to wear those high boots, and I'm starting to think that I'd better wear them in here. Some of the stuff you have to listen to in here is absolutely amazing.

4:20

Whether it's low grain prices, low feed prices, grasshoppers, the BSE situation, this government has been at the plate first up every single time and will continue to be whenever this industry is in crisis. We have developed markets for all these products in a way that no other province has done. How come this feeding operation hasn't established in Saskatchewan? Lots of wide open spaces there. They could raise cattle there just as easily as they could here. More water in the north than we have here. So I don't buy the argument from the Member for Edmonton-Highlands that this is all this government's fault that there are low margins in agriculture.

I do have some concerns about this bill. I'd like to start off by thanking the Member for Leduc for taking the time both in the House in addressing some of my concerns but outside the House and sitting with me for hours combing through this stuff, this pile on my desk here, trying to work with me to address those concerns. I'd like to thank him for that.

I think most of the concerns I've raised can be addressed in regulations if there's a will and a commitment from the member to do so. I think I've already got that commitment from the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. However, there are a couple of outstanding issues that were raised as a result of the comments that the Member for Leduc made.

In second reading I asked how many practice review committees were established, and I believe the answer was two. If there were only two in the last year, it does cause me to wonder yet why we need to change the rules and give more discretion to perhaps not hear some of these complaints that are construed to be vexatious or without merit.

I'd like to remind the member that vexatious actions can work both ways. I've got a number of examples that I could give, that I

have talked to the member about before. I classify these operations into the good, the bad, and the ugly. The ugly is a very, very small percentage. They're the ones that cause the most problems, and they can actually go out and be very vexatious to anyone who raises a complaint. We have to have protection against that sort of thing too. I'm hoping that the member and the minister will look at those particular instances and look at addressing those in the regulations.

The other thing I'm concerned about that probably can't be addressed in the regulations is the issue of giving the NRCB more discretion or more power, because in my particular situation in my riding regarding one particular development – I'm not going to put a classification on that; I'll let the neighbours do that – I think there's no trust in that community with the NRCB. The NRCB has not earned their trust and certainly currently does not have that trust, and to give them more discretion is not going to increase that trust in that community.

So I'd like the minister's comments on that particular issue, and with that I'll take my seat.

Mr. Klapstein: I will respond to the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills in this way, saying that there is a process under which regulations are developed, and I'll certainly work with him through that process, but I can't make that decision myself today.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to participate in this debate?

[The clauses of Bill 17 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 21

Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a few comments on Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004. I look forward to speaking to the bill in committee today. When we look at this bill, we are looking at the third attempt at amending the Child Welfare Act within three years. I certainly hope that on this particular occasion the amendments that have been proposed will satisfy everybody and that we can move forward from this position.

What we are trying to do with the amendments in this bill is align this bill with the Family Law Act and the Vital Statistics Act. Certainly, the major goal is that we have a smooth transition when we do go forward with this legislation. So this, Mr. Chairman, is certainly more of a housekeeping bill. What we are doing is making the wording consistent between the Family Law Act and the Vital Statistics Act.

Some of the things that we look at when we do our sectional analysis – I'm looking at subsection (3), which redefines the job of the child advocate and also includes the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act. This allows the child advocate to delegate his duties to people within the child's life.

I know that our party has always supported the advocate, that the

advocate be a separate office from the government. Yet this bill in its form still has the advocate reporting to the minister, so certainly we feel that this is one of the areas that we'd like further clarification as to why the advocate is not a separate office from the government.

Section 4 changes the alternative dispute resolution to be defined by regulations. It also changes the disclosure of documents created by the alternative dispute resolution to include any documents that affect the development of a child. Our questions here are: what documents don't affect the development of a child, and who in this situation is going to protect the child's personal information after the dispute is settled?

Section 7 removes financial contributions that the family may have to provide when their child goes into service, allows the court to demand treatment for both the child and guardian, and also finishes with the clause: "any other terms that the Court considers necessary." This gives the court the ability to make decisions without regulated control on what is required to make the family come back together.

Section 11 changes the amount of time a court can make a secure services order from 10 to five days, and it forces the family or guardians to be notified by any means necessary within one day if a secure services order is given by the courts. They may apply for five more days to stabilize a child or assess a child and prepare a plan for service. There is also a set of information that is applied to the child when a secure services order is passed.

One last area that I would like to comment on is section 15, which repealed all the information about how Children's Services would obtain child support and allows the director to apply to the courts for child support. This particular section, Mr. Chairman, requires a careful looking over for it deletes a large part about child support from the original act. This removes a process by which directors would act to obtain child support. What is going to be done now in this instance? Does the child support law handle this?

So those were some of my concerns with the bill at this particular time, Mr. Chairman. I thank you for the opportunity to put those on the record at this time.

4:30

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I hope to be able to answer some of the questions that the Member for Edmonton-Glenarry has just raised. I'm pleased to stand in Committee of the Whole and speak to Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004. The intent of this bill is to make minor amendments to the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003, legislation that received royal assent last spring and that is vital to the protection and preservation of Alberta's children, youth, and families. The purpose of the amendments, although there are many, is straightforward: to clarify the act, to ensure that the original intent of the act is carried out, and implementation.

I want to thank the members of the Assembly for their questions at second reading and in the committee as they provide an opportunity for clarifying a number of points and misconceptions. I welcome the opportunity today to clear up any confusion and create a greater understanding about these amendments and how they will help to ensure that the legislation is applied in practice in the manner that was intended.

I would like now to address each of the questions and points in detail to aid in that understanding. First, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003, as passed last spring in this House is significant legislation that will enhance services to children and families and will be renamed the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act

upon proclamation. The Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004, is making minor amendments to that act to ensure consistency with the Family Law Act, the Vital Statistics Act, and the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act.

The amendments were identified as work began on preparing the draft regulations. This is consistent with the usual process of preparing legislation for implementation. The draft regulations are now in the process of being drafted. The ministry has been consulting with stakeholders throughout the process. In keeping with this consultation, an open process, both opposition parties received a letter dated December 1, 2003, that provided a postregulatory framework and invited questions should further clarification be required. The offer to meet and discuss the framework was and continues to be extended to all members.

Regarding the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition's concern about the child and youth advocate, Mr. Chairman, the proposed amendments not only retain the role of the child advocate but also enhance that role by authorizing the advocate to meet the needs of children and youth involved in prostitution.

Changes in the alternative dispute resolution have been made so that a family feels comfortable sharing their situation while at the same time ensuring their confidentiality and the safety and well-being of the children. Information and records from alternative dispute resolution processes are highly confidential, but there are instances when its disclosure may be "necessary to protect the survival, security or development of the child." The Leader of the Official Opposition raised a concern about including "development of the child." It is important to keep in mind that above and beyond this specific point, any disclosure is limited to situations where a child is in need of intervention under the act.

A question was raised about who was going to protect the child's personal information after the dispute is settled. Mr. Chairman, confidentiality provisions of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act as well as FOIP are in place to protect those privacy interests.

Changing the duration of an initial secure services order from 10 days to five days will ensure that Charter rights are protected. This change will also ensure consistency with the confinement provisions in PCHIP legislation. The requirement that parents be notified of an application for a secure services order is a due process issue. Notice will provide parents with an opportunity to make representations to the court regarding an application for a secure services order.

We can assure the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods that the amendments do not repeal any requirements regarding children's treaty registration.

Regarding the time for licensing residential facilities, the ministry has consulted with operators impacted by the new licensing provisions. The 18-month transitional period will ensure that both operators and the ministry have sufficient time to implement a smooth and effective transition.

The act currently provides authority to the court to direct legal representation for children with child welfare status. The amendments enhance that authority by also giving the courts the ability to direct legal representation for children who are the subjects of a private guardianship application.

The change in maximum sentencing time for a parent or guardian who causes a child to be in need of protective services holds parents and guardians accountable, Mr. Chairman. It is consistent with the maximum sentencing time under our Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act.

During second reading the hon. members for Edmonton-Centre and Edmonton-Mill Woods referred to a number of sections that were being removed from the Child Welfare Act. The most pressing

questions from the Member for Edmonton-Centre were in regard to the sections around child support orders.

Concern was expressed with the following points: the elimination of sections talking about support orders or maintenance orders from the act; concern about removing rules around how the director of child welfare goes about establishing support orders or obtaining money from a guardian in support of a child; striking out the ability of a guardian, parent, or trustee ordered to pay child support to apply to the court for a review of the order; removal of the rules around dealing with child support, including the removal of the review process and the ability of the courts to vary an order that's in place.

Mr. Chairman, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre was right when she supposed that there might be a simple reason for this amendment. The process for obtaining court-ordered child support for children in the care of the director is addressed in the new Family Law Act, which was introduced last spring and passed last fall. The removal of these processes from the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003, is a simple matter of streamlining Alberta's legislation by avoiding duplication and striving for consistency. By removing these provisions, we haven't lost anything. In fact, we've ensured consistency, ensured that there's only one process for courts to follow, and avoided unnecessary duplication.

Mr. Chairman, as I said earlier, these amendments are housekeeping. They are minor, but they're still important. I appreciate this opportunity to speak to the concerns and questions that have been raised. The Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004, is vital legislation. It is essential that it is clear as we prepare for implementation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to make some comments with respect to Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004, at this time. I just want to indicate that some of the changes are of interest.

The main intention of section 3, which amends section 6, seems to be the inclusion of matters pertaining to the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act as part of the jurisdiction of the child and youth advocate, and that seems to be something worth supporting.

However, there does seem to be another change which is of a somewhat more dubious quality. In the proposed subsection (3)(b) the authority of the child and youth advocate is being extended to include PCHIP legislation, but instead of the advocate being able to receive, review, and investigate complaints, the advocate will now only be able to receive and review complaints. If this power is somewhere else restated, then hopefully the minister or the mover of the bill can direct us to that. Otherwise, I believe that it needs to be amended.

4:40

Section 4, Mr. Chairman, sets out some basic guidelines for an alternative dispute resolution mechanism. Now, we're not opposed to that in theory, but there are some concerns about the fact that the mechanism depends almost entirely on the regulations.

Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are useful insofar as they reduce the workloads of courts and appeal panels and insofar as they are able to foster a more amicable and less confrontational atmosphere for resolving disagreements. The courts and appeal panels do, however, have a role in ensuring that intimidation, threat, and subtle forms of duress are minimized. They're meant to counter power differences and level the playing field. One hopes that the alternative dispute mechanism will also do this. In the case of

parent/teen conflicts or abusive situations there are unavoidable power imbalances, and we can't expect negotiations or compromise in these situations to necessarily be fair or appropriate.

The minister may well have thought out plans for how to make this alternative dispute resolution mechanism work, but we cannot know because once again the bulk of the matter is left up to regulation. It would be much preferable if we could see the details or even the framework in the Assembly and thereby have a better idea of what we are discussing.

Further, we need assurances of a strong commitment from the minister to provide adequate resources for these alternative dispute processes. It's not enough, Mr. Chairman, to create a program. It must be adequately funded. Some of the people we have contacted have raised this as a very real concern.

Now, under section 7, which amends section 32, page 5, it appears that this amendment gives with one hand and takes with the other. It adds a provision under which the court may authorize or mandate participation in treatment and/or remedial programs, and that is certainly worth supporting. Hopefully, the minister or the mover can explain, however, why the clause in the original act is being dropped that would allow the court to prescribe financial contributions to the maintenance of the child.

When a child or youth is in danger of harming himself or herself or others or if the young person has severe substance abuse problems, then often secure treatment is an important resource for introducing some stability and the context necessary to be brought out of immediate danger. This is an important resource but is one that must be used very carefully. I've had at least one young person come into my office terrified that she would be put back into secure treatment. She felt that secure treatment was as much a prison as it was a treatment mechanism. So we must understand that a balance is necessary between the loss of certain rights and freedoms of young individuals and the need to strongly intervene to restore the youth's safety.

Mr. Chairman, when the Child Welfare Act was passed, the length of stay in secure treatment was radically reduced. The reasoning behind this was never fully explained. So I think it's good that this legislation is shortening the time allowed for the director to communicate with youth about their secure treatment and their ability to challenge a situation, but there still are questions about the length of stay of youth in secure treatment.

With those comments, for the moment, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat. I am particularly interested in the question of whether the child and youth advocate will not have the authority to investigate complaints but only to receive and review them. Pending the answer, I may have an amendment.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

Mr. Mason: Well, that being the case, Mr. Chairman, I will propose an amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I guess somebody else will have to speak before I can recognize you.

[The clauses of Bill 21 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed?

An Hon. Member: Opposed.

The Deputy Chair: Carried.

Bill 23
Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to just commend the Minister of Revenue for introducing this act, that in effect is going to bring Alberta aviation in line with the framework that's available for airlines around the world. The more we move into trying to be part of the world industry, communication strategy, even our tourism, both the people who want to come here and Canadians and Albertans who want to travel – we have to have access to air carrier capacity.

As we look at the airlines around the world with limited capital, limited investment, they make choices on where they're going to put in new flights based on the relative cost-effectiveness of their dollars. This, in effect, now will take out a factor for them that was discriminatory against new flights, new routes being established into either of our major international airports, in Edmonton or in Calgary.

So now that that deterrent is gone, this will give our airport authorities a chance to go out and negotiate on a more even basis with other airports and countries to get increased capacity to serve Albertans both in terms of our wish to travel and our wish to have tourists come and businesspeople come and others to participate in the traffic flows in our airports.

Just in conclusion, this is something that we've been hearing from the airline industry, from the airport authorities for years. The fact that the minister now is making the commitment through the budgeting process and this act to bring us in line with other airports and other authorities I think is good, and we should support this act.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 23 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report bills 17, 21, and 23.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Maskell: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 17, Bill 21, Bill 23. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: 4:50 **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 20
Minors' Property Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have spoken at introduction, second reading, and again in committee with respect to Bill 20, the Minors' Property Act. I move it for third reading.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to have an opportunity to speak to this particular bill, Bill 20, the Minors' Property Act. It seems that as we review what has been said in *Hansard* over the last few days on this bill, we are satisfied with the answers that we have received. Generally, we support this particular bill.

I think those are really all the comments I have at this time because, generally speaking, this bill is a step in the right direction. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General to close debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 20 read a third time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we return in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried, the Assembly adjourned at 4:52 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 17, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/17

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

Before we recommence our debate on the interim supply estimates, I wonder if we might have permission to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure this evening to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Catherine Ripley. Of the many hats that she wears, she's first and foremost a parent of two children, one attending Harry Ainlay and one attending Strathcona composite high school in the city of Edmonton. Catherine is here this evening as part of the Education Watch program. She's here out of concern for the quality of education and funding for public education.

But I want to recognize Catherine Ripley as chair of the Whitemud Coalition, an organization that I've had the opportunity to work with over the past number of years to learn more about education, about the needs of education in our community, who has what I consider to be very positive input and critique with respect to what the current situation is in each of our schools in the area, someone who has put heart and soul into the education system and is also an author of children's books. Catherine Ripley is in the members' gallery. I'd ask her to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This evening in the public gallery we have a couple of people who are amnesiacs. They're masochists. They work all day, and then they come here to watch us work all night. They're celebrating St. Patrick's Day. I would like the members who provided a lot of food to some of our colleagues today to please rise. Their names are Evelyn Oberg and Fran Cuglietta. Would you please rise and receive the warm welcome. We enjoyed your lunch.

head: **Interim Supply Estimates 2004-05
Offices of the Legislative Assembly,
Government, and Lottery Fund**

The Chair: Are there any further comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this set of estimates? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and put some questions on the record before I vote on the proposed schedule of interim supply amounts that the government has brought forward. I know that in the previous debate, on day 1 of the two-day debate – we're now on the second day – there was quite a bit of discussion about the timing of the

budget, which leads us always to the requirement or need for an interim supply. We even had participation from the Minister of Environment, which is always a special moment for us in the House. But tonight I'm just going through, raising some questions for those departments that we have not had an opportunity to examine in Public Accounts.

I would like to put some of the questions on the record when they are asking for money to be approved without any information attached to it, which tends to happen with interim supply. You literally just get a sheet with a figure, an amount next to the name of the department.

In this case I'll start from the top with Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. There's a request there for \$108,200,000. Of course, there's never any information that goes with that, so we don't know what they want to spend it on except for the sort of a blanket statement at the beginning saying: well, you know, salaries and . . . Here we go.

Operating expenses includes salaries, supplies, grants, amortization of capital assets and debt servicing costs. Equipment/inventory purchases consist of consumable inventories and movable capital assets, which are routinely moved or which may be installed as a service level improvement to existing facilities.

Then it goes on with some details about what they mean by that, but we don't actually know what's going to happen in each department.

So for those departments that we are not likely to get a chance to examine in Public Accounts, I just wanted to ask some of those questions to see if any issues that have been raised by the Auditor General have been addressed, and therefore can we move forward with confidence in approving another sum of money to be allocated to that same department?

I notice that thus far in Public Accounts this year, which only meets while the Legislature is in session, we've examined Municipal Affairs, Justice, Seniors, and this very morning Infrastructure. On the agenda upcoming is Community Development, Learning, Gaming, Health, and Finance.

The Chair: Hon. members, even with this aid it's getting harder and harder to hear the hon. member. I wonder if we could move the audible level down considerably so that whispering would be a matter of course instead of the louder conversation.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. A valiant job as always. Oh, Wednesday nights. Yeah.

Okay. When I examine Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in the Auditor General's report for the previous fiscal year, there is a recommendation that this department improve its performance measurement by "reviewing its goals and performance measures to ensure that they reflect the results that the Ministry wants to achieve" and "strengthening the process that the Ministry uses to compile its performance measures."

The implications and risks of not following through on this particular performance measurement – and I'm quoting directly from page 51 of the Auditor General's report, Implications and Risks – are:

If goals and measures are not carefully designed, readers will not be able to assess progress and staff may not understand critical directions. Executive, stakeholders, and the general public will not receive relevant, accurate, and timely performance information until the measurement processes are improved.

This, in fact, is sounding very like a previous Auditor General's comment on this same department, so perhaps this is sort of an ongoing working version of this, but I'd like to know where the ministry is on achieving that goal.

There's also a numbered recommendation, number 4, appearing on page 52 of the Auditor General's report recommending that "the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation award insurance benefits in accordance with its lack of moisture insurance contracts." In addition, on page 53, an unnumbered recommendation recommending that

the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation improve control over its information technology (IT) by:

- obtaining assurance on technical aspects of its computer control environment; and
- implementing appropriate controls for two of its commercial loan systems.

I believe those are the numbered and unnumbered recommendations appearing for the Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

Mrs. McClellan: I missed the second one.

Ms Blakeman: The second one was numbered recommendation 4, appearing on page 52: "Agriculture Financial Services Corporation award insurance benefits in accordance with its lack of moisture . . ." Okay.

Mrs. McClellan: What was the one before that?

Ms Blakeman: That was performance measurements before it, and after it was another Agriculture Financial Services Corp.

Okay. Children's Services. On page 59, then, of the Auditor General's report in the Department of Children's Services, recommendation 5, that "Children's Services improve the Authorities' strategic management information systems." In Children's Services the amount being asked for as an interim supply is \$184 million, not an amount of money to be sniffed at in any way, shape, or form. But we do need certain controls and processes in place. I'm interested in hearing from whoever's speaking for Children's Services tonight whether there has been progress on addressing that concern raised by the Auditor General.

8:10

The implication of not following through on that is considerable. "Without good strategic management information, Authorities risk making improper decisions and not achieving their goals." Well, yeah, we'd like to know how well they've done on that before we approve for them another \$184 million.

There's also a key recommendation, which is sort of the gold star on the top 10 hit parade of the Auditor General's concerns. There's a key recommendation, recommendation 6, appearing on page 66 of the Auditor General's report for Children's Services recommending that the department "improve monitoring of services provided by the Delegated First Nation Agencies." The implication of not meeting that is that "the Department's review of each DFNA's compliance with standards set by the Department is not comprehensive; therefore, non-compliance with standards may occur."

I have notes in my book which tell me I probably have already asked the other recommendations that are raised here. Oh, no, I haven't. Okay.

Recommendation 7, appearing on page 68, recommending that the Ministry of Children's Services "improve its systems to recover expenses from providing services to children and families ordinarily resident-on-reserve." That's a repeated recommendation, Mr. Chairman; it also appeared as recommendation 7 in 2002. Of course, the implications there are that "inadequate cost recovery processes could prevent the Department from recovering all eligible costs."

Contract management systems. There's an unnumbered recom-

mendation that the Department of Children's Services "strengthen the processes used to award and manage contracts." Again, that's a repeated recommendation. So there is some struggle in this department that is requesting \$184 million for three months of operation to achieve this if we have repeated recommendations being made.

Another unnumbered recommendation, appearing on page 75, that the ministry "ensure that the Authorities' business plans are approved before the start of the year." Mr. Chairman, what a concept, truly what a good concept to have business plans approved before the start of the year.

I'm sure that as I move along, I will find that that same recommendation is likely appearing in the Department of Health and Wellness, where we know that the regional health authorities might have just had their business plans approved for the fiscal year that is almost done, but it's also possible that that didn't happen yet. Maybe the minister can address that.

Under the next department that I'm not likely to be able to examine in Public Accounts, we're looking at Economic Development. We have recommendation 10 recommending that the Ministry of Economic Development "revise its business plan to clearly demonstrate the desired results each core business is to achieve, and ensure its performance measures demonstrate the Ministry's contribution to results."

Now, Economic Development is requesting \$14.4 million. Last year it requested \$11.445 million, and the year before that \$8.56 million. So I'm detecting a trend here, Mr. Chairman. It seems to be that not only do we keep coming back and asking for interim supply, but every year this particular department asks for more money and with no description of what they're going to use it on other than a sort of blanket one. They seem to be having some trouble with their business plans, which is a little frightening considering that we're talking about the Department of Economic Development, which is I think supposed to be all about business plans.

Another unnumbered recommendation, also appearing on page 89, recommends that the department "expand its business plan discussion of significant environmental factors and risks, including setting out their relationship to the strategic priorities stated in the plan."

On page 90 another unnumbered recommendation, that the ministry "streamline its operational planning process and improve guidance on operational plans provided to divisions/branches."

Another unnumbered one, on page 91 of the Auditor General's report, recommends that

the Ministry of Economic Development accelerate the implementation of its internal performance measurement framework for each division and branch, including developing logic models or similar tools, and improve its internal reporting process.

The implications of not doing that are that the "business plan may not be fully achieved unless, and until, the Ministry's Managing for Results systems are more effectively implemented."

Examining the Department of Energy, Mr. Chairman, another department that just seems to want to get more, have more, spend more, in 2002-03 this particular department requested an interim supply of \$40.5 million, last year \$47.13 million, and this year \$50.2 million. Hard to rein this minister in, I tell you.

All right. We're looking at the Auditor General's comments for the Department of Energy, which, I regret, we will probably be unlikely to scrutinize through Public Accounts because, of course, the committee limits itself to only sitting . . .

Mr. MacDonald: Would you like to see the budget for Public Accounts increased for this?

Ms Blakeman: Well, Public Accounts can in fact meet outside of the sitting, but the government members continually vote not to

allow the committee to do that, so we only get through a limited number of departments every year. I feel it's incumbent upon us to make sure that we keep these very considered requests and concerns from the Auditor General top of mind as we examine any requests for future allocations of money to a department.

So on the Department of Energy I would like the minister to answer the question, please, appearing on page 95 regarding whether the recommendation that "the Department of Energy assess whether the royalty reduction programs are achieving their intended objectives" has in fact been dealt with. The implication and risk of this is that

without timely reviews, the Department cannot assess whether program objectives are being met and if royalties need to be adjusted. Timely information assists in resolving any uncertainty about the results of these programs.

A numbered recommendation appearing on page 96, Mr. Chairman, again for the Department of Energy, recommends that "the Department of Energy document and communicate the objectives of the Alberta Royalty Tax Credit program and develop measures to assess whether the program is meeting its objectives." Well, I'd like to know whether that has in fact happened. I'm sure the minister, given the amount of heckling he's doing, is going to stand up and speak, and I'm looking forward to him answering the questions.

Appearing on page 97 of the Auditor General's report is another unnumbered recommendation. It recommends that the Department of Energy

- improve the communication of its needs for assurance on well and production data to the EUB
- evaluate the extent of audit work done on well and production data by the EUB in relation to its needs.

The implications and risks of not implementing this recommendation, Mr. Chairman, are that the department "cannot be sure of the completeness and accuracy of well and production data that it uses to calculate Crown royalty revenues. Royalties may be foregone if the data used in royalty calculations is inaccurate." That means that the government does not get revenue that it was expecting, and it's going to have to get that revenue from somewhere else, probably out of the pockets of Albertans. So it's important that we have accurate data and that we get every single royalty penny that we're entitled to.

8:20

The Department of Environment, one of my best hecklers. I'm hoping he's in tonight to be able to answer the questions on the record. A numbered recommendation, recommendation 12, appearing on page 103 of the Auditor General's report, especially for the Minister of Environment, recommends that "the Ministry of Environment implement an integrated information system to track contaminated sites in Alberta." Under Implications and Risks

the Ministry has a variety of business needs for contaminated site information. Making information accessible to those who need it will enhance the management of individual sites. Individual employees with site-specific, accurate information will make better decisions about new approvals. Without a complete, accurate, integrated information system, the Ministry can only summarize or report the status of contaminated site files with considerable manual effort.

So I'd like to hear from the Minister of Environment whether he's been able to implement that recommendation.

Appearing on page 105 of the Auditor General's report under the Department of Environment a numbered recommendation, recommendation 13, recommends that

the Deputy Minister of Environment, working with the Sustainable Development Coordinating Council:

- plan and report against Alberta's Commitment to Sustainable

Resource and Environment Management annually to Standing Policy Committee; and

- complete the legislative and regulatory regime review required by the Commitment.

The implication of not implementing that is that

to realize the benefits of IRM in Alberta, the undertakings in the Commitment must be implemented.

Well, that makes perfect sense, Mr. Chairman.

Without annual planning and reporting against the Commitment,

- accountability for the IRM initiative is diminished
- key stakeholders' awareness of and interest in IRM may erode
- support decreases for the public service as they design and implement integrated and innovative solutions.

We are anticipating being able to examine Executive Council and the Premier in Public Accounts, or at least we're still hoping.

I believe that although the Finance minister was to appear before us on the 31st of March, she has rescheduled, and I will assume that we, in fact, will see her before this spring session rises. There are some really good, key recommendations in here, Mr. Chairman, some juicy, key, top 10, gold star ones, so I'm looking forward to seeing her.

Gaming we are going to examine shortly, which I'm looking forward to, of course.

Mr. Chairman, I will have to stand later and continue my scrutiny. Thank you very much.

Mrs. McClellan: I am going to just give a couple of brief responses to the hon. member's questions on the interim supply on Agriculture.

At first when I was listening, I thought: I've heard this before. "You have interim supply; what's it for?" Well, you know, we all know what it's for. In the time period between the end of this fiscal year and the budget being passed, we have wages that have to be paid. I don't think it's an unreasonable expectation that our valued civil servants get their paycheques, and I think everybody on all sides of the House agrees with that.

It's a bit hard to give detail because these are general expenses that we're talking about in ours, and I will say that in Agriculture it is primarily wages, although we do have programs that are important to be carrying out such as water programs, pumping and so on, that don't wait for anything but timeliness. We're on a season in this industry.

Then I listened carefully to the comments in the Auditor General's report, and I thought: well, you know, where are we going here? Then I thought: no; that's a very valid question because if you're going to have recommendations from the Auditor General and you're asking for money for a new year, it's a natural question to ask whether you've dealt with those issues. I'm going to deal with just a couple of them, and as always I'll give written answers with more detail.

The one that intrigues me the most is the one on performance measures. The Auditor General asked a question that is difficult, I think, to answer because of the very much a partnership relationship between our department and industry. When you look at our goals, are they actually met by the industry or by the department? Well, actually they're met by the industry in the main, so we will reflect that better in our new business plan, where the goals and performance measures that we set out are more specific to the actual department's place in that goal, which may be, for example, our value-added strategy of going to \$20 billion in value-added by 2010 or \$10 billion in primary by 2010.

It will actually be the industry that will achieve the final goal, but I think that what we have to do is measure how effective our part in that achievement is, which is laid out in the value-added strategy, as to where the department support is to the industry to achieve that

goal rather than the \$20 billion being the goal that we measure. It really will not be done by government; it will be done by industry. But we have a role in assisting the industry in getting there. So what I think the hon. member is saying and what the Auditor General said is: make sure that the performance measures you put in to measure your performance are actually your performance that is geared to assisting the industry to reach a certain goal.

We take all of the Auditor General's comments very seriously and I think to date have been very successful at implementing the changes that he's requested. We'll do that on the issue of insurance benefits and contracts. I'm trying to recall, but I believe the discussion was around a pilot project, and I will give you some written clarification on that. I'm sure that what the Auditor General is saying there is: don't make corrections, even in a pilot. The same with the technology on the commercial loans. I think that will be better answered for you in writing, where I can give you some detail.

But I did want to make some comments on performance measures and goals because I think that is an important part, and it's one that we're going to try and address much better in our new business plan. I'll look forward to the opportunity of having this discussion when that business plan is presented with our budget, and I know that we'll have a good amount of time to talk then.

Thank you.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. I appreciate her attempts to answer some questions when we consider granting her department \$108.2 million. I appreciate it.

Just to continue on, then, with some of the other departments that we will not have an opportunity to scrutinize. That includes Government Services. There is an unnumbered recommendation appearing on page 139 recommending that "the Department of Government Services make provision for appropriate recovery facilities and equipment to resume business operations if a service disruption occurs." The background here is that there's a computerized registry system for land titles, motor vehicles, personal property. All are critical for the department, and these systems support the delivery of core programs. The department has contracted out the operation and maintenance of these to private service providers.

The implications and risks if this recommendation is not implemented are that

business operations could be severely affected in case of a service disruption. The Department could also incur significant legal liability if land title and personal property registrations are not processed promptly during a service disruption. Law enforcement across Alberta can be impaired if the motor vehicle registry is not available.

Mr. Chairman, very exciting. We have a key recommendation in Government Services. That's recommendation 19, one of the gold star, pay attention, blue ribbon, top 10 hit parade kind of key recommendations. That's recommending that "the Department of Government Services complete and approve a project management plan for the Registry Renewal Initiative." Now, that's a project to renew the systems for the land titles, motor vehicle, and personal property registries to ensure that they are capable of meeting the future growth in demand, and it's about moving to new technology. The project will cost approximately \$100 million and will take place over eight years. The department has spent approximately \$13 million on the project in this fiscal year alone.

8:30

The implications and risks of not implementing this key recommendation: "Lack of established project management processes and understanding of it by all participants, could cause significant cost

overruns, time delays and missed project objectives." That sounds kind of dry and dusty, Mr. Chairman, but in fact what it really means in layperson's terms just for people following along at home is that lots of money could get misspent if this is not implemented.

Oh, this is really an interesting department, Mr. Chairman, because in fact on page 143 of the Auditor General's report we have another key recommendation, and that is recommendation 20, recommending that "the Alberta Corporate Service Centre clearly define its performance measures and improve its processes to track and report results." Now, Mr. Chairman, this is important because this is the second time that this exact recommendation has been made, which means that there has been unsatisfactory progress on it and the Auditor General feels that he needs to bring it up again. It's so important that it's one of the key recommendations. So tsk, tsk, tsk to the Minister of Government Services for not being able to implement this.

Now, when I look at whether we, you know, should really be alarmed about this, in fact in the fiscal year 2002-03 the Government Services department requested \$48.9 million in interim money; in other words, to operate for three months. Lots of money, folks at home. The following year, last year, 2003-04, they requested \$58.2 million, \$10 million more than they'd asked for the year before. And where are we this year? Well, they're trying to rein in. They're only asking for \$59.3 million in interim supply, and that's once again for three months of operation.

The fact that we have not one but two key recommendations is significant. I think this department needs to work a little harder.

Key recommendation 20 talks about the Alberta Corporate Service Centre and performance measurements. The implications of not implementing that: "Without adequate performance measurement systems, performance information may be unreliable or lacking and may lead to poor management decisions." Implications for Alberta taxpayers: more money, money wasted, money not spent effectively, not value for money. So we need to look carefully at that.

We are expecting to examine the Health and Wellness department.

The one following that would be the Department of Human Resources and Employment, a minister who when he appears before the Public Accounts is usually very helpful in explaining where his department is going, and he does know his stuff. I am looking forward to hearing what he has to say because I don't think we're going to get a chance to see him this year.

I note that on page 168 there is a numbered recommendation, recommendation 24, recommending that "the Department of Human Resources and Employment ensure the Contract Management Administration System meets user requirements." Now, given that this department was – well, actually, they're getting better. No, not quite. In the '02-03 year, Mr. Chairman, this department requested \$318.4 million. Last year they requested – and kudos to them – less money. They only asked for \$274 million for interim supply for three months of operation. This year they weren't able to rein in quite so much. They're asking for \$286.9 million. You can see why, then, the Auditor General is trying to "ensure the Contract Management Administration System meets user requirements."

The implications and risks, of course, are that other departments are planning to implement CMAS to improve their contract management processes. It is therefore critical that inefficiencies, instability, and inability to produce management reports be corrected before CMAS is implemented elsewhere.

There is an additional recommendation in this department, I believe, Mr. Chairman, appearing on page 175, regarding the Workers' Compensation Board. Yes, I'm right. Recommendation 25: "We recommend that the Workers' Compensation Board . . . strengthen controls in its claim management system for economic loss payments." The implications and risks there are that

if [economic loss payments classification] and calculation are not accurate, the WCB may pay inaccurate benefits to injured workers and charge incorrect costs to employers.

That doesn't help especially our small business people.

The processing of ELPs also impacts the assumptions used to determine the claim benefit liability. The actuary needs a consistent history of the ELP program to make reasonable assumptions in determining claim benefit liabilities.

We were able to see the Department of Infrastructure today, in fact, although I was very disappointed in the information about P3s and no reports or cost-benefit analysis forthcoming there.

The Department of Innovation and Science. Oh, Mr. Chairman, SuperNet. Oh dear. All right. Such high hopes. First of all, we will note that this Department of Innovation and Science is restraining itself. In '02-03 Innovation and Science requested \$64 million as interim supply. Last year they only requested \$55 million, and this year going for a record. Can we do it? Yes, we think so: \$52.2 million. So the most restraint shown so far. We'll give a little gold star and send it over there to the minister.

But let's have a look at the recommendation: "We recommend that the Ministry of Innovation and Science prepare a plan for testing completed components of SuperNet." Now, what is the implication of not doing that? Well, "without an adequate plan for testing the completed network, the Ministry risks implementing a system that does not function as [needed]." I'm pretty sure I heard that little voice saying: I told you so. That would be, hmm, yes, my little voice saying: I told you so. I'm sure if we check *Hansard*, we'll find it in there a number of times, annoying and squeaky no doubt, but in there definitely on SuperNet. That one is going to come back to haunt you.

All righty. Page 199 of the Auditor General's report is recommending that

the Deputy Minister of Innovation and Science work with other deputy ministers to optimize the use of IMAGIS . . .

Implementation of IMAGIS began in 1997 and by 2001 ten modules were in use in government. However, much of the business of ministries that could be processed through these ten IMAGIS modules is processed through other applications.

So it starts and stops there, Mr. Chairman.

The implications and risks of not implementing this recommendation: "Without a structured approach, the government may fail to obtain full benefits from the IMAGIS system."

Now, on page 201, we have a numbered recommendation. The Auditor General is very thorough and predictable, which is a good thing in an Auditor General, and you do get sort of escalating kinds of recommendations from the Auditor General. The unnumbered recommendations are sort of the amber light, the flashing amber: slow down; caution, please pay attention. The numbered recommendations are much more of a full amber light, really: warning, warning. Then the key recommendations are honking big, red stop signs with full flashing lights and sometimes those little blue and white ones flashing right behind them indicating that there is serious trouble coming. So you pay attention when you get numbered ones.

8:40

The numbered one here is recommendation 29, recommending that "the Ministry of Innovation and Science formalize and implement an effective accountability framework for IMAGIS." Now, Mr. Chairman, sadly, I note that this is the second time this recommendation has been made to this ministry, was in fact also made as recommendation 32 in the previous fiscal year's Auditor General's report.

The implications and risks of not implementing this are that

without an appropriate accountability framework in place, IMAGIS may not reflect the Ministry's requirements for controls, expectations and needs.

The Ministry will be entering into a new contract with a service provider in the next fiscal year.

That would be now.

It is important that management resolve this concern before finalizing the new contract with a service provider.

So a direct question to the minister: was this implemented before there was a new contract with the new service provider? It's important that that be reconciled. I'm looking forward to having the Minister of Innovation and Science respond to that.

We also have another unnumbered recommendation appearing on page 204 recommending – oh dear, "again" recommending. Oh dear, this ministry really is struggling. So this was a recommendation from 2002, and it's being repeated. They "again recommend that the Ministry of Innovation and Science coordinate reviews of control environments at service providers."

Implications and risks: "Unless the Ministry coordinates reviews of service providers, unnecessary waste and duplication of reviews will occur." What does that mean to Alberta taxpayers? More money, a waste of money. We don't want these things to happen. So did the Ministry correct this?

Another key recommendation. Is that two in this department? Oh dear, that would be bad. No. This is the first key recommendation here. So this is recommendation 30. It is a key recommendation, one of only 14 for the entire government. They "recommend that the Ministry of Innovation and Science, with the cooperation of other ministries, implement a systems development methodology." This as well is a repeat. It was number 33 the previous year.

Implications and risks are that

without an approved set of systems development criteria, flawed systems may be developed. In some cases, they may even pose a security risk. The government will have unnecessary administrative overhead from using poorly designed and inadequately tested systems, as well as additional costs to fix the systems on an ad hoc basis.

Now moving on to International and Intergovernmental Relations. Oh dear. Well, we were doing so well with Innovation and Science. I'm sorry. That's totally reversed itself. For this small but interesting department we have a very disappointing overturn of the excellent work that had been done by Innovation and Science.

When we look at International and Intergovernmental Relations, we had in 2002-03 a request for \$1.8 million, last year \$1.9 million, and this year – I'm sorry; it's true, Mr. Chairman – \$2.3 million. That's for three months of operations. Do we have issues that need to be resolved? Do we have issues, Mr. Chairman? Yes, we do have issues, and the Auditor General has issues as well. That issue would be appearing on page 210 of the Auditor General's report recommending that "the Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations enhance its intergovernmental agreements systems to comply with section 11 and schedule 6 of the Government Organization Act."

Well, what does that really mean?

Section 11 requires the Minister to approve all intergovernmental agreements. Schedule 6 requires the Ministry to "be a party to the negotiation of all proposed intergovernmental agreements" and to "conduct a continuing review of all intergovernmental agreements."

All of that is in quotes.

The implications and risks of not implementing that recommendation are that

without effective systems at the Ministry to manage the intergovernmental agreements requirements of the Government Organization Act, government entities could enter into agreements that do not reflect the Alberta government's goals and principles.

So I hope that the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations can give us some answers about why that is appearing.

Public Accounts was able to examine the Minister of Justice and will be examining the Ministry of Learning, I'm happy to say. So we're moving on. Oh, my goodness, that's going to be a heavy day. That's a lot of pages. Oh my. Municipal Affairs we've also been able to scrutinize. Revenue is I hope going to be coming.

So now we're looking at Solicitor General. It's that alphabet thing. Okay. Under the Solicitor General – holy mackerel. Well, Mr. Chairman, this could be a record. I can't do the percentages fast enough in my head, but here we go. In the year 2002-03 the Solicitor General requested \$46.5 million for three months worth of operation. Last year – whoa – \$66.8 million. So a \$20 million increase for three months of operation. Where are we this year? This year the Solicitor General is requesting \$84.1 million. Whoa. This is out of control here. We're just running amok, they would say.

Seriously, Mr. Chairman, that may well be warranted spending, but when I look at recommendations from the Auditor General, I am seeing on page 272 of the Auditor General's report – oh, Mr. Chairman, it's a repeat, and it's a repeat from a long time ago, which means that they've had a long time to implement this and have not done it or have not been successful.

This is from 1998, Mr. Chairman, recommendation 34, appearing this time around on the marquis as recommendation 40: "We again recommend . . ." Now, that's kind of secret code language from the Auditor General saying tsk, tsk, tsk with all capital letters. When they say "we again recommend," it's like underlining and bolding; it really means they're serious. "We again recommend that the Department of the Solicitor General implement the plan for provincial policing standards." I will be delighted to come back to this one when I start again.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

An Hon. Member: Question.

Mr. MacDonald: I do have questions and lots of them.

At this time in light of the fact that the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development has answered some questions previously, perhaps I could ask her, Mr. Chairman, about the money that we're voting on here, the \$108 million. I can understand where she's coming from, the need to continue to finance government in an orderly and timely fashion. I can understand that, and I can live with that, but certainly I'm with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods that perhaps the session should start the middle of January, and perhaps this wouldn't be necessary.

Mr. Chairman, of the \$108 million that the ag department is going to spend, is some of this earmarked for this new lab, this new level 3 lab that Alberta Agriculture is going to build? Certainly, there are monies set aside for renovations for the current level 2 lab, and it's all done, and I'm very glad to hear that that's all done. But I understand that plans are currently being developed for a new 30,000 square foot building that will house an 11,000 square foot level 3 lab. I understand that this is going to be state of the art, and it should be. It will allow Alberta Agriculture to move into higher levels of disease monitoring and allow research to be conducted on biological agents that require a higher level of containment.

8:50

Now, this level 3 lab is obviously needed to increase the province's testing capacity for TSEs. Now, what is the state of this

project? If the hon. minister could update the House on that. Certainly, I hope that this lab is handy to the constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud, somewhere down around the university so that the veterinarian pathologists would have a place to practice while they go to school perhaps. But I would like to certainly hear from the minister that it's going to be in the city of Edmonton.

Thank you. I would be delighted to hear her response.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Chairman, I'd be pleased to respond to the hon. member and appreciate his interest in the initiatives taken on testing. The level 2 lab improvements have been completed. The level 2 lab, in it's refurbished form and with the training of staff and some additional staff hired, has been completed. It has been operational – I'm trying to remember – for three or four weeks and now has the capability of doing up to 1,000 tests using the Bio-Rad tests. That was the test that was determined would be used here after they reviewed two or three of the rapid tests that are used around the world. So that is in place.

Actually, the improvements and renovations to that lab were done very efficiently by the Department of Infrastructure. We had to wait for formal approval of the lab by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency; they do those approvals. We received verbal go-ahead, and then we had to wait for the test kits. This is another issue, but we have those, and we're in operation.

The level 3 lab groundbreaking will occur as soon as weather permits. It will be located in the area of the Longman Building, which is our present lab facilities, which is of course close to the university. There was a great deal of consultation done as to the best location because, of course, there are some laboratory services of Ag Canada's in Lethbridge. We have some at the research park as well as at the university. It was determined that for all of the purposes of this lab the location chosen close to the Longman Building was the best.

You asked whether some of the \$108 million was for that lab. The lab actually will be built by Infrastructure, as all government projects are, but certainly operationally those responsibilities will be with Alberta Agriculture. Those will be, obviously, a part of our business plan and budget as it becomes operational. The level 3 lab is not expected to be operational until the spring of 2005. These are very complex buildings; this is a very high-level lab. But I can tell you that the design work is done, the location has been determined, and it's moving along very well. We expect to break ground as soon as weather permits. It'll be a great addition to our province, and I am extremely pleased that it does have space for research. I think that's incredibly important.

With the great research that occurs over at the University of Alberta in agriculture and in health sciences, this has an opportunity for us to attract more top scientists to our province and, again, play a leadership role in research in some animal health and, in fact, related to human health, crossover research. Whether all of that would occur at that lab, every research capability that we increase gives us opportunities for more.

So thank you for your interest. That's the best information I can give you at this time.

The Chair: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and ask some questions about the 2004-2005 interim supply estimates before the Assembly since last night. We've spent almost three hours to this point, I guess, on discussing these estimates.

I read with some considerable interest the *Hansard* from last night, Mr. Chairman, and I find in *Hansard* that lots of important

questions have been asked from the opposition side, both by the New Democrat opposition and by the Liberal opposition, but very few answers are forthcoming. Certainly, from last night's records I notice that there are no answers provided for any of the questions that were raised then.

Today it seems that one notices a little improvement. A few questions have been answered very briefly. Very briefly. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development has been particularly generous in answering some of these questions. The rest of the government continues to be silent.

Mr. Chairman, I didn't have a calculator at my disposal, but I noticed that for the two months of the next fiscal year, for the months of April and May, until May 31, close to \$5.5 billion are being asked for by way of this interim supply estimate. Now, if you sort of prorate it on a yearly basis, \$5.5 billion for two months multiplied by six, I think it would bring the budget to more than \$32 billion. I'd like to ask the government whether or not it's appropriate to base our estimate of the overall budget for the next year on the request that's been brought before us for two months of the next year by way of this estimate here.

If that is the case, then surely the important question to ask, I guess, from my side is: what's the revenue picture? Thirty-three billion dollars of projected expenditures based on the two-month estimates presented to the Assembly that we're debating tonight is close to, I believe, \$10 billion more than the 2003-2004 budget. So the question is: where are the revenues going to come from?

I know that \$500 million have been requested by the government to be transferred by way of a bill on which I've spoken before from the sustainability fund over into the general revenues for the government to spend. But \$500 million won't pay for the implementation of the Learning Commission's report, which I believe this government is seriously committed to implementing. Also, it will need some revenues to meet the expenses that it's going to incur to give the tax cut gift of \$106 million starting April 1 to corporations of this province.

9:00

So it has an interesting sort of balance sheet. It wants to spend more and at the same time wants to tax more in some areas but also spend more on tax cuts to certain entities and corporations in this province. It's a confusing picture. I'd like to have some answers to it. Where are the revenues coming from in order to meet, according to my estimate, \$33 billion, a budget that seems to be, by implication at least, being rejected for 2004-2005?

Mr. Chairman, then, of course, there is the question of priorities of the government. If the government is going to spend \$161 million on corporate tax cuts in the new fiscal year, why would it not consider in fact using some of that money, rather than spending it on this gift to corporations, to provide relief to seniors by eliminating their health taxes, which are called premiums in this province? Seniors certainly would greatly appreciate this. The cost would be much less, and a lot more people would be served by that. So that's one question there.

I'm curious about one item here. The Department of Finance is asking for \$18.5 million in operating expenses and/or equipment inventory purchases. Compared to that, the next department on the list, Gaming, is asking for \$50.5 million for the same item. My understanding is that the Gaming department is much smaller than the Department of Finance yet is asking for almost three times as much in interim supply estimates. Maybe the Minister of Finance can solve this riddle for me.

The Department of Finance is clearly one of the most important departments. I'm sure they've got lots of staff, lots of salary bills to

pay, yet the Gaming department is asking for three times more money in these estimates. I hope I'm not just asking the government to satisfy my idle curiosity about it. It's a real, substantive question: why this discrepancy between these two departments? One tiny one, which doesn't really produce any goods other than to encourage and promote gambling in this province to make more Albertans addicted to this what I call social disease, asking for more money from this Assembly for the next two months just doesn't make much sense.

Also, Mr. Chairman, there is some answer on page 1 of this little booklet that we have here before us, lottery fund payments. The Gaming department is asking for lottery fund payments to the tune of \$313,600,000. There is some attempt to explain where this money will go. On the first page it says, "Lottery Fund payments consist of the transfer of lottery proceeds to departments for selected projects."

So I'm sure that the government knows, the Minister of Finance would know, what these selected projects are. Would it be impossible for the Minister of Finance to simply list these projects for the attention of the Assembly by way of justifying the request for \$313,600,000 in lottery fund payments under Gaming? Again, I think it's a legitimate question. I am sure that the Minister of Finance will consider it an appropriate question and do her very best to provide this simple, factual information that's absolutely essential for the Assembly to have before it votes on these estimates.

In the same manner, Mr. Chairman, I again find on page 1 under Capital Investments some reference to oil, gas, and electricity transmission facilities for which, I think, capital investment funds are being asked. I wonder if the Minister of Energy, who is asking for 50 plus some million dollars in interim supply estimates, would please share with the Assembly some information with respect to where some or all of this money is going to be spent. Is some of it going to be spent on these oil, gas, and electricity transmission facilities? If that is the case, then I think surely this Assembly is rightfully in a position to ask what amount of that \$50 million would be spent on oil, gas, and electricity transmission facilities.

So these are some of the general questions, Mr. Chairman, and I have some other questions here which I would certainly like to have addressed. I'm sure that the ministers and the government are anxious to answer these questions as best they can and do so with the utmost earnestness. The Minister of Justice is surely asking for some money, so I'm sure he'd be happy to address some of these questions related to his own ministry and perhaps to other departments as well.

But here is the question for the Minister of Finance that I believe is certainly her bailiwick, her territory. In the last two budgets school property taxes have been allowed by this government and by this ministry to increase along with the increase in Alberta's property tax base, breaking a promise made by this Minister of Finance in April 2001, as a freshly-minted Minister of Finance at the time, coming out of the election, to freeze school property taxes at a constant \$1.2 billion. We're talking about freezing the absolute amount of taxes to be collected from property tax. But the minister broke that promise last year. Does the minister and the government plan to do the same all over again this coming year?

What about the motion that was passed two weeks ago to phase out property taxes by this Assembly? The motion was sponsored by and shepherded through this Assembly by government backbenchers, and it passed. I'd like to hear what the Minister of Finance's position is with respect to the Assembly's decision to vote for that motion. Is the minister now going to be guided by the passage of that motion by this Assembly and stop levying any property taxes for school funding purposes?

9:10

Another set of questions, Mr. Chairman, in the area of the Ministry of Learning. How much more funding can school boards reasonably expect?

How will funds be allocated to implement the Learning Commission recommendations?

What priority will be given to fixing classroom conditions in the existing K to 12 system?

Within what time frame will the government implement the class size guidelines from the Learning Commission report, especially those in kindergarten to grade 3, where in the big metropolitan, urban areas of the province existing class sizes are much, much higher than the 17 students per class recommended by the Learning Commission?

With respect to K to 3 class sizes or class complexity, on the other side of the issue, in areas outside of the major metropolitan centres, the greater Calgary/greater Edmonton regions, the problem is not so much in terms of the class size as such but the class complexity, which poses just as difficult challenges to school boards, to teachers, to parents when they are trying to provide the very best education that they can to these very young children who are in our schools going through kindergarten to grade 3. So those are some of the questions on the K to 12 part of Learning.

Then, of course, the question is: what funds are going to be allocated as part of these interim supply estimates to postsecondary institutions?

Is the base funding formula going to be changed for colleges and universities and technical institutes to help fill the gap that they have been suffering from in terms of their ability to pay the bills, the costs that are going up for providing the very essential educational experience and services that they do, and the money that is available to them from this government? There's no indication here, Mr. Chairman, how these interim supply estimates and the budget that's going to follow next week are going to address these questions. So those are a few of the questions here.

One or two other questions here, given the time I may have. Oh, yes. The tax giveaways that the government is planning to continue with to the corporate sector. How are the expenditures related to those gifts going to be paid for, and from where are the revenues going to come to do that? Through increase of service fees? Increase in health care premiums? Decreases to the services that are provided to seniors, or through cutbacks in the other social assistance programs?

I would like to ask questions about the AISH programs. Lots of Albertans depend on those. Is the government by way of these estimates going to allocate some money which will be used to increase the amount of money that AISH recipients receive starting the 1st of April? I know that the corporate sector is going to be receiving its gift of \$106 million which will kick in as of the 1st of April. Are the AISH recipients likely to be treated with any degree of similar kindness and generosity on the part of this government, or are they going to continue to be ignored and, in fact, going to be asked to wait for another year or two while the government meets its promises to the already wealthy in this province in the corporate sector, who do not need any of those gifts in order for them to remain financially viable and competitive?

Another question is on P3s, Mr. Chairman. P3s, in my view, are something that is causing lots of people to ask serious questions about the real intentions of this government. Is this a way of doing catch-up with respect to the huge deficits in infrastructure?

The Chair: Hon. member, we've run out of time.
The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. The hon. member opposite has asked a number of questions on interim supply. Some of them I think are very valid questions, and I appreciate his inquiring into a number of areas. As you know, next week I will be bringing down the budget for the government, and a lot of those specific questions will be answered in that budget presentation on a department-by-department basis, so I have to be careful not to go too far into the specific details.

However, all that being said, I know that it was debated last night as to why we have interim supply, and it was part of the introduction that I gave when I filed the documents with the Legislature, to see that the government continues on over the year-end and, in fact, while we go through the department-by-department debate on the budgets when they're presented in the Committee of Supply on the budgets themselves.

All that being said, I know that some ministries have got up and talked about where dollars are needed. The obvious, of course, are the ongoing operations of their departments: their salaries, et cetera, their expenses. But a number of the departments clearly deal with other front-line groups that deliver services on behalf of the government, and their arrangements do begin at the beginning of the fiscal year, as of April 1. They need to be in fact advanced dollars so that their operations again continue on so that there isn't a disruption while we debate budgets within this Legislature, and that's important.

What I can say is that you've talked about a number of things that are near and dear to everyone's heart, health care being one of them, which is a very important aspect of any budget document that comes forward. Clearly, it is an area that affects every household in this province and is a focus and a priority for our government. You've heard the Minister of Health and Wellness on a daily basis talk about the sustainability of the health system and the renewal of the health system as a key focus for our government, and I believe that over the next number of months you'll see him focus his attentions on that sustainability and the road map that will get us to that.

You heard the Premier today talk about the Minister of Justice coming out with a release of the strategic plan that will be part of the budget document in the next few days. Again, that too will be a key element of the long-term road map of the vision for the government that takes us well beyond the four- or five-year time frame that normally is presented within a budgetary document.

This, of course, Mr. Chairman, came about as a result of the recommendations from the Financial Management Commission, recommendation 12, which to me was one of the most fundamental recommendations, I believe, that any government in Canada could ever accept. That was to be thinking strategically and thinking beyond the normal political mandate so that you could do some long-term planning and strategizing as you move forward and that would give focus to people not only within the Assembly itself but in the front-line areas such as the school boards, the universities, the health authorities, the municipalities so that they could in fact work on a long-term strategy that would deliver the objectives they have laid forward and the vision they have laid forward, and it would be in sync instead of in contradiction or waiting to see so there wouldn't be surprises. There could actually be long-term strategies laid out. It's not an unusual function; it's just unusual for governments to do that. Here in Alberta we haven't been afraid to take those new paths so that we could provide that kind of critical path and structure.

So that will be coming out, as the Premier said today, in the next few days from the Minister of Justice.

9:20

You've heard our Solicitor General talk about the importance of

policing, and those announcements will be coming out as part of the budget process. These are initiatives that we've heard from people. We've heard people tell us that they're critically important and they have to be dealt with, and the Solicitor General has talked about that already.

One of the biggest items coming forward in the budget, of course, is in the Learning portfolio. You've heard the Minister of Learning talk about the recommendations from the Learning Commission and how those recommendations will be implemented over the next few years and that the focus on learning will be key for Alberta, and we've accepted those as a government. So those, too, are very important reflections of the priorities for our government, and they're all part of this.

Again, life doesn't stop because of a date, and we found that in the capital plan this year. We said: let's not be tied to a date in capital, that because of March 31 everything has to stop; let's continue on. And we changed that in the capital planning process, which I think was wise.

I did try to find out where the rule came in that everything had to be spent before March 31 or you lost it, and that's why we made the fundamental change in structure this year that you could carry that capital forward and spend it when it made sense to do it. Again, the front-line delivery folks would have that evaluation and that expertise in their own shop. So it was a fundamental change, and I think it was very important.

So what we have here in the interim supply estimates are quite clearly the things that sustain us through those debates and the particulars of the budget that do come forward to maintain the ongoing programs so we don't put those programs in jeopardy. I think it's important to proceed on with it, and next week, as I say, I'll be bringing down the budget.

One of the things that you also mentioned was P3s. I know it was an issue, Mr. Chairman, that came up today again. Well, we've been very, very careful in our P3 process and very, very thorough, I believe. We even have a special advisory group with expertise in that area to make sure that when we look at projects that may qualify or be selected for a P3 concept, they in fact make sense. Some jurisdictions have gone off and I think got caught in the concept of P3 without the real evaluation. One of the key elements of a P3 project is the ability to transfer risk, and that's one of the key elements that has to be evaluated and associated with those kinds of projects.

Today someone asked the question about all the ones that have failed and have been wrong. The key is to make sure that you recognize where some of the weaknesses have been and make sure that they're not within our structure, and then we protect ourselves from those kinds of structures.

So that is one vehicle that can be used by governments, but it isn't the only vehicle because you do have to do an evaluation. You have to do a cost-benefit analysis. You have to do a long-term evaluation as to whether it makes sense to have someone else get involved in the project or to do it as we have done all along, and we've said in this government that the vast majority of our projects will continue to be financed in the way they have traditionally, that we will pay for them as we go along.

But there is an opportunity to use alternative financing. We've built that into the capital structure. We've left that door open, and if ideas do come forward, we will seriously evaluate them and look at them, but we will only go forward if it makes sense to do that. We're not prepared to just do it because it's the popular thing of the day.

Insofar as support, we could go through these. We have support, again, for the offices of the Legislative Assembly that have to carry

on beyond March 31: the Auditor General, the office of the Ombudsman, the Chief Electoral Officer, the Ethics Commissioner, and the Information and Privacy Commissioner. These are all functions, Mr. Chairman, that must continue on as we go through a budgetary debate, once the budget is submitted next week, and of course the departments of the government.

The realistic side of the situation is that things progress on, and they must be secure. That's all this is doing. This carries us on for two months and satisfies those agencies or groups that have to receive their operating up front to continue on. Nothing more, nothing less. So there's no magic to this. The real debate will come as we go through the budget documents and go on the elements within each vote and debate line by line in those votes the details of the expenditures on a department-by-department basis. I would hope that we would proceed with passing these interim estimates and proceed, then, next week with the budget and have the detailed debate at that time when we have the departments' estimates before the House.

I haven't answered all of your questions – some of them will have to wait until after the budget – but I fully intend to make sure that your questions are answered as you ask them through Committee of Supply in the budget debate. As I've told you on many occasions, if I haven't answered them all in committee, we will undertake to get answers back to you, and we will go through the *Hansard* for the questions. I think the vast majority of this debate needs to take place after the budget comes through.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I just had to continue on because, of course, I'm on one of those issues that I just feel very strongly about. What I had been talking about was recommendation 40 from the Auditor General's 2002-2003 report appearing on page 272. I'll note that it is a repeat recommendation as well. It's recommending "that the Department of the Solicitor General implement the plan for provincial policing standards."

Now, seeing that this ministry is requesting \$84.1 million, I think it's more than reasonable to ask how the ministry is responding to the recommendations that were made regarding the ministry's operations, particularly with this minister. She is the black hole of space as far as reports are concerned, loves to commission them and have MLA committees running around there. [interjection] Oh, I'm sorry. He commissions them. She doesn't implement them and doesn't publish them. We've got three of them that are outstanding that are coming from her department which taxpayers have paid for, Mr. Chairman, and have not been able to see.

This is a fourth one actually, because what's still out there is the MLA review of the Police Act. That, in fact, did report, but then the minister looked at it for a while and said: "Well, you know, we're going to accept some and reject some. We want to do another feedback loop, and we'll get back to you." That's the last we heard of it. So we don't really know what was the end result of all of that, and that was July of 2001. Then in the fall of 2001 was that sort of first feedback loop, and we've never heard anything since.

The second thing that's outstanding completely – we've never seen it again; it disappeared into the wormhole of space – is the review of the Corrections Act. Again, a number of backbench MLAs went around the country looking at corrections: no published report; nothing happening there. With the victims' fund, which was a consultation that was chaired by the Member for Calgary-Shaw, a report was done. Poof, Mr. Chairman, no sign of it. Gone.

When I asked in question period for the Solicitor General to please

release all of these reports that taxpayers have paid for, I got told: "Well, I'm going to do something. Just wait for the budget, and then I can release all of these." I say: excuse me? Some of these are outstanding and, in fact, existed. We've actually seen parts of them, the policing review from 2001 anyway. So we don't need to wait until the 2004-2005 budget to be released to get these reports released. She can do them at any time.

9:30

The fourth unimplemented, unpublished, unfinished piece of business from this department is this plan for provincial policing standards. Now, the Auditor General notes that

the Ministry had drafted a policing standards manual but had decided not to issue the manual because it wanted to . . .

Wait for it.

. . . review the report of the MLA Policing Review Committee . . . issued on July 10, 2002, to assess its impact on policing standards.

Now we're waiting on a provincial policing standard, which is waiting on this MLA policing review, which does not have to wait for the budget. So let's have it. What is the problem that everything is being kept behind closed doors and under cover of darkness there?

What are the implications and risks of this? "Until the plan is implemented, the Ministry does not know whether police services meet the province's minimum policing standards. Public safety could be at risk." Now, the Auditor General doesn't run around making wild statements, so I've got to take him seriously when he says, "Public safety could be at risk," because we don't know what is supposed to happen here and we can't measure it. So this is very serious.

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

You know, one of the things we keep getting from this front bench around everything we ask now is: stay tuned. Well, if I can send a message back to the Public Affairs Bureau: come up with another one because that isn't working for us. I mean, this whole spin about: "Oh, gosh, you know, we've got to pay the salaries of the civil servant, and that's why we need this interim supply." Well, of course that's why you need the interim supply. Of course it's going to pay all of those salaries. And, no, the opposition is not saying that bureaucrats shouldn't get paid here.

What we are saying is that the timing of all of this is 100 per cent under the control of the government. The government calls us into this sitting; the government decides when the budget is going to be prepared and be released; the government decides when the throne speech is going to happen. The government is perfectly capable of calling this House back in on the 15th of January, the 25th of January, the 1st of February, or whatever. Lots of time to give us to get the throne speech done, to get a budget brought in, and to debate the full budget and pass it before the fiscal year-end, which is the point.

We were at a time once when special warrants were used only under extraordinary circumstances, when for some, you know, major reason, good reason we couldn't have the budget passed before the fiscal year began, which is the 1st of April. Now, what could be a circumstance there? Well, an election, for example. If the election were very close to the end of the fiscal year, then it wouldn't be possible to get the House in and get the budget passed in time, so that would be the use for a special warrant, or what's now called interim supply.

This has now become – and I actually heard someone say this last night – traditional. It's traditional that it would be this late, and that's the reason for it being this late. That's ridiculous. The government has total control about what they're doing here, so it's

the government's choice that they're going to be that late with getting the budget in here that we would have to have an interim supply budget brought forward. This is not about tradition; this is about choice.

The other excuse I've heard brought up by the government is, "Well, we have to wait for the federal government. We can't do our budget until we've heard from the feds." Well, I think out of the eight budgets I've been around for, the feds have actually produced a budget in the spring that was even close to what this government would be waiting for once. There's no need. The province is not tied to the federal budget. It doesn't have to wait for it, and most years it can't wait for it because the feds don't produce a budget anywhere close to this.

So, you know, go back to Public Affairs and get another spin on this one because this one ain't cutting it. It's not working. It's entirely up to the front bench how this goes, and obviously the choice is that they want an interim supply. If anybody's going to start yakking off about how bureaucrats aren't being paid, I will direct their attention to the front bench, whose choice it is to have an interim supply and to have us begin the budget debates so late that we cannot get a budget passed prior the beginning of the fiscal year.

Looking at Sustainable Resource Development, which is a ministry that is requesting . . . Oh; okay. This is good. Mr. Speaker, this is encouraging. This is why the minister wanted me to look at his department in particular, because I'm afraid, minister of science and technology, you've lost first place here for most reduced requests in interim supply. The new award is now going to, probably temporarily, the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, who in 2002-2003 requested \$101.9 million, last year requested \$92.9 million, and this year, Mr. Chairman – and truly he is moving to the head of the line – is down to \$52.3 million as an interim supply for, once again I'll remind you all, three months of spending. I commend the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development for his austerity program here.

Now, when I look at what the Auditor General is looking for, I would be questioning the minister on whether he's been able to implement these recommendations, because they're concerns raised by the Auditor General. On page 277 an unnumbered recommendation requests that the Department of Sustainable Resource Development "follow the government's best practice guidelines for contracted services and grants when undertaking major capital or long-term lease projects."

The implications and risks of not implementing this are that the department

manages contracts totalling millions of dollars each year. Following the government's best practices will help the Department acquire cost-effective services with less risk. For example, in the "decision to contract" stage, a business case should identify risks, clarify estimated costs, and analyze lease vs. buy options. In the "review/approval process", the Department should consider the financial stability of its bidders. In the "continuous improvement" stage, the Department should consider how to improve its contracting practices.

So I'm looking to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development as to how he is progressing in implementing that.

Finally, when we look at Transportation, which is a budget that is – holy mackerel; that's got to be the biggest jump. In the year 2002-2003 the Department of Transportation requested \$139 million as an interim supply. Last year, Mr. Chairman, this department requested \$220.3 million and this year \$367.3 million. Yowza, says I. That's a lot of money for three months.

Mr. MacDonald: How is *Hansard* going to spell yowza?

Ms Blakeman: I have every faith that *Hansard* will figure out how to spell yowza. And there's an exclamation mark in there in case anybody was wondering.

All right. When I look at page 282 of the Auditor General's report under the Department of Transportation, there is a numbered recommendation, which means that we should take this seriously, recommending that the Ministry of Transportation

strengthen its monitoring of and audit processes for driver examiners by:

- preparing annual plans for monitoring and auditing examiners
- promptly monitoring and auditing driver examiners, and reporting the results to senior management
- training driver program administrators to identify the risk factors of unethical behaviour and to investigate problem examiners
- making the license renewal process as rigorous as the application process.

The implications and risks of not implementing this would be that there is a risk that the Ministry will not identify and investigate examiners who are not conducting examinations in accordance with legislation and policy. This could result in unqualified drivers obtaining driver licenses, risking the safety of the travelling public.

Very serious, and I commend the Auditor General for having raised the concern. I'm interested in how the minister plans on implementing that or, in fact, if it has been implemented, especially since he's asking for an astonishing \$367.3 million for three months of operation.

On page 285 we have the recommendation that the Ministry of Transportation "implement a process to mitigate the risk of examiners being affiliated with driver training schools or registry agents" and also recommending that the ministry "enhance its code of conduct and require examiners to reconfirm compliance with the code of conduct and conflict-of-interest requirements." Implications and risks are that "there is a risk that the Ministry will not identify or prevent unethical practices, which could result in issuing licences to unqualified drivers."

9:40

So I look forward to hearing verbally, or if not verbally then, please, in writing as soon as possible because, of course, I am not going to be able to support this request for interim supply until I am satisfied that these recommendations have in fact been implemented. Now, following the Committee of Supply examination of the interim supply requests, we will have an appropriation bill before us that goes through second reading, Committee of the Whole, and third reading, so we do have until the beginning of next week for ministers to reply to this member in writing with the answers to the questions that I have put before them.

At this point, Mr. Chairman, I would like to bring forward an amendment.

Some Hon. Members: Ah.

Ms Blakeman: That would be the sound of cheering that I hear. Thank you so much for the support. I'll keep talking while they distribute the amendment for Committee of Supply.

Essentially, what I'm asking is that "the Department of Justice estimates for the 2004-2005 interim supply . . . be reduced by \$12,250 so that the operating expense and equipment/inventory purchase to be voted is \$70,487,750."

Now, what is this connected to, you say? Well, what this is connected to is the standing policy committees and the pay for the Standing Policy Committee on Justice and Government Services, which covers goings-on in the departments of Justice, Solicitor General, and Government Services. These are committees that I

view, in fact, as unparliamentary and as essentially committees of the Tory caucus because in most cases these meetings are not open to the public. They're not open to the media. There is no *Hansard* recording kept of the proceedings of these meetings, and very rarely are other members of the House able to obtain, and certainly they're not allowed to participate in, the proceedings of these committees.

I do not believe that taxpayer money should be funding these committees. This is just one; there are four other committees that exist that are these standing policy committees. I don't believe that the taxpayer should be paying for these essentially internal policy committees.

Mr. MacDonald: Does SPC stand for special progressive conservative?

Ms Blakeman: Well, I'm asked if SPC stands for special progressive conservative, but it doesn't. It stands for standing policy committee.

I continue to argue that these, in fact, are internal Tory caucus committees, certainly not committees of the Legislative Assembly, and I would argue that they are not government committees and should not be paid for by the public dollar. They should be paid for by the partisan funds that the government caucus has access to.

Now, I believe that the amendment has been distributed, and I believe that I may call this amendment A1.

The Acting Chair: That would be fine. This amendment will be A1.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I think that it's important, especially when today we had Mr. Speaker's MLA for a Day youth participants in the building and watching our proceedings.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

I went up and spoke to a group of them this afternoon on the role of the opposition, and they were very interested in parliamentary process and, in fact, in their involvement. We talked a bit about democratic deficits that existed and why they feel disconnected from the proceedings of this particular House. I think these standing policy committees are in some small part responsible for that distancing that people feel. What this government has done over the 10 years that they've been in under the current leadership is move the business of this Assembly behind closed doors into internal workings of the government Tory caucus.

Dr. Massey: I think you got the attention of the Deputy Premier.

Ms Blakeman: Did we indeed? Okay.

So we don't have members of the backbench debating government bills in this House, for example, and when we say, "Well, you know, why don't you?" we're told: "We've already done it. We did it through this standing policy committee. We've already vetted it there." But we have no idea what questions were asked, who participated in the debate, who supported something, who didn't support something.

Part of what happens in this House and part of the reason that it's open to the public, that the galleries are open to the public, that there is a transcript kept of what we do, is so that our constituents can in fact look up what we've said and find out what we're saying on their behalf or, perhaps, not saying on their behalf. Then they can take issue with us and say, "You're not representing me."

We have no idea of what those government members feel about various bills. They don't debate the bills in this Assembly. They heckle. They love to heckle the opposition, who are in fact taking

the time to prepare and look at what's being said in the bills and get up and speak for their constituents. But I never know what the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar actually thinks about these issues. He's more than willing to heckle me from the backbench there, but he doesn't get up and speak on the record for government bills.

Who are the other ones that we love to hear from here? West Yellowhead, Vermilion-Lloydminster, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, Edmonton-Castle Downs, Calgary-Fish Creek, Edmonton-McClung: all of them are really keen on heckling opposition members when they're up to speak, but we have no idea of what they actually feel about bills. And what's one of their primary excuses as to why they don't debate when the bill is being debated on the floor at the Legislative Assembly? Because they've already talked about it in the standing policy committee. How do we know that?

I hope you'll support this amendment. Thank you so much.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader on amendment A1.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm delighted to rise and speak to this amendment if for no other reason than that the hon. member has targeted the Department of Justice estimates, and if there is any department in government whose estimates should not be reduced by \$12,250, it's got to be the Department of Justice.

The Department of Justice works so hard to make our community safe in this province. The Department of Justice, Mr. Chairman, has the maintenance enforcement program. The hon. member, herself, on a daily basis talks about how important that program is to Alberta's children, raising money, collecting money that is ordered by courts so that Alberta's children can be properly taken care of. The hon. member should be ashamed, trying to lower the Department of Justice's budget by \$12,250. Alberta's children deserve better from that hon. member.

Mr. Chairman, I am absolutely shocked and appalled, to use a term that often was used by the predecessor from Edmonton-Strathcona as Leader of the Official Opposition some years ago – shocked and appalled – that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre would even dream of reducing the estimates for the Department of Justice by \$12,250. How many children does she want to go without their maintenance enforcement payments because the Department of Justice doesn't have the money to go out and collect?

The Department of Justice, Mr. Chairman, has the Public Trustee's office. [interjection] The Public Trustee – the hon. member obviously doesn't know – takes care of those vulnerable Albertans who cannot take care of themselves. The Minors' Property Act, which we've debated in this House, the Public Trustee Act, that we've debated in this House – the Public Trustee is responsible to take care of the assets of those people who aren't able to take care of themselves, to handle decedents' estates when there is no one else in place to take care of those decedents, to take care of the unfortunate in this province. And this hon. member brings forward a motion to reduce the budget by \$12,250.

The court system. We have a very strong court system in this province, but it can't do the job that it ought to be able to do or could do if it were provided even more resources, not less resources. So we need to try and reform the court systems by talking about single-trial courts, which can make more effective use of the resources.

9:50

We talk about the domestic violence court in Calgary. Her Liberal cousins have removed the support for domestic violence court because it's a pilot project that's ended, and in typical federal Liberal

fashion they start things but then withdraw your money and let the province carry the ball when it's successful.

Dr. Massey: Through the municipalities.

Mr. Hancock: Well, they were partners with us. The municipalities do have some concerns in that regard, and we work and the Minister of Municipal Affairs works very closely with them to try and make sure that we can achieve something. They're going to be very excited after the next budget.

But I can tell you that no one is going to be excited if this hon. member achieves her dream of reducing the Department of Justice estimates by \$12,250 because it takes away from the very thing which makes this community, this Alberta, a safe place to live, a safe, caring community, which is fundamental – fundamental, Mr. Chairman – to any just society.

Now, she uses as the pathetic excuse for taking away money from these very, very important roles of government, the standing policy committees. She says that because those are not committees of the Legislature involving all parties, they're not valid committees. Well, nobody has ever said that they were committees of the Legislature; they're committees of government. Each department of government consults with members of government with respect to government policy before it's brought to the Legislature. What could be more appropriate than that?

When it comes to the Legislature, members of the opposition and all members of the Legislature get to comment on it. But in developing government policy, we consult with the public. We have a thorough consultation process with the public, and members of the opposition aren't precluded from that process. They can be involved in the consultation processes with the government that go on on a regulation basis before any new public policy is brought to this Chamber. They can participate in that way. But when you're talking about developing government policy, obviously you consult with government members.

Now, government in our system of parliamentary democracy consists essentially in the truest form as members of Executive Council, but just because that's what is defined as government, it does not mean that members of Executive Council cannot create committees and consult more broadly. That's precisely what a standing policy committee is. In fact, this jurisdiction, Mr. Chairman, has, I think, the distinction of involving private members on the government side in policy development, budget development, and legislation development in a far greater way than any other parliamentary democracy that I'm aware of. That's after the public consultation and before it comes to the floor of the Legislature, leaving in the Legislature more time and opportunity for members of the opposition to raise any concerns that they might have.

The irony of it, Mr. Chairman, is that the bill that's had the most debate in this House is about agricultural operations, but if they read it, it's about spreading manure. That's the irony of it. The bill that's had the longest debate in the House so far and the most amendments from the opposition side is a bill about how we spread manure. It's manure management.

So, Mr. Chairman, I would encourage this House to turn down this ill-founded, ill-thought-out amendment because the effect of this amendment, even if it's only on interim supply, is to take away dollars from a department which needs those dollars, which, in fact, has been able to prevail upon Treasury Board, as they would know because they debated supplementary supply . . .

Dr. Pannu: Small change.

Mr. Hancock: Small change. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona calls \$12,250 small change. All I can say, Mr. Chairman, is that I have no idea what his pension is, but it must be a heck of a lot more than any pension I would get.

If \$12,250 is small change, I can tell you what we can do for \$12,250. Let's see; a quick calculation here. We can probably collect \$100,000 for children in Alberta with \$12,250. I'm guessing at that. I'll have to go back and remind myself. Maybe you'll raise the same type of amendment when we bring in our full supply. But with that kind of money, Mr. Chairman, we can do a lot. It's not just a modest amount. It's not a modest amount of money to the Department of Justice; I can tell you that.

I can tell you – and I'll get back to the concept that the hon. member raised about standing policy committees – that the standing policy committee that I report to that's chaired by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler does a phenomenal job. A phenomenal job. What does it do?

Ms Blakeman: That may well be. It's taxpayers' money.

Mr. Hancock: Darn right it's taxpayers' money, and it should be taxpayers' money because they're getting value.

Ms Blakeman: It's an internal government committee.

Mr. Hancock: Well, all committees of government are internal government committees. It's not a committee of the Legislature; it's a government committee. It's not a partisan committee; it's a government committee. Well, I shouldn't say that it's not partisan because, of course, it's all members of the governing party that are on it. [interjection] Would you rather that I stopped now? Is that what you're suggesting?

I was making a point about the efficacy of standing policy committees, I believe. Standing policy committees perform a phenomenal function, and I can tell you what they do. You know, I have another committee that perhaps you want to tack onto this agenda, the dollars that are spent on the Justice Policy Advisory Committee. Perhaps the Justice Policy Advisory Committee's budget should be cut as well.

Maybe my travel expenses should be cut. Maybe I shouldn't travel anywhere. The hon. member in Public Accounts asked where I travelled. Well, I think she was surprised to know that I have gone to Nova Scotia for a meeting with justice ministers from across the country. That was on September 10 and 11 of that fatal year.

I went to Nunavut, as a matter of fact. Iqaluit, again to meet with justice ministers. The hon. member would probably look at the bills from that and suggest that it was way too high. Well, I can tell you: it's expensive to travel to Nunavut. But it's also expensive not to travel to Nunavut when justice ministers are meeting and talking about the Criminal Code and talking about amendments to the Criminal Code that might protect children by enhancing the laws against child pornography. Now, how do you value that? Are you going to check and see whether I spent \$15 on juice when I was at a meeting when we were talking about passing laws with respect to child pornography, and are you going to try and determine the value of that?

But back to the Justice Policy Advisory Committee, which is a committee of government. I meet with all sorts of people to talk about justice issues. The amendment just talks about taking \$12,250 out of my budget. That could affect all sorts of different things. It doesn't specifically say: with respect to standing policy committees.

But I'd like to come back to standing policy committees because they are one of the most effective tools of government, and I'll tell

you why. When we develop policy in the Department of Justice, we've gone out and talked to stakeholders about what barriers to success are, what things are getting in the way of having safe communities. We bring those ideas together; we develop a policy framework; we talk about being a policy-driven organization and policy outcomes for government. Then we bring them back in, and we frame those into a policy discussion. We can take them to a standing policy committee, which has representatives on it from all across this province, something we wouldn't get, actually . . .

Dr. Massey: None from the opposition.

Mr. Hancock: No, but we do have representatives from Edmonton on that, and the only representatives you have are from Edmonton except for one from Lethbridge.

So the standing policy committee does have representatives from all across the province – all across the province – and they can provide meaningful input from each of their communities about the proposed justice policy initiatives. Then we can take those initiatives back with the benefit of that input and refine it and do a better job of bringing forward better initiatives, and then we can put it in the form of a policy decision with recommendations. We can go back to that standing policy committee, and coming back to that standing policy committee, we can then refine that policy idea and get approval for it. It's the first stage, in fact, before it goes to cabinet. It can have broader input.

10:00

Many other governments in the parliamentary democracy don't have the benefit of that. They just have cabinet ministers who take policy ideas – I think the federal Liberal government operates in this way. They take their policy ideas, but at the initial stage of policy development they just drop their bills on the House without the benefit of any input from even their own private members.

Ms Blakeman: And then they all debate it, yes.

Mr. Hancock: Sure, they all debate it but after the decisions are made and the government has determined that it's part of its agenda and it's going to pass the bill.

Dr. Massey: How often are bills changed in here?

Mr. Hancock: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods asks: how often do bills change in here? I can respond to him honestly: every time a good idea is brought to the floor of the House to change that bill. Every single time a good idea is brought to the floor of the House to change that bill. [interjections]

Well, Mr. Chairman, obviously, they don't want to hear any more. They keep interrupting and heckling, so I will cede the floor to someone else. But I hope that hon. members would not acquiesce to the request from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, who so often purports to support maintenance enforcement and other initiatives taken by Justice to help the poor, the unfortunate, and those that need help, the children of this province, and who would want to take \$12,250 out of the Department of Justice so that the Minister of Justice couldn't go to federal/provincial/territorial ministers' meetings and ensure that the Criminal Code of Canada is amended to raise the age of consent, if we're ever successful in that, or to deal with things like conditional sentences or child pornography. She wants to take that out of the governance of this province.

I would ask that members do not support this amendment.

The Chair: Hon. members, I have a couple of words to say. I hesitate to even acknowledge the next speaker because Standing

Order 58(4) provides for the vote on an estimate before the Committee of Supply to be called "after it has received not less than 2 hours of consideration." This being two hours and pursuant to Government Motion 12 agreed to March 16, 2004, I must now put the following questions for the 2004-2005 interim supply estimates for the offices of the Legislative Assembly, the government and lottery fund for the next fiscal year ending March 31, 2005.

But first we must deal with amendment A1 as moved by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Chair: Now for the votes. Hon. members of supply, please realize that we will go through each and every line item, which may take us to the time in which we could have proposed one, which is quarter to 11.

Agreed to:

Legislative Assembly

Support to the Legislative Assembly	
Operating Expense	\$9,700,000
Office of the Auditor General	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$4,400,000
Office of the Ombudsman	
Operating Expense	\$600,000
Office of the Chief Electoral Officer	
Operating Expense	\$3,400,000
Office of the Ethics Commissioner	
Operating Expense	\$100,000
Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner	
Operating Expense	\$1,000,000

Government

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$13,800,000
Agriculture, Food and Rural Development	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$108,200,000
Children's Services	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$184,000,000
Community Development	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$215,100,000
Capital Investment	\$200,000
Economic Development	
Operating Expense	\$14,400,000
Energy	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$50,200,000
Environment	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$30,900,000
Executive Council	
Operating Expense	\$6,000,000
Finance	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$18,500,000
Nonbudgetary Disbursements	\$18,400,000
Gaming	
Operating Expense	\$50,500,000
Lottery Fund Payments	\$313,600,000

Government Services	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$59,300,000
Health and Wellness	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$1,997,000,000
Capital Investment	\$5,700,000
Human Resources and Employment	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$286,900,000
Infrastructure	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$383,800,000
Capital Investment	\$16,900,000
Innovation and Science	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$46,200,000
Capital Investment	\$6,000,000
International and Intergovernmental Relations	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$2,300,000
Justice	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$70,500,000
10:10	
Learning	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$949,200,000
Nonbudgetary Disbursements	\$48,000,000
Municipal Affairs	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$29,300,000
Revenue	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$12,500,000
Seniors	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$101,600,000
Solicitor General	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$84,100,000
Sustainable Resource Development	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$49,300,000
Capital Investment	\$3,000,000
Transportation	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$265,600,000
Capital Investment	\$101,700,000

The Chair: Apparently, I've run out of numbers to read.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and none too soon. I would move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates for interim supply.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions and reports as follows. All resolutions relating to the 2004-2005 interim supply estimates have been approved.

Support to the Legislative Assembly, operating expense, \$9,700,000; office of the Auditor General, operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$4,400,000; office of the Ombudsman, operating expense, \$600,000; office of the Chief Electoral Officer, operating expense, \$3,400,000; office of the Ethics Commissioner, operating expense, \$100,000; office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, operating expense, \$1,000,000.

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$13,800,000.

Agriculture, Food and Rural Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$108,200,000.

Children's Services: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$184,000,000.

Community Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$215,100,000; capital investment, \$200,000.

Economic Development: operating expense, \$14,400,000.

Energy: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$50,200,000.

Environment: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$30,900,000.

Executive Council: operating expense, \$6,000,000.

Finance: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$18,500,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$18,400,000.

Gaming: operating expense, \$50,500,000; lottery fund payments, \$313,600,000.

Government Services: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$59,300,000.

Health and Wellness: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,997,000,000; capital investment, \$5,700,000.

Human Resources and Employment: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$286,900,000.

Infrastructure: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$383,800,000; capital investment, \$16,900,000.

Innovation and Science: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$46,200,000; capital investment, \$6,000,000.

International and Intergovernmental Relations: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$2,300,000.

Justice: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$70,500,000.

Learning: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$949,200,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$48,000,000.

Municipal Affairs: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$29,300,000.

Revenue: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$12,500,000.

Seniors: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$101,600,000.

Solicitor General: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$84,100,000.

Sustainable Resource Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$49,300,000; capital investment, \$3,000,000.

Transportation: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$265,600,000; capital investment, \$101,700,000.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to table a list of those resolutions voted upon by the Committee of Supply pursuant to Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of Supply on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Having done good work to ensure that the public servants get their paycheques on April 1, I think that we ought to move adjournment until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:19 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, March 18, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/18

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As we conclude for this week our work in this Assembly, we renew our energies with thanks so that we may continue our work with the people in the constituencies we represent. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very fortunate today. I have two school groups visiting. First, I'd like to start by introducing to you and through you to members of the Assembly 61 students from Lacombe upper elementary school. I asked them earlier whether they were glad to be here, and they said that they were very happy, that they were enthusiastic, and I know that they're very bright. With them today are teachers Miss Heather MacKay, Mr. Derek Rankin, and Ms Sasha Krivoshein and parent helpers Tim and Moira Ellen, Mr. Darren Woodford, Ms Lynda Baker, Mr. Dave Helmer, Mrs. Pat Wilson, Mr. Scott Derwanz, Mr. Darrel Johnston, Mrs. Cathy McEachem, Mr. Kelvin Rieland, Mrs. Margie Van Giersbergen, and Mrs. Barbara Webb. I would ask the 61 students to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly. Thank you.

My second students are from Lakeview Christian school, and there are 13 students and nine adults here today. I would welcome these students as well to the Legislature. Joining them are teachers Miss Goossen and Miss Isaac as well as group leaders Ray Unruh and Ralph Wiebe. I would ask the Lakeview Christian school students, who I'm sure are also bright and enthusiastic, to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure today that I introduce the students from St. Mary's school on behalf of the MLA for Cardston-Taber-Warner. There are 29 great students along with their teachers, Mrs. Gay Lagler and Mr. Pat Pyne, and their student teacher, Miss Kendra Bailey. They're also with 10 other people that are either parents or helpers. At this time I'd appreciate it if they'd all stand and have the Assembly give them a great warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a couple from Linden, Alberta, Tom and Carrie Courtney. They're seated in the public gallery. If the name sounds familiar, it should be because they were the owner-operators of a very successful business, Courtney Berg enterprises, for a number of years in Linden, and the business is still successful, still growing, still expanding and being operated by their son and son-in-law to date. But their real claim to fame is that they are also the very proud

grandparents of our own researcher, Richard Westlund, who's also seated in the public gallery. I'd ask all three to stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a former constituent of Edmonton-Centre. We like to hang on to them for as long as we can. Marilyn Burns is joining us today in the gallery, and she's very interested, particularly in auto insurance reform. So, Marilyn, I would ask you to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of this Assembly a constituent of Edmonton-Gold Bar, Dr. Ryan Dunch. Dr. Dunch has children in three public schools in Edmonton: in the Chinese bilingual program at Meyonohk school, at Victoria school, and at Strathearn school. Dr. Dunch is concerned about the quality of public education and the lack of adequate funding for public education in this province. I would like Dr. Dunch, who is in the public gallery, to now stand and receive the traditional warm and gracious welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am delighted to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly one Edmonton-Strathcona constituent, Dr. Robert Wilson. Dr. Wilson has two young children attending grades 2 and 3, I think, at McKernan elementary junior high. Dr. Robert Wilson is very active in the Education Watch initiative, a parent organization very concerned about the lack of adequate funding for public education in this province. I believe he is seated in the public gallery. I would ask him to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure today to introduce to you and through you a visitor to our country but more importantly a visitor to Alberta. Her name is Mika Hirano. She resides in Anpachi, Japan. Mika has just finished four years of university in Japan, and she graduated just last week as a teacher. She decided to take a couple of weeks off and come over here and visit with her friend and be our guest in our home for the next couple of weeks, but the nice thing is that Mika has just received word that she has got a job in her own school in her own town starting the 1st of April. So we wish her the best of luck. Mika is seated in the members' gallery. I ask her to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, there are two people that are actually working with Mika, and we shouldn't ignore the other partner of that beautiful relationship, and I'd like Phyllis Coutts to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The auto insurance rate freeze is just a political tease by this government. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. Have any major players in the Alberta auto insurance market refused to date to issue a credit or rebate since this freeze was initiated by the Premier last fall?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can say that from the latest report I've had, about 95 per cent or more of the industry have complied with the freeze. In fact, I've had numerous people, even in this Assembly, say that they have actually received not only a credit from their insurance company since the freeze was put in place, but they've actually received refund cheques if their insurance came up for renewal after the October 30 freeze date. So there has been a compliance by the industry.

As you know, we are in a situation of a legal action right now, so I do know of one company that has taken us to court, and that, I believe, is the extent of it, but I believe all others have complied with the freeze that was put in place on October 30.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: why is Meloche Monnex, the fourth largest player in the Alberta auto market, with over \$150 million in direct written premiums in 2002, not listed on your web site as agreeing to issue either rebates or credits? They're the fourth largest player in this market. Why are they not there?

1:40

Mrs. Nelson: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to get into individual companies. It is my understanding from the latest briefing that I've had that the companies have, not always happily, agreed to the freeze that's been put in place and have complied with the ruling that we put forward. Whether it comes through the broker or through the insurance company depends on the relationship that's there.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: will the hon. minister order those insurance companies to issue interest on the amounts of rebate or credit that consumers in this province are owed, particularly after the large profits that have been just announced?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, we asked the industry on very short notice to put a freeze in place and to co-operate with us to work to get a reform program going forward. We said that from October 30 forward for up to 18 months there would be a freeze in place, and under the fair practices regulations that we put in place, there are other rules there as well. We asked the industry to comply with it, and we asked them to work within a tight time frame to accomplish that. We didn't legislate that tight time frame because we learned very quickly that some were experiencing some difficulty with their computer systems and were having trouble complying if their systems weren't as modern as the others.

But I can say that even with all those difficulties the industry did come forward and has co-operated on the credits and/or refunds that we requested that they put in place. I can say that, in fact, they are today, as we speak, continuing to co-operate. We aren't always agreeing on every regulation but are continuing to co-operate to try

and put forward a new structure, as are the other proponents that were against this. The legal profession is also working with us.

So people are coming together to realize that this plan, Mr. Speaker, was clearly geared for the consumers of the province of Alberta. Once that realization was recognized by both sides, they decided to be part of the solution and not stay as the problem.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Rural Gas Co-ops and Electrification Associations

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Divisions in this Progressive Conservative government continue to grow larger and larger, wider and wider. Now, a recent report on rural issues states – and this is the report that was put out yesterday by the hon. Member for Wainwright and the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake – that “policies regarding gas and electricity utilities need to respect the work of Rural Gas Co-ops and Rural Electrification Associations . . . They gave rural areas quality utilities at affordable prices.” However, in the next breath this government plans a \$3 million propaganda campaign to convince rural Albertans to abandon their rural electrification associations and gas co-ops in favour of so-called competition. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. Why is this government trying to break up the rural gas co-ops and the rural electrification associations?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, as has chronically been the case, we are compelled to correct the member's preamble. I would state to him that there is less division amongst these 74 than there is amongst those seven. The reason is because this government works very closely with all the members that are a part of this government.

One of those important parts, the parts created by government, are rural electrification associations, that out of 9,000 megawatts deliver some 87 megawatts of electricity efficiently, reasonably, and with good service across this great province.

Mr. Speaker, the rural gas co-ops are a model. They are such a model that I took the book on rural gas co-ops and gave it to legislators from Alaska and said: if you want to prosper, gasify your rural areas; here's how you do it. The rural gas co-ops serve as a template. Those organizations shall remain strong, will remain strong, and will withstand any malarkey that comes from that member.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to that minister: given that there is no competition in Alberta's energy market and rural electrification associations and gas co-ops have provided rural Alberta with something that really works, affordable utilities for decades, why is this government spending \$3 million on a propaganda campaign that rural members do not want?

Mr. Smith: I guess that because there's no preamble in a supplemental, I can't correct the preamble that we didn't hear, Mr. Speaker. In fact, the ability for us to continue to deliver affordable electricity and affordable gas prices in this marketplace, whether it be rural Alberta, whether it be northern Alberta, whether it be southern Alberta, is something we've worked very hard on since 1996. I don't care which jurisdiction you look at across Canada, whether it's New Brunswick, that has just spent \$750 million retrofitting an oil-fired generator to an input product that doesn't exist or they can't obtain, to the \$40 billion debt in Ontario and a decision to spend billions of dollars to go nuclear, I'll tell you what. If he wants to see trouble, all he has to do is leave Alberta.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that this government plans by 2010 to provide all customers choice with electricity, how can this minister say that this government is not planning to dismantle the rural electrification associations that Albertans rely on? It's a tradition that works.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, if there's any proof that when the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness was the hon. minister of education and he introduced early reading competencies into the school system it was very important – because this member is not displaying a reading competency. If he goes through the report that was put together by the Member for Wainwright and the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, he will see that there is an Alberta that thrives on the oil patch out there, there's a rural Alberta that has endless opportunities that are nowhere else in Canada. We look forward for this government to capitalize on those rural opportunities, and the oil and gas industry intends to be a part of it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Health Care Labour Negotiations

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The compulsory arbitration board assisting in negotiations with Alberta's nurses wrote the Minister of Human Resources and Employment on Tuesday asking him to extend the deadline for negotiations. In the letter the board requests: "It is in the public interest that we ask you to extend the Board's mandate." While nurses have said that they want to continue negotiations and avert a crisis, the provincial health authorities remain silent. My questions are to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Will the minister encourage the provincial health authorities to continue negotiations as the compulsory arbitration board requests?

Mr. Dunford: Yes, certainly we will. We've contemplated for some time that in putting the compulsory arbitration board together, they would be able to find a way to provide an agreement for the parties, and we've talked about a date on March 31.

Dr. Taft: Is the minister prepared to use his power and unilaterally extend the deadline past June 15 if the provincial health authorities do not continue negotiations?

Mr. Dunford: The question is hypothetical. We have the letter, as the member has indicated. As is my normal method of operation, we're analyzing it carefully, and we'll make a decision.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. What steps does this government have planned in the event the provincial health authorities walk away from the negotiations?

1:50

Mr. Dunford: Well, again hypothetical. Does the member not understand that as an hon. member in this House he, like me, should be encouraging this group to come to an agreement and not all of a sudden start to provide shadows and innuendo that maybe they can't come to an agreement? What he's asking is not right.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

There once was a minister of health
Who often acted with stealth.
His plans were carefully hidden.
He had to do as he was bidden,
For the system's objective is now wealth.

To the Minister of Health and Wellness: given that the Premier has stated that he doesn't want to release the Graydon report because the media and opposition will pounce on it, is the government admitting that Albertans will find his recommendations unacceptable?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm impressed. I can only reply by saying:

An intelligent question I will not dodge
If asked by the hon. doc named Raj.
But if the question is inane,
From answering such I will refrain.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to say this. We have made a commitment that the report the hon. member refers to will be part of the overall discussion of health care reform in this province. It's an important discussion not only in Alberta but throughout the country, and in the due course of time we will be releasing the Graydon report that he refers to.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Time marches on.

Is the government that scared of the contents of the Graydon report that it needs a communications plan before its release?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, with all matters of government policy and government discussion and appropriate consultation that takes place, we always have a communication plan. We're not as haphazard as the members opposite.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: isn't it insulting to Albertans to suggest that they can't make up their own mind about health care reform without passing a report through the filter of 200 or more spin doctors in the government's Public Affairs Bureau?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, that falls in the category of inane questions.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Highway Signs

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's a tough act to follow, so I won't try.

My question today is to the Minister of Transportation. The Department of Transportation has recently announced a new highway signage policy which would phase out community business signs on highways over the next two years. This concerns many businesses that rely on tourism to supplement their income. To the Minister of Transportation: what impact will this new policy have on local businesses in small rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The impact on the small businesses in rural Alberta will be very positive. We've heard from Albertans that it's time to renew our signs in the province of Alberta, and as we head to the celebration of our centennial, we recognize

that something must be done to add a little bit more colour and newness to all our destination signs. As a result, there was a cross-ministry initiative – Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Community Development, Economic Development, and Alberta Transportation – that came together and offered a policy that was accepted by government. We are now going to be in the process of implementing that policy.

There are, of course, two stages to it. First is the logo component. Logos really are the food, the lodging, and the gas that tourists or other Albertans want to locate in the province. That will be the first component of the change.

Then it will be followed with tourist-oriented destination signs as well. I want to say, Mr. Speaker, that those signs will be international in terms of the criteria and the colour. You'll see the same colour of signs in our neighbouring provinces and also in the United States, and our intent here is to provide the best possible very pleasant experience for the thousands of tourists that visit this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second and last question to the same minister: what options are available for businesses to make the public aware of the specific services they have to offer?

Mr. Stelmach: A very good question. That's phase 2 of the policy. We will immediately, with the departments that I mentioned before and with the help of all government members, move to the next stage of open houses and discussions of how we will deal with the kind of community business signs that the hon. member is mentioning.

There are, of course, a number of schools of thought in terms of how many signs we require, should they be the same across the province, and what would be the rules in terms of who can put up a sign and when and at what location along our provincial highways. That, Mr. Speaker, is the next stage, and I welcome input from all members of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

SuperNet

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The rural development strategy released yesterday is critical of the SuperNet. Individual access, lack of technical support, and prohibitive costs are listed as barriers for rural residents. The SuperNet will remain NoNet for many rural Albertans. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Why would the government build the network to a town but not hook up the network to the users?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Interim Leader of the Opposition referred to the jurisdiction of Heisler, and as a matter of note Heisler names its roads and its streets after the Premiers of Alberta.

But on a more serious matter – that's just a little bit of trivia for the House – I think the people responsible for the report that was released yesterday, the Member for Wainwright and the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, understand full well the importance of rural development and understand the opportunity that having the availability of high-speed broadband networks brings to rural

communities to enable them to look at opportunities for additional development in their places.

Dr. Massey: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that hooking up to SuperNet costs from \$3,000 to \$10,000 per year for every public building, how are cash-strapped communities ever going to afford to join up?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question. When the contemplation of the contract with our providers was being worked on, municipalities were not part of those discussions. As we moved along in the process, we actually engaged with the AUMA and the AAMD and C to talk about how we could help to facilitate their connection to the network. As a result, we included in the contract a provision that lets the municipalities have the same connection at the same rates as the other government of Alberta entities. That was added after those discussions.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, we also helped to facilitate an agreement which allows the municipalities for a fee – I think it's about \$4,000 – to be able to provide that connection to their buildings. But the municipalities still have to make a decision as to whether that, in fact, is something that they desire. That's a decision that they have to make.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: how many more tax dollars will be needed and should be added to the \$200 million cost of the project thus far before rural Albertans can be hooked up?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the contract we have for building the SuperNet, particularly as it relates to the rural communities, the extended network, is \$193 million. If there are any overruns on that bill, that is the responsibility of our major contractor, Bell West. So our commitment through the SuperNet construct is to make sure that libraries, hospitals, government buildings, and schools will all be connected to this high-speed optical network, which will allow us to do more things like distance delivery of education, a remote diagnostic and imaging that is unique in the world.

With respect to some specific issues around municipalities I would ask the Minister of Municipal Affairs to supplement.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to say that the hon. members for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and Wainwright have done excellent work on rural development. What we have heard in this report, though, is quite simply this. There's no other program like it anywhere in Canada, number one. By the end of this fiscal year, March 31, every single municipality in this province will be hooked up, so that really says that we're working in partnership.

Let me just give you one other small example. There are rural communities that may not have a town hall or an administration building. In fact, they're using professional accounting firms where they enjoy that service. Do you know what? What's happening is that the rural municipality doesn't want to put that money into a private accounting firm to have that service for them. So what we're trying to work out with the ministry of innovation is a partnership that can serve very well every rural and urban municipality by the end of the fiscal year. It's going to happen. I know that the hon. member may not like it, but it's very good news for every single municipality in this province.

Electricity Generation

Mr. VanderBurg: The discussion on power has caused debate; some even say that things aren't going great. But, Mr. Speaker, during the past few years the province of Alberta has enjoyed a building frenzy in electrical generation. I understand that the industry participants in Whitecourt-St. Anne are looking to new, innovative ways to bring power production and new generation to the Whitecourt area. Many jurisdictions are now considering nuclear plants to generate power and choosing to close down coal production. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. Given Ontario's power generation report released today by John Manley's review committee, it appears that there's increasing support for nuclear power in Ontario. Can a nuclear power facility be built here in Alberta?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's a good question. The question surrounds the issue of competitive market generation. The same competitive market generation that the opposition ballyhoos as a bad principle has in fact delivered some 3,000 new megawatts, has delivered downward pressure on electricity prices to the tune of moving from 16 cents a kilowatt hour down to some 4 cents to 5 cents a kilowatt hour.

There's an extremely robust business-to-business, or wholesale, marketplace, and in fact more power generation is welcome in this province. We have in fact structured through export policy principles, market policy principles, and transmission policy principles an area that is warm and conducive to new generation. That generation is not limited to biomass, wind, natural gas. It can in fact be anything that the investor, who has the risk, chooses to put forward. What the investor, or the proponent of the plant, must do is come before the environmental process, and he must come before the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board process. It is that strong regulatory system that regulates the permitting of power generation in this province.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, given that answer, are we contemplating creating debt, as other jurisdictions have, to further expand electricity generation?

Mr. Smith: Well, to quote another famous conservative, that being Mrs. Nancy Reagan, Mr. Speaker, I think we'll just say no.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, then, could the private sector possibly put in nuclear generations maybe in the oil sands area?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, Atomic Energy of Canada Limited, a long-time recipient of multiple aid and subsidy from the federal government, particularly in the time of the corrupt Liberal government that we see today, has put forward certain studies that would indicate that there could be substantial replacement of natural gas as an input resource to steam generation in the oil sands.

There is a process, as I outlined earlier, and then I think Albertans also have a concern. That concern would be with the fact of the horrific activities of 9/11; secondly, the extremely tragic bombing in Bali; and thirdly, followed by the incidents in Madrid 911 days after 9/11, that in fact having a nuclear facility so close to a most precious and most prized asset of the government of Alberta would be quite risky for Alberta's security, Mr. Speaker.

Private/Public Partnerships for Hospital Construction

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Premier said that we Liberals like to cherry-pick when it comes to P3s, picking out the

worst examples and ignoring the good ones. Perhaps he would be more likely to listen to the concerns of a prominent group of economists including a former director with Canada's Auditor General. They state in a report that, quote, the P3 model for public hospitals is likely to lead to significantly greater costs, diminished accountability, and a deterioration of universal service, end quote.* To the minister of health: given that this report clearly states that the P3 model for public hospitals is likely to lead to a deterioration of the quality and extent of universal service, how can this minister condone the P3 experiment for hospitals?

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, the chair is having a little difficulty with the question. There's no identification of whose report, where it comes from. Is it an Alberta government report or the like? I don't know how a minister can deal with something that is not identified.

The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, simply by associating myself with the comments that the Premier made in this House yesterday.

Mr. Bonner: To the Minister of Infrastructure: given that this report states – and this report was tabled in the House – that “it is reasonable to expect P3 hospitals to be at least 10% more costly than their public sector equivalents,” what actual proof can the minister provide that Alberta will be the exception?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, as you clearly indicated, we know nothing of the report, if in fact it even exists, but that won't stop me from making some comments about P3s. The fact is that the hon. member across the way obviously doesn't have a clue what a P3 is. I've said it in this House more than once, the process that we go through and the fact that a P3 project has to be able to show that it is good for Albertans or it won't proceed.

To demonstrate that he doesn't understand anything about P3s, he keeps on saying that the quality of health care, for example, in a P3 hospital is going to be less than in a publicly owned one. I would like to know how on earth the bricks and mortar that happen to be owned by the private sector are going to deteriorate the health care that is provided by the regional health authorities in that building. How is the ownership of the building going to affect the quality of care in the building? That demonstrates how little he understands about the whole P3.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, given that the minister has never been able to provide to the House one example of a P3 hospital that has been successful, why is there a process for approving P3 hospitals when the evidence shows that the entire concept of a P3 hospital is flawed?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, we haven't in this province yet had a proposal come to us for a P3 hospital, but I'm certainly not discouraging anyone from bringing one forward. First, the business case has to be presented; it has to show that, in fact, it's good for the province. That's internally within our department that we do that. Then before it can go any further, it has to go to an outside committee that has not got any government people on it, that is in the private sector, and they do a complete analysis of the project. Coming out of there, it has to show that it is going to be beneficial to Albertans to go with that kind of a project. Then it has to go before Treasury Board and cabinet before it can get approval.

Mr. Speaker, we have built in all kinds of checks and balances,

*See p. 583, left col., para. 1, line 3

and I can assure the member that if a project goes ahead, then we will be able to show that, in fact, it's good for Albertans. All he's got to do is go and look at the Confederation Bridge and then come back to this House and tell us that that's a bad P3.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:10 BSE Testing Program

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since last May the government of Alberta has assisted the Alberta beef industry as a whole with more than \$400 million to successfully sustain itself during this still ongoing BSE crisis. It is still not out of the woods. This week the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced changes in their BSE testing regime, expanding it to about 220,000 animals, 10 times the number tested last year, and they will also conduct random tests on about 20,000 older and healthy animals. My question today is to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. How does the Alberta BSE testing program compare to the USDA's?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, we're pleased that the USDA has announced its enhanced BSE surveillance. Their planned level of surveillance certainly is taken from the recommendations of the international panel for a very aggressive North American surveillance plan, which is exactly what the government of Canada did when we received the recommendations from the international committee. The difficulty in testing a percentage of healthy older animals is minimal. It would be about .003 per cent of our herd. We could do it, I think, relatively easily. It's certainly recognized internationally that the higher value in testing is in older animals in the high-risk area.

BSE is a national priority. There's no question. Ministers of agriculture will be meeting in Ottawa, I believe it is, in early April. This will be a subject again of our discussions and deliberations because the testing protocols that are accepted would be accepted for all of Canada in order for them to be useful to the international community.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: are there any programs to ensure consumer confidence in the safety of our beef given that the probability of humans contracting mad cow disease by eating Alberta beef is so minute?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, since the first case of BSE was reported on May 20 last year, the Alberta government and the Canadian government have been completely open and transparent about what is occurring and what is being discussed here. I would also say that because of what I think has been pretty fair and comprehensive media reporting on this issue, the Canadian public have understood the minimal risk in consuming the product, and of course that was demonstrated, I think, first in our province, led by our province but certainly across Canada, in the increased consumption of beef, unparalleled by any country experiencing BSE.

Mr. Speaker, there is something that I think we all have to keep in mind. Testing of animals is not about human health. It is a practice for disease surveillance in a herd. Human health is protected in this area by the removal of the specified risk materials, which takes the risk to about 99.96 per cent. I believe that Canadians understand that, I believe they support it, and I believe they would want our resources put in ensuring that SRMs are removed from all animals

from that group, and that should be audited. That's what I believe Canadians would want.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what are the Alberta government's current efforts in working with other nations to open their borders to our beef?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have been very aggressive in working with other countries through a number of ministries: the Ministry of Economic Development certainly in marketing, our ministry in explaining what we do in our province as we are the major beef-producing province in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, I think what has maybe been lost in some of this is the importance of the work that Minister Speller has done with other countries with the minister's office and CFIA. Japan has agreed to work with us on equivalency of testing animals. So rather than us testing every animal, which, when you've had a feed ban in place since 1997 – since the majority of animals that we slaughter for consumption are under 18 months, certainly under 24 months, they have agreed to have our scientists work together to look at what protocols we have in place, what precautionary measures we have in place that would meet the equivalency, in their mind, of testing every animal. That's a very important point that has to be recalled.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Granting of Liquor Licences

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Over the past number of years Cathedral Close seniors' residence in downtown Edmonton has had to contend with loud late-night noise from a rock and roll club across the back alley. The old club closed, but the new owners are trying to open a club in the same location. Recognizing the historic problems, the city of Edmonton would only grant a private club licence to minimize noise and activity in the surrounding area. My questions today are to the Minister of Gaming. Why is the AGLC granting the club a class A public liquor licence, totally undermining the efforts of the city and the nearby residents?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, with respect to liquor licences the first step necessarily is to obtain zoning and a business licence from the municipality in question before the application can be made. While I'm not familiar with the particulars of this matter, I can say that the city of Edmonton will have granted a business licence which allows for the applicant to proceed for a class A licence. If that is the case, then the rules that have already been established by the AGLC regarding such applications will be followed.

But if a municipality wishes to curtail such licences in their community, they have the power to do that. For example, we have jurisdictions within Alberta that are completely dry. That is perhaps an extreme example but a very good example of where a municipality has the control to say: we don't want that in our community.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: is it the policy of the AGLC to have staff aggressively lobby the managers of the seniors' complex and the nearby hotel, who are opposed to the granting of a licence?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, I didn't hear the beginning of the question, so I'm not sure which particular group the hon. member was referring to, but I can say this. Business members in the community will proceed to do what is in their interests in talking to adjacent facilities to have them buy into applications. That is something that is within their purview.

Certainly, the AGLC takes a neutral role relative to all of this and receives the applications. If parties from the public wish to contact the AGLC with respect to information on liquor licensing, they may. In certain situations members of city councils in Calgary, in Red Deer, in Edmonton, indeed, have contacted AGLC to say: we would like you to come out and participate in a public fashion to discuss the rules of liquor licensing so that we as a community can be informed as to what our options are. That is something that the AGLC does when asked, and it's something that the communities value.

2:20

Ms Blakeman: Given that the residents of the Cathedral Close Apartments have been denied access to the information for this new club, will this minister now make these applications public?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, I have no particular familiarity with this application that the hon. member is referring to. I would suggest that if there are members of the public who wish information regarding the process for licensing, they contact the AGLC, be specific about what they are talking about, and I am sure that the AGLC will provide them with good information so that they will understand what options are available to them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Health Care Labour Negotiations (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. All three members of the mediation panel in the negotiation between Alberta's nurses and health authorities have written to the minister of human resources asking for his intervention. They have asked the minister to use his good offices to encourage the parties to extend the time deadline so that a settlement can be reached. My question is for the minister. Will he do so? Yes or no?

The Speaker: We've had that exact same question earlier in the question period.

Minister, go ahead.

Mr. Dunford: Well, it's not quite that simple, yes or no. We have to analyze the situation and make a decision.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Premier recently threatened to put nurses in jail if they broke this government's unjust laws, won't the minister accept his responsibility and allow the mediation process to have the time that it needs to work effectively?

Mr. Dunford: Again, there's a process. We're analyzing the request.

Mr. Mason: Can the minister tell us when he will have gone through his careful process of analysis and have made a decision? When will he inform the House, and will it be before it's too late?

Mr. Dunford: Well, a colleague mentioned here a number of days ago that it was better to be right than right away.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

School Auditory/Verbal Therapy Program

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a great deal of concern about the future of a very important and innovative program in Calgary involving a P3-type partnership between the Calgary board of education, the Alberta Children's hospital, and parents. This one-of-a-kind program in Canada deserves national recognition as a model for others to copy, but instead it is being threatened because it is located in the Knob Hill school, which is being threatened with closure and is vitally tied into the professional staff from the Alberta Children's hospital, located right next door, which is also slated for closure. This amazing program effectively cures deafness in children. It involves cochlear implants and auditory/verbal therapy training. It allows deaf children to be able to hear and communicate normally but if and only if they get this training at an early age. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What will happen to this program?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, let me say first of all that I can't speak to the issues as they might relate to the Calgary board of education's decision on whether or not this facility will be closed. I have been advised by the Minister of Learning that Knob Hill school is one of two facilities being considered for closure.

But I will say this, Mr. Speaker. Cochlear implants and their associated therapy, an intensive speech therapy which is required, are fully funded by Alberta Health and Wellness. The students who are at Knob Hill school who are in the midst of their therapy will continue to receive their therapy. What I am advised about this program is that intensive speech therapy is an integral part of receiving a cochlear implant, and my Department of Health and Wellness has been in touch with the health region to ensure that the needs of these students continue to be met. I don't know where though.

Mr. Lord: My second question, to the same minister: does the newly planned Children's hospital incorporate an auditory/verbal training classroom within their new premises?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the details of the new Children's hospital are still in development, so it is too early to be able to say with certainty what facilities and programs it might house. Again, I will simply reiterate that the important needs of these students will continue to be met, but I cannot say with certainty at what facility they will be delivered.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lord: That's my final question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Woodland Caribou

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Woodland caribou populations have been threatened in Alberta since 1985, and there is still not adequate protection in the province. The government's own scientists state that if industrial activities continue, Alberta's

woodland caribou population will be threatened with extinction. While the Ministry of SRD initiated a woodland caribou recovery team, that is scheduled to deliver a recovery plan this year, industrial activity in caribou habitat continues unabated. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: does this ministry not see the contradiction in working towards the recovery of a species while it allows a core part of the woodland caribou's range to be significantly altered by forestry activities?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question. Of course, like I always say, what the Liberals would do if they were the government is they'd close everything down, but we don't. In this area we have more responsibility than that.

We have to ensure that the economic development that happens in Alberta continues, because that's what makes Alberta strong. We have one of the best forest industries in North America, with thousands of people involved in that industry and the other industries, the oil and gas industry and the agriculture industry. We have a strong economy in Alberta. We have strong environment policies in place and wildlife management also. So we do maintain a balance, and you can be assured that this ministry will not neglect the responsibility of ensuring that the animals are protected while we develop and harvest the resources we need to develop.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, will the minister then call a stop to new industrial development in caribou habitat until caribou populations have been restored to historic levels?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, only the Liberals would stop everything in a situation like this. We don't do that. That's why we are the government. That is why we have a strong economy, a good environment, and good wildlife management, and we'll continue doing that.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, well, then, will the minister at least conduct an assessment on how much industrial development can continue while still maintaining a healthy caribou population?

Mr. Cardinal: Of course, Mr. Speaker, it's always a challenge to keep the balance, and you can be assured that we can do that. I am a resident of northern Alberta. I have been out there all my life, and that's a long time, and I know for a fact that we have a good balance at this time. I invite the member – and the member has probably never been in northern Alberta – to experience first-hand what is out there. I challenge her to come out there.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Natural Resource Revenues

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently the enormous profits that oil and gas companies are making in this province have been widely reported. My constituents continue to ask if we're getting the value for their natural resources. My questions are for the Minister of Energy. What is the rate that Albertans get for their oil and gas from these companies, and are we giving away our natural resources to others?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the question: is Alberta giving away its natural resources? The answer to that question is no. The answer to the question is absolutely not. Furthermore, the royalty system ensures that the people of Alberta, who do own this resource, receive a fair financial return.

Let me say, Mr. Speaker, just in terms of numbers, that between 2001 and 2003 for conventional oil, the oil that is now produced at a lesser rate than what comes from the oil sands, that rate averages at 16.75 to about 17 and three-quarters per cent. That continues to encourage conventional drilling, and it continues to encourage optimum development. For natural gas it's in the neighbourhood of 19.6 per cent to 20 per cent to a low of about 17 per cent. What we have found is that as we approach the end of this fiscal year, it looks very closely like the royalties of the last four years will equal the previous 10 years combined.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Are we getting the return for our natural resources compared to other producers of oil and gas such as Alaska or neighbouring provinces, and should we be reviewing our royalty structure?

The Speaker: Two questions. Take the first one please, minister.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is an extremely good question. There is an international forum headed by Dr. Pedro Van Meurs and Daniel Johnston. They've rated Alberta as one of the toughest fiscal regimes in the world in terms of the high share of nonrenewable resource revenue received by government, and that's, I think, absolutely critical. I mean, if you take a look across the world at how organizations, countries, collect their royalties, we have a great deal of oil and gas, but it's in very small areas and in very diverse areas stretched over some 660,000 square miles. We have probably done the best job in the free world of developing an important resource for the benefit of Albertans.

Mrs. Ady: My last question is: is there benefit for us to be doing refining and upgrading in this province of those natural resources?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, one of the great things that Edmonton depends on – Edmonton – is its refinery infrastructure. With the oil sands that refinery infrastructure will be around for the next 50 to 75 years.

If we can just take a second and talk about the forecasted production from the oil sands, yesterday the posting at the Edmonton Hardisty oil terminal was about \$52 Canadian per barrel – \$52 Canadian per barrel of oil. Today that posting is just under \$50, at \$49.83. Mr. Speaker, by 2017 it's estimated that we'll produce about 3 million barrels a day from the oil sands. Now, at \$50 a barrel and a \$10 lifting cost that delivers a 25 per cent royalty when the projects are paid out. That means that we get about \$30 million per day out of the oil sands. If you project that forward, that's very close to a billion dollars a month, and a billion dollars a month over 12 months puts \$12 billion a year in the hands of future Albertans.

Are we giving away our resources? I don't think so.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there is a policy in the question period, if a member of Executive Council chooses to clarify an answer given earlier, to allow the member who raised the question to ask a supplementary question. I've received a request now from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to rise on a point of clarification with respect to something that was said when he addressed a question. So if I do permit that, then it would only be right, not knowing what this clarification is going to be, to permit a member of Executive Council to make a comment as well.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Private/Public Partnerships for Hospital Construction

(continued)

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for this opportunity. I did neglect to mention the name of the report earlier in my questions. The name of the report was *Funding Hospital Infrastructure: Why P3s Don't Work, and What Will*. It was prepared by some very well-known people: Lewis Auerbach, Arthur Donner, Douglas D. Peters, Monica Townson, and Armine Yalnizyan. This was tabled in the House on November 26, 2003.* Thank you very much.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, from the contents that the member used, it would almost sound like this came out of the Parkland Institute, and I'm just wondering if all of those people that he mentioned are part of the Parkland Institute. I guess it's not fair for me to ask the question, but . . .

The Speaker: No, it isn't fair, hon. minister. In this case you don't get to ask a question under that.

Hon. members, before we move on to the next item that the Clerk will call, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 23 bright and enthusiastic students from Edison school, which is located in my constituency of Highwood. They are accompanied today by teacher Mrs. Lonnie Antal; parents Ms Cindy Clark, Mrs. Barb Cameron, Mrs. Barb Murray, Mrs. Pearl Figol, Mr. Rick Festa, Mrs. Marcie Hamilton, Mrs. Elly Singer. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you to all the members of this Assembly 19 of Alberta's brightest and best students. They are from Saint John's School of Alberta in my constituency. The school is located near Genesee, Alberta. It's an all-boys school, and it's been visited quite often by Her Honour the Honourable Lieutenant Governor as she's had a relative that went to that school, and there have been some other famous people go through there. They are accompanied today by their headmaster, Keith McKay, and also their social studies teacher, Larry Sherwood. So I'd ask all 21 of them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**
Qui Tam Legislation

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to talk about how Canadians and Albertans might take some proactive steps to avoid any of the scandals we now see unfolding within the federal government these past few months and how we could help ensure that nothing like that ever happens in Alberta. An ounce of prevention is always worth a pound of cure, and one of the best ideas that I have seen to prevent

such problems for government is called *qui tam* legislation.

Qui tam legislation is also known as whistle-blower reward legislation, and it is an innovative new approach to prevent fraud against the government. It has the great benefit of not costing the government any net dollars, it requires no new bureaucracies, nor does it suffer from some of the drawbacks associated with whistle-blower protection legislation, which can be problematic. I expect some people may be familiar with *qui tam* because it is now sweeping the United States and is an astounding success there.

Qui tam legislation was first initiated by the U.S. federal government in order to catch unethical suppliers selling shoddy goods at inflated prices to the government or to catch outright fraud through phoney invoicing, for example. It promptly recovered over \$5 billion that had been paid out to fraudulent suppliers, found money for the government that they didn't know they had, therefore providing windfall budget increases for government departments and helping keep taxes and deficits down. Since then 13 states have enacted *qui tam* legislation, and eight more are pending.

Initially opponents to this legislation state that there is no need for it. It was thought that there was little or no fraud occurring that the government accountants weren't already catching, and in the first year there were actually only 33 cases in the entire U.S. brought forward. Now, however, as word has spread, there have been 483 cases of major fraud reported. In California each case netted the state \$100 million in recovered funds. In fact, one case currently before California right now is actually looking at a potential \$2 billion recovery for fraud against the government. These are not small cases. In Florida the largest successful case to date, involving health care fraud, recovered for the state \$875 million, and that's in U.S. dollars.

Mr. Speaker, clearly it is time for *qui tam* legislation in Canada. The solution is before us. I urge this Assembly to start the process in Alberta and once again lead the way in Canada. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Neglect of Infrastructure

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier stated yesterday that retiring the last of the province's \$3.7 billion debt in 2005, Alberta's centennial year, would be a wonderful legacy. However, the Premier will also leave another legacy, an appalling legacy of deteriorating roads, run-down schools, and neglected hospitals.

In the government's 10-year obsession to be debt free for its burn-the-mortgage party in 2005, it has racked up an immense infrastructure debt. The government would need to spend \$7 billion just to catch up on badly needed infrastructure projects it has ignored over the years. This backlog includes outstanding requests for infrastructure from health regions, school boards, postsecondary institutions, and government facilities.

The government's neglect of infrastructure affects the lives of all Albertans. A good government provides stable, predictable, and reliable funding for schools, roads, and hospitals, ensuring that infrastructure needs are met now and in the future. It is simply bad financial management to double up on the mortgage payments when the roof over our children's heads is leaking.

So while the government congratulates itself on making the last payment of the \$3.7 billion on the province's debt, I hope they remember that it was at a cost of withholding \$7 billion from schools, hospitals, and roads.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

*See p. 579, right col., para. 1, line 4

2:40

Great Kids Awards

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to stand and acknowledge the Great Kids awards program and the two recipients who live in West Yellowhead. Since 1999 the government has worked hard to recognize outstanding children throughout Alberta who day in and day out exemplify the best qualities of our province. To be eligible, a nominee must reside in Alberta, be five to 18 years of age, demonstrate considerable effort in school, contribute to their community through volunteer services, and contribute to the quality of home life by willingly assuming responsibilities within their family.

I am proud to say that the constituency of West Yellowhead has two young Albertans recognized this year. Mikyla Sherlow, age 8, of Jasper saved up her own allowance to buy books for children in the local hospital. Not only that; Mikyla helped organize a successful fundraising campaign to buy a new \$7,000 wheelchair for a local boy. Jayden Madsen, age 17, of Hinton is a musically talented honours student whose dedication to others is truly remarkable. Jayden worked all summer to pay for one year of education for an exchange student from Belarus whom his family had hosted previously and who could not afford to pay her own expenses.

This is just two examples, Mr. Speaker, of remarkable Albertans who even at such a young age exemplify the spirit of this province. I would like to congratulate Mikyla and Jayden on their awards and wish them all the very best in their future endeavours.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Seniors' Programs

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week I received a series of phone calls from seniors who complained about being badly treated in their meetings with Tory MLAs. At recent visits to seniors' residences in my constituency I heard the frustration felt by seniors whose pocketbooks are being picked by health care premiums, health user fees, and reductions in home care services.

Seniors are terrified that they will lose their homes because of unaffordable utility costs and lose their vehicles because of sky-high insurance premiums. This government robbed seniors of universal optical and dental care and reneged on a promise to not increase health care premiums. Perhaps worse, with almost no advance notice the government increased fees for long-term care facilities. The majority of the residents in such facilities are seniors, and even seniors who do not currently require such care are very conscious of the fact that they might have such a need in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly urge the Premier and the health minister to scrap health care premiums for seniors in next week's budget. This would be an important first step in scrapping premiums for all Albertans. Indeed, the government needs to go further and restore universal optical and dental benefits for seniors.

Ensuring dignity, respect, and good quality of life for Alberta seniors should be a priority for this government, but it's not. Instead, seniors are left feeling betrayed. They feel as if their hard work and lifetime of paying taxes and of building this province has been left by the wayside.

The unconscionable stress these financial burdens put on seniors and their families is tantamount to elder abuse, so it is no surprise that groups such as the Coalition of Seniors Advocates and Seniors United Now have begun challenging the government. I'm truly proud of their work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one petition here. I'm presenting this petition signed by 102 Alberta seniors petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to recognize and value the contributions and sacrifices the seniors have made in building the Province of Alberta, and treat them with due respect and dignity by reversing those policies that cause unnecessary financial hardship for them and undermine their quality of life.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 100, 101, 102, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 159, 160, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, and 168. Mr. Speaker, I can count higher, but I won't for today.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Bill 24**Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004**

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 24, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Bill Pr. 1**St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004**

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to beg leave today to introduce for first reading Bill Pr. 1, the St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill will be asking for natural powers to grant degrees, diplomas, and certificates for St. Mary's College as well as to change the name.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 1 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Bill Pr. 2**Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act**

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce

a bill being the Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act.

The following act is repealed: An Act to Incorporate the Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 2 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

**Bill Pr. 3
Living Faith Bible College Act**

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill Pr. 3, Living Faith Bible College Act.

This bill will incorporate a private bible college that will be located near Caroline, Alberta. There's an entity currently operating as Living Faith Bible College, which has operated since 1971 by the Living Faith Evangelistic Association. Bill Pr. 3 will create an entity that is distinct from the Living Faith Evangelistic Association.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 3 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of a letter dated March 16, 2004, from Andrew Sims, chair of the Compulsory Arbitration Board, to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment requesting that the deadline for the health authorities' and Alberta nurses' mediation negotiations be extended to June 15, 2004.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

2:50

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the information of all members of the Assembly a letter that I wrote today to the Information and Privacy Commissioner requesting some information or an update on Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

Thank you.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Under Standing Order 7(5) I would ask that the Government House Leader share the projected government business for the week of March 22 to 25.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, March 22, 2004, at 9 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders for second reading Bill 24, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004. For third reading Bill 17, Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 18, Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act; and as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday, March 23, 2004, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders it is anticipated that we may have the introduction

of two bills. They would be bills 25 and 26. The first would be with respect to the Teaching Profession Act, and the second would be with respect to the School Act. Both of those will go on notice this afternoon, and they may be introduced on Tuesday. In Committee of the Whole Bill 24, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004; Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. And third reading of bills 17, 18, 19, and 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004; and as per the Order Paper. At 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders for third reading bills 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, and 23, the Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004.

On Wednesday in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders for third reading Bill 24, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004, the hon. Mrs. Nelson. Recognizing that it's the normal practice of the House to adjourn after question period for preparation of the House for the delivery of the budget at 3:30, we may ask the House to briefly consider Bill 24 before adjourning or, indeed, deal with it at 8 p.m. In any event, we would ask to adjourn at 3:15 for the delivery of the budget under Government Motion 13, to approve the fiscal policies of the government. At 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders we'll deal with Government Motion 14, the main estimates referral to the Committee of Supply; third reading of the appropriation act, if not dealt with in the afternoon; second reading of bills 25 and 26, if available; and third readings as per the Order Paper.

Thursday, March 25, 2004, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders consideration of Government Motion 14, the main estimates motion, if not done on Wednesday evening, and then consideration of Government Motion 13, approval of the fiscal policies of the government. We would anticipate that at that time the Interim Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the third party would respond to the Budget Address. Thereafter, third readings as per the Order Paper.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 22
Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004**

[Adjourned debate March 16: Dr. Pannu]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. It is time that we started some form of reform in this Assembly about how elections are run and organized, and I'm happy to see this bill coming forward at this time. Certainly, there are some parts of the bill that I like quite a bit and some that I'm not quite so fond of, although, generally speaking, I think that it does make some progress in some areas that we will support, and subsequently we'll likely support the entire bill.

Some of the parts that I like about the act are in section 3, where the Chief Electoral Officer is required to take an oath of office and to be impartial and not disclose any information. I'm surprised that this wasn't something already in the act. It seems to me just good common sense that that person does that, as all of us have and all of our staff have in our offices, because of course in dealing with elections, there are always some confidential pieces of information that come before them that need to be treated as such. So I think that that's a good part to have in there.

Section 17 talks about clarifying the right of access for enumerators. It deals particularly with apartments and condos and other

multiple-residence buildings. It just means that the enumerators will have access to these buildings to enumerate. We all know that access to these buildings during a writ period, pre writ, or for the enumerators – we have a very difficult time getting into some of the buildings. Even when you take a photocopy of the piece of legislation that entitles you by law to enter, we particularly find ourselves blocked time and time again from that kind of access. The same goes for the enumerators.

I find that it isn't as hard to get into the high-rises as it is to get into the walk-up apartments. Often the residential managers have jobs, so they are not always available, and then they are not at all interested in whatever piece of paper you put under their nose. They'll arbitrarily decide whether you can have access or not. So whatever we can do to share that information and to ensure that anyone who needs access to those buildings can in fact get it is a good thing because it is a big problem now.

At least in buildings where you can get in the front door, you can often leave some piece of information in the lobby, if you can't gain access to the apartment manager, via their mailbox or the collecting point they have for unaddressed mail. But in many areas of the city, including my own riding, there are a number of walk-up apartments that have the buzzer system on the outside of the doors and the mailboxes on the inside of the first set of security doors. You just literally have to repeatedly come back and try and find a time when those people are in residence and answer their buzzers. So it's an ongoing problem and certainly a problem for enumerators as much as it is for politicians and their teams.

Section 43 allows each of the candidates to have scrutineers at the registration officer's station while the electors are being sworn in. From our perspective this will allow candidates to raise objections to people who are being enrolled. Now, traditionally that hasn't been a really big problem for me in elections, although we certainly did at one time find someone who had voted more than once, but it is an issue. We need to tighten up the rules in that regard, and I'm glad that this particular piece has been put in here.

Section 63 deals with access for individual candidates who are campaigning in multidwelling units. This is the same argument that I had in section 17. We see this always as an issue. It's going to be an issue again even with this piece of legislation in there, but hopefully we can try and see if this doesn't speed up the process. So I'm glad to see this in here.

Section 94 talks about the candidate not being able to be appointed as a chief financial officer during a campaign period. I have no idea why any candidate would want to also be their own chief financial officer. It seems a completely insane parameter to work within. But I definitely believe that they should not be, and I'm certainly supportive of this piece of the legislation that's come in.

One of the parts of the act that I don't like quite as much, Mr. Speaker, would be section 34, that talks about increasing the amount that a candidate has to pay in order to become a registered candidate. It goes from \$200 to \$500. Well, to most of us that is not a large sum of money. There are certainly some people and some parties who would find that to be onerous, particularly when they have no expectation of getting their money back at the end of the election.

In our first past the post system, which I find not to be a very democratic system, we have to encourage as many people and as many parties as we can to be involved in the electoral process. So even those with little access to funds should be entitled to put their name on the ballot and to be heard and to have their views heard and to have their supporters have someone on the ballot to vote for.

3:00

This is part of this section that I don't like, and it doesn't wash for

me when you make the argument that we have to look at some form of cost recovery. We all know that \$500 is a drop in the bucket when it comes to the amount of dollars involved in organizing elections and that the costs of adding one name to ballots and to information pieces is really neither here nor there when it comes to registrations.

I have heard the argument that people want the dollars increased so that you just have serious candidates at the table, but I say: what's wrong with having candidates who aren't so serious? They are the ones that often bring up the most interesting issues during a campaign and stimulate good debate, and that's really what we're looking for in campaigns, I believe. So I certainly encourage people from parties like the Rhinoceros Party and some individuals . . .

Mr. Bonner: The Green Party.

Ms Carlson: Well, I like a lot of the Green Party policies, so I don't see them as a fringe party. I support what they're doing even though I know their funds are limited. They have something to say, Mr. Speaker, and they have as much right as any of the rest of us to say it. So I don't like that part.

Section 56 talks about allowing a returning officer to appoint "additional electors to assist in counting the votes from the advance poll." Now, I think I understand why they're doing this. In recent years we've seen larger numbers of people vote at the advance poll, so it takes some time to count them, and often that's the last poll that's reported on election night. But I don't like the idea at all of them being able to appoint people. I think that is a decision that needs to be made prior to the writ being dropped because once again it's an area where there could at least be perceived abuses in the process, so I don't like it.

I wish that this piece was not in here worded like this. If they need additional staff, then that has to be dealt with in another way, not just give them the arbitrary ability to appoint additional electors to assist them. So I'm hoping that we see some amendment to that at some point in time in this Assembly.

Section 89 talks about the transfer of election money held in trust for a party or candidate, and it talks there about if there is no registered party, no registered constituency association, or registered candidate, the Crown can annex the funds. Well, I haven't heard a satisfactory reason for that happening, and I certainly hope that I do, Mr. Speaker, because as it stands, it doesn't sound to me like a very good idea. I particularly wonder how this affects independent candidates who may be running. So I'm hoping that at some point we get an explanation for that.

Section 90 talks about increasing the donation limits to a registered constituency association by \$250, in aggregate totals to registered constituency associations by \$1,250, \$500 for individual candidates, and \$2,500 for aggregate amounts to registered candidates. Our policy on democratic renewal objects to the increasing of donation powers for corporations and unions.

On a personal note I have to say that that actually increases my ability to raise money because, being in opposition, many companies and many individuals don't want to hit the list, Mr. Speaker. So they'll ask me specifically what the limit is where they're listed, and they'll give me \$1 or \$5 less than that. I think it's the wrong way to run elections, but it's the way that it happens out there. While I don't like that particular section, it actually helps people who are not in government to raise funds. So by doing that, it makes the process more democratic.

Section 91 I think is unusual because it considers the price paid at a fundraising event in excess of the market value to be considered a contribution. This is falling in line with some of the changes we've

seen at the federal level for how much you can contribute. I don't mind seeing this at all. However, it does make it a little harder for corporations to make contributions in a year, particularly an election year. I don't think that's a bad thing. I think that that's probably a good thing, and I guess we're going to see how this plays out. I wouldn't mind hearing the minister talk about that and respond as to why this has been put in there.

I think the last question I really have is the part in section 8 that talks about establishing the new permanent identifier numbers. On the one hand, that has a bit of a Big Brother concept to me. You know, we've got a social insurance card number, we've got a driver's licence card number, and now we're going to have a voter number. So I'm wondering if that's a very good idea.

It looks to me like this is a set-up for the government to move to some sort of electronic form of voting. I wish that before they would go there, we would have a more open debate on how we should handle elections in the future with the people of this province.

There is no doubt that people are busier and busier. We find this on election days. It's harder to access people by telephone or at the doors. It's harder to get them out to vote, because while in theory people are supposed to have time off from work to vote, it doesn't happen in practice.

We see people trying to squeeze in their voting between taking the kids to school, getting to work, buying the groceries, organizing the soccer and hockey and other recreational activities of their kids, and running in to mark their ballot one minute before 8 o'clock. Some of them are not getting there at all, or some of them, walking in and seeing the long lineups, say, "I really don't have time for this," and they just leave, and they don't vote.

As we see over time, the voting percentage is dropping across the country, particularly in the younger crowd. [interjection] Well, no. In fact, we're seeing the numbers in many cases increase for Liberals, in opposition to what the Minister of Economic Development has just said. So that's not my biggest concern. I have a greater concern with how we ensure that everyone who wishes to enjoy their franchise can do so. I think that's part of a larger debate that we should be having before we start to see legislation being changed.

It may be that electronic voting or some other form of participation in the democratic process is the way to go in the future, but I don't think that it's up to any government to arbitrarily decide that. In the absence of having had that discussion, I am quite opposed to being assigned a particular voting number.

I want to know what that information is being used for. Now it's secret. When you're assigned a number, then people know whether or not you've voted, and I want to know how that information will be handled, how you can protect the confidentiality of it, and what the expectations are for the future. It's far too early, I think, for us to have been considering that kind of participation for voters.

So I think with that, Mr. Speaker, I will take my seat and see what kind of responses we get from the government. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) provides for a five-minute question and comment period should any hon. member choose to exercise this option. The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: On the Standing Order 29?

Mr. Renner: Yes. I'd like to ask the member to comment on a situation that I think we've all experienced. She made comment about the importance of candidates having access to apartment

buildings and trailer parks and such, and I couldn't agree more. The concern that I think I have and others have is not so much: do candidates have access, but are the residents aware that candidates have access? It doesn't do you much good to have access and you're unwelcome at the door because no one realized that you're supposed to have access. How would the member suggest that that might be rectified?

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, yeah, that's a very good question. I've often thought about what would help that process in terms of educating voters on what the rights are. I think that it would be something important for the government to take a look at in terms of a pre-election advertising campaign at all levels – federal, provincial, and municipal – so that people are aware of what their roles, their responsibilities are and what the undertakings are for all of us to be a part of the democratic process.

I'm certainly thinking that that's an interesting question for debate in this House and that between all of us we could come up with some very great solutions.

3:10

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I assume that when the hon. member said that it would be a good idea for the government to undertake an advertising campaign, she actually meant the Chief Electoral Officer given that we're talking about an election campaign.

But my question to the hon. member is: if she were to be assured that there have been no discussions that I'm aware of as the promoter of the bill with respect to going to electronic voting and that the concept of the unique identifier number was put forward by the Chief Electoral Officer solely as a method of ensuring the accuracy of the lists so that you could differentiate between Mike Smith Sr., for example, and Mike Smith Jr. – I'm making those names up – at a given residence and know which one was moving where and could track those people so that you were always able to be sure you had the right people and that that unique identifier number was for the sole use of the Chief Electoral Officer in doing so and I believe even in the act not to be made public but to be a private identifier number and also to use interchangeably, for example, with other sources of data relative to the name . . . [interjections] It's a question and comment period I believe, and they can take it as a comment if they want.

If she were assured that that was the indicator, would she have some more comfort with the concept of a unique identifier number?

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, I just love it when I get to answer a question. The answer would be, yes, that does help. I was looking for some qualifiers, but I would also like to point out that it's a very slippery slope, and it's something that we have to keep an eye on because today it's to track those people in that fashion, and tomorrow we have to wonder what it could be.

I really appreciate the answer, and that helps with my concerns.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. We're still in the question and comment section, hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Oh. I'm sorry.

The Speaker: No additional members wishing to participate? Then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity

to make a few observations about Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. There has been some concern expressed about section 63, the right of access for campaigning. I, like all other candidates in the House, have experienced that difficulty of getting into some units even if you do have the appropriate documentation. But I think this maybe needs a harder look.

We have a senior citizens home in our constituency. One of the candidates last election appeared at the residence with the documentation and a couple of workers with him and proceeded to thunder through the residence, knocking on doors and in general disturbing and frightening those residents. Many of them are in those homes because they are dependent on others, and it was a major disturbance in the residence.

I know it's difficult to deal with, but I wonder if there isn't a need for some provision for residences like that where there could be a central meeting place set up and people informed. It just seems that allowing free access to that building was really not in the best interests of the voters.

So as sympathetic as I am to section 63 and the need for candidates to get into multiple-family dwellings, I really think there has to be some caveat and some sensitivity to residences where there are seniors who have gone into those residences because they want privacy. They don't want to be disturbed and find themselves upset by some overenthusiastic candidate and campaign workers. As much as I support and think that section 63 is important, I think it needs to be applied with some good common sense and some sensitivity on the part of the candidates.

Section 90, the section that deals with finance, Mr. Speaker, I think is important. The increases that are being proposed are modest increases. One of the things that I think we've been extremely fortunate with is that you can run for political office, you can run for this Legislature and be successful without requiring huge, huge fundraising efforts. You can run a campaign for \$18,000, \$20,000 and be successful.

I think that it's important that that be able to happen, that we don't go down the road that our counterparts to the south have gone where fundraising becomes sort of the major activity of the candidate before and during the election. The cost of running for public office in some cases has become so high that people are discouraged from seeking office.

As I said, I think that we've been fortunate here in keeping the lid on costs and making sure that those who want to run for the Legislature or for municipal office can do so without having to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to raise money or trying to raise sums that just seem inappropriate for someone seeking public office.

I'm pleased that they're there, and I thank the minister for pointing out to me that the limits for candidates and for constituency associations have been raised, but the amount that may be donated to a party, \$15,000, remains the same. That hasn't been changed in this particular section of the bill.

The other section that I wanted to mention, Mr. Speaker, was section 34, where they struck out \$200 and replaced that with \$500, the amount that registered candidates have to put up before they can run. I can't help but think that this is a backward movement. I think that we have to make it as easy as possible for people to run for public office. Many candidates run knowing that they don't have much chance for success. I'm not sure that we should be putting this kind of a barrier in front of those individuals, who I think, as the previous speaker indicated, sometimes bring a different perspective to campaigns, in my view a welcome perspective. It seemed to me that \$200 was an appropriate sum for candidates to put up.

There are a number of other issues in the act. I think most of us agree, Mr. Speaker, that it improves the electoral process in the

province, and for that I think the government deserves credit. There are some sections, and I think I've indicated a couple of them, that I have some questions about, but we're pleased to support the bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:20

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Then we'll proceed to the next speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to speak to Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, this afternoon. Certainly, for the most part I think this is a good bill. It makes required housekeeping changes to the act and certainly will make the whole process of elections run smoother and clarify some areas.

Now, one of the areas that this particular bill deals with is access to multi-unit dwellings. As other speakers today have already said, this is a difficult situation. In Edmonton-Glengarry we have a number of walk-up apartments where you don't have access. You have to ring for access, and on many occasions when you go by, it's very difficult to get in there, first of all, when nobody is home and the caretaker isn't in, and secondly, if they are in and they deny you access. Then certainly you don't get the opportunity to show them any identification that you are a candidate and, as well, speak with them on how we are allowed access to those buildings. So this is one area that I think is addressed in this particular bill, and it is a good change and, hopefully, will make access to those multi-unit dwellings much easier.

It also addresses some very important issues such as better scrutiny of elections. After my experiences in the last election I certainly welcome these changes. During the last election when we were phoning some constituents, they were indicating that they thought they'd already voted, yet they didn't really think they had. We asked them why, and it was because somebody had come by with a special ballot that they had signed, but they couldn't remember whether or not they had written in the name of a person or a party or what had happened from that point of view.

We certainly brought this to the attention of the returning officer. It was quite interesting when our scrutineer was there and that particular ballot box was opened. The deputy returning officer that was in charge of that box certainly indicated right off the bat that there were somewhere in the neighbourhood of 12 ballots that were all filled in with the same handwriting. As well, he continued to empty that box and again found another pack of ballots all filled in with the same handwriting.

Even after the election was complete – and because it was a very close race, we did have an official count – there were some concerns brought to the Chief Electoral Officer by sons of a constituent whose father had experienced the same type of thing and had really not ever indicated which candidate he was voting for, yet his ballot had been taken. When we are looking at special ballots, I think that this bill will help address some of the concerns that I had in this particular case.

As well, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar today tabled a letter that he was forwarding to the Information and Privacy Commissioner, and again this was dealing particularly with section 8(c) and (d), which allows the Chief Electoral Officer to assign unique and permanent identification numbers to electors. Again, I do have some concerns, along with other members in our caucus, regarding this particular practice. It would appear to me that this certainly is a precursor to electronic voting and that we are preparing the way.

I have some concerns when it comes to electronic voting, as we all do. I think just the recent increases in the number of thefts from people that have bank cards and are having their PIN number swiped and then the thief using those PIN numbers to withdraw money from their account. Again, if we are looking at this whole idea of electronic voting down the line, I think that we have to have some very, very stringent controls on how these numbers are issued so that they don't fall into the wrong hands and people are having votes registered when they're in Hawaii and have no idea that they are voting.

As well, I think what we also have to do, Mr. Speaker, if we are going to electronic voting is think of that segment of our population that today will not use an automatic teller or banking machine, for example, just because it's too confusing for them. These are the same people that if they go, for example, for a test on their competency as a driver – some insurance companies are requesting this now, and there is a company that does that type of service here in Edmonton – these seniors get very confused when they have to have their reflexes tested on a machine, and they find the whole process very confusing.

So I would hope that in this whole process, if we do go to electronic voting, there will also be some opportunity where seniors who certainly have no desire to work with computers or to use them would have a very accessible, easy type of situation where they can vote as they always have.

As well, many Albertans have deep concerns when it comes to their protection of confidentiality in regard to electronic information and how we've had too many examples of where this information has fallen into the hands of the public, whether it be by hard drives that were not properly erased or break-ins at companies or establishments that have this type of information on-line, and with a theft certainly all this confidential personal information can fall into the wrong hands.

So those are some of my concerns with Bill 22, Mr. Speaker. Overall, as I say, I think it's a very good bill, and it will certainly improve the voting process that we do have in the province. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available, should hon. members choose to participate.

Then back to the debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 22 read a second time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

**Bill 17
Agricultural Operation Practices
Amendment Act, 2004**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to stand today and move third reading of Bill 17, the Agricultural Operation Practices Amendment Act, 2004.

Last spring the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, responsible for the act, requested that a government steering committee conduct a review of AOPA. It was my pleasure to chair the steering committee that conducted the review of AOPA with key stakeholders between May and November of 2003. These amendments will provide further clarity for technical and policy changes to the way the Natural Resources Conservation Board regulates confined feeding operations in Alberta. This includes further

clarification of regulating manure management standards for all operations and compliance monitoring and enforcement of province-wide standards.

3:30

The changes proposed in this bill make it easier for operators to make changes to their operations as long as the changes are environmentally responsible. At the same time, the roles and responsibilities of the Natural Resources Conservation Board and the municipalities with regard to confined feeding operations are more clearly defined.

I encourage all members of the Assembly to support Bill 17 in third reading.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. I'm happy to have one last opportunity to speak to this bill. We did a fairly intensive review of it yesterday in Committee of the Whole, and I have to say that I was quite disappointed that none of our amendments were accepted by the government. We didn't make those amendments up, Mr. Speaker. They came from stakeholders across the province who were very interested in seeing this particular piece of legislation strengthened and very much looked to having greater protection for people who live in surrounding areas. That was the intent of the amendments that we had brought in and that were subsequently defeated.

There are many people who, while they support intensive livestock operations, or confined feeding operations, in this province, are very concerned about the health impact and the environmental impact in the regions and to those directly affected. The greatest debate we had here over the amendments was who, in fact, was directly affected. The government and the sponsor of the bill say that only those parties within half a mile of the operation can be so considered.

We're putting forward a case that people up to two miles away should be considered to be directly affected. I stand by that position, Mr. Speaker, as a result of having visited many of the operations and as a result of having talked to many people who live in those communities. So we are hoping that at some point in the future that particular position will be revisited.

So we're torn in terms of whether or not we should support this particular bill. There are many members of my caucus who don't like it and who will be voting against it. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make a few concluding remarks as well on the bill. For some of the people I heard from, I think some of their complaints were as much regarding what wasn't in the bill as what was in the bill. Some of the things that they told me related to the grandfathering of existing operations and that there's no mechanism to bring those bad operations into compliance in the future or even phase them in, that there should be, or look at this in the future, some type of mechanism of bringing all operations up to a reasonable standard, especially those that are causing environmental concerns and unnecessary nuisances.

One of the things I'd like to also say is about what's not in there, comparable administrative penalties similar to what's found in the Public Lands Act and the Forest Reserves Act that could be applied by field people to bring enforcement up to par and give properly trained personnel in the field the authority to eliminate some problems by having the power to enforce. Giving the NRCB more power or more discretion if it's in the field of enforcement I would support, but at the present time they haven't totally earned the trust

of Albertans across the province in the way they have enforced the act to date. Whether it's due to improper training or not having the will to do it, I'm not sure. But this is something that I would encourage the member and the minister to look at in the future and do whatever we can in regulations to achieve that.

So with that, I'll take my seat.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for five minutes. Comments or questions to the last speaker?

The hon. Member for Leduc to close the debate.

Mr. Klapstein: No. I'd just ask that the question be put.

[Motion carried; Bill 17 read a third time]

Bill 18

Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: We need someone to move this bill. The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move Bill 18, the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 2004, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Justice at third reading.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 18. It's a good bill. I think that many of us, most of us, I'd even dare say that all of us deal in our constituency office day after day with people who are having difficulty with securing the maintenance payments that they rightly deserve, and usually the people who suffer from that are children.

So a number of proposed changes, and I think that at third reading it's useful to look back at just some of the broad strokes, the kinds of things that the bill does. It specifies what's going to happen with lottery winnings over a thousand dollars. They're to go to support the family of a debtor who has maintenance arrears. That, I suspect, is not going to happen very often, Mr. Speaker, but again the message is clear that maintenance payments are to be seriously addressed and not to be taken lightly.

There's a section now that will restrict the fishing and hunting licences. There's already a provision for restricting drivers' licences, but this will broaden the sanctions that can be brought to bear to encourage debtors to live up to their obligations.

There's some provision for protecting individuals from liability, and the bill now protects the maintenance enforcement program from being found liable for decisions made in good faith or for delays in processing documents. That seems to be a logical move, Mr. Speaker, that there should be protection for the maintenance enforcement program from that kind of action, and the new bill provides that they won't be liable for action to be taken against them.

There are provisions with respect to reciprocal agreements. This is often a difficulty as people, individuals move from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. This, again, will not allow people to escape from their obligations simply by moving.

There are provisions with respect to releasing information and who the information can be shared with. This bill will allow the maintenance enforcement program to co-operate with police to promote public and client safety, and that's an important concern, Mr. Speaker, for many of the people that are involved in these programs. The situations that arose for them to be in the position of receiving payments are often ones where there's been great animos-

ity and conflict, and I think this is a good provision with respect to police and allowing more information to be shared in the interests of those who are seeking payments.

3:40

The provisions with respect to garnishees have been broadened and made more efficient by having a central information place for Treasury Branches and credit unions so that it's clear where those payments are to be made or, if there's a garnishee, where it may be served.

There are provisions, Mr. Speaker, that affect deterrent fees. The maintenance program can but doesn't at the present time charge service fees and charge chronic debtors for costs of enforcement. It's a change in that provision that I think is a good change. The MLA review committee recommended that debtors bear the costs that arise from their default, and those fees will encourage debtors to keep payments. Of course, that's the thrust of many of the provisions of the act, that everything is being done, that every kind of pressure and force is being exerted to make sure that individuals who have obligations under this legislation live up to those obligations.

There are other provisions with respect to making inquiries, voluntary support deductions, the jurisdictions of the courts, and promoting financial disclosure, again, Mr. Speaker, all of those provisions designed to make sure that the maintenance enforcement program works and that the families that depend upon that support and really suffer if they don't get it are more likely to be paid.

So we're pleased to support the bill, Mr. Speaker, at third reading. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a third time]

Bill 23

Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to third reading of Bill 23, the Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004, and also to move it at third reading stage of this particular process.

As has previously been mentioned in the House, the proposed amendments in this bill will align legislation with the government's recent decision to eliminate Alberta's aviation fuel tax on eligible international passenger and cargo flights. Bill 23 also includes a number of significant administrative changes. I think we're all well aware of the impact of these decisions and the need for a bill like this to round out all of those previous decisions in a very formal way, so to speak.

Mr. Speaker, amendments in this bill were a collaborative effort, in fact, between the ministries of Revenue, Finance, Economic Development, and Transportation. I wish to thank all of those ministers and their staff and all members in their departments for their contributions. Given that there were no further points raised during the discussion when this came up during Committee of the Whole, I'm hoping that this particular stage of debate will see equal support for this bill.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to add a few comments on Bill 23, the Fuel Tax Amendment Act, 2004. It certainly was a welcome announcement for many different reasons when the government decided to eliminate the 1.5 cents per litre aviation fuel tax on international passenger and cargo flights, including flights to the United States.

This abolishment came into effect on March 1 of this year, and certainly the initiative is going to help attract more flights to Alberta from outside the country. This has many spinoffs not only for people travelling here for tourism, but I think it's also something that will be welcome considering the increase of the Canadian dollar in comparison to the U.S. dollar. That was also giving us other spinoffs as well, such as the Oilers have just announced or are thinking of announcing that they will drop ticket prices next year, and that would be a first in pro sports.

Eliminating this tax, Mr. Speaker, allows Alberta's two international airports to compete on a more level playing field with other jurisdictions. While Alberta's aviation fuel tax is competitive within Canada, it does not compare favourably to tax levels in the U.S., Europe, or Asia Pacific markets. So the elimination of the aviation fuel tax will result in an annual loss of \$3 million in provincial revenue. At the time of the announcement the Revenue minister said that the province is also considering reducing the domestic fuel tax on aviation fuel, worth another \$9 million annually. Certainly, I hope that these will increase air traffic in Canada.

With Bill 23, Mr. Speaker, there certainly isn't anything contentious, and I can only see that there will be many benefits as a result of this bill, such things as I mentioned earlier: creating beneficial economic activity and, certainly, the jobs that are created around it.

This legislation also, Mr. Speaker, will bring us into line with other jurisdictions that do not charge aviation fuel taxes on international flights. In most U.S. states air carriers providing international

services are either exempt or eligible for a full refund on fuel taxes. B.C. offers cargo shippers a refund on fuel taxes for international flights, and the U.S., Quebec, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland have exempted taxes on all international flights.

This is a change that is welcome. It is a change that has been lobbied hard for by the Calgary Airport Authority. I certainly welcome the legislation, and I would urge all members of the Assembly to support it. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 23 read a third time]

3:50

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very productive week, and we've gotten through the agenda as much as we had hoped to get through, and I understand that there may be another snowstorm coming. That's what the forecast is. That being the case, I know that all hon. members will be anxious to get out to their own constituencies to do the important work that we do on behalf of all Albertans, and therefore I would move that we now call it 5:30 and adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on Monday next.

[Motion carried; at 3:51 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 22, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/22

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. Guide us so that we may use the privilege given us as elected Members of the Legislative Assembly. Give us the strength to labour diligently, the courage to think and to speak with clarity and conviction and without prejudice or pride. Amen.

Hon. members, we'll now participate in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau. To all the members and to all the people in the gallery please feel free to join in in the language of your choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to this House a group of students from the grade 6 class of Talmud Torah elementary school in my riding. They are with their parent helpers, Debbi Joffe, Terry Karpman, and Aube Levine, and their teacher, Christy Dowell. They're seated in the members' gallery. I would very much like to welcome them. Shalom. Please stand and be given the warm welcome of this House today.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly five very esteemed representatives from the county of St. Paul. Joining us today are Deputy Reeve Mike Bergeron, councillors Sharil Baumgardner, Don Mudryk, Frank Sloan, and Allen Young. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon, and I would ask them to rise, if they would, and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise to introduce two groups of special guests. Firstly, I have some special family members who are visiting from the fine city of Airdrie, Alberta: my brother Dale Rathgeber, his wife, Germaine, and my nephew and niece, Kendel and Jase. I'd ask them to rise. They're in the public gallery. I'd ask all members to give them the warm welcome of this Assembly.

I'm also pleased to introduce to you and through you to all

members of the Assembly 33 students and two teachers from NorQuest College, of which the Westmount campus is located in the Edmonton-Calder constituency. They're studying English as a Second Language. There are 33 students along with their instructors, Ms Capune and Ms Ilott. I believe they're in the members' gallery. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm reception of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members assembled here this afternoon some valued constituents from Edmonton-Mill Creek. Joining us today in the gallery are Terry Brosda, whose children attend Julia Kiniski school, and Lori Reid, whose children also attend Julia Kiniski school. They are part of the Education Watch initiative. They are joined by Preet Sara, the co-ordinator of Action for Education and the Education Watch initiative. I don't know if Judith Frank made it today or not. She was planning to come. I'll ask those who are here to please now rise and receive the warm welcome of everyone here.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly 36 students who are joining us from Holy Family Catholic school, one of my favourite schools because that's where my children went. They are joined today by teachers Miss Sonia Mangieri, Mrs. Louisa Hoekstra, and parents Mr. Scott Vickery, Mrs. Marline Magdales, and, of course, an old friend of a few of us here in this Assembly, Mr. Norm Murphy. I would ask that they all now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly another class from Clara Tyner elementary school, another fine public school in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar. The 26 polite but enthusiastic students that are here today are led by their teacher, Mrs. Sandi James, and they are accompanied by parent helpers Cheryl Anderson, Colleen Ellis, Bonnie Smith, Donna Thachuk, Leona Paush, and Mary Synnett. They are in the public gallery, and I would now ask them all to please rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce more parents who are here watching our proceedings as part of the Education Watch initiative. They are seated in the members' gallery. They're concerned about the quality of education their children are receiving and the level of funding for public education. I'll ask them to rise as I read their names. One is Mr. Ross Alexander, who is a parent with one child attending Lendrum elementary. The second is Shari-Lynn Lane, who has two children attending Lendrum elementary. Please give them a warm welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two very distinguished gentlemen from my riding. They are seated in the public gallery, and they are here today to meet with various ministers to tell us all the wonderful things that are happening at Olds College and Olds College Centre for Innovation. They are Stan Mills, the chairman of the board of Olds College, and Jim Smith, chairman of the board of Olds College Centre for Innovation. They're in the public gallery. Would they please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, Calgarians can't trust the Calgary health region. The region has become a political patronage playground while two more people die needlessly. This government responds as it did in the case of Vince Motta, as it did in the case of Maren Burkhart: don't worry; the Calgary health region will handle it. Well, I am worried, and Calgarians are worried. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. How can Calgarians trust the Calgary health region to get to the bottom of these deaths when the Motta inquiry just one year ago said, quote, the CHR appears to view the inquiry process as a public relations exercise, end quote?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, let me say first of all that there were tragic deaths that occurred as a result of a medical error. I want to express my deep condolences and sympathies to the families involved. Not because I know who these individuals or who their families are; it's because I use the system in exactly the same way as these families use the system. I want to say that this could be my father, this could be my child, this could be my wife, this could be somebody that all of us know personally, and I am deeply committed to a health care system that helps people and doesn't harm them or in this case kill them.

1:40

So, Mr. Speaker, I want to say that we are fully committed as a government to independent reviews that are currently being conducted by the medical examiner, who is not an employee of the Calgary health region. We are fully committed to work that's being done by outside groups like the pharmacists. The College of Pharmacists is interested in reviewing what happened here. There are many who are interested in getting to the bottom of this.

Yes, there are individuals that must be accountable for what happened in this circumstance, but just as important we have to go beyond that. Merely finding accountability for the individuals involved is not sufficient. We must go further. We must understand how we can change the system so that we can take human error out of the system.

Will our health care system ever be perfect? It cannot because our system is always subject to the frailties of human judgment and human activity. We need to look at this from a patient safety perspective and ask ourselves, Mr. Speaker: what can the system do from its point of view so that as much as possible we can take the frailties of human error out of the picture?

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, how can Calgarians trust the Calgary health region when just one day after the region claimed that similarly labelled chemicals were to blame for the medical mixup, the company producing the chemicals said that the labelling is very different?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we again are still allowing the process to be

completed, the process wherein the region itself looks with a critical eye as to how this happened. They want to get to the bottom of this, and their motivation is exactly the same as, I would suggest, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview's or mine or yours or any Albertan's. The motivation is this: we want a health care system that protects people, that helps them, that saves their lives, not one that harms them. So it's for that reason that I ask the hon. member to put himself in the shoes of somebody with the regional health authority. Is he suggesting that in fact people want to harm people in our health care system? The answer is of course no.

Mr. Speaker, we are allowing this process to take place. If the medical examiner recommends to the Attorney General's fatality inquiry board that one should be constituted, we'll fully participate in that.

I can say that in speaking with Greg Eberhart, the registrar of the College of Pharmacists, he too is interested in this, and it's the reason why we will be having a review, also an independent review by the Health Quality Council of Alberta, in collaboration with the national patient safety institute, getting to the issue of how we can deal with products that have potassium in them. I expect that the best practices from across the country will be reviewed so that we can help prevent this from happening again in the future.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, how can Calgarians trust the Calgary health region when this recent dialysis solution mix-up occurred four years after the Calgary health region assured Patricia Evans' family that steps would be taken to prevent it from ever occurring again?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I don't wish to bring the individual cases before the floor of this Legislature and make a political statement out of it. I can tell you that, again, the people who work in the health region in Calgary, as they are throughout this province, are committed to a health care system that helps people, not one that harms them. I think that Albertans and Calgarians who look at the circumstances here will understand that that is their motivation, and they seek not to correct something that may have happened in the past but to make sure that that correction is there for the benefit of people in the future.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, Calgarians cannot trust the Calgary health region. Despite warnings from employees that the new central production pharmacy could lead to errors in the system, the Calgary health region publicly touted the new cost-saving facility as a safer way of dispensing medications. We need to shed light on this issue. The public needs to know. Again to the same minister: how were employee concerns with the central production pharmacy and the tech-check-tech policy addressed by the Calgary health region?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, of course, we always look for efficiencies in the operations of our system but not at the cost of quality. I can assure you that Mr. Eberhart from the College of Pharmacists is interested in finding out the bottom of this: how did this happen, and how can we make changes to the system to prevent it from happening again? The regional health authority, as I indicated, is also equally motivated in this.

But I point out, Mr. Speaker, that at the outset, in answering the hon. member's first question, I talked about the fact that our system is subject to the frailties of human error and human activity and that as long as we have people making judgments and people doing things in the health care system, our system is necessarily subject to errors a person may make and that there's an enormous difference between a human error and a professional error. Such a human error could have been made by any one of a number of people. It could

have been made by a pharmacy tech; it could have been made by a pharmacist; it could have been made by a doctor.

So let us allow the system to go through the review so that we can find accountability for the individuals involved, but let's also look at the bigger picture of how we actually make our system safer in the future.

Dr. Taft: Will the minister immediately make public all written records of warnings and concerns raised by employees of the Calgary health region about the central production facility, including memos, e-mails, and minutes of meetings?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'll take that question under advisement. I don't know, personally, of any particular documents that the hon. member refers to, so I'll have to take that under advisement accordingly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What reassurances will this minister offer employees of the Calgary health region who want to speak up on this issue but are frightened to do so?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, again, everybody is motivated by the right thing. I would say this. If the hon. member is suggesting that this should be an exercise simply in naming and blaming and shaming individuals, then it will have the exact opposite effect of what he's trying to accomplish, which is to bring this out into the full fullness of light.

Mr. Speaker, what I've suggested to you is that we are interested in getting to the bottom of this. There will be a complete, full, and frank disclosure of what's happened. It think that it's important we do that from a patient safety initiative. If the hon. member wishes to go on this name and blame and shame route, all it will do is the next time somebody dies, there might not be such full and frank disclosure that in fact an error was made. He will have the exact opposite effect of what he's trying to accomplish, which is to make our system safer.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

SuperNet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The SuperNet boondoggle has already cost taxpayers \$193 million, and despite promises that any cost overruns would be paid for by Bell West, just last Friday the government had to provide \$1.2 million to municipalities who could not afford the hook-up fee. The tab for hooking up the SuperNet to the remaining 4,400 schools, libraries, and public buildings is \$17.6 million. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Where is the \$17.6 million coming from? The province? Or will it be downloaded onto the municipalities?

1:50

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, there are some things I can accept. One is where people might have a difference of opinion with respect to a value of a particular project. In the case of the SuperNet, a project that connects libraries, schools, hospitals, and government buildings, that is provided for in the \$193 million. That means that all 4,700 locations are hooked up to the door.

What I cannot accept is a press release that, frankly, is incorrect, because municipalities were never included in the hookup and are not included in the contract. Mr. Speaker, I'm going to ask the

Minister of Municipal Affairs to supplement, but I would ask the Alberta Liberal opposition to withdraw their press release and the facts that I think are recorded on their web site.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, last Thursday a member of the opposition berated the government for doing nothing to help municipalities. On their web site on Friday they're criticizing the government for doing something.

What I find interesting – and I take the quote from Thursday's *Hansard* – is the “prohibitive costs [creating] barriers for rural residents” when it comes to access to technology. The member then went on to say – and I quote from *Hansard* – “how are cash-strapped [municipalities] ever going to afford to join up?”

I said: please stay tuned. We announced on Friday that every municipality in this province is hooked up now, and they're saying no. So I am encouraging every Albertan to go to www.liberal.com so they can see the untruths that are on their web site.

Ms Blakeman: Can't even get the web site right.

To the same minister: given that to service each SuperNet hookup costs the user from \$3,000 to \$10,000 a year, will the taxpayers also be on the hook for those costs, which could be as much as half a billion dollars over the next 10 years?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, again this is an example of trying to confuse the issue. There is the build cost of the SuperNet. That's in a contract of \$193 million. In this case the municipalities are responsible for the connection charges, and the fact that they have approached us to help them get connected tells me that they're very interested in being hooked up and having access to that service.

As far as the schools are concerned, there is a provision already in their budget and has been for a number of years to have them pay for the connection charges to a certain level so they can continue to deliver the programs that people in larger centres are used to, so students in Rainbow Lake can have access to the same kind of quality of education that we're used to in the major centres.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, in the *Hansard* last Thursday members from the opposition said: how are you helping “struggling communities, like the village of Heisler”? The hon. member did say that they're not receiving help. They're part of the program that was announced on Friday. We're helping them. The president of the AAMD and C is quoted as saying: the government listened, and they're acting. They thank us for that. The president of the AUMA, Mr. Patterson, said: this is terrific for helping Alberta municipalities.

In fact, what they're saying on their web site is shameful.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Innovation and Science: given that the Minister of Economic Development believes that wireless technology is the future, how much more will this government spend before the SuperNet is rendered useless by wireless technology?

The Speaker: Well, now we're getting into a real debate about the future. All I know is that we're in the present. Be very, very brief. I don't know where the crystal ball is here.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to answer that one because there have always been wireless solutions as part of the original intent of the Alberta SuperNet. Wireless makes a whole lot of sense for short-haul distance so you can get connected to that base

network, which will carry the huge amounts of traffic and data that are required.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Wainwright.

Calgary Health Region (continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since day one the Calgary health region has been a laboratory for Tory privatization schemes. It's been turned into a retirement resort for recycled Tories like Jim Dinning, Rod Love, and current CEO Jack Davis. Whether it's the decision to blow up hospitals and start building new ones, the Vince Motta fatality inquiry, or the recent tragic deaths in the Foothills intensive care unit, the fingerprints of this Tory government are all over the long-standing problems at the Calgary health region. My question is to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. How many more tragedies have to take place before cabinet orders a full public inquiry into deep-seated systemic problems of the Calgary health region?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, there have been in the health system across this country, across North America situations where deaths have occurred accidentally, where serious incidents have occurred and need to be investigated and need to be learned from. We have a process in this province as all provinces do and, I think, most jurisdictions do.

Under the Ministry of Justice in this province there's a medical examiner's office. The medical examiner has the job of an independent review of any unexplained death outside of hospital, any unexplained death in hospital, any death in custody. The medical examiner does a thorough review of the circumstances of the death to find out the cause of death and the circumstances around it to determine whether there's anything which can be learned from it. If in the course of that investigation the medical examiner discovers information which ought to be brought to the attention of other investigating authorities, such as the police, for example, it's his obligation to do that.

Once he's completed an investigation, he may report inappropriate circumstances to the Fatality Review Board. The Fatality Review Board is a board of citizens of this province consisting of a lawyer, a doctor, and a citizen who's not a lawyer or a doctor. Those three people look at the public interest side to determine whether further information is needed or whether it's in the public interest to have a public fatality inquiry, and if they believe that it is, they recommend to the Minister of Justice that a public fatality inquiry be called. I know of no circumstance where they've recommended a public fatality inquiry where one hasn't been called, but that decision obviously does remain one for the Minister of Justice to bring forward.

So we do have a process, a public Fatality Review Board, and a process for inquiry to learn from unexplained deaths, whether in or out of hospital or anywhere else in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given the most recent deaths in the ICU at Foothills hospital, how can the government continue to ignore Judge Manfred Delong's call for a public inquiry into the culture of denial at the Calgary regional health authority?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would answer the question this

way because I think the hon. member goes far beyond what we have at the current time. What we have at the current time is the medical examiner . . . [interjection] The hon. member says, "Culture of denial." There's no denial involved in this. The medical examiner is doing his job as he's tasked to do, to do an independent review, to do a thorough examination of all of the circumstances surrounding those deaths, and when he has completed his investigation, he will make recommendations. There's no denial in that. It's a question of having the facts before you jump to conclusions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that the Pharmacists Association of Alberta has been warning for months that a shortage of hospital pharmacists was endangering patient safety, why is the government refusing to support their call for a public inquiry into whether a shortage of qualified pharmacists may have contributed to the two tragic deaths in the ICU at Foothills hospital?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I humbly apologize, but I couldn't quite get the question that was being asked by the hon. member. I'm not trying to avoid it, but perhaps he could repeat it.

The Speaker: It doesn't work that way. There's supposed to be total decorum in the House.

The hon. Member for Wainwright, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Rural Economy

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past year Alberta has been hit by BSE, forest fires, extensive continued threats of drought, global security concerns, and a number of other issues. My constituents are concerned about the possible erosion of the Alberta advantage. My question is to the Minister of Economic Development. Can you please tell us how Alberta's economy, particularly the rural economy, is expected to fare this year?

2:00

The Speaker: Hon. minister, we're going into the future here. If the hon. minister has a crystal ball that the rest of us don't have, he should share it. Go ahead.

Mr. Norris: Well, I don't think it takes a crystal ball, Mr. Speaker, to see what's going on in Alberta; I mean, drive down any highway or go visit any town or city in Alberta.

I would like to answer the hon. member's question in this way. There's a massive amount of focus in this House about negativity and finding and identifying problems. However, Mr. Speaker, in Alberta we have been challenged more than any other jurisdiction. [interjection] The hon. member likes to make light of it because he'll probably never be over here talking as a government member. However, we are very, very sympathetic to what's happened in Alberta not only through forest fires that caused massive devastation and the BSE, not only one but two mad cows – while they make jokes about it, we take it very seriously because it's the livelihoods and the jobs of Albertans that are affected.

As a result, to answer to the hon. member's question, there have been a number of initiatives that have taken place for rural Alberta. As all members will know, the hon. Member for Wainwright as well as the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake with the minister of agriculture recently released the rural development strategy, which speaks to the importance of rural Alberta. [interjections] You know,

Mr. Speaker, it's ironic. When they ask questions, they don't want to have answers. They just sit there with grins on their faces.

It's time to start listening about what's building Alberta. It's not negativity. It's not comments about how bad everything is. It's understanding what the future holds, and what the future holds for this particular province is a healthy rural Alberta, healthy agriculture, healthy forestry.

The outlook for the future, to the hon. colleague's question, is that Alberta once again, for the 10th year in a row – so listen to this – will lead the nation in growth at 3 and a half per cent, and the Conference Board of Canada says that for the next five years Alberta will continue to lead the nation.

So the Alberta advantage is in place. We're going to keep working on it. I thank you for the question. I'm sad that the sensitivity to the other Albertans who have struggled so much doesn't seem to resonate with the hon. members opposite.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental question to the same minister: what exactly is the Department of Economic Development and the minister doing to encourage economic development outside the Edmonton/Calgary corridor?

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Speaker, I will try and be a little more brief. The question that's posed by the hon. member is an excellent one. The Calgary/Edmonton corridor has been ranked the number one growth area in North America, second only to Luxembourg in the whole world. So, clearly, there is an awful lot of economic activity happening down highway 2 from Calgary to Edmonton.

What we're concerned with as a department and we've worked very, very hard with the hon. Deputy Premier is to identify opportunities for rural Alberta, and one of the ways we do it is through regional economic alliances. Now, these alliances identify strengths and weaknesses of particular regions, rather than cities versus cities and counties versus counties. In our province we have 12 of them, Mr. Speaker. We signed two of them most recently. The hon. member for Lethbridge was at that signing.

What they do is take the region and talk about the strengths, because the global site selectors, that everybody covets to come in and set up a new plant or a factory, do not have time to come visit any more. They want to talk very, very briefly on web sites, et cetera. So we've worked very hard with that, and we're continuing, for the hon. member's edification, to promote tourism as a great rural development tool.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Occupational Health and Safety

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2003 124 Albertans died as a result of their work, compared to 98 in 2002 and 106 in 2001. Fifty-seven of last year's work-related deaths were attributed to occupational disease. We need to reduce this frightening statistic. We need to reduce health care costs, and we need to improve the health of Alberta workers. My first question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Given that the minister has done some excellent work as far as reducing workplace incidents, will he initiate now a public information campaign for employers and employees to ensure that proper respiratory equipment is supplied and worn on every dangerous job site across this province?

Mr. Dunford: Well, that's something that certainly we'll take a look

at, Mr. Speaker. We've tried to use this WorkSafe initiative on all fronts. We've tried as best we can to approach every work site here in Alberta and all of the different activities that are involved. We've had a long array of different subinitiatives inside WorkSafe Alberta. I certainly would agree with the hon. member that the number of deaths in this province is still too many, and we have to do everything we can, working not only with the Department of Health and Wellness but also the Department of Transportation and other ministries, to get these numbers down.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: what effort is the minister making to reduce workers' exposure to toxic substances, that over a number of years can slowly kill that worker?

Mr. Dunford: Well, without the details actually in front of me, Mr. Speaker, I think I can say that with the legislation that we put in place, with the regulations, and with the most recent publication of the safety code, we've looked at all aspects of activity at the work site. I can take it under advisement if he's looking for actual technical details, but for the time being, I want to assure the hon. member that something as important as the environment in which we breathe will not and cannot be overlooked.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that in the last four years there has been an increase of more than 70 per cent in the number of workers dying from occupational diseases on an annual basis, does the minister consider that the occupational disease reserve fund, which sits at \$220 million and is held by the WCB, is adequate to meet the needs of future claims?

Mr. Dunford: Well, again, I believe the hon. member is on an important topic here. I believe he's already stated in perhaps the preamble that for many of these occupational diseases that he's talking about, it's taken many, many years for the actual symptoms to come to light. Certainly, we expect and would want to monitor that the Workers' Compensation Board, under its chair and all of the members that represent the employers, the employees, and the public, would be cognizant of what future costs will be. They have, as I would understand, actuaries that they'll be able to work with. So it'll be very important that they keep an eye on that fund.

Now, where the challenge always comes, Mr. Speaker, is that we must be aware that we're not talking about taxpayers' dollars here. We are talking about contributions that have been made to the fund by employers. So it is very, very important that any board for workers' compensation that's put in place be very, very judicial and meet their obligations that they have under the legislation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Education Funding

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government recently announced additional funding for education. In spite of this, my constituents continue to ask me why they are being asked to raise money to purchase textbooks and other learning resources for the classroom. My questions are for the Minister of Learning. Are parents required to purchase textbooks?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent question, because last spring we responded to this concern by adding \$20 million to the Learning Resources Centre. This was money that the school boards could utilize to do things like purchase textbooks. In essence, it was a line of credit with the Learning Resources Centre. By spending the Learning Resources Centre monies, it would actually free up monies to do other things. So about a year ago we did make an announcement of \$20 million. That money subsequently went in to allow them to purchase textbooks, things like that.

Mrs. Ady: I have one supplemental. If this extra \$20 million dollars was put there to address these concerns, what has Alberta Learning done to ensure that school jurisdictions don't miss out on this opportunity?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's an excellent question as well, because what we found out is that up until about six weeks ago, 25 per cent of that money had not been used; \$5 million of the \$20 million had not been used by school boards to purchase the textbooks that, indeed, each and every member here had heard were so critically important to the school system. That was why we had put in a \$20 million line of credit. But only \$15 million of that had been picked up to date. So what my department did was send out almost an emergency signal to the school boards saying that there is \$5 million still available and they should use it. To date they are working quickly and heartily to ensure that that is being used.

The whole point of this is that I find it very interesting that when we put out the money, we all heard about not enough textbooks in the classroom, but the school boards, in effect, did not utilize the dollars that were there to purchase the textbooks.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

2:10

Mathematics Curricula

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mrs. Adachi, a parent who's been in contact with the Learning department, is completely frustrated with the continuing mess that the department created with the introduction of pure, applied, and transition mathematics programs. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Why are parents still in the position of trying to sort out different sets of rules offered by the Learning department, school districts, and secondary institutions with respect to these programs?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, first of all, when it comes to pure math and applied math, there were certainly some questions when it was first brought in about five or six years ago. One of the questions, in general, was that students would have a much more difficult time with pure math, that students were having a very difficult time with applied math.

One of the things, as an aside to the hon. member, that I will say is that in this last set of diploma examinations, we had more students than ever taking pure math. We had more students than ever succeeding at pure math. More students have succeeded at pure math than succeeded at math 30 in the old system, so I will say that pure math has been a success.

Where there has been some issue with applied math is in getting into postsecondary institutions. All the postsecondary institutions have made abundantly clear in their catalogues that go out to each and every school to each and every student what will or will not be accepted. This is not necessarily specific to each and every institution, but as a general rule applied math is accepted for the non

science-based faculties, Mr. Speaker. For example, my daughter is in grade 12, and she has just been accepted at the University of Lethbridge with applied math, without pure math.

So as a general rule what I would suggest to parents is that they get the catalogue from the postsecondary institutions, that they take a look at each individual application that they want to do. It is all laid out there very, very nicely for the parents and students.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: why are transitions between applied math and pure math almost impossible given the course sequence requirements and the lack of course offerings? They can't get the course.

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, a couple of things have happened with respect to this. It soon became very apparent that there were students who would be enrolled in applied math that wanted to proceed into pure math. There have been bridging courses put in at the postsecondary institutions. So you could have applied math, go into the postsecondary institution and take a bridging course to get into the pure math program, and subsequently go on if, for example, you wanted to change from an arts-based faculty to a science-based faculty.

Again, I'll return the question by saying to the parents out there: make sure that you take a look at the postsecondary institution catalogues and make sure that you know that before the students apply.

Dr. Massey: To the minister, Mr. Speaker: why were the changes introduced before problems with acceptance of the courses by postsecondary institutions and sequencing were ironed out?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, what happened was that initially when we talked to the postsecondary institutions – and I will draw the attention of the House to the fact that this was about two to three years ago – and prior to the acceptance of the programs, the universities and postsecondary institutions had told us that they would be accepting applied math. What then happened about two months prior to the start of applied math 30 is that the University of Alberta said that it would not accept it. This started a cascade of events where other institutions joined in.

We subsequently sat down with the postsecondary institutions at that time and determined that the rationale and reason behind what they said was that there was not enough I believe it was geometry – I may be corrected on that – involved in the course. We subsequently made some minor changes to applied math, and at that time they said that the applied math would be accepted when it came to the arts faculties. The majority of the postsecondary institutions in Alberta now have applied math and accept it for the arts faculties. To the science faculties though – and I completely concur with this – it should be pure math; it needs to be pure math.

The other key component to this is that there has to be the bridging. The hon. member did speak one very important phraseology in my department, which was "transitions." As a matter of fact, we have established an executive directorship position that deals specifically with transitions, Mr. Speaker, which is a very important element of my department.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Drug-sniffing Dogs in Schools

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the

Solicitor General. Last week the Solicitor General announced a canine sniffer program to help detect illegal drugs in our jails. Would the minister also consider randomly using these canine units to help ensure that our schools are also drug free?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you. The hon. member raises a very excellent question. As he indicated, last week I did announce entering into an agreement to have drug dogs randomly search our jails at all of our correctional facilities and remand centres. Over the year we would like the opportunity to evaluate the program to determine its success and whether or not to expand our own agreement.

Mr. Speaker, I want to let the hon. member know that I do not have the authority to set up an agreement with the RCMP to search the schools, but it's a very interesting idea, and I'll be happy to share our findings with anyone else that's interested in the program.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary is to the Minister of Learning. Mr. Minister, do school boards have the necessary authority and protection under the privacy laws to avail themselves of drug-sniffing canine units to help ensure that their schools are drug free?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's an excellent question as well. I do not as Minister of Learning have the authority to allow a drug-sniffing dog at a high school, for example, or a school of any sort. I will say, though, that the principal and the school board do have the ability to do that. As a matter of fact, in 1998 a Supreme Court decision upheld the right of having drug-sniffing dogs go in and randomly sniff lockers.

So, Mr. Speaker, in direct response to the hon. member's question, if the principal and the school board do say that they wanted to go ahead, yes, indeed it can go ahead, and the concerns about privacy are secondary to the concerns about finding illegal substances in the lockers of school-age children.

Mr. Herard: Well, that's good news, Mr. Speaker.

My final supplemental to the Minister of Learning: would you consider, then, funding a drug-sniffing canine program and make it available to Alberta school boards to send a message that illegal drugs will not be tolerated in our schools?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, that's an excellent question. Certainly, the Solicitor General and myself will be talking about this. Over the past two to three months it's become very apparent that such drugs as crystal meth have been appearing in our schools at a very alarming rate. It is also very apparent that something needs to be done. I think that this certainly is one element that we can act on, but I think there are many other things that need to be done, and we do need to pursue this a significant ways further. The Solicitor General and myself will be looking at this very important issue. Our schools cannot be places where drugs are being sold.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Protection of Wildlife

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A number of wildlife

biologists and organizations for the protection of wildlife in Alberta have raised concerns about wolf and elk populations in and around our national parks. Low wildlife populations mean less biodiversity in our parks, indicating that our wildlife and our natural areas are not being properly cared for. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: will this ministry conduct a proper species count in order to determine what action needs to be taken to ensure that we have healthy wolf and elk populations here in Alberta?

2:20

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, because the member is referring to wildlife, to parks, the Minister of Community Development will no doubt supplement my question because he is the person in charge of the parks.

In relation to the wolves and also the elk population we do have many challenges when it comes to the animal population out there. The animals are getting urbanized. We have more wolves going into hamlets and towns and villages across Alberta. We have deer and elk and moose and coyote populations coming into town. They are getting very urbanized and we have a real challenge.

I know that we have to work together to ensure that there is a balance, Mr. Speaker, because it's also not healthy for the animals to be too tame so that they start moving to urban centres and depending on urban areas for their survival. I'll give you an example. Last year there were over 16,000 accidents between vehicles and elk, moose, and deer, and, in fact, five fatalities.

So we do have many challenges, and the Minister of Community Development may want to supplement in relation to the parks themselves.

The Speaker: I think we should move on with the next question because of the time element today.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what plans does this ministry have to ensure that healthy prey/predator populations are maintained?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, part of our plan, of course, is to sustain a balance. Again, the Minister of Community Development may want to supplement after. My ministry manages over a hundred million acres of public land, and there are multi-users on that public land, including the oil and gas industry, including the forest industry, including agriculture, tourism, and recreation users, and, of course, the wildlife users also. So it is a challenge, and you can be assured that we won't be shutting down the economy and sacrificing the economy unless we can put a balance in place.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: what is this ministry doing to regulate human interaction with wildlife outside of park limits?

Mr. Cardinal: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is one of the challenges we have. When you say 16,000 accidents, the cost of that alone – and then we had five fatalities, which is nothing to be proud of. We do have a challenge out there. It will continue to be a challenge in the future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Federal Aid to Cattle Industry

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. After spending \$400 million in provincial taxpayers' money, much of which seems

to have gone to the fattening of the profit margins of U.S.-owned meat packers, it remains to be seen whether the latest federal government program will be any more effective in helping small and medium-sized cattle producers, yet the Premier can't resist the temptation to trash the federal initiative by calling it a pre-election ploy. My question is to the Minister of Finance. Is the government not concerned that such statements may jeopardize federal government aid to beef producers now or in the future?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, it doesn't matter what seems to come out; this hon. member has to be negative about it. Someone mentioned that negativity was in this House constantly.

This was a positive today for our producers, that the federal government came forward, albeit we've been waiting for this initiative to culminate and come forward. But today, clearly – let's be very clear – in Lethbridge the Prime Minister did announce that there was a \$995 million project coming forward; \$680 million was going to be dedicated towards BSE relief. Today he announced this. There would be \$250 million in income support payments for all producers. This is part of the bridging process for the CAIS program that would be coming forward, and then there would be a top-up of the Canadian farm income program of \$65 million. This is welcome news for Alberta's producers.

I can't say how much they have suffered, Mr. Speaker, because our minister of agriculture and rural development has expressed that far better than I, but I have been able to experience some of the meetings with her and seen the devastation that has occurred within the province of Alberta and realized that all the help that can come forward is absolutely necessary.

We've been waiting for this federal announcement for quite some time, so we're delighted that it has come forward, and I'm sure that our producers today are happy. Even though you are negative about the whole program, everybody else in the province will be happy that it's finally come forward.

The Speaker: Just a second here. Hold on. The chair is not negative, and the member speaks to the chair, so I sure hope that there are not people out there saying that the Speaker is negative. That would be wrong.

Mr. Mason: We on our side consider you to be very positive indeed.

I would just like to ask the Minister of Finance how she can reconcile this apparent support for this federal beef program with the Premier's statement that this is simply a pre-election ploy by the federal Liberals?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, let me clarify. My comment was not to suggest the chair was negative. You've been absolutely supportive.

Mr. Speaker, the key message on this whole program from the federal government is in fact that they have recognized that they have a national responsibility to come to the table to bring aid and assistance to the devastation within the cattle industry, and clearly they have done that.

Clearly, everyone knows that today, as we are sitting here, our Premier and minister of agriculture and rural development are in Washington working to have the borders opened. Mr. Speaker, our Premier and our minister of agriculture and rural development have led the way for Canada to a resolution of opening the borders and getting this market back into a working situation. So to have any kind of indication that there's some negativity here attached to their efforts is wrong, and once again the member opposite is wrong.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given the apparent support for this federal BSE program by Alberta beef producers, is the government not worried that it will undermine the beef industry when it plays politics with this issue?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, if anyone read the member opposite's news release today, you'd know who was playing politics and not very smart politics – I can tell you that right now – because rural Alberta supports this government, not that caucus.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Family Violence

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As we focus on the obvious needs of women in domestic violence, we must be careful that we do not demonize men in the process. Recently, after consultations with the Human Rights Commission, the Lethbridge police department removed an anti male police manual. My first question is to the Solicitor General. In light of the Human Rights Commission recommendations will she direct all Alberta law enforcement agencies to review and eliminate all gender-biased training and public information materials?

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand that about a year ago the Lethbridge Police Service published a booklet on domestic violence in the community. A complaint was made to the Alberta Human Rights Commission about the absence of gender-neutral language in the booklet. The booklet contained words like "he" and "him" to describe the offender. The issue was resolved very quickly when the Lethbridge Police Service withdrew the publication and stopped distributing it.

Mr. Speaker, I think this shows how important it is for all of us to remember that domestic violence affects everyone: the husbands, the wives, the children, and the grandparents. In terms of gender bias in information from law enforcement agencies at this point this is one case in Lethbridge, over a year ago, that was addressed immediately. If the member has information about other cases, I would be glad to hear about them and take the appropriate action.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you. This positive step will not end family violence but may result in better law enforcement.

Will the Solicitor General take steps to ensure that all law enforcement officers are properly trained to deal with domestic violence in a fair and unbiased way?

2:30

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes, Mr. Speaker, we will. My department participates in the provision of family violence training to police members. We're working currently in consultation with Alberta Children's Services and Alberta Justice to enhance police training in this area.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you. To the Minister of Justice: Alberta Justice is preparing new procedures to assist in dealing with family violence without gender bias. Will women's and men's advocacy groups be consulted in this work?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, any time we engage in consultation, we deal with all of the stakeholders that are involved in the area. We're very happy to be working with Children's Services, the Solicitor General, Health and Wellness, and many other government departments with the family violence round-table initiative to talk about family violence. It's an issue that's very, very important to Albertans, and it shouldn't be swept under the rug. It should be brought out and discussed.

We should understand that if we want to feel safe in our homes, we have to talk about the problem of domestic violence, family violence. We shouldn't get sidetracked in that discussion with respect to the question of whether it's violence by men against women or violence by women against men or, for that matter, violence by men against men or women against women. What we're talking about is violence, and we need to deal with the violence. We need to deal with the violence through our processes.

We have some very wonderful initiatives in this province. The domestic violence court, or HomeFront as it is now known, in Calgary, a wonderful community-driven project to deal with domestic violence in a most appropriate way, to get people into the system and out of the system as fast as possible, and to get treatment where it's appropriate so people understand the effect of violence on children, the effect of violence on families. The recidivism rate in that HomeFront project shows that we can and will do something about domestic violence in our homes and in our communities and that we can do that if the community pulls together.

But let's not get sidetracked on issues of gender. Violence can happen in any number of different ways, and while the majority of reported instances are instances of men initiating violence against women, we need not get into the bias of that discussion, because violence is violence regardless of whether it's perpetrated by a man, a woman or whether it's in the house or in the community.

The Speaker: Hon. members, today there will be seven members participating in Recognitions, and we'll start in about 30 seconds from now following your approval for Introduction of Guests if that's given. Okay?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It certainly is a great pleasure for me to rise today on behalf of myself and my colleague from Grande Prairie-Wapiti to introduce to you and through you to the Legislative Assembly 28 energetic and talented students from the Sexsmith/La Glace schools junior high band. They're in Edmonton for the Alberta International Band Festival today, and they are accompanied by Mr. Duane Paulson, Mrs. Liz Good-Gerow, Mr. Greg Sandboe, and Mr. Bill Lappenbush and Mrs. Tina Lappenbush. I would ask them all to please rise now and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Recognitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

L'École La Mission

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Tuesday evening the entire school community of l'école La Mission in St. Albert

celebrated with their usual joie de vivre the official opening of the first francophone school in Alberta built exclusively for Charter section 23 students.

I wish to congratulate chairman Claude Duret and the trustees of Le Conseil Scolaire Centre-Nord on the official formal opening of this beautiful and highly functional building. It is truly a facility designed to embody and encourage a high-quality learning environment. I would especially like to commend the parents of l'école La Mission, who have worked so hard over the past 10 years and who have held onto their dreams so tenaciously for a proper school building with all its amenities for their children.

I am very pleased that the constituency of St. Albert that I'm proud to represent in this Assembly has a truly francophone school the environment of which enlivens and enlightens our broader community.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Zicki Eludin

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise in the Assembly today to recognize an extraordinary individual from my constituency. On Saturday, March 13, Zicki Eludin was the recipient of a volunteer award granted by the Land Stewardship Centre of Canada. These awards recognize exemplary environmental stewardship efforts by Canadians.

Zicki was awarded this honour in acknowledgment of his leadership excellence with the Lac La Biche Fisheries Enhancement Group and the Lac La Biche Watershed Steering Committee. He has played a key role in the success of both groups. Zicki's leadership abilities, hard work, enthusiasm, and commitment to conservation have greatly benefited the fisheries ecosystems in the Lac La Biche region.

I congratulate Zicki Eludin and would ask all members of this Assembly to join me in commending his accomplishments and his dedication to land and water stewardship.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

St. Peter the Apostle Parish Choir

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise in the Assembly today to acknowledge the outstanding performances of the St. Peter the Apostle parish choir, who have been recently recognized in my constituency for their inspirational and compelling dramatic performances and for the sincere generosity and charity that they have shown towards the St. Albert-Sturgeon community.

A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity of attending the musical play *Mary's Veil* at the St. Albert Arden Theatre. This is the second year of performances to sellout crowds.

It was written by the community's own Sandra Brenneis, who also performs along with her sister the former MLA for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert and chairperson of the West Sturgeon Aging In Place Society Foundation, Ms. Colleen Soetaert, who, I might add, gives a compelling and heartfelt performance along with the rest of the parish choir performers.

These performers' depiction and commitment in *Mary's Veil* was poignant and riveting. They displayed a wondrous ability in their craft as well as a sincere generosity, which has been immense considering that all proceeds from the musical will go towards the West Sturgeon Aging in Place Society Foundation.

I would like to congratulate Ms Sandra Brenneis and the entire cast of community volunteers for their service to our community.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

World Water Day

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. March 22 is World Water Day, and this year's theme focuses on water and disasters. We have seen our share of floods and droughts in Alberta, and in a province that has grown so quickly over the years, water has become an issue of grave concern. The water scarcity crisis we are facing has the potential to disrupt the economy, weaken the poor and vulnerable, and impede sustainable development and the reduction of poverty as it has done in so many other countries.

The message imparted by this year's World Water Day theme is to be informed and be prepared, which is precisely what Alberta must do in order to avoid a severe water scarcity crisis. For years now I have advocated the proper stewardship of our water, but questions continue to arise over the government's long-term plans to ensure that our water is safe, clean, and in healthy supply.

We must prohibit the use of fresh water for oil injection and focus on other choices. We must also ensure that our drinking water is being treated and handled with the utmost care and the best technology. We must take action now to ensure a healthy water supply now and in the future. I urge the government to take on this challenge.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Wamer.

Cardston High School Lady Cougars

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise in this Assembly today to recognize the Cardston high school Lady Cougars, who on Saturday, March 20, won the 3A girls provincial basketball championship. The team is comprised of Haley Fox, Joni Low, Lindsay McMurray, Julie McMurray, Megan Nelson, Alisha Nelson, Kenzie Sheen, Sadie Thomas, Katelyn Toone, Brandie Walburger, Kim Young, and coaches Tim Court and Jason Janisko.

The tournament took place in the newly modernized Cardston high school gymnasium and consisted of the 12 best 3A girls basketball teams in the province. The championship game took place in front of 1,200 fans. The Cardston Lady Cougars faced the Magrath Pandas, another southern Alberta team from the Westwind school division, in the final match.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the Cardston Lady Cougars on their achievement in winning this year's provincials and on an outstanding season of 16 and 0. This team has displayed remarkable talent and skill during an exceptional season of basketball.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Black Gold School Division

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to recognize the Black Gold regional school division for establishing its healthy hearts program. The program is being developed to increase physical activity among staff and students in 14 schools in the division.

Alberta Learning is funding the project through the initiative for school improvement program. The University of Alberta has partnered with the Black Gold school division to provide the

necessary cardiovascular health assessments needed in the program.

The project is certainly a commendable undertaking, particularly because of its emphasis on a healthy lifestyle for staff and students, and I thank the Minister of Learning, the Hon. Lyle Oberg, for his support of the program.

The Speaker: And the hon. member knows he's not supposed to mention members by name.

Mr. Klapstein: Sorry.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

2:40 Tegler Trust and Tegler Foundation

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Tegler Trust was established in 1921 on the death of businessman Robert Tegler. The trust has supported charities ever since.

In June 1981 the trustees of the Tegler Foundation made a decision to fund a major project, a senior citizens' high-rise apartment building named Tegler Manor. In 1993 the Tegler Trust opened another major project, the 83-suite Tegler Terrace, located in the Edmonton-Riverview constituency at 9918-149th Street. Its construction carries on the Tegler tradition of red brick and stone pillars.

The Tegler Trust is presently working with the John Janzen Nature Centre in Edmonton on their revitalization project, and they're having discussions with the Alberta Safety Council for funding towards a safety village in Strathcona county. The Tegler Foundation has also acquired additional properties for residences for low-income people.

Part of the foundation's philosophy is to provide a safe, secure community while encouraging volunteerism from its residents. I commend the trustees of the Tegler Foundation.

Thank you.

head: Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to present a petition signed by 99 Alberta seniors petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to

recognize and value the contributions and sacrifices the seniors have made in building the Province of Alberta, and treat them with due respect and dignity by reversing those policies that cause unnecessary financial hardship for them and undermine their quality of life.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm presenting a petition signed by 202 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to "return to a regulated electricity system, reduce power bills, and develop a program to assist Albertans in improving energy efficiency."

head: Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm giving notice that at the appropriate time I will rise under Standing Order 40 to propose a

motion. The contents of this have been already distributed to members in the Assembly.

Thank you.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. The first is a copy of a memorandum directed to yourself from myself but signed by myself as Government House Leader, the Official Opposition House Leader, and the New Democrat Party House Leader. It sets out the schedule which has been agreed to by all three party House leaders with respect to the schedule for Committee of Supply.

Under Standing Order 58(6), of course, it provides that the Leader of the Official Opposition may, by giving written notice to the Clerk and the Government House Leader prior to noon on the day following the Budget Address, designate which department's estimates are to be considered by the Committee of Supply on any Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday afternoon.

Our normal course is to discuss these matters and come up with an agreed-upon schedule, and that's the schedule which I'm tabling today.

I've tabled five copies of that schedule, but I would also note that in the memorandum it indicates that the departments of Revenue and Finance are both scheduled for the evening of April 21, and that requires unanimous consent of the House under 58(2) because under 58(2) of the Standing Orders the number of sitting days that it's called to consider shall equal the number of members of Executive Council. Having two on that one sitting day would require unanimous consent of the House, so I would request the Speaker to ask for unanimous consent of the House for that particular matter in accordance with the schedule as agreed between the House leaders.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I have a question, though, first of all. Not all hon. members in the Assembly have a copy of this particular document. Would my assumption be correct?

Mr. Hancock: Yes.

The Speaker: So I will wait until all hon. members have a copy of such document, and I will deal with the question as we proceed with the point of order and the Standing Order 40 application this afternoon. I think that in fairness to all hon. members they should have in their possession such a document.

The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to table the appropriate number of copies today of a communiqué that I issued on March 19 on behalf of the government and, I hope, all Albertans saluting and recognizing the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which, of course, was yesterday, March 21. In it we are just all reminded that we have a responsibility amongst us to ensure that all fundamental rights and freedoms are safeguarded for Albertans and others in this great world.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I have two tablings today. The first is from Chris Callaghan, who's writing to me and making note that this senior couple can afford insurance premiums no longer. Their

insurance will not be renewed. They're also having to curtail other small pleasures "in order to pay for the rising costs of utilities, property taxes, etc." I have the appropriate number of copies to table.

Also, I would like to table five copies of a general notice from Morgex Insurance to members of the Alberta Teachers' Association in which they note that "the Government imposed Rate Freeze of Auto Insurance premiums is not applicable to policies that are being issued with a new insurance carrier." That, in fact, Morgex did in the summer of 2003.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table in the Assembly today on behalf of the Minister of Finance the requisite number of copies of the Report of Selected Payments to Members and Former Members of the Legislative Assembly and Persons Directly Associated with Members of the Legislative Assembly for the year ended March 31, 2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. I'm tabling five copies of a letter dated January 5, 2004, from Ms Bev McKay, president of Families Allied to Influence Responsible Eldercare, addressed to the Premier. Ms McKay is drawing the Premier's attention to the *Toronto Star's* "recent investigative report on the political neglect of Ontario's long-term care system." She is alerting the Premier to the declining quality of long-term care in Alberta and urging him to take action.

My second tabling is a New Democrat opposition document titled *Scrap Health Premiums: It's Good Medicine*.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we have a request from the hon. Government House Leader to deal with a motion, but I'm not going to call that until, first of all, hon. members have a copy. Mr. Clerk, were such copies being made available? Okay.

Then we'll deal with the point of order by the Government House Leader first because if the House approves the Standing Order 40 application, there will be no opportunity to deal with such.

The Government House Leader.

Point of Order Referring to Nonmembers

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My point of order is a relatively brief one in nature, and I would refer yourself and members of the House to *Beauchesne's* 493(4) and 493(3). *Beauchesne's* 493(4) indicates that "the Speaker has cautioned Members to exercise great care in making statements about persons who are outside the House and unable to reply."

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona in a preamble to his question referred to the Calgary health authority as being a place for retired Tories and named a former provincial treasurer and a former member – I won't speculate on the constituency because I don't remember it right now – personally but then also went on to name the CEO of the Calgary health authority, Mr. Jack Davis. Now, Mr. Jack Davis was not a member of this House and was a senior deputy minister, in fact, Deputy Minister of Executive Council in this government. While it may be a very honoured designation for many Albertans, it was not appropriate for him to include that person as a retired Tory in his preamble.

I would suggest that the hon. member should be requested to withdraw the reference to individuals not in this House, particularly when he's suggesting that a former civil servant and someone who was the most senior civil servant in the province is a retired Tory.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on this point of order.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. I'd like to respond to that briefly, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Government House Leader is quite correct in pointing out the suggestion, but the wording of this section gives quite a bit of latitude to the Speaker with respect to this matter.
2:50

I would submit that the people involved – also the former executive assistant to the Premier was mentioned – are all very closely associated with this government and its policies. The point being made is that there is a certain amount of patronage related to the Calgary health authority. I believe that all people who are mentioned were in fact very closely associated with the government and its policies and have been put in various positions with the Calgary health authority in order to carry out the policies of this government with respect to health care, with which we respectfully disagree.

So I would submit, Mr. Speaker, that it's not a valid point of order. It's simply stating what to us is clearly the case.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, there are two citations here that should come into play. One thing I sincerely hope is that members will not start to believe that there's considerable latitude given to the chair to be subjective about these things because that would put the chair into a horrendous position.

Let me just quote, first of all, from *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, Marleau and Montpetit, page 524.

The Speaker has ruled that Members have a responsibility to protect the innocent, not only from outright slander but from any slur directly or indirectly implied, and has stressed that Members should avoid as much as possible mentioning by name people from outside the House who are unable to reply and defend themselves against innuendo.

I might also point out *Beauchesne* paragraph 493(4), which essentially has the same thing.

Today here is what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona said; this is the second statement in the question: "It's been turned into a retirement resort for recycled Tories like Jim Dinning, Rod Love, and current CEO Jack Davis." Now, I do know that at least one of these individuals is certainly a former member of this House under the political term Progressive Conservative, the other one never was elected, and the third one certainly didn't fall in that particular situation.

Out of interest over the weekend I was reading something, and it had to do with an interview in one of the major urban papers about one of the current members in the House today. There's a paragraph in there about the hon. member basically saying that he had been an adviser to a former Premier of the province's government – this is not a correct quotation; it's not a disservice, but it sort of sums up to the same thing – and the hon. member said with a big smile on his face: wow, if they'd only known that I'd been a sleeper Liberal for 18 years as an adviser to them. So you can never really be sure what the politics of anybody are.

In the case of the naming of this one particular individual, Jack Davis, former deputy minister, the fact that he may have been a Deputy Minister of Executive Council could not suggest for a

moment that he was in fact one. I found that article rather elucidating.

Certainly, from what I've just quoted from *Montpetit* and I've quoted from *Beauchesne*, that basically we have to protect, it is a valid point of order, Government House Leader, in my view. A valid point of order. In fact, one should be very careful not to bring into question individuals who cannot defend themselves. It's not a good thing to do by innuendo.

I don't know if we want to quarrel and draw the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. He knows better. He'll stand up and say he knows better, and I'll ask him to say that, and then we'll move on.

Dr. Pannu: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I certainly respect your direction, and I won't err next time around. Thank you.

The Speaker: Okay.

Request for Unanimous Consent Committee of Supply Schedule

The Speaker: Now, the pages are going to circulate the document that the hon. Government House Leader referred to. I think that it's important that we deal with this one now. In the event that you give Standing Order 40 application approval, then we would not have a chance to deal with it. So I'll wait a second here to make sure that everybody has this.

Opposition House Leader, do your members have a copy of the document we're talking about? Third party?

So as I understand this – pages, just continue doing as I talk – the Government House Leader, the Official Opposition House Leader, the third party House leader have gotten together, done what they're supposed to do in trying to bridge all the gaps and deal with everything, but there's a requirement now to waive Standing Order 58(2) where it says: "The number of sitting days that the Committee of Supply is called to consider the main estimates shall equal the number of members of the Executive Council with portfolio." This particular scenario that's been agreed to by the three House leaders would have us not really needing that intent.

So the question here is: is the Assembly prepared to waive Standing Order 58(2)? Is there clear understanding? Opposition House Leader, clear understanding? Third party House leader, clear understanding? Okay. Then I'll call the question. Is the Assembly in favour of waiving Standing Order 58(2) so that we might proceed with the 2004 spring sitting of the legislative Committee of Supply calendar as tabled in the House today?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Mr. Hancock: Just on a point, Mr. Speaker. I noted that on the document that circulated, the date is March 23, and obviously it should have been March 22. I wonder if the official document could be corrected in that regard?

The Speaker: Actually, in the question that I gave, it didn't have the date of the document.

Mr. Hancock: No, no. I'm just talking about the document that was tabled.

The Speaker: Yes, I know. But I didn't say that in my motion.

Mr. Hancock: No, you didn't. Okay.

The Speaker: It should be okay. But officially this document is

March 22, not March 23, for all intents and purposes. Anybody opposed to that? Okay.

head: **Motions under Standing Order 40**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to appoint an independent, nonpartisan commission under the Public Inquiries Act which shall

- (1) inquire into the circumstances and the effect of government policies, procedures, and practices in the Calgary health region that led to incorrect dialysis solutions being given and subsequently resulting in the deaths of Kathleen Prowse and Bart Wassing,
- (2) examine any issues the commission deems necessary to ensure that health services are being appropriately managed and delivered by the Calgary health region and the government, and
- (3) make findings and recommendations to ensure the appropriate management and delivery of health services in Calgary to protect the health and safety of Calgarians.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today on a Standing Order 40 application to present a motion to the Assembly.

As you know, Standing Order 40 applications are to be made in case of urgent and pressing necessity. I can think of no matter more pressing than addressing the mismanagement of services that Albertans rely on when they are sick and in need of medical attention.

Mr. Speaker, if this sounds familiar, it's because I asked this Assembly to consider a similar motion less than two weeks ago for a public inquiry into Calgary's emergency health services. This Assembly turned that motion down. Well, here we are two weeks later, and after learning of two more needless deaths in the Calgary health region, I'm again asking this Assembly to consider a public inquiry. This time I'm asking for a public inquiry to look into the circumstances and the effect of government policies, procedures, and practices in the Calgary health region that led to the incorrect dialysis solutions being given to Kathleen Prowse and Bart Wassing.

As well, this public inquiry would examine any issues they deem necessary to ensure that health services are being appropriately managed and delivered by the Calgary health region and this government. This public inquiry is necessary, Mr. Speaker. It is necessary because only six months after the Calgary health region vowed that recommendations made by the fatality inquiry into Maren Burkhart's death would be carried out, Vince Motta died under similar circumstances.

3:00

This public inquiry is necessary because the fatality inquiry into Vince Motta's death found that the Calgary health region provided information that, quote, lent itself to confusion or was capable of misleading the inquiry, end quote. This public inquiry is necessary because the Calgary health region assured us after Vince Motta's death that they would take action to make things better in Calgary's emergency rooms, but things have only gotten worse.

This public inquiry is necessary because just one day after the Calgary health region claimed that similarly labelled chemicals were to blame for the recent medical mix-up, the company that produces the chemicals said that the labelling is actually quite different. This

public inquiry is necessary because this recent dialysis solution mix-up occurred four years after the Calgary health region assured Patricia Evans' family that steps would be taken to prevent this sort of error.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, this public inquiry is necessary because Calgarians no longer trust the Calgary health region. The Calgary health region is the largest government body in Calgary, and it is charged with managing and delivering health services. It has proven that it can no longer be trusted to do this.

It's time to end the practice of political patronage appointments in the Calgary health region. It's time to end the Calgary health region's preoccupation with saving face over saving lives. It's time to shed light on the management of the Calgary health region and the role that this government has played in allowing it to deteriorate.

For the health workers in Calgary who work valiantly to keep the system afloat and for the hundreds of thousands of Calgarians who rely on the health services that the Calgary health region provides, Mr. Speaker and all members of this Assembly, I am asking this House to vote to change things for the better.

Thank you.

[Unanimous consent denied]

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 18, it's my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 18, it is my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 100, 101, 102, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 159, 160, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, and 168.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Expenses for Minister of Energy

M3. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a breakdown of the Minister of Energy's expenses, including but not limited to airfare, food, accommodation, and conference fees, from March 1, 2001, to February 17, 2004.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think it is very, very important that we have a look at these expenses and a breakdown of the Minister of Energy's travels. They have been, to say the least, extensive. We're looking at least at 22 trips, and the

minister has certainly gone beyond Wetaskiwin. There are undisclosed locations in California; Texas with other members of Executive Council; New York City, of course; Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan; Washington, D.C.; Anchorage, Alaska; Dawson City, Yukon; Texas again, this time Dallas; Halifax, Nova Scotia; Kansas; the capital city, Ottawa; again to Washington; San Francisco, California; Portland, Oregon; back to Halifax; Rome; Tucson; back to Texas; Olympia, Washington; Portland, Oregon; Washington, D.C.; Casper, Wyoming; Chicago, Illinois; New Orleans, Louisiana. There are many different places.

Certainly, there is even a trip – and there was quite a famous speech made by the Minister of Energy – to Rio de Janeiro. I believe it was an energy conference. The text of that speech was put on the Department of Energy's website, and it was an interesting read.

So a lot of information would come from this motion for a return in light of, you know, the expenses by this government, by Executive Council. There has certainly been an increase in the level of travel. The taxpayers have every right to know the breakdown of the Minister of Energy's expenses. Certainly, the taxpayers could be of the impression that the hon. minister was travelling extensively looking for a new energy policy because the current one is not working. All these conference fees, accommodations, airfare – I think it's a good idea.

The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General stated two weeks ago in this Assembly, I believe, that he believed that the government was open and transparent and accountable. So now is this government's chance to back that up.

Thank you.

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Energy I'd like to recommend that the Assembly reject this motion since the information sought by the member is available to the general public.

Travel is part of the job of any government. Alberta is an exporting province and relies heavily on capital investment from outside the province. Ministerial missions occur in order to promote Alberta businesses, products, and services to international customers, to attract investment to the province, and they serve also to encourage new businesses to move to Alberta. So it's a given that we have to have contacts. We have to take the initiative in attracting this economic development to this province.

Mr. Speaker, ministers also participate in federal/provincial/territorial ministerial meetings with their counterparts. These meetings are valuable intergovernmental forums to advance the views and priorities of Albertans. There have also been over 130 provincial, territorial, and federal meetings over the time period that is in question. More information on those meetings is available through the Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat website at www.scics.gc.ca.

Prior to embarking on any foreign mission, ministers are required to issue a news release which includes itineraries, a list of those travelling, the estimated cost, and the reason for the trip. As well, each year the Minister of Finance tables the report of the selected payments to members and former Members of the Legislative Assembly and persons directly associated with the Members of the Legislative Assembly pursuant to section 37(4) of the Legislative Assembly Act and section 16(1) of the Conflicts of Interest Act.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, in addition to payments being required by legislation to be reported, this report includes other payments to MLAs such as remuneration, benefits and expenses, and payments to former members under the Members of the Legislative Assembly Pension Plan Act and the public service pension plan.

Mr. Speaker, energy-related missions have been very successful lately. They've led to face-to-face meetings with the vice-president of the United States to talk about how Alberta can contribute to the new U.S. energy strategy. They've also led to literally thousands of key decision-makers around the world learning a great deal about the energy sector in Alberta and investment opportunities.

Finally, because the Auditor General of Alberta annually reviews the records of government departments as part of his ongoing responsibilities, if there were any issues concerning inappropriate expenses, they would be identified by the Auditor General's review. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I would like to speak in favour of the release of this information. I was quite surprised when the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar itemized the various destinations of the Minister of Energy. That was a tremendous travelogue, I would say.

I reject the arguments put forward by the minister of intergovernmental affairs that we don't need to know this information because they were all valuable and important conferences and meetings. That's not the question. The question is not whether or not these were worth while. The question is: how much was spent in which areas on these trips? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has asked that question, and there is no good reason in my view for a lack of complete transparency on this question, and I really wonder why the minister – I've got to get his title right.

Ms Carlson: Intergovernmental . . .

Mr. MacDonald: Affairs . . .

Mr. Mason: Intergovernmental affairs. That's it?

Ms Carlson: International and intergovernmental affairs.

Mr. Mason: International and intergovernmental affairs. Thank you very much, hon. member.

The Speaker: Actually, it's International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that. [interjections] I can imagine what would happen if we had a motion for a return on that.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, you know, the fact that the Auditor General will look at it is not a good argument either because the Auditor General will have a look at it and he will just make sure that everything is in order; that is to say, that it's within the policies and so on and that all things are properly expensed.

The question is whether or not the public would approve of these expenditures. That's the question. It's a political question, not an accounting question. As a result, I would suggest that we ought to reject the hon. minister's proposal and accept this question.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make a few comments with respect to this matter. I think it's fair to say that this Assembly has a procedure with respect to accounts. The question here is with respect to expenses, and expenses are accounts. Both of

the members who have spoken from the opposite side are very familiar with these procedures, namely that we do have a legislative committee dealing with account matters. Indeed, the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is the chair of that committee, and the Member for Edmonton-Highlands, I believe, is a member of the committee, and that has been so since the last election in March of 2001.

I note that the time period for this particular motion for a return starts in March of 2001, and by my reckoning one of the years in question, the year ending March 2002, would have already been before this committee for questioning. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the procedure is that the minister appears, together with the accounts for the year in question, to answer those questions posed by the members of the committee, and the Auditor General, who has reviewed the accounts of the particular ministry, is available also to answer questions. The purpose of that particular procedure is specifically to allow members of this Assembly to inquire into matters relative to the accounts.

It seems to me that both of the hon. members opposite, perhaps in hindsight, have felt that they have not done all that they should have done in reviewing this particular minister's accounts for that year, but the fact of the matter is that that likely is not so because I know that they are both very, very diligent.

The fact is that the Auditor General has a role. The Auditor General's role is to review accounts. The Auditor General has done that. The Auditor General has commented on it, and he has indicated that there is absolutely nothing untoward.

As it relates to the information of the Minister of Energy and his travel, we have a procedure in this House relative to international travel where press releases are set out before the travel takes place indicating when the travel takes place, where the travel will go, who the minister will meet with, the expenses associated with that travel, who is travelling with the minister, and so on and so forth. There is a great deal of information that is available as you go forward from day to day, from month to month, over the years.

But the short of it, Mr. Speaker, is that in this particular case there is a process. There's an Auditor General who looks into this. This Assembly has a process to look into it. Both of these hon. members have been part of that, and the time that is available to review accounts can be used to specifically ask questions of both the minister and the Auditor General relative to these matters.

Ms Carlson: Well, Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to participate in speaking to this particular motion and to respond to the Deputy Government House Leader's participation in the royal runaround, which is what we've been getting from the government since we first started asking these questions about getting details on these particular travel expenses for the minister in question here and other ministers.

The Deputy Government House Leader talked extensively on our ability to access Public Accounts information as if at any point in my history with this Assembly that would have ever resulted in any kind of full disclosure or details. It doesn't, Mr. Speaker, as that member very well knows. Not only are details never made available on expense accounts, Public Accounts only has an hour and a half to examine all details of those particular ministries who, in fact, choose to appear before them. Never in the history that I've been here have all ministries actually made it through the Public Accounts system in any given year. So some are always not available to be scrutinized.

In the first few years that I was here, I was on that committee. We never could get that kind of detail from the ministers. The ministers always say that this is not the most appropriate place to disclose that information; send in a written question or a motion for a return.

Well, we do that, and what do we get? No information. When we ask for the information in question period, what do we get? Once again they say to go to Public Accounts or go to a written question or go to a motion for a return.

My question is: what do they have to hide? If there's nothing to hide here and they're not afraid of the public scrutiny of these expenses, which is truly a political scrutiny that needs to take place, then why don't they just disclose the information?

The Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations stated that perhaps we should be going to the report of the payments made to the members on the trips they've taken. I have before me, Mr. Speaker, the Report of Selected Payments to Members and Former Members of the Legislative Assembly and Persons Directly Associated with Members of the Legislative Assembly, year ended March 31, 2003.

When I go to this particular Minister of Energy that we're asking for the information for, what do I see? I see his remuneration for the year, and then, under the area that you would think we would be able to look and see the details of the expenses for all these conferences and trips and meetings that he went to out of the province, what do I see? I see travel expenses as a minister of the Crown. His kilometre reimbursement. That came to \$48,815. That was for government business for the stuff that he paid for. Then I see kilometre reimbursement as an MLA, \$10,207. Then I see the subsistence allowance to cover the cost of meals while maintaining a temporary residence around session, so once again not on these conference duties, \$20,020.

3:20

So the portion of this that's related to his travel as a minister only discloses that amount of money that he put on his credit card. We know full well from the information that we've gotten around these trips that a great percentage of these monies are not paid directly by the ministers themselves. They're paid by aides or other people along on the trip. So we want a full public scrutiny, a full political review, of how much these ministers are spending on these conferences and these trips.

I'm not saying that it isn't well spent in some cases, but let the people decide whether or not they think that these guys are 'snorfeeling' at the trough or whether we're getting value for money in this province. So it's worth while to ask this question, and it's politically astute for this government to provide the information, and they are once again stonewalling.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member opposite raised a number of points which I think need a response. First of all, she indicates that not all members of the Executive Council choose to go to Public Accounts. Well, my understanding is that Public Accounts summons ministers of Executive Council and summons the ones that they want to examine. Certainly, I know that I've recently had the opportunity to have been summoned and to appear before Public Accounts, and I didn't understand that I had an option. I understood that when Public Accounts asks a minister of Executive Council, you try and negotiate a day that makes sense, obviously, but if they want you to go, you go.

The other thing that I wanted to mention that wasn't mentioned by the members opposite: sometimes I think members of this House don't realize that every time a document is tabled in the House, it becomes a sessional record, and then it is stored forever as a record of the session. We've tabled documents in this House as though they're important documents – they may have some relevance and

importance to the people who have written them or have sent them in or want their viewpoint on the record – but once they're tabled, they get a sessional record number and they go into the archives and they're stored forever.

So the more things you ask for on the record and the more documents that are tabled, the larger and larger amount of sessional records in storage, and, you know, in many cases, although, as I say, they may have been important in the context in which they were written, they're not an important long-term record for the House.

Now, we have on the Order Paper today 180 motions for returns, and if all of those were answered in the positive, there would be boxes and boxes and boxes of material that will be then numbered as sessional records and stored forever as sessional records of the House. That is not the most appropriate place for those records, Mr. Speaker.

In fact, those records are in the appropriate place for them, and that is in the hands of the financial people. They have been reviewed and can be reviewed by the Auditor General on behalf of the public to make sure that policies have been followed and monies have been expended appropriately. But to bring in a hundred and whatever it was number of questions asking for all the financial records of government to be brought in and marked as sessional papers and then stored forever in the archives of the Legislature is just nonsensical.

The hon. member opposite talked about the filing that was filed to date for the year ended March 31, 2003, and indicated that the minister in question in this particular motion for a return had \$48,800 worth of expenses as a minister of the Crown: kilometre reimbursements for use of personal vehicle for government business, vehicle rentals, airfare, accommodation, meals, taxis, parking, et cetera. So \$48,800, Mr. Speaker.

I don't have the exact number at hand, but I think the revenue from oil and gas, which comes as a result of that particular minister's department and the policies that that particular minister has to take responsibility for and the networking with respect to energy councils and other energy producing states around the world and all of those issues, is close to \$8 billion in the last year, if I recall correctly, and I stand to be corrected whether it was 7 and a half billion dollars, but in order of magnitude a phenomenal amount of revenue.

To suggest that a minister of the Crown ought not be able to spend \$50,000 in travelling, or even more if there's some that hasn't been appropriately accounted for here because somebody else paid for it, although in my experience that's attributed to the member . . . That's a rather modest amount of money for the responsibility and the income that comes to this province from oil and gas revenues.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the question is really one of accountability. The hon. members opposite are suggesting that members of Executive Council ought to be held accountable, and that's absolutely true. The public is entitled to have accountability; they're entitled to know that their money is being spent appropriately. We have policies in place to ensure that that happens, and we have auditors in place to ensure that that happens.

Now, members opposite, I think – and I don't want to attribute motives – the vast majority of these questions seem to have come onto the Order Paper after the federal Auditor General discovered that a senior civil servant was spending money inappropriately. The Auditor General, doing her job, found that there were some places where the policies were not being appropriately followed or where there were inappropriate payments and brought that to light. Mr. Speaker, that's precisely the way the system ought to work.

How it cannot work is for individuals to be held accountable for minute or relatively small expenditures on a case-by-case basis because the first thing that happens when you table these expenses

is that somebody is going to, as we've seen in this House, come back and say: on October 3 you spent \$300 on a dinner; can you tell us who was with you and what you were talking about? Well, Mr. Speaker, that's an inappropriate way to have accountability because what you're doing is suggesting that there's a finite result from every meeting. What you're doing is suggesting that there ought to be absolute disclosure of every single person that's met with and every single topic that's on the table. That can't happen. That would restrict the operation of government in such a manner that you would not be able to actually make good policy.

Ministers of Executive Council and other members of government meet all the time with individuals. They meet within the province; they meet without the province; they go to appropriate conferences. Sometimes you can tell in advance what results you're going to be able to get; sometimes you go in the hopes of getting a result. But you cannot judge appropriate accountability by coming back three years later and saying: you spent \$500 on a conference fee; was that an appropriate expenditure?

Those are judgments that are made in the course of doing business. Whether you are in the private sector or whether you are in government, you have to be in a position to make those judgment calls on a day-to-day basis as you're doing your business and you have to be held accountable to the appropriate policy structure that's in place and you have to be held accountable by an Auditor General reviewing the statements and saying: have you operated within the confines of policy and within the monies that have been voted to you by the Legislature to do your job?

So asking for accountability of the specifics of this nature, asking for records of food and accommodation and airfare to go on the records of the House for time immemorial is an inappropriate way to ask for accountability. There are, as the Member for Calgary-Glenmore pointed out earlier, appropriate ways to do it. The hon. members opposite just haven't found those yet.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to make a few comments in regard to the motion for a return as brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. Certainly, one of the tasks as opposition is accountability. It is a major task of opposition, and it is one of the things that makes democracy work.

Now, we've heard the hon. member across the way say that we shouldn't have to have a breakdown on \$48,000 for kilometre reimbursement for use of a personal vehicle for government business, vehicle rentals, airfare, accommodation, meals, taxi, and parking, et cetera while travelling on government business, that there are people that do this for us.

Certainly, the Department of Energy is responsible for billions of dollars of revenue for Albertans. But at the same time if we were to ask seniors in this province who are on fixed incomes what they could do with \$48,000, they would have to give you a very detailed account of all their expenditures. This is quite a bit. [interjection] That's exactly right. Another example was the forensic audit we had on the Edmonton public school board that was ordered by the minister.

3:30

If we have seniors who wish to apply for the Alberta seniors' benefits, then certainly their expenditures are put forward. They are very detailed, and they are scrutinized to make certain that they qualify. So are we doing anything out of the ordinary; for example, the audit that took place on the Edmonton public school board? No. We also have, Mr. Speaker, the audit that's done on our seniors

when they apply for the Alberta seniors' benefits, and that certainly isn't anywhere in the neighbourhood of \$48,000.

So I think that Albertans not only want to see the breakdown of these expenses; they're entitled to it. As we go through the process in this House and as we continue, whether it be in question period or whether it be in written questions or whether it be in motions for returns, as we follow through this process, every time the question is asked, we get directed to another process as to how we can find answers to these questions. So, yes, this is definitely a case of accountability here, and it is just another dodge by this government to not allow Albertans to see the breakdown of these expenses.

So with those comments, I will take my seat, and I will certainly listen to the comments from other members. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I listened to all the speakers with a great deal of interest, and certainly I must say that I'm disappointed that Motion for a Return 3 is to be rejected.

I listened, first, with a great deal of interest, as a matter of fact, to the hon. Minister of Justice. The minister stated that it's just not possible to look at the Order Paper, to look at the motions for returns and the written questions that are on here, that we can't possibly respond to all these questions, these motions because the legislative process would be overloaded with filing, that we would have official responses on each one of these requests, and that somehow there's something detrimental if these responses were to become part of the permanent record of this Assembly.

Well, it's only in the last month, if one were to take a quick review of *Hansard*, that the Minister of Finance said in response to a question from this hon. member: well, put it on the Order Paper; have a written question. The same day during the same question period, on February 24, 2004, the Minister of Government Services also told this member to put it on the Order Paper in the form of a written question. There was no concern about the records of the Assembly being overloaded on that day. On March 4 the Premier, in response to a question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, said: it's a written question. There was no concern about overloading the records of this Assembly.

On March 16 the hon. minister of health made a similar statement in response to a question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview, and just last week, on March 17, the same minister of health made the same request to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview. So to make the argument a week later that it's going to clog up the records system of the Assembly is, to say the least, lame and does not have any merit.

Now, certainly no one on this side of the House is arguing that all government travel is bad or wrong. I would agree with the hon. minister of intergovernmental relations, his department, that certainly travel is important and necessary not only at the national level but at the international level, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Mason: Moose Jaw?

Mr. MacDonald: No. Moose Jaw was a trip that the Minister of Energy took.

We're not saying that all travel is bad. We want a process that is open and accountable for the expenses and what goes on on these trips and who goes. If there is nothing untoward, as an hon. member across the way said, well, why not release all the documents? We need to know.

Now, if this information is publicly available, as the hon. minister

stated, where is this information? Where is it publicly available? I had a FOIP request on some other trips because not all trips are on the itinerary. Not all trips are listed there. I had a FOIP request on three trips, and I received back a request that was in the hundreds of dollars: come up with the cash; we might give you the information. That is against the spirit and the intent of the FOIP Act.

Mr. Speaker, this particular minister likes to travel more than the others, and these are trips that we know about. Certainly, the hon. Minister of Justice always seems to be at home doing his homework. Two trips are listed here. As I said earlier, I don't know whether the hon. minister is in search of an electricity policy or what the quest is, this Holy Grail – for a good alternative to electricity deregulation he only has to go to www.liberalopposition.com to see what a real electricity policy looks like. He wouldn't have to travel to all these foreign, exotic destinations to find it. He can just click on the Internet, and there it is.

Mr. Hancock: At www.opposition.com.

Mr. MacDonald: No, you're missing it. It's www.liberalopposition.com. You have the habit of missing that "opposition." [interjection] No. This is a travel log. It's not a fairy tale. Twenty-two trips is certainly not a fairy tale, to the Minister of Infrastructure.

Many of these trips are over budget, and if we're to determine how many of them are over budget, we need to have the information that is outlined in Motion for a Return 3. This is only part of the process.

You know, departmental policy seems to be to rack up air miles. The total reported cost of all of the trips that we are aware of was supposedly \$1.1 million, but the government did not publicly provide costs for 26 of the trips, so the actual total may be much higher than that. Whenever these itineraries are made and these press releases are put out on the destination, the cost, and who is going, maybe there are trips that are not officially discussed.

Ms Evans: Not likely.

Mr. MacDonald: Now, the hon. Minister of Children's Services said, "Not likely." Well, the government, our research indicates, failed to provide itineraries for 79 trips. Taxpayers have the right to know who went on those trips and how much money was spent.

I'm sorry. This is incomplete. By responding to this Motion for a Return 3 the government could really be open, really be transparent, and could really be accountable to the citizens, Mr. Speaker.

3:40

That pretty well concludes my statements in regard to Motion for a Return 3, but I would have to say that I'm disappointed. There is a joke making the rounds in the coffee shop at Capilano Mall, and it goes something like this. How do you get eight Tory cabinet ministers into a four-seater Cessna? The reply is: tell them that you're going to open a trade mission in Mexico. That's the public's perception. You can correct that perception by agreeing to this Motion for a Return 3.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion for a Return 3 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 3:41 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Bonner
Carlson

MacDonald

Mason

Against the motion:

Abbott	Haley	Norris
Ady	Hancock	Ouellette
Amery	Herard	Renner
Broda	Horner	Snelgrove
Cenaiko	Jablonski	Stelmach
Coutts	Kryczka	Stevens
Danyluk	Lord	Strang
DeLong	Lougheed	Tannas
Doerksen	Lukaszuk	Tarchuk
Dunford	Lund	Taylor
Evans	Maskell	VanderBurg
Forsyth	McClelland	Vandermeer
Friedel	Melchin	Woloshyn
Gordon		

Totals: For – 4 Against – 40

[Motion for a Return 3 lost]

Department of Health and Wellness IT Costs

M10. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Health and Wellness on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Mr. Bonner: Once again, Mr. Speaker, we are requesting information that deals strictly with the Ministry of Health and Wellness, and again it's an opportunity for Albertans to get a detailed look at information regarding technological services. We are quite concerned as an opposition with exactly how many dollars are being spent in this particular area and not only how those dollars are being spent. We also are looking forward to some answers as to which companies were used and how many dollars were used for each.

Like so many other things in today's world where we start dealing with technology, it can become a black hole. There's no doubt that in order to first of all introduce systems, to get them up and running, to iron out the bugs, to constantly keep updating your equipment so that you can stay abreast of the latest technology, these are extremely expensive propositions. Certainly, we have to have this information in order to compare whether or not Albertans are getting full value for the dollars being spent. We have debated in this House on numerous occasions different bills regarding health information, the collection of health information, how it is used, who it's shared with, who it can be shared with, and certainly with Motion for a Return 10, by allowing us this information, we will have the opportunity to do that type of analysis.

So with those comments, I look forward to hearing debate on both sides regarding Motion for a Return 10. Thank you.

The Speaker: Before I recognize the hon. Minister of Innovation and Science, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly two gentlemen that I had the privilege of meeting with. The first one is Norm

Castiglione, who is the chair of the Wood Buffalo housing corporation. He is accompanied by Tim Walsh, a businessman and developer from Fort McMurray. I'd ask the House to give them the usual welcome.

head: **Motions for Returns**

Department of Health and Wellness IT Costs (continued)

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise on behalf of my colleague the Minister of Health and Wellness to address Motion for a Return 10. This government is open to providing information on information technology services. In fact, the type of information sought in this motion for a return and in a number of other motions before the Assembly is made available annually through a document released by Alberta Finance entitled General Revenue Fund: Details of Grants, Supplies and Services, Capital Assets and Other, by Payee.

Mr. Speaker, given the number of additional motions for returns requesting similar information from all other government departments, I move that Motion for a Return 10 be amended as follows and would read that

an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the government of Alberta on contracts for information technology services and a listing of vendors providing these services for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The amended motion will provide the Assembly with the total amount spent by all government departments on information technology services and a list of vendors utilized to provide these services.

This amendment and its notification have been provided to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview prior to 11 this morning as per procedures, and the amendment has been circulated already to the members of this Assembly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on the amendment.

Ms Carlson: Yes, on the amendment. Mr. Speaker, this is an unacceptable amendment, completely unacceptable. We do not want the government to provide the information on all departments lumped together. We want to be able to examine department by department the questions that are coming before the Assembly this afternoon as motions for returns.

So for them to strike out "the Ministry of Health and Wellness" and substitute "government of Alberta," first of all I thought it was a sneaky way to get around taking a look at each of the departments, but really it's just blatant that they refuse to provide the information. So I don't agree with that first part, part (a). And part (b), striking out "broken down by company and total dollar amount for each" and substituting "and a listing of vendors providing these services" – well, the minister who just explained the amendment clearly told us that the listing of vendors is available in another document, so they're duplicating their own services here, which is what we hear repeatedly from this government that they don't want to do. It doesn't help Albertans to scrutinize the government activities if they don't see a dollar amount of those monies paid out to vendors.

This government continually, on a day-to-day basis, talks about the rising costs of health care, but we have little way to determine which parts of those costs are attributed to administration and which parts of those are attributed to direct delivery of services. Now, anyone who has watched the American system over the past decade knows that the greatest rise in cost for them and the greatest reason

why their costs are higher than our costs is administration. That is exactly where vendors providing services come into it.

So we need to start to get to the root of the issue about why health care costs are increasing. This is one piece of that puzzle to start to give us those answers. This government should be accountable and should be quite prepared to tell us who's getting the money and how much they're getting.

4:00

As my colleague from Edmonton-Glengarry stated, we all know that technology services really can be a black hole. We've seen that with other discussions we've had in this Assembly. We need to know that we're getting value for money. The only way we get to see that is by seeing how much money they're actually spending.

So I urge this government to defeat this amendment and to stop ducking the issue and just put their cards on the table and let people see what they're spending.

The Speaker: On the amendment.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Point of Order

Admissibility of Amendment

Mr. Mason: Point of order, Mr. Speaker, if I may. I'm looking at *Beauchesne's* on page 176, and it's section 579, which states that "an amendment setting forth a proposition dealing with a matter which is foreign to the proposition involved in the main motion is not relevant and cannot be moved."

It would be my submission that by lumping all government departments under this motion by way of this amendment, the government is attempting to introduce other matters which are not directly the subject of the motion which has been moved. Each department may in fact be treated differently by individual motions, and to try to lump them all together is simply an attempt to introduce matters that were completely outside the purview of the original motion which has been moved.

Therefore, I believe that it should be in fact out of order to introduce such an amendment since it is introducing matters that were not considered in the original motion.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on the point of order.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, the proposed amendment is in order. It doesn't go outside of the purview of the motion at all. The purview of the motion is that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview has requested a motion for a return from this House returning to this House information with respect to technology services broken down by company, et cetera. The amendment essentially recognizes that at least some members of the House would like the same information on other government departments.

In fact, there are 15 government departments for which the identical information is requested. Those departments are reflected in motions for returns 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 61, 62, 70, 71, 72, 73, 103, 122, 123, and 146. If we wait a few more days, I assume the other departments of government for which the information hasn't been requested will be on the Order Paper.

Mr. Speaker, the purpose of amending the question is so that all the information which is being requested of the House through a motion for a return can be dealt with. It's the same information with respect to each of those individual departments, and the purport of the amendment is to say that that information for all of government

should be provided. That way we don't deal with 15 different questions on exactly the same topic differentiated only by department but we deal with the one question.

If the members opposite want the information provided in a certain way so that they can differentiate between departments with respect to how much is being spent in each department, I'm sure that that won't be too difficult to discern. I can't speak for the hon. member, but I think that type of information would be readily ascertainable when they get the information.

Mr. Speaker, it doesn't make sense to have the House deal with 15 different motions on the same topic separated only by different departments in each case when the amendment would provide quite consistently with the import of the motion in terms of getting information on information technology services by just saying: provide it for all of them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on the point of order raised by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Ms Carlson: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I certainly agree with the point of order raised by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. As he pointed out and as the Government House Leader just confirmed, we did not ask for information on every department of government. In fact, barely more than half of them were requested.

It is impossible for us to do the analysis which we are asking for, which is to compare the administrative costs within a particular department with regard to technology as compared to other operating expenses, if we get all of that information lumped into one. According to this government's amendment we will never get that dollar value, so we would concur that it defeats the original intention of the motion.

The Speaker: Others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry on this point of order.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would have to concur with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, who just raised that point. When I look at the point of order and we look at amendment (b), what they wish to insert here is: "a listing of vendors providing these services." There's absolutely no dollar amount indicated in this particular amendment. Therefore, we would not be receiving the information that we have requested, so I do support the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on this particular point of order.

The Speaker: Okay, hon. members. I want us to be very, very clear on this. There's a point of order raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, which I am going to rule against. As far as I can see in terms of looking at this and following the process and our Standing Orders, we basically have an amendment brought forward to be reviewed by Parliamentary Counsel and then to be sent to other members prior to 11 o'clock this morning.

So I'm ruling the point of order out, but I want everybody to strike from their ears everything else that was added to this debate which has nothing to it. I have no idea of what intent is or anything else. I'm simply looking at a document that has words on it but nothing else.

All we're talking about now is the amendment. Further participation on the amendment? Proceed on the amendment.

Debate Continued

Mr. Bonner: Thank you. On the amendment, Mr. Speaker, striking out "Ministry of Health and Wellness" and substituting "government of Alberta." Again, we have a situation here where the information that we would receive would not be open and transparent. It would

not be in the detail that we would wish where accountability in the ministry of health could be determined. Certainly there's broad overview for the government of Alberta. It's not the specific information that was requested in the original Motion for a Return 10.

As well, section (b), striking out "broken out by company and total dollar amount for each" and substituting "a listing of vendors providing these services": we are not as interested in the vendors providing these services as we are with the dollars that are being spent and how they are being distributed. So I certainly cannot support this amendment to Motion for a Return 10, and I urge my fellow members to vote against this amendment.

Thank you.

The Speaker: On the amendment.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes. Cognizant of your comments relative to the discussion on the point of order I feel it necessary to reiterate, then, on the debate itself that, first of all, the amendment proposes a listing of vendors providing these services. The hon. member in moving that indicated that how much is paid to each individual vendor is a question that is an amount that's published every year by Alberta Finance in general revenue fund details of grants, supplies, and services. It's not that difficult if you know who the vendor is to find out how much a vendor was paid in a given year. So that information is available. This amendment doesn't take away from the opposition or anyone else the ability to find out how much any particular vendor receives in any given year.

By doing this amendment in this fashion, the first and most important part is that there are, as I mentioned earlier, some 180 motions for a return. Mr. Speaker, under any analysis of that we won't deal with all of those motions for returns in this session.

4:10

If the hon. members really want the information that they are requesting, they ought to support this amendment because by supporting this amendment, the motion would then provide for the information to be provided with respect to all government departments, and that would delete the need to deal with motions for returns 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 61, 62, 70, 71, 72, 73, 103, 122, 123, and 146, which are identical motions but with respect to different departments. So by supporting this amendment, we encompass all government departments; the information is there with respect to all government departments.

I would urge people to support the amendment.

The Speaker: The amendment in front of me is the document that I have, and it's very clear that there are no numbers in it. There's a vote on an amendment.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: Now we go back to finish the debate on the motion as amended. The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness I recommend that we accept the motion as amended.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's still very unfortunate that we cannot support the amended Motion for a Return

10. This amendment certainly takes the heart out of the motion. It takes out the specificity of dealing with one department only, and as well it doesn't allow us to have a detailed look at the numbers that we have requested in the original motion for a return.

As well, we are informed day in and day out in this House during question period when we ask questions to try and get specific information that they would be better handled under Written Questions or Motions for Returns. To amend Motion for a Return 10 in this fashion certainly takes the thrust out of the question and the importance of informing all members of the House as to where the dollars are going in the most expensive department that we deal with in this government.

This amended motion certainly is a travesty when it comes to looking at openness and accountability. It seems that we have a double standard here, Mr. Speaker, that on one point we have minister after minister getting up in this House and saying that we have an open and transparent and accountable government, yet when we do put forward motions for returns in this particular fashion, then we have amendments which cloud the accounting.

Motion for a Return 10 in its original state was a very legitimate request. It was one that all Albertans would have been happy to see unless, of course, they were on the other side of the House. It certainly would have given them an opportunity to see where these very valuable tax dollars are going, and it also would give them an opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to analyze comments and statements that are being made by the minister of health, by the Premier that costs for health care continue to escalate.

This original motion for a return would certainly have given Albertans the opportunity to look for themselves to determine if these costs are out of line or whether they're not out of line. It would also give them the information they require to support or not support the Premier's notion that we are pulling ourselves out of the Canada Health Act and going to go it on our own and say goodbye to the over a billion dollars, from my understanding, that the federal government provides towards our health care system here in Alberta.

So this definitely is an amended motion that I can't support. I would hope that all members of this House would reconsider what this amended motion is really doing; that is, not allowing Albertans to see the specific breakdown of where dollars in the largest department in this government are being spent.

Thank you.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion for a Return 10 as amended carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:17 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Abbott	Haley	Melchin
Ady	Hancock	Norris
Amery	Herard	Ouellette
Broda	Horner	Renner
Cenaiko	Jablonski	Snelgrove
Coutts	Jonson	Stelmach
Danyluk	Kryczka	Stevens
DeLong	Lord	Strang
Doerksen	Lougheed	Tannas
Dunford	Lukaszuk	Tarchuk
Evans	Lund	Taylor

Forsyth	Maskell	VanderBurg
Friedel	McClelland	Vandermeer
Gordon		

Against the motion:

Bonner	MacDonald	Mason
Carlson		

Totals:	For – 40	Against – 4
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[Motion for a Return 10 as amended carried]

Speaker's Ruling

Amendment to Motion for a Return 10

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we call the next question, I have to make a comment here. We need some clarification with respect to what happened.

We have under Standing Orders our own process for written questions and motions for returns. Standing Order 34 is very, very clear on the process and the manner in which we deal with this. On the Wednesday or Thursday of each week there's an opportunity for one of the government House leaders to point out and make comments with respect to motions for returns and written questions and which will be dealt with the following Monday. In our Routine we have time set aside on Monday – it's also the same afternoon that's set aside as private members' day – to deal with these particular matters.

Now, openness and transparency is something that this Assembly by way of the very Standing Orders basically said that it would deal with in this kind of a situation. So we had an amendment that was suggested last Thursday. The amendment was reviewed by Parliamentary Counsel, who basically initialled it, and there was advice provided to, I think, the drafter of the original question by 11 o'clock this morning, so that process was met. Then we had a point of order this afternoon.

4:30

During the debate something else was added to this discussion, and it had to do with the number of other written questions or motions for returns that this was to apply to. That's not part of the motion. It's not part of the amendment. I have no idea how the chair is supposed to determine subjectively to which one of these other motions for returns this particular amendment is to apply. That would be a very unfair situation.

There is a process that this Assembly has written for its Standing Orders. There's a process agreed to as to what the rules would be and not to be open, clear, and transparent with respect to what the intent of the amendment would be. I have no alternative right now but to ask the Government House Leader: what is the intent of this motion as amended supposed to be? We're going to hear other comments on this as well.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that because I was about to rise on a point of order to deal with that precise question. Having dealt with a motion, whether it passed or not, which has now included that that information be provided for all government departments, it would be my submission that pursuant to rule 558, which says that

"a question being once made and carried in the affirmative or negative, cannot be questioned again but must stand as the judgment of the House." Unless such a rule were in existence, the time of the House might be used in the discussion of a motion of the same nature and contradictory decisions would be sometimes arrived at in the course of the same session.

Pursuant to *Beauchesne's* 558 and the fact that Motion for a Return 10 has now been passed as amended in a form which encompasses all government departments, motions for returns 12, 13, 14, 15, and 18, which are on the Order Paper to be dealt with today, and motions for returns 61, 62, 70, 71, 72, 73, 103, 122, 123, and 146, which are on the Order Paper but not to be dealt with today, all of which are exactly the same motion except for the description of the government department, have now been subsumed by passing Motion for a Return 10 as amended, which deals with all government departments. So it would not be in order, in my humble submission, to deal with those other questions.

We could I suppose deal with a matter of this nature by amending the motion to actually include those numbers in the amended motion, but I think you cover the same ground by saying that if private members have put on the Order Paper a motion for a return which is identical in every respect with the exception of the name of the department and you amend the motion to say that that information relative to all government departments is to be returned, then you've subsumed the other motions. So I would ask that motions 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 61, 62, 70, 71, 72, 73, 103, 122, 123, and 146 be struck from the Order Paper as having already been determined by the vote on Motion for a Return 10.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would submit that that's an unreasonable request. He should have named those particular motions and the numbers of those motions in the amendment if that was what his intent was. As it stands, I think that Standing Order 34 takes precedence over what he has just stated and that when we get to those motions – motions for returns 12, 13, 14, 15, and so on as he listed – he has to stand up and say that they're going to reject them on the basis of this amendment that was just passed.

It is not possible that he could reasonably after the amendment has passed then declare which motions for returns are now going to be subject to that particular rule. Under our orders they are to be accepted or rejected, and I believe that means on an individual basis, and I would expect us to deal with them accordingly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I certainly can understand the dilemma of the chair in respect to this since we've now passed a motion which relates to all government departments, but it also limited the scope of the original motion. So I think it's not possible to argue that it necessarily applies to every other similar motion because this motion that was passed does not include those things asked in the motions for other departments that were excluded by this motion.

So I would submit that when each of these motions is put, it must be incumbent on some member of the Assembly, be it the Government House Leader or someone else, to stand up on a point of order and to argue that that particular motion has been rendered out of order by the passage of the motion that we just dealt with. Then the chair would have to rule on each case as we proceed.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, there are two things here that bother me. In this Assembly each week as is per the custom and the tradition of this Assembly the Government House Leader or a Deputy Government House Leader advises the House which written questions will be dealt with in the subsequent week. Last week motions for returns 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and then beyond – there's no 61

or something else. Other numbers were going so quickly that they went way beyond the chair's ability to write these down. They're not identified as coming up today, and that's a disconcerting thing.

The second thing. There is clearly a definition difference in terms of what the intent of these motions is. I'm going to reserve judgment on this because as far as I understand, the next motion for a return to come up is Motion for a Return 11, and that would be the one that would be called, and it would not fall under the purview of what at least the Government House Leader suggested it should fall under in terms of Motion for a Return 10.

This is unprecedented in our Assembly to my knowledge, and it has some other deviations that I'm not sure all the members really would want to see happen without further contemplation of this. Now, one thing that's becoming very, very clear to the chair – for all intents and purposes one of the most important parts of the Routine was time provided for private members' business in a session, and with an Order Paper as thick as this, it becomes highly unlikely that any private members' business will be dealt with during the duration of this session.

So, Clerk, call the next motion for a return.

Chinook Regional Health Authority IT Costs

M11. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Chinook regional health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again the purpose of this motion for a return certainly is to provide a number of different avenues of detailed information on technological services. It also, if passed, would allow Albertans to see the companies with which these contracts are signed and the total dollar amount that goes to each company.

So I would urge all members to support Motion for a Return 11. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm speaking on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness, and he is forced to reject Motion for a Return 11 for the following reasons. In 2002-2003 we had 17 health regions, not 9. Therefore, he cannot provide the requested information for the restructured Chinook regional health authority for the 2002-2003 fiscal year, nor can he provide information by contractor.

His ministry does not require information to be reported by contractor, so these data are not included in the financial statements. However, Mr. Speaker, this fall, after the financial statements for the nine regions are audited, he can provide total dollars spent on information technology services by each of these regions.

Thank you.

4:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, in regard to Motion for a Return 11 I can't understand why the total dollar amount spent by the Chinook regional health

authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amounts for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year couldn't be determined and put before the Assembly. When we look at the next year, 2003-04, there are estimates for the nine different regional health authorities for diagnostic and medical equipment funding, so surely somewhere in the previous fiscal year there would be a breakdown of the information in regard to the provision of information technology services.

As this government expresses more and more of an interest in contracting out and privatizing health care delivery in this province, this Motion for a Return 11 is certainly appropriate. When we look at the detail that is provided not only in the respective budget year but in the respective annual reports that are filed by the regional health authorities, I fail to understand why this information cannot be provided.

Certainly, we're back in the year 2002-2003. There have been a lot of questions asked about how the budgets are finalized for the regional health authorities. Sometimes it's months after the budget is tabled here. But we're going back almost two complete years now, so surely this information can be provided in regard to information technology services.

In other departments there is an increase in the number of service contracts. Certainly, in Government Services for information technology every year there seems to be a step up, so one is only to assume that the same will also apply to not only the department of health but the Chinook regional health authority. I can't believe that we as members of the opposition and taxpayers would be not given that information, and I am disappointed.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I certainly am disappointed, as well, that this would not be agreed to by the government. This is important information that we all should have and the public should have.

I just want to be placed on record as saying that the government doesn't have good reason to deny this request, and I think that the public should, taking a look at this action of the government, raise questions with members of the government and the government caucus as to why this seems to be an ongoing practice of this government.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. members for Edmonton-Gold Bar and Edmonton-Highlands for their input on this very important question. Once again, in order to analyze information, it has to be provided, and by not being given that information, we certainly don't have the accountability that's required on these huge amounts of dollars, so I would urge all members to support Motion for a Return 11.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 11 lost]

The Clerk: Motion for a Return 12, Ms Carlson.

The Speaker: Now. Okay, hon. Government House Leader. A point of order, I presume?

Point of Order**Amendment to Motion for a Return 10**

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker. You indicated earlier that you were going to reserve decision with respect to the questions that I had pointed out were redundant due to the passage of Motion for a Return 10, so I would ask for your advice and direction. I'm prepared to suggest that the House deal with this motion on a without prejudice basis so that you can continue to reserve or look for your alternate method of handling this particular issue, because this is the first question that comes up.

This question relates to: "do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Economic Development." Motion 10 was: "do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Health and Wellness." By amending Motion 10 to include all government departments, it clearly includes the Department of Economic Development, and therefore it is our view that this motion is redundant.

I appreciate the fact that you would like to look at this. I'm prepared to suggest that the House, if it's appropriate, can deal with this motion on a without prejudice basis, come back to and deal with the remainder that we haven't dealt with under your decision, your determination to reserve judgment.

The Speaker: Quite frankly, I think that's the proper approach for the House to deal with this matter.

So the question is there for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to move.

Department of Economic Development IT Costs

M12. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Economic Development on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Ms Carlson: We don't get enough breakdown of how the dollars are spent in budgets. We certainly don't get enough information on the breakdown of dollars requested in appropriations. We don't get enough information coming forward in the business plans. We can't get the minister to answer the questions in Public Accounts. We can't get the minister to answer the questions in question period, so we are doing what has been in fact recommended to us by many of the ministers and the Premier, particularly in this session; that is, to put it in writing, put it on the Order Paper as a written question.

Given that we have followed their advice on this and followed all other possible alternatives to get in touch with this information, Mr. Speaker, I respectfully request that the government provide this information.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the government and cognizant of the remarks you made earlier about without prejudice to any ruling you might make with respect to the appropriateness of Motion for a Return 12, given the passage of Motion for a Return 10, I would indicate that we would have to reject the motion.

The information that's being asked for will be provided by the Minister of Innovation and Science pursuant to Motion for a Return 10. Members opposite voted against Motion for a Return 10 asking for a complete return from all government departments with respect to contracts for information technology services, but the Minister of

Innovation and Science, who is in fact responsible for technology services for the government, has been I think generous in suggesting that, rather than dealing with each of these motions on a motion-by-motion basis, on a department-by-department basis. Given the need for this House to deal with some 79 written questions and 180 motions for returns that are currently on the Order Paper, it doesn't make sense to deal with them on an individual, motion-by-motion basis.

In this case the Minister of Innovation and Science has said that he'll provide the technology contract services pursuant to Motion for a Return 10. That covers what's being asked for in Motion for a Return 12. I'd ask the House to reject Motion for a Return 12.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly in regard to Motion for a Return 12 I listened with interest, and I would remind all hon. members of this Assembly just why this information is necessary and why it should be provided. I would remind the hon. minister of how many times in the last month we on this side of the Assembly have been reminded to ask for this information. To now hear that we may be denied is disappointing.

You go through the budget and look at the fiscal year 2002-03 for the Ministry of Economic Development, and there's just one line, one element, 2.3.1: information management and dissemination, \$2.6 million. That is not good enough, and I'm disappointed at this time that we cannot be provided with that information in the interests of being open and accountable and transparent.

Thank you.

4:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to conclude the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I would challenge one of the statements made by the Government House Leader, and that is when he states that the amended Motion for a Return 10 covers Motion for a Return 12. It does not, particularly with regard to the way it was amended in the (b) section.

This Motion for a Return 12 asks for "contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year." Motion for a Return 10 was amended by striking out "broken down by company and total dollar amount for each," and substituting only "a listing of vendors providing these services." So it can't be taken as a precedent for this particular argument at this particular time because it is a different motion.

I would urge all members to please support Motion for a Return 12 as it stands on the Order Paper at this time.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion for a Return 12 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:52 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Bonner
Carlson

MacDonald

Mason

Against the motion:

Abbott
Ady
Amery

Haley
Hancock
Horner

Norris
Ouellette
Rathgeber

Broda	Jablonski	Renner
Cenaiko	Jonson	Snelgrove
Coutts	Kryczka	Stelmach
DeLong	Lord	Stevens
Dunford	Lougheed	Strang
Evans	Lukaszuk	Tannas
Forsyth	Lund	Tarchuk
Friedel	Maskell	Taylor
Gordon	McClelland	VanderBurg
Graham	Melchin	Vandermeer
Totals:	For – 4	Against – 39

[Motion for a Return 12 lost]

The Speaker: The motion disappears from the Order Paper, never to return.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Department of Environment IT Costs

M13. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Environment on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, this is information that we need to assess how much money is being spent in the department on administrative-type expenses and whether they're getting good value for money and whether or not they're shortchanging the operations of the department.

When we take a look at the amount of budget cutting that's been done in this particular department over the past 10 years, it's significant. When I hear from people who work within the department, I hear repeatedly that operations on the ground are being cut back, and they're not sure where the money is going. So this is one more way for us to ascertain whether or not this government is getting good value for its money. It is certainly information that should be available for the scrutiny of the Official Opposition and opposition members and, for that matter, all members of the public in Alberta so that they also can ascertain whether or not we're getting good value for the dollars that are spent in Alberta.

Further, we should have asked for even more information on this motion for a return. We should have asked for the kinds of competitive bids and the bidding process that we see in this area because, as we all know, information technology is a very competitive environment at this particular time, and that would be one more piece for us to be able to use to ascertain whether or not we're getting good value for money. We didn't go to that amount of detail, so we respectfully submit that this is a very modest request to be made in order to see whether or not we're getting good value.

Once again, we have asked for this information in a number of other venues: question period, Public Accounts, general debate during the Assembly. None of those questions have been answered, all of us at all times being referred to using other methods for discerning this information. One of those listed by the government themselves is to use motions for returns or written questions. Well, we have availed ourselves of that process and now expect the government to live up to their word and actually provide the information.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First, I would renew my objection to this question under rule 558 and, of course, indicate that I understand that you wish to reserve decision with respect to the point of order that was raised earlier. Therefore, it's appropriate to proceed on a without prejudice basis in dealing with this particular question notwithstanding that the ruling may in fact rule it out of order if that's the determination you make.

So in proceeding, then, I would indicate that it would be appropriate for the Legislature to reject this question because the stuff and substance of the question has been dealt with in Motion for a Return 10, and the House has already agreed to a motion for a return requiring the return of the information as was approved in that amended Motion for a Return 10.

Just out of interest's sake, the hon. member, in promoting this motion, indicated that this information has been asked for. I'm going to make a point of going back and reviewing *Hansard* because, while I know that there have been questions asked for and responses made with respect to expenses, I don't recall that similar questions have been asked with respect to information on technology services. So I'm not sure that members of Executive Council have been asked in question period to respond, and even if they were, it would be appropriate to say that there are other ways of dealing with this information.

However, Motion for a Return 10 has been passed. The Minister of Innovation and Science has indicated that he's prepared to provide to the House as a result of that motion all of the information technology services contract information as provided for in that Motion for a Return 10 for all government departments, so this motion is redundant.

There's one last thing that I would like to point out. This afternoon, since Orders of the Day have been called, we have dealt with Motion for a Return 3, Motion for a Return 10, Motion for a Return 11, and Motion for a Return 12, and we're now on Motion for a Return 13. There are 50 motions for returns that are due today. There are another 48 motions for returns which will be due next Monday. We will never get back to discussing private members' business in this House in this session if we deal with each of these questions on an individual basis. So I can only assume that the members opposite, by demanding that we deal with it on a department-by-department basis, are really trying to do away with private members' business instead of getting any information that they want.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I would like to make two points. The first is that it's inappropriate for the Government House Leader to refer to Motion for a Return 10 as being the basis for why this particular motion for a return should be rejected. For one thing, a judgment has been reserved on that, and for another thing, if this motion is defeated, then it disappears from the Order Paper forever, never to reappear. So it's an inappropriate basis of argument for him to use.

5:10

Secondly, I will not apologize to the Government House Leader if he's getting tetchy because democracy is slow and not to his liking. This is the process that we have in place for dealing with these particular issues. It was up to this member and his government to decide when these motions for returns would come up after their due dates, and that they all come on this particular day is not our fault. This is the process that they have been recommending to us to

find out detailed information, and, Mr. Speaker, we are taking full advantage of it and would like them to reciprocate by actually sharing the information with us.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion for a Return 13 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:11 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Bonner	MacDonald	Mason
Carlson		

Against the motion:

Abbott	Haley	Melchin
Ady	Hancock	Norris
Amery	Herard	Ouellette
Broda	Horner	Rathgeber
Cardinal	Hutton	Renner
Cenaiko	Jablonski	Snelgrove
Coutts	Jonson	Stelmach
DeLong	Kryczka	Stevens
Dunford	Lord	Strang
Evans	Lougheed	Tannas
Forsyth	Lukaszuk	Tarchuk
Friedel	Lund	Taylor
Gordon	Maskell	VanderBurg
Graham	McClelland	Vandermeer

Totals:	For – 4	Against – 42
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[Motion for a Return 13 lost]

Speaker's Ruling

Private Members' Business

The Speaker: Okay. This has been an interesting afternoon to watch and to think and to say, so I'm going to make some comments. Monday afternoon in our Routine is private members' business, very, very important in terms of the history of this Assembly and everything else that we deal with. Now, among the private members' business is the right for written questions and motions for returns. That is just as important as private members' bills. The problem is time. It's finite. It must end by 5:30 in the afternoon.

Now, there's a whole series of different things that can happen in a parliament. Of course, skilled parliamentarians are supposed to try and figure out the rules and deal with the rules and do it in a democratic way in the sense that we all smile at one another as, you know, certain things happen. So let me just throw out some scenarios to you.

We have private members' bills. It turns out, as I look at the

Order Paper, that the first 10 all seem to belong to a private member who belongs to the government caucus.

An Hon. Member: The luck of the draw.

The Speaker: That's right. It was a draw. It was a very, very fair and transparent open draw.

So I suspect that one of the strategies that an effective opposition might do is to make sure that there's never ever any time on the agenda for those bills to come to the agenda. Not suggesting that for a moment. I might also suggest that it could also in some circumstances fall into the game plan of a Government House Leader that if a private member's bill might be of a certain nature – because these are private members' bills. So that might suggest, on the other hand, that opposition members seem to be, at least on this Order Paper that I'm looking at – they're the only authors of the written questions and motions for returns. I do not see any government private members, who have the right to do that, but they haven't. So there's a whole bundle in here.

The way it's going right now is that I sit back and I look here, and my subjective view is that the only private members' bills that will ever reach the floor this session would be government private members' bills, but with all the written questions and motions for returns, if we spend as much time as we did today on five of them, none of those will ever get to the point.

On Wednesday, March 31, 1999, the Government House Leader of the day requested and received unanimous consent of the Assembly to deal with eight motions for returns as a collective. There was also on that same day another government minister in a certain capacity who requested that six motions for returns be dealt as a collective, required unanimous consent. It wasn't granted. So you have all kinds of scenarios.

Now, motions for returns: again, private members most important. Please remember, everybody, that one of the options given to the Government House Leader is to give notice on Wednesday or Thursday of a motion to be dealt with in the Assembly the following Monday: putting all of the motions for returns and all of the written questions in one motion or two motions in this case and dealing with them in one motion, one debate, either to accept them all or to defeat them all. Those are all options.

The Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, for that wonderful advice.

The Speaker: It was no advice. It was just postulation.

Mr. Hancock: It was advice to the House. In light of that, we should probably all go home and think about it for a while, so I move that we adjourn till 8 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:27 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 22, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/22

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

504. Mr. Hutton moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to (a) continue to develop and implement strategies to reduce and ultimately eliminate alcohol consumption prior to and during pregnancy, (b) develop and implement initiatives to support Albertans affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, FASD, and (c) continue to work with all levels of government, partners and stakeholders, and members of the public to create an environment that would address the systemic problem of women consuming alcohol while pregnant.

[Debate adjourned March 15: Mrs. Ady speaking]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to resume debate on Motion 504, brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. As I was saying, prior to coming into office, I had never understood that fetal alcohol syndrome existed. It wasn't a condition that had come by me in life. I'd never really thought that I knew anybody that had the condition and wasn't particularly well educated about it. Yet surprisingly to me I did know somebody with the condition.

I had a friend who had adopted a young daughter. They hadn't been able to have children of their own and were so excited when they got this little baby girl. By about grade 1 they started to notice some major deficiencies. We weren't sure what they were. Nobody was really aware. They just worked harder. They tried to help her with her learning disabilities more, and they tried to help correct her behaviour more. It seemed like the harder they tried, the worse things seemed to go, and there was no understanding for why things weren't going well.

As this child got older and older and moved into adolescence, of course we as other parents started to notice that she had other behaviors that we weren't all that impressed with, and because things were not going well with this daughter, I know that sometimes her mother felt discouraged because she felt like she was being judged as a parent. It wasn't until she was 18 years old that she was diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome. So all those years she and her mother lived under this kind of almost cloud or criticism as they didn't understand the condition they were living with, and it was quite a long ways along in her life before they did discover what that was. It made a big difference to her mother to have an explanation and a reason for why things didn't go well.

So when I looked at the hon. member's motion, I said that this is something that I'd really like to speak to because there are some important messages in here. One, we need to prevent it. We need to find a way to help women understand that they should not drink alcohol during pregnancy. Two, we need more strategies and designs to support those that actually have the condition. And its final objective is to request that we continue to work together as governments, as partners, and as stakeholders.

At this point I would like to compliment the hon. Children's

Services minister for the work that she and her department have been doing around fetal alcohol syndrome. I know from attending a conference with her a year or so ago that Alberta is looked to as one of the leaders in this area, and a lot of that is because of the work that she's done and the awareness that she's brought around the issue.

Mr. Speaker, fetal alcohol syndrome is most commonly referred to as FASD, and it's preventable. That's the thing that we need to remember. Many of the problems that surround this disorder revolve around the misconceptions as to the medical impact of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Medical disability is specific, and it relates directly to the amount of alcohol consumed, but it's uncertain. We know that the severity of this disorder can be great.

When I was first exposed to the condition, I remember hearing the statistic that a fetal alcohol syndrome child can cost the system up to a million dollars by the time they turn 18. Then after age 18, of course, if they enter the criminal justice system, it's very difficult to track what that in fact costs us as a government.

People with fetal alcohol syndrome have distinctive physical appearances and generally have lower IQs. Individuals with fetal alcohol effect, or FAE, may look normal and have relatively normal intelligence. I was really struck by this as the chair of the social care review committee when I was interviewing a boy in a foster care facility one day. He was telling me about his ambitions and what he wanted to do someday. He said that he'd like to go to university and then he'd like to go to med school, and he was telling me all about his plans. I thought: here's a boy that has an idea of what he wants to do, and I was impressed with him. So later I said to his foster care mother: you know, here's a boy who has a plan. He seems to have some direction and some focus. I said: he wants to go to med school someday. She said: you know, that's really great, and once he gets used to using a toilet properly, I'm sure he's going to be able to go to med school.

Mr. Speaker, I was completely fooled by this boy. He had such high verbal skills and for all intents and purposes made me think, because he spoke with such confidence about his future, that he really did understand the parameters of his future, which he did not. I think that's the part of the condition that is so deceiving, that sometimes they do have high verbal skills, so they seem or look relatively normal when they are working with great disabilities.

Some of those disabilities can be impulsive actions, lying, violence, and aggression. FAE can result in limited cognitive responses such as the inability to predict consequences or the incapacity to learn from experience. Imagine if you couldn't learn from your experiences all the lessons you would be relearning over and over in life. Individuals may also have a lack of conscience and be prone to addiction. Many individuals with FAE or FASD never get diagnosed like my friend's daughter. Research indicates that there's a high presence of homeless people and roughly 50 per cent of juvenile and adult offenders that suffer from undiagnosed FASD.

Mr. Speaker, the possible outcomes stemming from this disorder are extremely alarming. Research indicates that 95 per cent of individuals who suffer the effects of FAE and who are between the ages of 12 and 51 will have some sort of mental health problems. Moreover, 68 per cent will experience trouble with the law, and 55 per cent will be admitted into a drug or alcohol treatment centre.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the most crucial point to be made this evening is that this disorder is preventable. Prevention strategies along with treatment programs for alcoholic women are the most important parts of alleviating the incidence of FASD. These steps are prudent to battling the effects of alcohol during pregnancy.

I'm remembering a beautiful young girl that I met at an FAS conference. She spoke to the conference about her future. She was just this stunning young woman. She got up there, and I remember

she said: yes, I have this condition. She said: I know I'll never marry, and I'll never have children, and I'll never have a credit card. She talked about all the things that she would never be able to do. She seemed to have enough of an understanding that she was working under capacity and that she would not have those futures. I remember looking at her and thinking how tragic it was that her future was so limited by someone who probably didn't understand or wasn't aware or perhaps was aware and not able to prevent addiction, but if someone could have helped her mother, her whole future could have been different.

Therefore, I ask all members to join with me in supporting Motion 504 and encouraging the development of new strategies to combat fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and I thank the member for bringing it forward. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, before I recognize the next speaker, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Acting Speaker: The Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature Kathleen Marta. Kathleen is a parent of two children attending Lendrum elementary school. Kathleen is here as part of the Education Watch initiative. She's concerned about the quality of education her children are receiving and the funding for public education in this province. She's in the members' gallery, and with your permission, Mr. Speaker, I'd have her rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly some guests who are present in the members' gallery this evening. They have come to observe our Legislative Assembly in action. They are also concerned about the quality of public education that is offered in the schools that their children are attending, and they're also concerned about the funding, the entire funding structure for public education in this province. The people in attendance this evening are Debbie MacLeod, and she is the parent of a child attending Rutherford elementary school. Heather Pick is also here with her oldest son, Fraser Pick. Heather has children attending each of Strathcona high, Vimy Ridge, Strathearn elementary, and Garneau elementary. I would now ask them to please rise and receive the warm and traditional and gracious welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to members of the Assembly it's my pleasure to make two introductions tonight. The first is to introduce Pat Sawatzky, who is known to many of us because she's been an advocate for education for some time and is here tonight as a part of the Education Watch. She has two children attending MacKenzie school. We'd ask Pat to rise and accept the welcome of the Assembly.

8:10

My second introduction tonight is on behalf of the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, the MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud. If I may, I'd like to introduce Shauna Gervais. She is a constituent of Edmonton-Whitemud, the parent of two children, one of whom, the elder, is attending the Catholic School of Hope for home-schooling. She's here this evening because of her concern about support and funding for special-needs students within Alberta schools. She is part of the Education Watch initiative. She's seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask that she please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

(continued)

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It does not give me pleasure to rise today and join in the debate on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. However, it would give me great pleasure to stand one day and celebrate the total eradication of this devastating disorder, and that is what Motion 504 hopes to achieve.

I'd like to say thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Glenora for bringing this motion forward. I know that finding a strategy to reduce and ultimately eliminate alcohol consumption during pregnancy is a goal that this hon. member hopes one day to achieve, as do most hon. members in the House. Although we all know that this goal will take considerable time and effort and the will of Albertans to achieve, it is a worthy goal and one that is very necessary for the safety and stability of our future.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is a very complicated and devastating disease that affects not only those who are afflicted, but it affects all of society. Society pays for this disorder in more than one way: special-needs funding in early childhood, special-needs funding throughout school, special-needs funding through Justice, and special-needs funding for lifelong supports. Funding for individuals with FASD reaches into the millions.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is a lifelong condition. A child with FASD becomes an adult with FASD. There is no cure for this disability. The damage is irreversible. The brain damage to an unborn baby that is caused when a mother drinks is permanent. There is no way to fix that brain damage. FASD is a life sentence. Some people estimate that 50 per cent of the people that are in our correctional facilities have FASD, so you can see that having FAS is a severe problem for crime in our society. We have FAS youth justice committees that try to give supports to our youth that are afflicted.

I have seen the horror in the eyes of a young mother who has suddenly become aware that she has damaged her beautiful child forever, because you see, Mr. Speaker, children don't necessarily have the visual effects of FASD although they have the brain damage. Therefore, they're expected to act normally, and when they don't make the right choices and when they get into trouble, it's called defiance. It isn't really recognized as a disability unless they have been diagnosed with this disability. I have seen the sadness and the tears in the eyes of a 16 year old who suddenly realizes that her problems are because she has fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, because she knows that her mother is an alcoholic.

So what is this government doing to combat fetal alcohol syndrome? Well, I think we need to look at the remarkable job done by our illustrious Minister of Children's Services, as the Member for

Calgary-Shaw has mentioned, to see how effective our strategies are. I think our education programs are getting the message across to young Albertans, and I know that there are a lot of Albertans who know that if they are pregnant, drinking alcohol is unacceptable. But I think what we should realize is that the concern is there. A lot of people realize the harm that they can do to their child if they are not careful, which makes me feel that the work being done on FAS is slowly starting to show results.

In a healing circle that I experienced with a group at an FAS conference in Saskatoon, I met a mother and her daughter who had a very strong bond. The daughter suffered many years of believing that she was stupid and defiant because she couldn't remember things and she made bad choices. When the mother and daughter finally understood what was wrong with the daughter, the daughter turned to her mother and asked: why did you drink when you were pregnant with me? The mother, in obvious emotional pain, looked at her daughter and said: because I didn't know; I didn't know.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage every member of this Legislature to support Motion 504 so that we can eradicate FASD, so that we can support those who will always be burdened by FASD, and so that no mother will ever have to look her child in the eye again and say, "Because I didn't know."

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate this evening on Motion 504, drinking during pregnancy, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. This motion deals with the problem of drinking while pregnant, and the motion certainly urges the government to do three very appropriate things.

But one of the things that I have not heard to date this evening, Mr. Speaker, is: how are we going to control advertising of liquor, particularly to young people, particularly to young females? There seems to be an increase, if one visits the University of Alberta, in liquor advertising. Every event seems to be tailor-made to a beer or wine or spirit company. The same applies at Grant MacEwan. The same applies at NAIT whenever one visits there. Certainly, there seems to be an impression left that young people can't have a good time unless there is liquor involved.

We all know that there are marketing programs that are targeted to young people. I'm not going to get into the tobacco companies, but certainly there are with liquor marketing campaigns and liquor sales, and this is something that I would urge the government through AADAC to perhaps have a look at. How are these marketing programs targeting young people, and how are they changing their drinking habits or their drinking patterns?

I had the opportunity not too long ago to visit Braemar school in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar, and there are some very, very good things being done by the Children's Services ministry in regard to pregnancy and young mothers, particularly those who have a need to continue their education. But in this matter, that is certainly one of the things I would like to see addressed.

I would also like to see a dedicated amount of money from the total sale of liquor used to combat this problem. I know there are those that say that there is adequate money for AADAC, but I for one was listening with a great deal of interest to what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre had to say in this Assembly last week, I believe, during question period in regard to the amounts of money that are being set aside for those who have problems controlling their liquor consumption.

Those, Mr. Speaker, are two of the issues that I would like to see added to the scope of this motion. Certainly, this motion is worthy

of support. I would urge all hon. members of this Assembly to accept it.

I also at this time would like to thank the Assembly for their time.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to speak to the Assembly today in support of Motion 504, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, and I congratulate him for bringing this debate to the floor of this House.

Mr. Speaker, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is one of the leading known causes of mental illness in North America today. Despite the widely publicized warnings that drinking during pregnancy harms the unborn child, alcohol use by pregnant women continues at alarming rates. Some general figures suggest that the cost for one FASD child is estimated anywhere between 1 and a half million and 2 million dollars over their lifetime.

Mr. Speaker, the total population of FASD in Alberta is unknown. However, due to demographics approximate statistics suggest that in Alberta 3 to 6 out of 1,000 are born with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder while 1 to 3 are born with fetal alcohol syndrome, and that is recognized as significantly high. With that said, it is a birth defect that can be prevented.

8:20

I address this Assembly today to reiterate the importance of increasing public awareness through educational resources and a public advertising campaign targeted at prevention amongst high-risk populations here in Alberta. Mr. Speaker, with an increase in public awareness geared toward the systemic problems associated with women consuming alcohol while pregnant, the ability of the government to minimize alcohol-related birth injury and neurodevelopmental disabilities would be increased greatly. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder cases are spawned from a vicious cycle of substance addiction and pride that must be halted for the sake of generations of Albertans to come.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, the solutions to this extremely preventable defect will not happen overnight. I urge the government and all members here to support Motion 504 and further examine other jurisdictions' strategies coupled with the current steps taken by the government in the prevention and treatment of those afflicted with FASD.

Mr. Speaker, a Health Canada study has suggested a three-step prevention process in stages for methods of curbing the progression of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in Canada. The three steps in sequence are primary prevention, secondary prevention, and tertiary prevention.

Firstly, primary prevention is a broad-based approach that seeks to address socioeconomic factors related to FASD and the effect it has on the health of a population. Primary prevention activities typically focus on behaviour change, systems, and/or the environment. Statistics in Canada and the United States suggest that prevalence of FASD is greater in lower socioeconomic families and communities. Therefore, two relatively effective methods of prevention of FASD, through a Health Canada study, looked at reducing the availability of alcohol through community-supported prohibition or price increases. Prohibition broadly supported by the community or price increases can reduce heavy alcohol use by pregnant women at least in the short term.

The second, moderately effective means of prevention saw the implementation of school/community substance abuse preventative programs coupled with a multicomponent media FASD awareness

campaign involving warning labels and posters that resulted in a moderate success rate. However, I believe we should really concentrate in this area. Secondly, the aim of secondary prevention activities targets women of child-bearing age who abuse substances and includes outreach, screening, referral, and brief intervention. The intent is to promote the health of the mother and prevent or minimize harm to the fetus.

Mr. Speaker, secondary prevention activities can only occur when a pregnancy is recognized, which is often four to six weeks or more into a pregnancy. However, studies have shown that absence or reduction in the consumption of alcohol as late as the third trimester may increase the viability of the fetus. This may be achieved through the use of brief and early intervention programs for pregnant women, which has yielded reasonable efficiency. For example, some evidence supports the effectiveness of drug education programs in reducing substance use among pregnant adolescents attending prenatal clinics.

There is also some evidence among experts that advanced training can be effective in helping physicians and other professionals who work with women who suffer from substance abuse. Educating all of those persons involved in a pregnancy at all levels of care would potentially produce a decrease in FASD in Alberta.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, tertiary prevention activities included in the Health Canada study targets those for whom FASD is already a concern. The aim of tertiary prevention is to minimize the damage to the fetus, reduce the likelihood of further affected pregnancies, and increase the capacity of the mother to care for her FASD children effectively. Tertiary prevention involves intensive multicomponent activities including strategies such as substance abuse treatment, birth control, and parenting programs.

Experts have identified that when dealing with tertiary prevention, the potential key for success is the ability to provide women with a comprehensive, co-ordinated, and consistent range of prenatal and substance treatment services. Case management has proven effective when providing for the various health and social needs of pregnant women who use substances. Furthermore, there is no evidence to support the use of punitive measures such as mandated treatment as being effective in improving maternal and fetal health. In fact, such measures discourage at-risk pregnant women from seeking assistance.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the efforts of Health Canada and the continued efforts of this government and its partners in reducing FASD. However, in light of the previously mentioned statistics, in order to eliminate this preventable birth defect, the government should consider focusing its resources on primary prevention, as stated in the Health Canada study, and build upon the already positive initiatives this government and its partners have embarked upon in the last five years.

I believe that Motion 504 will further enhance this government's already steadfast approach to eliminating FASD through the education of our children and addressing the overall health of at-risk pregnant women in Alberta communities. The potential of this preventative education will serve all socioeconomic regions of Alberta for generations to come.

Coupled with the seriousness and complexity involved with the prevention of FASD in Alberta, I would also like to bring to the government's attention the financial and societal risks that have resulted from persons afflicted with FASD. Mr. Speaker, evidence suggests a correlation amongst individuals affected with FASD and the portion of those incarcerated in the Canadian prison system that may be afflicted with FASD. With an inmate population, male and female, of both federal and provincial prisons estimated at 148,979, studies have concluded that those incarcerated in Canadian prisons

afflicted with FASD may range from a conservative estimate of .33 inmates per thousand to as high as 9.1 inmates per thousand.

Statistics of those suffering with FASD in our prisons have not really yet been solidified. However, Dr. Christine Loock, a noted expert in FASD research, estimates that at least 1 out of 4 inmates incarcerated in federal correctional institutions are not in prison because of a conscious crime but because of their fetal alcohol affliction. Alcohol injury to the brain impairs individuals with FASD and their decision-making abilities. Therefore, those individuals afflicted with FASD have difficulty in deciphering the difference between right and wrong. It is important to identify those individuals at high risk of FASD and associate the correlation of FASD victims and the likelihood for criminal behaviour. As a result, the potential of individuals in the Canadian prison system afflicted with FASD could be larger than anyone expects.

In light of these potential findings, I would ask the government to consider expanding its funding to support the Prairie Northern initiative, which was designed in 1999 to combat fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I also urge the government to further enhance the strategies of the initiative along with Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories and to investigate more closely preventative practices and methods in deterring alcohol consumption among pregnant women. I believe that the support and co-ordination of the numerous partners and stakeholders working alongside the Alberta government would enhance and further develop the message of the seriousness of the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy.

For those individuals who are already living with FASD, it is recommended that we continue to advocate for a model of service delivery that involves accurate diagnosis, long-term intervention, adequate funding, realistic expectations, and a lifespan approach for those Albertans who are injured. However, Mr. Speaker, wherever possible I would urge the government to further assist in the prevention of FASD in Alberta communities so as to limit the amount of those affected by FASD, therefore reducing the financial and, more importantly, the emotional costs associated with caring for individuals with FASD. That would benefit our society. Supporting initiatives such as DARE, Clean Scene, and other Alberta's Promise members should be a high priority for all of us.

Mr. Speaker, FASD is a significant issue for Albertans and often has devastating consequences for the affected individuals and their families. Abstinence from drugs and alcohol during pregnancy is the key to prevention. Therefore, I would strongly encourage the government to increase our funding for research and development in promoting public awareness campaigns within all Alberta communities. This would undoubtedly identify the horrific consequences of consuming alcohol and/or drugs during pregnancy.

I believe that coupled with an increase in the education of Alberta's youth through things like DARE and Clean Scene, two good examples, enlightening them to the disabling consequences of substance abuse during pregnancy will be the potential solution to combating FASD. As I have previously said, FASD is a birth defect that the government and our society can prevent if Albertans are willing to work together for the common good of all.

I urge all members to vote in favour of Motion 504. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise in the Assembly this evening and add my comments to the discussion and debate surrounding Motion 504, the encouragement of new strategies to combat fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD.

8:30

Mr. Speaker, as we have already heard this evening, this motion works to support the steps already taken by the government but, further, addresses the issue by encouraging new strategies to deal with the effects of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. The motion takes a balanced approach. It recognizes the important work the province has accomplished to deal with this problem but also acknowledges that we need to take these initiatives further. I feel that we have a challenge before us to increase awareness and develop new strategies in an effort to combat this problem, which has a visible presence in our society. This is especially evident in our corrections system.

Mr. Speaker, I was on a corrections committee led by the Member for Red Deer-North that visited our correctional institutes in Alberta, and this was a continuing concern of personnel and administration. It became very evident to us the challenges that these personnel had in our corrections system.

We need to create a greater understanding surrounding the consequences of drinking while pregnant. Since 1973 the medical profession has known that alcohol consumption during pregnancy impedes fetal brain development, affecting intelligence, learning skills, and behaviour. Studies have not been able to determine the frequency and the amount of alcohol consumption that results in children with FASD. The general consensus of the experts, however, is that there is a risk and that the risk increases with the amount of alcohol consumed.

The levels of alcohol and the direct effects on the fetus are unclear; however, what is clear is that no consumption of alcohol during a pregnancy has been established as safe for the fetus. Because researchers have not been able to determine a safe level of drinking during pregnancy, Health Canada recommends that women who are pregnant or wish to be pregnant – and I stress “wish to be pregnant” – should abstain from drinking alcohol completely.

One of the leading problems surrounding fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is the lack of understanding. This deficiency of knowledge is evident throughout the general population, and there tends to be an inconsistent message amongst professionals. FASD is believed to be one of the leading causes of preventable birth defects and developmental delay among Canadian births. Mr. Speaker, I must stress that it is one of the leading causes, but it is also preventable, a problem the public tends to understand very little about. Addressing FASD is a priority for this province. Preventing the disorder is one of Alberta's major health strategies.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to highlight some of the important steps the province has taken to deal with fetal alcohol syndrome and its related disorders. The Department of Children's Services has supported many programs and has designed services to prevent FASD and assist children who are affected by the disorder. These include demonstration and educational programs along with research and partnership initiatives. I stress that our education systems are new, and there need to be innovative ways to try to bring the message to all individuals.

The department budgets \$4.75 million for FASD initiatives. Of that money, \$2.4 million gets administered through child and family services authorities and, therefore, goes directly to addressing regional considerations. The local region is allocated control in planning and delivery of services to accommodate the local needs and determine how best to assist individual communities.

Children's Services supports partnerships and cross-ministry initiatives that reflect a multijurisdictional approach to addressing FASD because this is a disorder that affects all Canadian provinces. The Alberta government recognizes the importance of working with other jurisdictions to develop strategies and build on each other's

knowledge and expertise to address this disorder. Alberta is a member of the Canada/northwest FASD and the prairie/northern Pacific FAS partnership. As you can see, Mr. Speaker, the province takes this issue very seriously.

However, our work is not done. We need to continue providing information to the public about this disorder. We must reach more Albertans and alert them to the dangers of consuming alcohol while pregnant. We also need to create new strategies in the battle against fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend the Member for Edmonton-Glenora for all his hard work on this important initiative. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder can have a devastating impact on the fetus and the health of a child. It is imperative that we raise awareness about the dangerous consequences of alcohol in pregnancy.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I believe the 38 minutes allocated have run out. Is that correct? As per Standing Order 8(4) the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has five minutes to close debate.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to just reinforce the comments made by all of my colleagues. I particularly would like to thank the hon. Minister of Children's Services for the work that she is doing right now in regard to this very preventable condition, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, as well as the Minister of Learning, who actually spearheaded this government's policy with regard to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I would like to thank him as well.

I'd also like to make the comment that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar mentioned a campaign geared towards discouraging youth and women, in particular. The hon. Minister of Gaming addressed that in his remarks. That certainly is the intent of my motion, and I think it was reinforced by the hon. Minister of Gaming.

With that, I'd like to just thank all my colleagues that have supported this motion, and I encourage all members to support it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 504 carried]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition.

8:40

Health Care Premiums

505. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft:
Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate health care premiums.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The debate over the elimination of health care premiums has gone on for some time in the province and continues. A bit of the background. Our caucus has long called for the elimination of health care premiums. We called for it during the 2001 election. Our plan called for the elimination of premiums first of all for seniors with a full phase-out of premiums in five years.

Even members of the governing party were musing prior to the 2001 elections about the elimination of health care premiums. It was at a Conservative convention in October of 2000 that a resolution was passed calling for the end of health care premiums. Members that are in this House were on record at that time as supporting such an elimination. The upshot of that was that instead of the premiums

being eradicated, they were actually increased by 30 per cent in the spring of 2002. So quite a reversal from what the convention had asked of the government.

I think it's important to note that the increase in premiums was across the board, including all seniors. That is a direct contradiction to a promise that was made in 1996 by the cabinet that premiums would not be increased for seniors in the near future. As recently as the fall of 2003 there have been musings by some government members about eliminating premiums either for seniors or for low-income Albertans.

That's some of the background to Motion 505, Mr. Speaker. I think it's important to note that Alberta is one of only two Canadian provinces that charge health care insurance premiums. It really is a regressive tax that puts the burden on everyone but particularly on middle-income earners and the working poor. Recently that burden became even greater. Based on recommendations from the Premier's Advisory Council on Health, the government boosted health care premiums by 30 per cent in 2002. This represents a huge tax increase, \$120 a year for individuals and \$240 a year for families.

The application of that premium charge is uneven, Mr. Speaker. A family with children earning \$35,000 per year spends approximately 3 cents of each and every dollar on health care premiums while a wealthy family earning \$100,000 a year or more spends 1 cent per dollar.

Most Albertans don't mind paying for public health care, but health premiums are not the way to do it. It's time, Mr. Speaker, to eliminate health care premiums. Of course, it's one thing to advocate eliminating those premiums, but it's another to figure out how it's going to be paid for. Health care premiums generate a lot of tax dollars. In the 2003-2004 fiscal year the Alberta government expected to collect \$871 million from those premiums. I think that there is the capacity within the system to compensate, however. In the past eight years the government has recorded on average a surplus of \$2.27 billion per year, almost three times the revenue generated by the health care premiums.

By introducing the flat tax in 2000, the government decided to forgo approximately \$1.5 billion from taxes, putting most of those dollars back into the pockets of Alberta's wealthiest citizens. Mr. Speaker, it would seem that if we can't afford to eliminate health care premiums, how could we afford that kind of a tax break? Eight provinces seem to be able to get along without resorting to premiums.

I think that the change would even be easier to absorb if we didn't know the kind of spending that the government has done, spending that would have allowed in part for those premiums to be eradicated. The topic has been raised a number of times in the last budget in terms of the addition of six new ministries to the government, the money that was spent on committees for health care reform, the money that was put into replacing video lottery terminals. So from one perspective it seems to be but a matter of will and priorities, Mr. Speaker, for the government.

Point of Order Decorum

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, decorum under 13(1). There's a radio playing or a cellphone or computer of some kind.

The Acting Speaker: I thought I also heard a little bit, but I'm not sure where it's coming from.

Hon. members, that is not allowed in the Assembly as you know. If you're using your Internet, please, you should have your volume turned off.

An Hon. Member: It's over there somewhere.

The Acting Speaker: Well, I'm just cautioning all members. We have an understanding that that should not be the case.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has the floor. Thank you.

Debate Continued

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In closing, I think we have to remember that the money from health care does not go directly to fund health care. It goes into the general revenue just like income tax, corporate taxes, fuel taxes, and school property taxes. Eliminating the premium tax would be like eliminating any other tax, except I think in this case it would benefit those who deserve it most, Alberta's middle and low-income earners. I think it's abundantly clear that health care insurance premiums are unfair, and it's time that this motion was supported and those premiums were done away with.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I just want to put on the record a few comments relative to this motion. I was provoked a lot by what the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition said when he talked about the flat tax and the fact, he said, that the rich were the ones that benefited most from that. Well, the fact is that some 130,000 Albertans were taken off the provincial tax roll by that move. Those were the folks down at the bottom end, and they had a hundred per cent reduction. While it's true that some people all along the way had a reduction, there were those at the bottom that had a hundred.

But I think we have to also look, when we're talking about the elimination of this particular fee, at the fact that it does generate about \$900 million in revenue. While it's true that that does go into general revenue, as do all other forms of taxation, if you look at the cost of doctors in the health care system, it doesn't even cover that cost. We are spending about \$7.3 billion on health, and so \$900 million is – while it's a lot of money, it's necessary to help pay for that huge expenditure.

Now, I am the first to advocate that we need to raise the level at which people start paying and have the graduated scale go farther up. It certainly is a burden for fixed-income people and those that are just above that current level because there are those at the bottom that currently don't pay anything.

But there are other ways that we can help people, I think, even broader and help poorer income people more, and that is to follow the bill that was presented by the hon. Member for Wainwright. He was talking about the removal of the funding of education from property. That is a very complicated system, Mr. Speaker, and I'm sure that the reason the Liberals are honing in on the health care premiums is because that's a 15-second bite. It sounds great. But try to explain the removal of funding of education from property.

I believe that if we start by removing that tax – and it generates some \$1.4 billion, and of course with the great management that this government has presented over the last number of years by paying down and paying off the debt and eliminating the servicing of deficit, we are going to have the opportunity to do a number of things in the upcoming years. Certainly, I would hope that one of them will be a reduction in taxation.

8:50

But when you look at what's happening with the funding of education on property, even though we have frozen the mill rate, the

fact is that the amount of money that people are paying out of their pockets annually increases. That's because of the way the assessment system works. I believe that if we started with the elimination of the assessment on land – the reason I say that, Mr. Speaker, is because, well, right here in the city, if you go down along the river valley into the older area where there are smaller homes and usually seniors and/or lower income people living there, the fact is that the land that those houses are situated on is going up in value every year. That means that the amount of taxes that they're paying for education is going up every year even though the mill rate is frozen.

That's getting to be a real burden, particularly on seniors and low-income people. So by eliminating that as the first step towards reducing taxation, we would do far more to help people on a low income and a fixed-income than we will by eliminating these health care premiums.

I would urge that we vote against this particular motion but look at two things: look at the gradual elimination of the funding of education from property, and raise the level at which people start having to pay health care premiums. That way we're going to help the very people that really need help.

There's another thing that I must mention about health care premiums. For many, many professional people and out in industry the employer pays for half and, in some cases, the total health care premium. So even if you eliminate them, you don't help those individuals. But if you remove the funding of education from land to start with, everybody gets help.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Motion 505, the elimination of health care premiums, sponsored by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview. Certainly, I have to support the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview whenever he wants to cut taxes, and this simply is a tax. It has grown larger and larger as time has progressed.

There were promises made in the past by this government to eliminate this tax. In fact, before the last election, on October 29th in the year 2000, Alberta's grassroots provincial Conservatives endorsed plans to scrap health care premiums, or the health care tax, but four years later it hasn't been done. We were leading up to the election in the winter of 2001, and that was the talk. I'm disappointed to say that it hasn't been done.

We have seen in fact from that time health care premiums go up from \$700 million to over \$900 million last year. If we're looking for a real tax break for everyone, this is it, and this is why we should support the motion as presented by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Now, in 2000, before the winter election of 2001, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford also said that getting rid of health care premiums was a bigger priority for him than cutting income taxes. The hon. member went on to say – and I'm pleased to learn that he agrees with us – that this is a tax. It's a tax, and it's got to go.

How could we pay for this tax reduction? Well, there are many ways we could pay for this, Mr. Speaker. We could look at among other things changing our rules on VLT purchases. We recently have spent over \$100 million on replacement of VLTs. In the fiscal year 2002-03 we spent \$33 million on horse racing. We could forget about that. Let's eliminate health care premiums and forget about the horse racing industry for the time being.

There was \$5 million on committees implementing health reform. Some of these committees have yet to report to this Assembly. In 2001 after the election we created six new cabinet spots, and that cost a handy \$50 million in salaries, wages, and employee benefits. We've seen the communications and travel budget go up, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Massey: Wait until Steve West gets at that cabinet.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. The former Minister of Energy is apt to reduce that cabinet. I don't think we could call him a cabinet maker. We might be able to call him in the future a cabinet breaker because I think he will probably reduce it in size.

Now we have this travel and communications budget that has skyrocketed totally out of control. The government may be sensitive whenever people on this side of the House bring up what all this costs, including pitchers of orange juice in London, England, and travel costs in Mexico. We've got vans, limousine services in New York city.

But I was pleased to see on the news tonight the Premier doing some good work in Washington trying to get the borders open for cattle exports. He had a wee glass of orange juice in his hand as he went into this room. It was a glass smaller than this, Mr. Speaker, and it was only half full, so I'm glad to see a fiscal conservative working.

There is money available if we do not have a large amount of money raised from premiums and fees and licences for health care.

Rev. Abbott: Relevance.

Mr. MacDonald: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar is talking about relevance. Well, this is one of the broken promises by this government leading up to the election. This government has continually promised that the only way taxes in Alberta, Mr. Speaker, are going is down. But it's been broken. I'm sorry; this has not been delivered. In 2002, just one year after the election, the government increased health care premiums, a regressive tax, by a whopping 30 per cent. That's not the only way taxes are going is down. That certainly is not.

Now, we can go down memory lane a little further to 1996. The Conservative cabinet promised that premiums would not be increased for seniors in the future. Another broken promise. In 2002 health care premiums for some seniors increased by 30 per cent.

Now, I suppose I cannot talk about the regional health authority boards and the election of those boards and then the firing of some of them because the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar may not think that that's relevant, so I won't go any further with that.

Mr. Speaker, there are many reasons to reduce taxes. There are many taxes that could be reduced, but the first one should be the health care insurance premium. Now, we are only one of two provinces that collect this tax. The other one is British Columbia, and it amazes me that in all the years that the New Democrats were in power in British Columbia, they never eliminated that tax. They never even discussed it that I'm aware of. But we have with this motion the ideal opportunity to reduce taxes in this province, and I can't think of a better way to start than to get rid of this regressive tax.

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded.

head: 9:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 24
Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Finance it's my pleasure to move second reading of Bill 24, Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004.

As you know, the current fiscal year ends this March 31, and the budget with respect to the year 2003-2004 comes to an end. The budget for the upcoming year will be introduced this upcoming Wednesday, and the process associated with the debate of that will take us into the second week of May. As such, this bill will allow the government to continue to operate while this Legislative Assembly debates that budget into the new year.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and discuss Bill 24, particularly in light of the budget that is going to be brought down for all Albertans on Wednesday.

Now, there are many items of interest in this bill. One only has to look at the office of the Chief Electoral Officer, for instance. We are looking at providing that officer with an operating expense of \$3.4 million.

Ms Blakeman: That's interesting.

Mr. MacDonald: It's quite interesting. One would only have to conclude that the government is preparing for an early election. If not, why are we so anxious to fund that office so quickly?

Ms Blakeman: How much was it last year?

Mr. MacDonald: I have no idea what it was last year, but it's certainly something that I'm going to research.

We're looking at Learning, for instance. Here we're looking at close to a billion dollars, just a whisker under a billion dollars. One only has to look at the newspaper or turn on a television set and you look at the financial dilemma some young students are facing in this province. Postsecondary education is getting unaffordable for some; 10 per cent of those, I'm told, that are attending the University of Alberta had in one way or another to apply for some form of emergency funding.

This is the government's idea, this Bill 24, of emergency funding, and I think we would be better suited to starting the budget debate much, much sooner, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps the session should start the 15th of January, maybe the third week of January, and then it wouldn't be necessary to have these large sums passed as interim funding.

When we look at education and we look at the billion dollars in here and I go back to previous budgets and previous budget announcements, there was the same government, different Learning minister or education minister, and the former education minister used to get very frustrated with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods whenever he would ask questions about adequate funding for public education in this province, and the former education minister would say: \$300 million. He would repeat this figure over and over and over again.

That was money that was allocated over a period of time, and people were left with the impression that this was a large sum of

money that was going to be immediately put into the public education system and we would see a reduction in class sizes; we would see infrastructure repairs; we would see a lot of things for public education. But when the public figured out that this was money that was to be brought in over a period of time, then it was much different.

I'm wondering if history is going to repeat itself in a day or two and we're going to be on initial reaction thinking: oh, my, there is a government that is finally coming to its senses. Not only are we going to see the billion dollars in interim supply, but we're also going to see additional funding for public education. It's not going to be an orchestrated public relations exercise, but it's going to be a commitment – finally a commitment – to hire more teachers, reduce class sizes, and fix up a lot of the infrastructure problems in our schools.

Now, Mr. Speaker, we look at this \$1 billion amount in Learning, and we think of what's going on in the city of Calgary. In the city of Calgary alone the infrastructure deficit for schools is in excess of \$400 million. That's a lot of money. When you add up that infrastructure deficit for schools and hospitals and roads throughout the province, it is in excess of \$7 billion. It's a lot of money.

Whenever we keep putting off much-needed repairs or naturally occurring repairs because of the age of the building or the road, the final repair bill is going to be much higher. So sometimes when we talk about deficits, when we talk about public debt held, we forget the entire picture. A government that doesn't, for instance, look at the repair costs in Calgary for the schools is probably a government that in the future is going to have to pay more money to repair those schools and in some cases even build new schools. I don't know how those communities around Douglasdale are doing, how the parents feel. Maybe they're getting new schools already. But there's a need for infrastructure across the province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, whenever we look at this bill department by department, I don't think there's anyone that's been left out. When you consider that we're looking at over 5 and a half billion dollars to operate for two months and we have six pages to explain it or not to explain it . . . What is the plan for the use of this money? Well, it's for operating expenses.

This is a big operation, and usually Conservative governments pride themselves on fiscal responsibility, but in my time in this Legislative Assembly this government has gone from roughly a \$14 billion budget to – I suppose on Wednesday we're going to find out that it's a handy \$21 billion, maybe \$22 billion. That's a significant increase, yet we still have the same problems. We have a public education system that's underfunded. We have a public health care system where we seem more interested in manufacturing wine lists for people recovering from surgeries than we are in reducing waiting lists. I don't think we've got our priorities right here. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure is shaking his head, but I don't think we do.

9:10

Now we are requesting to proceed with Bill 24, Mr. Speaker, this interim supply bill, without first tabling the budget. Thus, in my view, the lack of details within the bill is where and how all this money will be spent. Ministers may be reluctant to provide any details on spending in Committee of Supply because of concern of giving away budget secrets. That's fair enough, but it was just in here last week that I heard that with Municipal Affairs we could be pleasantly surprised – I believe that was how it was put – and I also heard that from another minister as well. So I don't know exactly what to believe, but I guess I'll just have to wait and see.

When we talk about this government and its history, the Alberta

government has a long history, in my view, of poor budget management. Albertans have been on a fiscal roller coaster for years, facing spending increases and budget cuts all within a matter of months. An excellent example of this is the fiscal year 2000-2001 when this government had to make a 1 per cent cut to all departments as a result of a global economic slowdown. Nevertheless, by the end of the year the government had started to spend again. There was this panic, there was this supposed reduction, but it didn't last too long. You could open your weekend paper and you could see where the government was spending money again.

Now, the lack of budget management was further illustrated just a few weeks ago when this government brought forward their second request for supplementary supply in the current fiscal year, Mr. Speaker. The amount of unbudgeted spending brought in over the course of fiscal year 2003-2004 totals \$1.35 billion. The government has said that this is because of economic and environmental disasters that they could not foresee.

To be fair, no one could have predicted BSE or the forest fires our province suffered this year. However, unbudgeted spending of more than \$1 billion is not a new habit of this government, nor was it simply brought on by last year's disasters. Last year this government racked up over a billion dollars in unbudgeted spending. The year before it was \$1.4 billion. So it's obvious that this government is unable to stick to the budget plans that it develops. Hopefully, with the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East's stability fund we're not going to see any more of the panic that was displayed back in 2000-2001.

This is a government, Mr. Speaker, that's very fond of saying that it's in charge of a \$20 billion corporation or \$21 billion corporation; however, their brand of fiscal irresponsibility would never fly in the business world. If the CFO of a \$20 billion corporation could not have a budget aired and implemented in time for April 1, he would not be the chief financial officer for very long. I think there would be a shareholder revolt. It would be interesting to go to that meeting. However, if this individual were in government, perhaps they would be in charge of the Ministry of Finance.

Something needs to be improved here, I believe, Mr. Speaker. This government cannot maintain stable funding, this government cannot manage program cuts, and this government does not listen to Albertans when setting priorities. So why should we rely on Bill 24 that this government is presenting in regard to interim supply? Certainly, one looks at the continuity of the civil service, and there are certain government programs that have to be delivered and in some cases administered. But if we're really concerned and we really want to improve, I think we should take the advice of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, and let's get the budget process going a little earlier. If that means that we have to start the session in January, then that is fine.

Now, in regard to this bill, Mr. Speaker, with the \$184 million that's going to Children's Services, how much of this money will go to implementing the five recommendations the Auditor General made in his last annual report?

We're looking further here at \$215 million in Community Development. How much of this money will be contracted out to private operators who run provincially owned parks? That is a real bone of contention, if I may use that term, with campers and outdoors people in this province. They're sick and tired of this government charging them \$5 for a little armload of wood whenever they go camping. It's wet wood; it's dirty wood. I don't know where they find this wood. Whenever we talk about privatization, Albertans bring this up, and they're not happy.

Now, Economic Development. What have we got for Economic Development? Fourteen million dollars. How much of this money

will be spent towards opening Alberta's new trade office in Washington, D.C.? How much of this money will be spent on out-of-province trips? [interjections] How much of this money will be spent trying to promote the agricultural economy after BSE?

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has the floor. If you wish to participate in the debate, you may rise after he's finished.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, with Economic Development I don't want to be giving the hon. minister encouragement when others would caution me not to, but certainly Alberta's exports to the People's Republic of China indicate by industry that with livestock from January of 2002 to December of 2003 we saw a significant reduction, to zero, of the number of cattle that were shipped there.

At some point if there were to be a trade mission to open up these markets to Alberta products, whether they be boxed beef or live cattle for breeding purposes, I would have no objection to that. I just see this as something that really needs to be done. It's a large market, and I'm surprised that we have no participation in that market. If the minister were to go there sometime and try to sell cattle on the hoof or boxes of beef, you wouldn't hear a complaint from this member, providing he tabled his expenses when he returned.

Now, Energy. The Energy department is spending \$50 million here. How much of this money will go towards this government's \$3 million propaganda campaign to promote electricity deregulation and other communications campaigns? I'm astonished that we're trying to convince rural Albertans that are participating in REAs and gas co-ops that this isn't in their interests. REAs, of course, operate on a not-for-profit basis; so do gas co-ops. They're both managed democratically by the people they provide the utility to, and they're sort of an Alberta tradition that works. It astounds me why we would have a communications plan to convince Albertans that this is not in their interests.

Again, Mr. Speaker, would the Minister of Energy be doubling the communications budget this year, as he did last year? How much of this \$50 million will be spent on the minister's travels? Certainly, this minister travels a lot. He travels more than Pepe. You know, he gets around. There's no doubt about that. Again, how much of this money will go towards ensuring that Albertans are paying the lowest prices for electricity and natural gas instead of the highest prices, as they are paying now?

9:20

Now, the Environment department is also going to get \$30 million. How much of this money will be spent on a water conservation strategy? How much of this money will be spent on initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and on other Kyoto requirements? How much of this money will fund green technologies?

Executive Council, further down here, is getting \$6 million. Why is the Executive Council requesting almost double the interim supply that it has requested in the last two years? Where are the extra dollars going? How much of this money will be spent on spin doctors, and how much of this money will be spent on out-of-province travelling, on the Premier's and his staff's dining bills and hotel rooms?

Finance is getting \$18 million, and then nonbudgetary disbursements are going to bring this up to over \$36 million, Mr. Speaker. How much of this money will be spent on improving the Finance minister's budgeting skills? Last year the government spent

\$230,000 on advertising for Budget 2003. How much will the government spend this year trying to convince Albertans that Budget 2004 is good news?

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, this debate for me is always about two things: timing and information. We always get the same line from the government members about, well, just given circumstances, sometimes circumstances beyond their control – once there was a reference to circumstances that the federal government had under their control. All kinds of reasons and sometimes no reasons as to why the government is late bringing its budget in and therefore needs to get an interim supply in order to keep running and pay everyone's salary and the rent and keep everything going.

Frankly, that argument just does not hold up. The government is in complete control of the agenda here. They can bring the session in whenever they wish and certainly well in advance of the time needed to debate the complete budget and the accompanying supply bill and get it all passed before the fiscal year-end so that we didn't have to do an interim supply. But this has now become common operational timing for this government, so they keep coming up with these frankly rather feeble excuses as to why they're late and why it can't be done on time and why, therefore, they need this interim supply, all the while pretending that somehow this isn't their fault.

Well, it's feeble and I expected better out of the government, but that's the one they keep using. I think the best one was that they had to wait for the federal government to table a budget and they couldn't do it until after the federal budget had come down. Well, if you look back over the last eight or nine years, I think the federal government has actually tabled a budget anywhere close to this time twice, maybe. So that was a particularly feeble year for excuses, that they had to wait for the federal government budget to come down before they could do theirs. It really is hardly connected, and most times you don't get a federal government budget tabled anywhere near it.

The second part of it is around information and just having one or two lines that appear in the supply document saying: well, you know, it's covering supplies and salaries. And there's a sort of little catch-all line. Here we go.

Operating expense includes salaries, supplies, grants, amortization of capital assets and debt servicing costs. Equipment/inventory purchases consist of consumable inventories and movable capital assets.

Then it sort of gives you a breakdown on how they do that. Then nonbudgetary disbursements and lottery fund payments. That's it. That's the description that you get for – what are they asking for? – over a billion dollars.

So there's a rather glaring lack of information. You know, it's as though asking for information is somehow a bad thing in this Assembly, because whenever the members of the opposition ask for information – you know, how am I supposed to make up my mind whether to support this interim supply? I'd like to know what the money is going to be spent on. They're asking, I think, for three months' worth of operational budget. That's going to cover April, May, June. Well, in some departments that's a very significant period of activity. Maybe most of its activity or significant activity takes place in that time.

For example, the budgets that the schools use are late this year, I understand, but basically they have to make up their mind about what kind of requisition they're going to have or how much money

they're going to have to operate the following year, and that all has to be done before June. So for money coming from the provincial government to the school boards, that's a very important period of time, because by June all the budgeting cycles are done and everything is set for the following year. So that period of activity is very important.

I had raised a number of questions during the Committee of Supply debates on this request for interim supply connected with points that had been raised by the Auditor General. I did in fact have one minister who did her best to answer my question on the spot, and that was the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. I didn't hear from any of the other ministers when I raised issues and concerns from the Auditor General. I didn't get any kind of answer back as to whether they were addressing those concerns and, therefore, whether I could rest a little easier when I was to trust them with voting through three months' worth of supply for their particular department.

So ever questing for information, I'm going to try again, Mr. Speaker, with a number of areas. Now, I have some in each department, and then I've collected a whole file folder of little bits and pieces that I've tossed in there to question various departments on. I don't want to go over territory already discussed by my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar. I believe he went as far as the Gaming budget?

Mr. MacDonald: I didn't get to Gaming.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, he was just going to start on Gaming. Okay.

So I have some questions, then, starting with Gaming. That department is requesting \$364.1 million. I'm wondering whether any of this money will be spent on rehabilitation programs for gambling addicts. In particular, I have raised a number of times in the past whether the department will tie together the amount of money raised through specific kinds of gambling or alcohol-related revenue to treatment of problem gambling or problem drinking. So two questions there: whether any of that money will be spent on rehabilitation programs and whether there would be a ratio or a direct link between the amount of money raised through, for example, VLT revenues and the amount of money spent on treating problem gambling.

I'm wondering how much money this year will be spent subsidizing the horse racing industry. I'm sure the minister will leap to his feet and go: we don't subsidize the horse racing industry. Of course, he knows that what I'm referring to there is the special deal through the RECs, racing entertainment centres, where there was a particular deal that was requested by Horse Racing Alberta and, in fact, granted by the government whereby they would be able to keep a larger percentage from the slots and VLTs. Maybe it was just slot machines.

Usually the deal was about 15 per cent back to the operator of the facility, 15 per cent to the charity, et cetera, et cetera, and in this case it came out to a much larger percentage that went directly to the operator, and that's how they were helping to pay off their machines, I think. Specifically, how much money is flowing through there to the horse racing industry? I think that last year it was \$65 million or \$81 million that flowed through. So three questions in that department.

Under Government Services, which is requesting \$59.3 million, will any of this money be used to offset the cost that energy consumers are being forced to pay for the Utilities Consumer Advocate office?

9:30

The second question: how much of this money will be spent

protecting Albertans from door-to-door energy marketers? Is there another campaign being expected there? Again, there is an expectation that Albertans will move to a contract basis where they will be signing a contract for purchase of electricity and gas. What other kinds of consumer protection, consumer enlightenment programs does the government have in mind around this new system so that we don't get ripped off?

How much of the money will be spent on updating the Fair Trading Act in order to protect Alberta's energy consumers from Direct Energy? That's an interesting one, but we keep hearing that poor Direct Energy keeps getting sued. They're up in the United Kingdom, and they're also before the courts in several places in the States, every time, I think, because they have unsavoury practices in pressuring people to sign these energy contracts. I know that the government has worked hard to entice Direct Energy. We even changed some legislation to make it more appealing to them to come into Alberta.

So is there any balance on this enticement that's going to be around protection for consumers in Alberta from any of the unscrupulous practices that Direct Energy has exhibited in the United States and in the United Kingdom? [interjection] Well, I didn't have to bad-mouth them actually – I'm getting heckled by one of the Calgary members here – because they did that to themselves by having such unscrupulous practices that they ended up before the courts. Of course, those court documents are in the public purview, and anyone can go and look it up. So I don't have to bad-mouth them; they managed to do that to themselves.

Under the Health and Wellness department \$2 billion is being requested. Now, the government recently announced a \$5 million boost to education and health, and I'm wondering how that breaks down. How much of that \$5 million is coming into Health and Wellness, and will any of this money particularly be directed to help the emergency room situation in Calgary and Edmonton? My colleague from Edmonton-Riverview has raised a number of times the code burgundy situation in the Calgary emergency rooms in their hospitals there.

Mr. MacDonald: Does that mean there's no red wine in the hospital surgical suites?

Ms Blakeman: No. The code burgundy is not about whether there's red wine available in the surgical suites. It's about having to create an additional code reflecting an emergency situation that is even more severe than a code red. That's what a code burgundy is, but I can understand how the member might have been led to believe it would be about something else.

Specifically, then, when we're looking at the emergency room situation in Calgary and Edmonton, how much of that money would be directed toward the code burgundy occurrences, and how is it expected that this money will decrease waiting lists? I know the government is planning on publicizing waiting lists, but what's being done to decrease the waiting lists?

Looking at Human Resources and Employment, \$286.9 million is being requested. How much of this money is earmarked for the nurses' salary settlements and for the AUPE salary settlements? Surely that is going to pertain to the first three months here that is under examination.

Under Infrastructure we have \$400.7 million that's being requested. How much of this is the Department of Infrastructure's budgeting for natural gas rebates for next year? The government has accrued a \$7 billion infrastructure gap from the outstanding requests for infrastructure support from school boards, health authorities, and postsecondary institutions. How much of this money will go toward paying down this \$7 billion infrastructure gap?

That's always an interesting debate. We have the government quite proud of itself, although frankly I think that the credit goes to Albertans, for having paid down debt. I think they're now down to owing \$3.5 billion, but at the same time we've created a \$7 billion infrastructure debt. So I don't know how much smart managing can really be credited there when we're down to \$3.5 billion on the one side and we've increased a deficit on the other side to \$7 billion. I think there's a problem there.

How much of that \$400.7 million will go toward building new schools or upgrading existing schools in Alberta? How much of this money will go toward building a hospital in southeast Calgary? We've had a little hint of an announcement there, but how much exactly? One presumes that some of the money will be advance-planning money that would probably be spent in the first three months. Therefore, this budget is under scrutiny, so what's the answer to that?

Ah, Innovation and Science. How much of this money will be going into the SuperNet project? How many more things will be added onto that running total that we have under SuperNet, which by the time it's all finished and done may in fact have been overtaken and will become obsolete technology.

Mr. Herard: Aw, come on. Why don't you learn about that?

Ms Blakeman: I have actually spent quite a bit of time learning about it. This member is very interested in getting into the debate, so I'm looking forward to what he's actually going to say.

I'm wondering how much of this money, if any of it, is going to go toward making sure that the other 4,400 and some hospitals, schools, and municipal buildings will get actually hooked right up to the SuperNet.

International and Intergovernmental Relations: \$2.3 million is requested. How will this money contribute to the reopening of the U.S. border to Alberta beef, and how much of this money will fund activities related to the softwood lumber dispute?

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Any questions?

Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on behalf of the Minister of Finance to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a second time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

**Bill 19
Public Trustee Act**

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General it is my pleasure to move third reading of Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Bill 19 is a complete revamp and updating of the Public Trustee Act. All of the bills are progressing very quickly through the Assembly in this spring sitting, mostly because we are not able to hear from the many government members here who are not adding to the debate, which is a pity, actually, because then their members don't know where they stand on particular bills.

I spoke fairly thoroughly during second reading of Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act, to the various updates that were being done. I spoke about the different catchment, whether it was a legal update, an administrative update, or whether it was around changes to the funds and how the funds would be administered. There is an additional section that is meshing with the new changes that are being brought forward under the Minors' Property Act, which is appearing in this session as Bill 20.

9:40

I did the usual stakeholder loop that I would do with bills like this. In fact, a number of the requests for the updating and modernization of the bill have come from the legal community and those that deal fairly frequently with the Public Trustee Act. I have actually heard no reservations or concerns expressed, at least that have reached my ears. The only request that I did have was concerns around power of attorney, so there is still some confusion in the minds of the public as to what the Public Trustee does and what powers they have. The

one concern that I heard really wasn't pertaining to Bill 19, the Public Trustee Act; it was to a different act entirely.

So I'm happy enough with what I've seen in the updates and modernizations that are appearing in the act. As I say, from stakeholder groups I've heard no concerns expressed, so at this point I'm happy to support the passage of Bill 19 in third reading. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 19 read a third time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move that the Assembly stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 9:41 p.m. the Assembly adjourned until Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 23, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/23

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Give to each member of this Legislature a strong and abiding sense of the great responsibility laid upon us. Give us a deep and thorough understanding of the needs of the people we serve. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, on your behalf I would like to introduce 15 visitors from the Barrhead-Westlock constituency and Tokoro, Japan. The town and county of Barrhead formally twinned with the town of Tokoro in 1991, and each year Tokoro sends a group of high school students to spend a week in Barrhead. With us today are eight students from the Tokoro high school. Accompanying the students are Mr. Shuji Abe, Ms. Miwako Nakadai, Mr. Hiroshi Minagawa, Ms. Debbie Bender, Mr. Kim Kalmbach, Ms. Louise Rau, and Mr. Michael Ward. They are seated in your gallery this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Dr. Angèle Leong-Sit, a constituent of Edmonton-Whitemud. She's the parent of three children, two of the children attending Earl Buxton elementary school in the Edmonton-Whitemud constituency. Dr. Leong-Sit is here as part of the Education Watch initiative. She's here this afternoon because of her concern about the quality of education her children are receiving and the funding for public education within Alberta schools. Dr. Leong-Sit is seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask that she please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's my pleasure today. When I first arrived in Alberta 26 years ago, I met some friends that are with us today. In fact, one of these gentlemen sat on the city council of Fort McMurray for many, many years. He's here today in the public gallery with his wife and friends. It's my pleasure to introduce Bill and Carol Gendreau, Sandy Williams, and Helen Gallant. I want to say that they are truly good friends, and it's a pleasure to see them here today.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a constituent and someone whose name is quite well known to Albertans and to us politicians, and that is Mr. John Carpay, the Alberta director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. John is here to observe this afternoon's House proceedings. John and his wife, Barb, also have a brand new baby boy who is exactly six weeks old today. John is seated in the public gallery. I'd like him to stand and receive the very warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two guests who are seated in the public gallery. First, Mr. Laurie Hawn. Mr. Laurie Hawn is the recently nominated candidate who will carry the colours of the new Conservative Party of Canada in the new riding of Edmonton-Centre. Mr. Hawn is in the public gallery. I'd ask him to rise and receive the warm response of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 52 constituents of mine, 50 being students from St. Lucy Catholic school accompanied by two teachers, Mrs. Lynn McLagan and Mr. Paul McNeely. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 55 constituents of mine from St. Dominic Catholic school. They are seated in both the members' gallery and the public gallery. They're accompanied by their teachers, Ms. Sherri Anwender, Mrs. Karen Letwin, and their parent helpers are Mrs. Monique Malo, Mr. and Mrs. Shokoples, and Mrs. Deanne Riley. I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly several guests from my constituency who are seated in the members' gallery. I'll ask them to rise as I read their names: Peter Duncan, who has one child attending McKernan elementary junior high, the school from which I graduated; Jane de Caen, who has three children, one attending Harry Ainlay, one at Avalon, and one at McKernan; Liz Miller, who has four sons, one at Scona, two at McKernan, and one at Windsor Park; and Karen Ferrari and Preet Sara, who both have children at Windsor Park and McKernan. These people are here today as members of the Education Watch initiative. They're observing our procedures and are very concerned about both the quality of education and the level of funding. Please give them all a warm welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much again, Mr. Speaker. It is also my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mr. Stephen Kushner. Mr. Kushner is well known to many members of the Assembly as the president of Merit Contractors. They represent open shop members of the construction industry, and he's here to view the proceedings of the Legislature. Mr. Kushner, could you rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one other guest to introduce who is here also as part of the Education Watch initiative, and her name is Danica Wolkow. She is seated in the members' gallery. Please give her a warm welcome as well.

Thank you.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Government Expense Claims

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government still won't come clean on its big spending habits, which should worry Albertans given that a budget is coming down tomorrow. The Liberal opposition has asked questions about government expenses in the House only to be told to put the questions in writing. We put the questions in writing only to be told we should do motions for returns, but yesterday our very first motion for a return on ministerial expenses was voted down. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. What is this government hiding?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Justice on my behalf filed a document. It's called the report of selected payments to ministers and former members of the Legislature and lists off all of the payments that were made to every member in this Assembly, even opposition members: their salaries, their expenses, and any payments that were paid to associates of members.

I also said in this Legislature earlier, as this carping keeps going on, that we have a full disclosure and we are audited on an annual basis by our own Auditor General, who has made reference in the audit report, Mr. Speaker, that he has audited the expenses and reimbursements of members of the Legislature, which includes everybody on both sides of the House, and has found nothing untoward.

1:40

We also have another process, Mr. Speaker, that I think is very, very important, and that's our Ethics Commissioner. He is obligated – I'm going to be saying something that you already reminded us of – that if there, in fact, are things that have come to his attention that need to be looked at, he would let us know. From the last conversation I had with him, there were no outstanding issues that needed to come before this Assembly, so members on both sides of this House have been following the rules and regulations that have been put forward.

Again I will say that our government is open and accountable to Albertans. We have been the only government in all of Canada that releases these documents on a quarterly basis and updates Albertans on the actions of their government. Quite frankly, from the results I think they're quite happy with us.

Ms Blakeman: Then answer the questions.

Why did government members vote down a motion to provide the expenses for the Minister of Energy, who with 23 trips under his belt is this government's most frequent flyer?

Speaker's Ruling

Decisions of the Assembly

The Speaker: The decisions of the Assembly are not to be the purview of the question period. Votes in the House that were taken yesterday are recorded in the documents of the Assembly. This is

not a question to be answered by a minister of the Crown. It was the members of the Assembly that made the decision, not one person.

Government Expense Claims

(continued)

The Speaker: Second supplemental, hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: does this government expect Albertans to believe that its spending habits are reasonable when it refuses to provide the spending figures to prove it?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, I believe that by filing this document that, quite frankly, lists off all your expenses as well so that people can ask questions as to why you have huge travel expenses when you live in the city of Edmonton – it's something you may want to answer to your own constituents.

Quite frankly, this was filed in this Assembly yesterday, and we are open and accountable. I can go through each page, Mr. Speaker, if the Assembly would like, but it is clearly here. It's available, and if people want to read this document, please pick it up or go into the library and get it.

Out-of-province Government Travel

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, when the government doesn't outright refuse to provide information about its lavish spending habits, it prices the information out of reach instead. This government wants over \$3,000 from the Alberta Liberal opposition just to tell Albertans how it spent their money on three recent government out-of-province trips. My first question is to the Minister of Government Services. Why should it cost almost \$1,800 just to access information about the expenses incurred during the Premier's mission to the United Kingdom when in the year 2002 over \$2,000 was spent on lunch alone in London on a previous trade mission?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, under freedom of information and protection of privacy there is a process by which fees are charged for the service of getting that information, because there is a cost to assembling the information, photostating it, and making sure that it is presentable and ready for the people that have requested specific information.

If a request for information comes in that is very broad based, asking for a lot of information that isn't specific, well, then, of course, the cost is appropriately higher than if you should ask for specific information. The costs for freedom of information and protection of privacy requests in Alberta are the lowest across Canada, and it's directly attributable to the amount of information that is being requested.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister: why should it cost another \$1,200 to access information about expenses incurred during the Premier's recent missions to Washington and New York and to India and Hong Kong when over \$8,000 was spent on a car service alone in New York City in 2002 on a similar trip?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, I certainly wasn't on the trip, and that question has been answered in this Assembly on two other occasions, if I recall.

Mr. Speaker, our Department of Government Services is responsible for the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. We are responsible for training privacy commissioners in each and every department. Those are the people that provide the information

upon request, and that is the extent of Government Services' responsibility for the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. So I am not responsible for every single solitary department that gives out the information through their privacy commissioners.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that it's apparent that this government is more concerned about protecting the information from the taxpayers than they are about spending less on their trips, why is this minister admitting that charging such outrageous fees is a disincentive to democracy, to accountability, and to transparency in government?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, there is a \$25 fee for the application to come into any minister's office. That is the lowest fee across Canada. The lowest fee across Canada. If a member or someone from the public is not satisfied with the information, they can also go to the Privacy Commissioner and ask for an appeal. That is part of the process, and that is also part of what the select standing committee of this House put into the report when the freedom of information and protection of privacy legislation is reviewed every three to five years in this Assembly.

In terms of actual costs that were on that trip, the hon. Minister of Economic Development was on the trip, and maybe he can shed some light on what the member is offering.

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Speaker, it would be a delight to rise. [interjections] Do you want an answer, or are you just going to . . .

The Speaker: Hon. minister, please. Through the chair.

Mr. Norris: Mr. Speaker, I did indeed have the honour of being with the Premier on both those trips. The limousine service they're talking about was organized by our department. It was actually two Ford Econoline vans. Our department did a cost comparative analysis to put four cabs on hold in New York City for the 12 hours a day that we were there or get the service, and we saved about \$2,500 by doing the service.

Aside from the security risks not addressed by having the Premier of the province in another country wandering around in New York City trying to get cabs, the reality is that to have an efficient business trip, you have to have your time organized, and your time and your meetings are very important. I don't know if you understand that, not having owned or run a business, but it's very important to be punctual when you're visiting other people.

The reality is all of those costs can be documented. Our department and others have made an effort to get the lowest cost for Albertans because the trips are vitally important for our exports.

Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the Calgary health region has again been caught in its own web of political spin. After claiming last week that an error in June 2000 with potassium chloride led to, quote, immediate and corrective action, end quote, we now learn that a similar incident occurred only two months later. In response the region has put forward one of its spin doctors, the Minister of Health and Wellness's former executive assistant, now acting VP for the Calgary health region, to backpedal by claiming that changes weren't immediate and that things take time. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that this minister was so quick to disband WestView regional health authority for failing to balance its books, why is the minister not taking similar action with the Calgary health region for needless deaths resulting from years of mismanagement?

Mr. Mar: Because the important thing, Mr. Speaker, is that we move forward on helping ensure that system errors in fact don't occur in the future. To that extent, what we've done as a government is we've asked the Health Quality Council of Alberta to work with the Canadian Patient Safety Institute to work with other experts to report to Albertans on the best practices that can be employed for the handling of materials that contain potassium. I expect that the experience and the recommendations of other jurisdictions will be reviewed. I want the Health Quality Council to work with other reviews, such as internal reviews being conducted by the Calgary health region and any external reviews that are being done by professional associations, like the pharmacists.

I would expect that the outcome of these reviews will result in health authorities throughout the entire province adopting the very best practices to ensure that errors in potassium handling will not occur in the future. I also expect, Mr. Speaker, that the process will be undertaken and completed on an urgent and timely basis over the next several weeks.

1:50

Dr. Taft: Given that we've heard too many reassurances and have seen too many deaths, Mr. Speaker, what will it take for this minister to finally act and remove the Calgary health region's senior management and appoint an independent administrator?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I know that the hon. member has received similar correspondence as I've received from the Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists because I was copied with a letter that was sent to him, and I will table this at the appropriate time. I want to quote out of this letter.

System failures contribute to the majority of errors in health care – not the negligence of individual providers. Although we do not have all of the facts, it would appear that the incident in Calgary may have occurred as a result of system failures. Much has also been made of the fact that pharmacists did not check the dialysate product. Studies have however proven that a tech-check-tech system is a safe and effective standard of care. Hospital pharmacy technicians receive proper academic instruction and their training is supplemented by additional certification within hospitals.

Finally, this paragraph concludes by saying:

Studies have also shown that the optimal place for pharmacists within the health system is advising and recommending therapies at the point of prescribing, not in the checking of drug products.

That, Mr. Speaker, is a letter dated 22 March 2004 from the Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists.

The Speaker: It will be tabled at the appropriate time.

Mr. Mar: Yes, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: why is the Calgary health region continuing its policy of hiring well-connected Tories for senior positions within the Calgary health region?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the issue is not whether one's political credentials are right. The question is one of one's qualifications. I think it's important to know that association with the Conservative Party is not a barrier to getting a job, nor is it a requirement to getting a job.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for West-Yellowhead.

Learning Commission Recommendations

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last September for no good reason this government laid off 1,000 teachers, leading to a spike in class sizes and deteriorating classroom conditions for Alberta students. Tomorrow's budget is the government's last opportunity to correct these errors by fully funding the Learning Commission recommendations in accordance with the timetable laid out in the report. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Has the government decided to fully fund the implementation of the phase 1 recommendations of the Learning Commission, in particular the reduction of class sizes, to make sure that parents, teachers, and school boards once again don't feel let down by this government?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just in my opening comments I would say that the budget would be tabled tomorrow, so I will not be talking about anything specific when it comes to the educational funding.

In the Learning Commission phase 1 is recommending approximately a little over \$300 million over the first three years of the plan. It recommends over five years that there be put in right around \$600 million. Also included in that was a recommendation for the funding formula to be put in and to be added to the funding.

I will say to the hon. member in regard to his specific question about class size, about teachers, about parents that included in the funding formula is a great amount of flexibility which allows the school boards to spend the money as they see fit.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that over one-quarter of kindergarten to grade 3 students in Edmonton public schools are packed into classrooms of 25 or more, within what time frame will the government implement the Learning Commission's class size guideline of 17 students in kindergarten to grade 3?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, included in the Learning Commission is that that recommendation be over five years. We are working on that, and I hope it to be considerably less than five years.

Dr. Pannu: My final supplementary, Mr. Speaker: given the Learning Commission's focus on improving early childhood education, what is the government's time frame and action plan for implementing the recommendations for full-day kindergarten and half-day junior kindergarten for children at risk?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm certainly glad the hon. member added in the last statement, which was "at risk." One of the current issues that we are dealing with is: how exactly do you define an at-risk child? Many of the factors that are out there are indeed only proxies, and we're attempting to get the most accurate proxy.

I will say to the hon. member that one of the things we're looking at at the moment is actually language and speech delay. That seems to be the most accurate proxy that is out there for high-risk needs, and we're currently looking at how we could implement that. It does have a lot of ramifications to not just the K to 12 system but also to the postsecondary system as speech pathologists and the like are very few and far between right at this moment.

We are working at it hard. I would anticipate that it will be done probably within the next two or three months. But, Mr. Speaker, the key thing to this is that when we do it, it's going to be done well. It is going to be done accurate; it is not necessarily going to be done quick.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Softwood Lumber Trade Dispute

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the World Trade Organization panel ruled that the process the United States used to determine whether softwood lumber poses a threat of economic harm to the United States producers does not comply with international trade law. The panel also said that the United States must take steps to comply with the WTO ruling. My main question is the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. How will this WTO decision impact the future NAFTA ruling in the dispute against Canadian softwood lumber for our Alberta industries?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Jonson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are two resolution panels involved here that are looking at this overall matter, one under the NAFTA, the North American free trade agreement, and one under the World Trade Organization. The issue is whether the U.S. International Trade Commission currently determined that our softwood threatens injury to the United States producers. Duties cannot be imposed unless it is established that imports are causing or threatening harm to producers in the importing country.

Mr. Speaker, back in September a NAFTA panel also found flaws in the International Trade Commission's analysis and have told the ITC to fix those flaws. The ITC issued revisions to its original ruling in December, and the NAFTA panel will make a decision on those revisions in April.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary question is to the same minister. Will the WTO ruling result in a reduction in duties or monies being returned to the Canadian softwood lumber producers?

Mr. Jonson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the simple answer is: not right now. Legal processes are not yet over, unfortunately. So far the U.S. has failed to make its case that our softwood lumber is threatening cause or harm to producers. However, the U.S. still has the option to appeal the WTO ruling. If it loses the appeal, it has to take steps to comply with WTO rules. It may have to redo its injury analysis to meet those rules. If they cannot do this, they will have to drop the duties completely. However, regretfully, we are not at that stage yet, and these legal processes are complex and lengthy and are running their course.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. In light of the softwood lumber dispute how have Alberta mills been able to keep their rate of production up?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's a very good question because there are some articles in the local papers today in relation to the forest of gold, talking about the forest industry, in fact, in Alberta and how well the industry is doing. They've increased production in the last number of years by 30 per cent. We used to ship 1.1 billion board feet of lumber to the U.S. on export markets. Now, we're shipping 1.5 billion.

So the industry is doing very well, and the reason for that is we probably have the most efficient mills in North America, Mr. Speaker. Our forestry practices are probably the best in North America, and we know how to keep a balance between economic development, environmental management, and fish and wildlife management. But as a government we do not create the jobs. We don't do a very good job creating the jobs, but we do, I think, a good job of creating the environment for private industry to create jobs and the wealth.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

2:00

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A recent study shows that the use of credit scores for a person's credit history in the rating process as an insurance underwriting tool has a negative impact on low-income and minority groups. In 2003 at least 40 U.S. states were drafting legislation ranging from full bans to limits on credit information use, while in Canada only Ontario has banned credit scoring as far as auto insurance premiums are concerned. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. To what extent are Alberta automobile insurance companies using credit scoring as a means to accept or reject drivers for automobile insurance in this province?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't have an answer to the hon. member on that question. It's not something that I've gone into on their financial records and asked them. I do know that they probably should refer that question to the individual company and have them answer it themselves.

Mr. MacDonald: I'm astonished, Mr. Speaker.

To the same minister: given that Ontario has banned this practice, will this government ban the use of credit scoring as a factor in calculating insurance rates and coverage in Alberta for Alberta drivers?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, under our new framework that we're putting forward, that would not be a criterion for qualifying for insurance. We would have in place under the new structure what's called the all-comers rule, so people would have an opportunity to access insurance within this province. So that would not be relevant at that point.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: can the minister guarantee Alberta consumers and drivers that no Albertan will be denied automobile insurance under the government's insurance reforms based on their credit scores or their personal credit history?

Mrs. Nelson: What I can say, Mr. Speaker, is that under this new structure Albertans will not be denied insurance within this province. Now, how it will be determined will be from their own driving

record and their accident record. If they've had at-fault accidents or they have a bad driving record, then they are going to pay for insurance.

Access to insurance is critically important, and one impetus for this whole structural change is to make sure that the law we have in place that says that you have to have automobile insurance can be adhered to. That's one of the reasons we made the structural change that we did.

So I'm glad to see that the Liberal Party or the member opposite at least is onside for the new restructuring of automobile insurance.

Environmental Initiatives

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, my constituents are consistently expressing a very strong concern and interest in environmental issues. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. Given that Canadian cities such as Halifax are now recycling about 60 per cent of their solid waste stream and other countries are moving towards 100 per cent recycling and reportedly even making money doing it, are there any new or recent initiatives being introduced by your department that would greatly encourage and facilitate recycling in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes. Let me start by saying that Alberta has one of the best recycling programs in the country. We recycle beverage containers, we recycle tires, we recycle used oil, we recycle milk jugs and, recently, fluorescent light bulbs. As we move forward, we still need to do more. About 80 per cent of our waste still ends up in landfills, and we need to reverse that so that 20 per cent ends up in landfills and 80 per cent ends up in recycling. As the member correctly pointed out, many other jurisdictions do.

So we've set a goal for Albertans to reduce the amount of waste they produce. Each Albertan, everybody in this House, everybody in the gallery, produces about 750 kilograms of waste a year. To us older folks that's about 1,600 to 1,700 pounds a year. We want to reduce that to 500 kilograms a year. To do that, we have to move into more recycling. We want to move into recycling of electronic waste, we want to move into more recycling of hazardous materials, and we want to move into more recycling of organics. So those are the areas that we're looking at moving into.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that widespread pesticide use is of concern to many Albertans, what policies or practices is your department involved in to ensure that pesticides are being used and disposed of appropriately?

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, we have worked with the agricultural industry as well as the pesticide industry, and I can tell you that over 1 million pesticide containers have been recycled. This is an operation that is a co-operation between the private sector, industry, Operation Clean Farm, and the Department of Environment. This program is an easy sell in rural Alberta because farmers are educated users of pesticides. They use them yearly. They know how to handle them, and they know how to dispose of the containers. When you have an educated population, recycling works very well, and this has been a very successful program.

Mr. Lord: My final supplement again to the same minister: is Alberta Environment considering incorporating proven to be

effective environmental management systems such as ISO 14000 into provincial programs?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, as has been correctly identified, ISO 14000 is an international environmental management technique, I guess one could call it. There is only one jurisdiction in Canada that has mandated or implemented ISO 14000, and that's the city of Calgary. Perhaps the hon. member who asked the question was on council there when it was mandated; I don't know.

We are looking at ISO 14000 in the Department of Environment, but we have to set standards that are appropriate to Alberta conditions, Alberta industry, Alberta environment. As we continue to look at them, we will set the standards that are appropriate to Alberta and Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Student Loan Program

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A millennium scholarship study confirms what Alberta students have been telling this government about student finance for years. The government's assumptions are plain wrong. Living cost allowances, expectations of parental contributions, and the overall plan based on increasing student debt just isn't working. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. When will the government's assumptions about parental contributions be adjusted to reflect reality?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the millennium scholarship fund put out a study about one to two years ago that said essentially the same type of thing. At that time it was criticized because the sample size was extremely small, and the millennium scholarship group said that they were going to go back, expand the scope of the study, and expand the numbers of people that were involved. It's our information that this did not occur and that, indeed, they were actually utilizing the same size sample group as they did before.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Speaker, Stats Canada put out a study about two weeks ago that stated that university today, when it takes into account the expenses, the fees, the books, and everything, is actually cheaper than it was in 1965, which I think is a very good deal for the citizens of Alberta.

Dr. Massey: He's been away too long.

To the same minister: when will the government take action to help Alberta students living away from home to reduce the \$3,000 gap between their living costs and student loan allowances?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, it would be very nice if the hon. member would read the study. What the study actually says is that Alberta has probably done the most of any province in Canada to address this. Rural students, for example, who are required to move to the cities to go to school now receive approximately \$2,250 in order to enable them to do this. I think that when you ask any of the student associations, they will tell you that the student loan program in Alberta is one of the best if not the best in Canada.

The other comment that occurred in the article basically stated that loan limits had not been increased for approximately three to four years. Obviously, Mr. Speaker, this is false because the loan limits in Alberta have consistently been increased over the past four to five years. Indeed, more than a 50 per cent increase has been put into the student loan program since I've been minister.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: when will the government simply overhaul the entire student finance plan and bring it into the 21st century?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, what the hon. member seems to tend to forget is that a considerable portion of the student loan program is actually overseen by the federal Liberal government. Our student loan program provides automatic remission; the federal Liberal student loan program gives no remission. We allow the interest to be phased in over a six-month period. There are differences with the federal student loan program. We have been working very hard to harmonize the Alberta student loan program with the federal student loan program, and finally we are at a point where it's very close to being harmonized.

2:10

Mr. Speaker, in today's budget – and it's probably just being read as we speak or will be a little later – there will be some significant changes to the federal student loan program, and I commend them for doing this. They have actually raised limits for the first time. Today in the budget they have kept pace with what Alberta has been doing. It's very good.

I would say that the student loan program currently in place in Alberta is the best of its kind in Canada and will continue to be the best of its kind.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Calgary Police Service Investigation

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary Police Service has concluded its investigation into a police officer's fatal shooting last fall of Mr. Deng Kuol, a member of the Sudanese community. The investigation and the review by a Crown prosecutor have found no criminal wrongdoing on the part of the officer involved. Members of the Sudanese community are unhappy with the process followed in investigating this incident, which happened to take place in my constituency. They have also questioned whether the investigation was truly fair and impartial. To the Solicitor General: is the minister satisfied with how this incident was investigated?

The Speaker: We're asking for an opinion here about a legal instrument.

The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the hon. member indicated, the Calgary Police Service did release the results of the investigation. The past few months since this incident have been a very difficult time for many people: the man's family and his friends, the Sudanese community, the police officer involved, and the Calgary Police Service itself. The police service understands the stress on the community affected and has said that it will try to rebuild a better relationship.

I'm assured that all proper investigation procedures were followed and that everything that could have been done to review the incident was done. The report of the investigation was reviewed by a Crown prosecutor as it is required by police service policies in incidents of this nature. The prosecutor has concluded that the officer involved acted reasonably and justifiably in self-defence. Mr. Speaker, the prosecutor has concurred that the investigation was impartial, objective, and exhaustive.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since many residents of my constituency called for a public inquiry at the time this incident took place and they're still calling for one in light of the findings, will the government hold a public inquiry?

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, there will be a fatality inquiry into this incident. That is required by law and is automatic in events of this nature. A fatality inquiry is held before a provincial court judge. It is a public hearing open to the media and open to community members who wish to attend. Witnesses will be called, and all evidence will be presented in an open, public, and objective manner. The inquiry will look at all the factors surrounding what happened, and the presiding judge may make recommendations on how to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.

Kananaskis Valley Development

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, the Evan-Thomas alluvial fan, where Evan-Thomas Creek meets the Kananaskis River, is one of the most important regions for wildlife in Kananaskis Country. It's a home to wolves, grizzly bears, moose, and bighorn sheep as well as the site of most of the existing commercial development in the Kananaskis. To the Minister of Community Development: given that the levels of development proposed for the Kananaskis Valley will negatively affect wildlife in the region, why is this ministry considering allowing further commercial development in the area?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, the Evan-Thomas review draft management plan was put together after a great amount of public consultation with local groups in the environmental sector, with local businesses, with the KID Council, and I myself have been down and met with them on numerous occasions over the past couple of years. I think we have made some very good progress toward some compromises that can be looked at so that we recognize the importance of the Evan-Thomas area not only to wildlife and the ecological systems that support it but also to tourists and to resident Albertans who like to visit that place and don't want to see it totally shut off from some of the amenities, that are in desperate need there. So we are looking at arriving at something very soon that would help move that particular project along in a very environmentally sensitive yet palatable way for all Albertans.

Ms Carlson: But, Mr. Speaker, why is this minister ignoring the protests of Albertans who do not want to see further development in Kananaskis?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, back when Evan-Thomas was established as a provincial recreation area – I think it goes back to the 1980s – there was always an understanding that on this issue of what would or would not be permitted in the future by way of development or other proposals that might be considered, there would always be an opportunity to review it at an important time in the history and development of that area. That time did come a couple of years ago, and that's what's being done.

But I want to assure the member that the policy that we are adhering to, the Kananaskis recreation policy, will be followed. It specifically says that there will not be any large-scale new developments allowed in that area, but there will be some consideration given to some small expansions to existing facilities so that we can accommodate the tremendous growth needs of the area and of people who want to visit that absolutely gorgeous jewel in the Canadian Rockies area.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, will the ministry expand surrounding provincial parks and wild-lands to protect this sensitive area from further commercial development?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, that's one of the best questions I've had in this regard, and it's a very good one. As part of the compromises and in sort of coming together on this issue with many groups, we have looked at how we might alleviate some of the concerns. One of them would be if we allow some type of an expansion, on the one hand, to existing facilities, which would help not only the tourism industry but also the important staff members who service the Evan-Thomas facilities that currently exist, but also to take a look at what we might do by way of including some other areas that would be desirable for expansion such as the hon. member is referring to. So we'll be getting back to the Assembly very soon with some further indications of what we're planning to do there, but I do thank the hon. member for a very good question.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Health Care Premiums

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Health care premiums are a regressive tax that hurts seniors, middle-class families, and working Albertans. Scrapping premiums will put over \$900 million directly into Albertans' pockets, saving \$1,056 per year for a typical family, yet the priority of this government is to keep implementing a multiyear \$1 billion tax cut for large and profitable corporations. My question is to the Minister of Finance. Why is the government's priority to keep cutting corporate taxes at the expense of scrapping health care premiums, which would provide far greater benefit for average Albertan families?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I read the member opposite's press release again today, and I have to be honest with you.

An Hon. Member: Which one?

Mrs. Nelson: Which one? They put them out by the dozen, and they all say absolutely nothing.

Insofar as taxes are concerned, this current year, that we're under right now, saw Albertans receive the benefit of us protecting them from the indexation of the personal income tax to make sure that Albertans have the lowest personal tax in the country, and we've done that very successfully. We are the only province, I can say again for individuals, that doesn't have a sales tax. That's a huge advantage for Albertans.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, why doesn't the Minister of Finance admit that a \$1,056 health care premium bill for a typical family is a huge tax that is paid primarily by people who can't afford it?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, our job here is to provide a package for Albertans that is one that provides them with core programs and a quality of life that we believe is the best in the country, and that's a balance. It's a balance of making sure that we profile certain areas, such as health and education, but also making sure that our fees and charges and taxes are the lowest overall in the country. Quite frankly, we've been successful in doing just that.

2:20

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, why has the government let down

Alberta's senior citizens again by failing to scrap health care premiums for all seniors at a modest cost of only \$90 million in lost revenue, preferring instead to keep cutting corporations' taxes?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to get into the particulars because we are bringing a budget down tomorrow, and this little game that comes from the opposite side on a regular basis before we bring down financial statements is just that: it's a little game. So we're not going to fall into the game that's being played, but I can tell you that I believe that what we will be presenting tomorrow meets the needs of Albertans, quite frankly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Contaminated Groundwater from Ogden Rail Site

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Part of my constituency is greatly concerned about an underground plume that has been migrating away from the contaminated site of the Ogden rail site into the community. I understand that Alberta Environment has been aware of this contamination since 1999, and it continues to spread into the community and toward the river. My question today is to the Minister of Environment. Why after five years are residents in my community still exposed to the toxic vapours that are associated with the contaminated groundwater?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is a serious issue, and the member is correct: we have some problems in that area. We have been working with the Calgary regional health authority to ensure that CP Rail is living up to its responsibilities and fulfills its responsibilities to the residents.

Currently concerns, as the member has identified, have been raised, Mr. Speaker, about possible health issues related to off-site contamination. That off-site contamination would take the form of vapours actually happening in people's basements. What we have insisted on and where these vapours are detected, CP Rail is putting in something called subslab depressurization units. These subslab depressurization units vent the vapours out of the affected basements, and this actually works. When these units are installed, the basements are vented and there are no more vapours in the basements.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you. My second question is to the same minister. Given that many residents have used the devices in their basements to remove the vapours, my question is: what is your department doing to ensure that all affected homes are identified and outfitted with the devices?

Dr. Taylor: Well, we need to put the number of homes in context. I mean, if it's your home, it's important and significant, but overall, Mr. Speaker, the total number of homes affected is about 35 homes. As I said, for those 35 families this is a significant issue.

So I can tell you that the testing for vapours in these homes is continuous, and CP Rail is actively testing the groundwater around the community. We've insisted on that to determine the extent of the contamination, where it is, how much there is of it, and that is actually happening right now.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is to the same minister. What is your department doing to ensure that there is no further contamination leaving the CP Rail site?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member has touched on an important point. Alberta Environment has required – this is not an option – CP Rail to place a barrier on the site to stop any further migration of the toxic materials off the site. So we've stopped it. To make sure that is happening, we require CP Rail to test any groundwater that does leave the site. So we know exactly what's happening around that site. Results to date have indicated that the barrier is working. The contamination is contained. It is not leaving the site. What we have to do is work on cleaning up the existing contamination. There is a 1-800 number that the residents can call if they wish to find out more information, and that 1-800 number is available at their MLA's office.

Transportation Department Survey

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, in 2003 Banister Research & Consulting Inc. conducted a client satisfaction survey for Alberta Transportation. To the Minister of Transportation: what was the mandate of this survey?*

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of the Banister survey. Maybe he can give me more details.

Mr. Bonner: Since the minister is not familiar with this survey that was conducted by Alberta Transportation, perhaps he could give me answers to my following two questions once he's had an opportunity to look at the information. Those questions would be: could the minister forward to us the cost of this survey to the Alberta taxpayer, and when will the results of this survey be publicly released?

Thank you.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I shall endeavour to bring that information forward. We do a fair amount of work in the department through various consulting agencies, including engineers, looking at various plans for Alberta Transportation well into the future. I'll get that information to the House.

The Speaker: Well, that worked well.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Identity Theft

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Solicitor General. Identity theft occurs when someone steals the identity of an unsuspecting victim. The thief then empties the bank accounts, runs up credit cards, and generally ruins the credit reputation of the victim. Last month someone stole credit files and personal information of 1,400 Canadians, many of whom were Albertans, as the result of a security breach at Equifax Canada. My question: what is being done by the Solicitor General to ensure that law enforcement considers identity theft to be a serious crime?

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member brings up a good question. Obviously, the department and the police in this province are very, very concerned about identity theft. Albertans take their privacy very seriously. Identity theft and, in this case, cybercrime are fraud, and all police services treat these incidents of crime very, very seriously.

*See page 678, right column, paragraph 11

We must keep in mind, Mr. Speaker, that crime is becoming more high tech and sophisticated. We will be announcing a significant increase in police funding in the provincial budget tomorrow to help provide police with more tools to keep up with this type of crime. The Alberta Solicitor General is currently working with other government departments and the federal government on a cross-government strategy to combat cybercrime. Lastly, we'll continue to push the federal government for a national strategy because these are crimes that have no borders.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you. My first supplemental is to the Attorney General. Are maximum penalties for identity theft sufficient to deter criminals?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the hon. member has referred to, there are provisions under the Criminal Code which would come into play with respect to areas of identity theft. The first which comes to mind would be the charge of personation which would carry, if I'm not mistaken, a penalty of up to 10 years in prison. Other charges might be available in the areas of fraud, false pretenses, false statements, uttering forged documents. All of those carry rather significant maximum penalties.

The trick, of course, is to get the appropriate penalty in place. Crown prosecutors, in taking these cases to court, consider them very, very serious because we're seeing more of an impact from identity theft situations, particularly with the onset of the use of the Internet. Our special prosecutions branch handles these cases, tends to aggressively prosecute them and try and get actual jail sentences attached to convictions in this area. So, yes, the maximum penalty is there. The trick is getting it put in place with respect to these crimes.

Of course, as the hon. Solicitor General mentioned and as I just mentioned, we have the special prosecutions branch, and we have a cybercrimes prosecutor specifically dedicated to looking at areas of Internet crime and crime using computer technology and information technology. That's very closely intertwined with this whole area of identity theft.

So we're taking it very seriously, we prosecute it aggressively, and we attempt to get very solid penalties in order to deter other citizens from engaging in this area.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the Minister of Government Services. Is our government being proactive in educating Albertans about the threat posed by identity theft?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, the quick answer to that is yes. We tend to kind of complete the picture here in terms of Albertans whose identities or assets have been stolen. What we do in Alberta Government Services is we offer a tipsheet for them as to how to get themselves out of the predicament that someone else has put them in.

Alberta Government Services has gotten together with all of the consumer protection ministers from across Canada and put together a national identity theft kit. What this national identity theft kit does is it provides a standard form that's used all across Canada by people who have had their identity taken away from them. It provides a

standard form for them to reach out to credit card companies, to banks, financial institutions and to take this form and process it to clear their name.

In addition to that, Alberta Government Services has just embarked on a new highly secure driver's licence card as well as the process and the delivery of that card that helps preserve people's identity. The last thing that we are involved in, Mr. Speaker, is that when you go to get your driver's licence, there is a stricter enforcement into proving who you are before you can apply for that driver's licence.

So those are the things that we are doing in Government Services to protect people's identity.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of four members to participate in Members' Statements, but let me say, first of all, thank you to all members today. Shorter questions have led to shorter answers, and we were able to deal with 14 different sets of questions, and that's appreciated.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Bernie and Sheila Inman

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 8, 2004, Bernie and Sheila Inman launched a very important safety video. In 1994 while working in the petroleum industry, Bernie Inman was critically injured and, as a result, is now confined to a wheelchair. His video *The Other Side* dramatically re-creates the incident and traces the impact of the accident on his wife, Sheila, and his coworker Al.

Since his accident Bernie and Sheila have become ambassadors for workplace safety. They have travelled throughout Alberta and Saskatchewan sharing their story and raising awareness about the importance of workplace safety. Their courage and commitment to this cause and each other are truly amazing.

Bernie and Sheila have been working closely with the Job Skills Safety Society to promote workplace safety. This society works tirelessly to address the unacceptable number of workplace injuries and fatalities and to ensure that young workers are properly trained for safety before they enter the workforce.

To accomplish their mission, they have designed JobSafe, an award-winning workplace safety training program. JobSafe educates youth about workplace health and safety issues, promotes the development of a positive attitude towards safety, and gives our youth a solid foundation for future workplace training.

I also thank EnCana, Talisman, and Toromont Process Systems for sponsoring and hosting this event. They are truly industry leaders in workplace safety awareness.

Alberta has set a record low for lost-time claim rates in 2002, and we are looking at setting another record for 2003. It is very exciting to see the work of Bernie, Sheila, and the Job Skills Safety Society pay off.

Workplace safety is everyone's responsibility. Government has to set standards and enforce them. Employers need to integrate safety into all their operations. Workers need to take personal responsibility for themselves and their coworkers.

It is time for everyone to choose safe, not sorry, and as Bernie puts it: Safety Starts with Awareness; Awareness Starts with You.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Alberta Athletes

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to recognize some of Alberta's outstanding athletes and teams for their national and international achievements.

Spruce Grove's Jennifer Heil was crowned as the women's overall moguls champion on the World Cup freestyle ski circuit this year after competing in 14 different events and reaching the podium nine times. She is also the first Canadian woman to ever win this prestigious championship.

Vermilion's Beckie Scott continued her success at the Canadian cross-country ski championships in New Brunswick, where she won three national titles in the 30-k race, the sprint race, and in a 10-k two-day pursuit event. One week previously Beckie finished second in the pursuit event at the world championships in Italy, missing the gold by a fraction of a second.

Red Deer's Jeremy Wotherspoon maintained his dominance in speed skating by winning the 500-metre event at the long track speed skating championships in Korea. He also won the overall title for this distance, proving yet again that he is the fastest man on ice in the world.

Edmonton's Chris Benoit recently won the world heavyweight wrestling championship in New York's Madison Square Garden. He is one of the most respected wrestlers anywhere, having begun his career in 1986 in Calgary Stampede Wrestling.

Alberta's college teams also achieved great success this season. The Lethbridge Community College Kodiaks won the Canadian Colleges Athletic Association's national championships in women's basketball, and the Red Deer College Kings won the men's volleyball national college championship for the fifth year in a row.

The U of A Bears basketball team captain, Kevin Petterson from Spruce Grove, won the 2004 Ken Shields TSN award for his outstanding commitment to athletics, academics, and community involvement. He was chosen over all other male university basketball players in the country.

Mr. Speaker, we are all very proud of our Alberta athletes, and our sport programs do indeed develop great athletes and great citizens. I would like everyone to join me and the Minister of Community Development in congratulating these talented Alberta athletes.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Weldwood of Canada Limited

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to clarify an issue that was raised in the House last week regarding Weldwood of Canada and IKEA. In a question raised in the House by an hon. member, it was suggested that Weldwood was dropped as a supplier of wood to IKEA because its forestry practices did not meet IKEA's wood purchasing standards.

It should be noted that this is incorrect. Weldwood was never a direct supplier of wood to IKEA. Until August 2003 Weldwood sold a wood product to a local Edmonton-based manufacturer which in turn remanufactured it into a shelving product for IKEA. However, the local company stopped using the supply from Weldwood for this particular product because the product specifications from IKEA changed. This decision was based on the adequate nature of the supply, not a concern for environmental standards. Weldwood continues to sell its product to the local company, but it is used in the manufacture of products.

I wish to clarify that Weldwood's Hinton forest management agreement is recognized nationally and internationally as an exceptionally well-managed forest, receiving numerous awards over

the 50-year period they have managed Alberta's first FMA. Weldwood's Hinton FMA was the first in Alberta to commit to sustainable forest management as a fundamental component of management plans, and Weldwood was also the first company in Canada to have all of its forest management tenures certified under the CSA standard.

They are proud of their excellence in sustainable forest management, Mr. Speaker, and so, too, are Albertans. I would encourage all members to take the time to learn about this company and the valuable work they do in sustaining Alberta's forests for future generations.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Democratic Renewal

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to talk about the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. A wave of democratic renewal is sweeping this country. From New Brunswick to B.C. governments are establishing secretariats, assemblies, and entire government departments on democratic renewal.

Liberal governments are leading the charge in democratic renewal in Canada. In Ontario a Democratic Renewal Secretariat has been set up. In Ottawa for the first time in a long time there is a secretary of state for democratic renewal. In Quebec there is a commission on democratic reform, and in B.C., our good neighbour, they are taking steps to look seriously at changing the first past the post electoral system in that province.

2:40

How are they doing it? With something called the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. The 160-member assembly is looking at alternatives to our present-day electoral system, which overcompensates governing parties and truly does a disservice to every other party.

The assembly in B.C. has met several times and has received presentations and submissions from electoral experts on what to do with the electoral system. Best of all, the results that come out of the citizens' assembly will be put to a referendum of B.C. residents so that the people can decide which system of elections they like the best.

Today I will be introducing an amendment to the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, which would allow Alberta to set up a citizens' assembly on electoral reform. I would urge all hon. members of this Assembly to support this amendment. Let's vote to take a step towards democratic renewal in Alberta. We certainly need it.

Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm presenting a petition signed by 119 Alberta seniors petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to

recognize and value the contributions and sacrifices the seniors have made in building the Province of Alberta, and treat them with due respect and dignity by reversing those policies that cause unnecessary financial hardship for them and undermine their quality of life.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to give notice that I plan to raise a matter of urgent and pressing necessity under Standing Order 40 at the appropriate time. I will send the notice of motion to the table.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give oral notice to members of the Assembly of a motion which I intend to move.

Be it resolved that since the mandatory registration of all nonrestricted firearms is an unnecessary intrusion on the property rights and cultural heritage of Albertans, fails to discourage criminal activity involving firearms, and has wasted an enormous amount of money, the Legislative Assembly of Alberta recommends that the government of Alberta urge the government of Canada to introduce amendments to the Firearms Act of Canada and the Criminal Code of Canada to remove the requirement for the registration of all nonrestricted firearms.

head:

Introduction of Bills

Bill 25

School Amendment Act, 2004

Rev. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce a bill being the School Amendment Act, 2004.

Bill 25 implements some of the recommendations of the Learning Commission regarding the statutory responsibilities of teachers, and it also makes legislative changes to improve the board of reference.

The Speaker: I've been advised, hon. member, that you are doing this on behalf of the hon. Minister of Learning. Is this correct?

Rev. Abbott: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 25 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Bill 26

Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, who is doing it on behalf of myself, I would like to move first reading of Bill 26, being the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this puts into force what has been negotiated with the Alberta Teachers' Association, specifically the practice review process, which is the first of its kind in North America and indeed maybe the first of its kind in the world.

This is a very progressive bill, and I would urge everyone in this Assembly to support it on first reading.

The Speaker: I take it, hon. Minister of Learning, that your name is on the bill.

Dr. Oberg: Yes.

[Motion carried; Bill 26 read a first time]

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to file today on behalf of the Deputy Premier copies of the news release and attached presentation to the United States Department of Agriculture stating Alberta's views on the reopening of the border to ruminant livestock trade. I commend it to everyone's reading.

Thank you for your attention.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness I have six copies of a letter dated March 22, 2004, from the Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists. I wish to table those.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand and submit today the required number of copies of the environmental protection security fund annual report. This indicates how much security we've taken in the form of bonds and so on from various companies that are having actions under the act.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of a letter dated February 20, 2004, from Mr. Albert Opstad, president of Seniors United Now, known as SUN, addressed to the Premier in which Mr. Opstad is expressing concern on behalf of the members of the organization that the throne speech had failed to make any reference to restoration of seniors' lost benefits and is asking the government to remedy the growing inequities.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a letter from Peter van Hal, who's the president of the Water Valley Community Association. He is making note that their community centre and heritage building is being charged on a demand or needle meter. He feels that "the argument is not the rate but the classification and the huge portion of electricity charged but not used, this is not logic, unreasonable, unjustifiable and needs to be rectified."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table copies of the correspondence I discussed in question period today. This is from Economic Development and dated March 11, 2004, and it's asking for close to \$3,000 in access to information FOIP request fees. It's very high. I can't afford to pay it.

Thank you.

head:

Motions under Standing Order 40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on a Standing Order 40 application.

Ministerial Travel Expenses

Ms Blakeman:

Be it resolved that an order of the Legislative Assembly to call for a complete disclosure be tabled in the Legislative Assembly by all members of Executive Council of all expenses incurred during travel outside the province since March 12, 2001, and that each member of Executive Council table receipts for those expenses in the Assembly.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise on a Standing Order 40 application to present a motion to the Assembly. The motion has been distributed.

Standing Order 40 applications are to be made in cases of urgent and pressing necessity, and I would argue that that is the case. This government claims that it is open and transparent, and this may be true, but you're going to have to fight your way through a lot of smoke and stone walls to see it.

In 1998 the government spent \$89 million on travel and communications. In last year's budget that number had jumped to \$131 million, representing a 147 per cent increase. We've been told by the government when we've requested expenses before that we need to write the members of Executive Council to get the information. The response that we received was to go to Public Accounts. When we asked the question in Public Accounts Committee, we're told that Public Accounts isn't the right venue to discuss expenses, that we should bring it up in the House as a written question or a motion for a return. We bring it up as a written question and a motion for a return, and we are told that it's too much paperwork to table the information.

2:50

Mr. Speaker, this is it. This is our last stop. This is one of the last places that we can ask. I think that in true-blue bureaucratic style this particular government has passed us from one body, from one process to another to another and refuses to be open and transparent with the opposition and with Albertans. They rail against big government, but they certainly like to use it when it suits their needs.

So, Mr. Speaker, this is a chance to show all Albertans that the government is open and has free information exchange for all. Will they do it? I certainly urge all members to grant unanimous consent to this request. A vote no is a vote for big, closed-door government, and I hope and live in hope that this government will do otherwise.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hancock: A point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: We'll deal with the point of order after we call the question.

Under Standing Order 40 applications it requires the unanimous consent of the Assembly.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Speaker: Now the Government House Leader on a point of order.

Point of Order

Offending the Practices of the Assembly

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under 23(1), "introduces any matter in debate which offends the practices and precedents of the Assembly," the hon. member in a very inappropriate way, I would submit, in a situation where she is the only person who gets to speak to a matter before the House, tries to characterize what the meaning of a person's no vote might be with respect to her motion.

Very inappropriate to do it in that circumstance in particular, where no member of the House has an occasion to rise and respond to put forward to the House what might be behind their indication of support or nonsupport for a motion. I would ask that the hon. member be cautioned to not do that.

We've seen quite a number of Standing Order 40s, and in each case there has been a characterization of some sort which no member of the House gets to respond to except by a no vote on the request for unanimous consent, but this one is particularly egregious because it purports to suggest that members of the House have some other purpose than representing their constituents when they say no to such a Standing Order 40 application.

The Speaker: On this point of order, the hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I take the citation that the Government House Leader has listed, 23(1), introducing a matter which offends practices and precedents of the Assembly. What just happened here is a plea in support of a request for a Standing Order 40, and I don't see how it offended the practice of the House, certainly, in urging members to vote for it. It's a free vote. In this case it's requesting unanimous consent. Members can certainly withhold that, but I don't think the characterization that I made is untoward, and certainly the members have it well within their command to either support or deny the application that was put forward. So I don't think that any practices of the House were offended by what just happened.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Anyone else on this point of order?

Well, one thing is very clear. Under Standing Order 40 with respect to a Standing Order 40 application – and these are our Standing Orders; these are written by the men and women of this particular Legislative Assembly and agreed to by them – it says in 40(1), "A motion may, in case of urgent and pressing necessity previously explained by the mover, be made by unanimous consent of the Assembly without notice having been given under Standing Order 38." Only one person can participate. There is no debate. There's a call for a question, for the mover of the motion to explain the case of urgent and pressing necessity. That's what our Standing Order says.

So I agree with the Government House Leader with respect to this. If there's no opportunity for any individual to participate, then one has to be very, very cautious about what they say in moving their Standing Order. The Standing Order basically says, "In case of urgent and pressing necessity," and that is the case and the reason and the basis for the argument.

To introduce anything else that might impute motives on behalf of another member puts that other member at a total disadvantage, where they cannot come back and say anything. It's an acceptable argument and one for clarity of at least decorum and good manners in an Assembly. There can be no imputation of motives as to how any individual can vote or should vote, and no one else should be able to speak for that individual member other than the individual member himself or herself.

I know that in the past, when I sat in the chair in front of me and I had an opportunity to vote, it was no one's business, no one's reason, nor could anyone impute to me why I would vote in a particular way. Oftentimes my reason for voting either yea or nay was probably different than the person sitting beside me. Never ever was it as a result of belonging to a group. It was a conscience decision, and that is the important thing with respect to this. I have

no idea what goes on in the minds of the men and women in front of me when they vote on a particular issue. So I could never ever impute a motive, never ever make the suggestion.

Standing Order 40 is a technique that's available to all members in the case of urgent and pressing necessity. So that's where it's going to end, please.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

Bill 21

Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I take leave to move third reading of Bill 21, the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill proposes amendments to the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2003, a very valuable piece of legislation that received royal assent last spring. I say "valuable" because this act is all about protecting and providing support to Alberta's children, youth, and families. Few things are more valuable than that or more worth our time and attention. We are currently drafting regulations and working with stakeholders to get ready for the implementation. It was in the course of this work that the need for some minor amendments arose.

These amendments are largely a matter of housekeeping. In general, Mr. Speaker, these amendments will ensure that the Child Welfare Amendment Act, 2004, is aligned with the Family Law Act, the Vital Statistics Act, and the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act, or PCHIP. They will also ensure that the implementation of the new legislation proceeds as smoothly as possible. That's the overall intent of the amendments.

Members of the Assembly have raised some questions and concerns, and although we've already responded to the vast majority of them, there may be some value in touching on them again.

We heard in Committee of the Whole from the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry for additional clarification regarding the reporting structure of the children and youth advocate. Mr. Speaker, the advocate works with the ministry. The current reporting relationship is direct to the minister and allows for issues to be identified quickly and for resolution to be obtained effectively. This is a relationship that works well in supporting children and youth and their families when dealing with our child protection system.

Under the new legislation accountability will be further enhanced by increasing the number of times per year the advocate must report to the minister. This reporting will now be quarterly. Accountability to the House is achieved through the advocate's annual reports, which are tabled in this Legislature.

A question has also been raised about the advocate's role. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands has asked for clarification on why the child and youth advocate is not able to investigate complaints. The advocate does not conduct investigations in the formal sense of the word. The advocate represents the child's views and ensures that his or her voice is heard. The advocate works with the system, children, and youth to resolve issues in a collaborative way that is supportive of youth. Again, the children and youth advocate is there to support children in understanding the child protection system and to assist children or youth who wish to review the decisions made by a director.

There are a few points around the amendments related to alterna-

tive dispute resolution processes that are worthy of reiteration. Alternative dispute resolution processes, or mediation, can be highly effective and conciliatory means of dealing with conflict. In fact, these processes are already being used to help families resolve issues in a quicker, more effective, and less intrusive manner.

3:00

In response to questions related to the availability of funding for alternative dispute resolution processes, it should be noted that this option is generally less expensive than proceeding through the courts to resolve an issue. We are also planning to build this program on existing programs. In terms of the regulations in this area both opposition parties received copies of the proposed regulatory framework in December 2003 and were invited to seek further clarification if it was required.

Another area where there appears to be some continuing confusion is the removal of provisions allowing Children's Services to obtain child support. I'd like to re-emphasize that these provisions are entirely manifested in Alberta's new Family Law Act. This keeps Alberta's legislation simple and avoids unnecessary duplication.

I would like to quickly recap the reasoning behind changing the duration of an initial secure services order from 10 to five days. Mr. Speaker, this amendment will ensure that Charter rights are protected. This change will also ensure consistency with the confinement provisions of the PCHIP legislation. The details amending secure treatment are exactly as the Member for Edmonton-Highlands has indicated. Secure treatment is a serious restriction on an individual's rights of freedom. Even when that individual is a child, these rights must be protected. For this reason secure services are reserved for extreme situations.

The goal is to quickly stabilize youth and transition them to the supportive follow-up treatment or services they require. This is very much in keeping with the legislation's focus on providing a full continuum of community services and minimizing intervention.

Mr. Speaker, the amendments in Bill 21 will prepare Alberta's new Child Welfare Amendment Act for implementation. This is important legislation that will help us better support and protect Alberta's children, youth, and families. I ask for the support of the House on third reading of Bill 21.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. We've had not a lot of discussion on this bill, but we did manage to put our comments and questions on the record, and thank you very much to the member for answering them. I'm sorry; I was a little bit distracted, so I didn't hear if he answered my questions about maintenance enforcement, but I'll check the *Hansard*.

Our concern is less specific to this bill but more that we seem to be adjusting, trying to achieve perfection with the Child Welfare Act in fits and starts. This is one in a series of minor changes to the Child Welfare Act that we have seen since, in fact, we redid the act a year or two ago. So our concern is more about the process and the need for these sort of small adjustments which become cumulative.

We are willing to support Bill 21. We have all the way through and given it very rapid passage. We did not hear from any stakeholders in the community that expressed grave concerns about it. Therefore, we are willing to support the passage of the bill, but I do want to put our concerns about amending a larger bill with this sort of instalment program and our concerns about how that reflects on the whole bill in the end. At this point we're willing to support third reading of Bill 21.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo to close the debate.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At this time I'd like to close the debate on Bill 21 and call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 21 read a third time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order. Before I call the next bill before us, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's indeed a great honour and privilege for me to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly an icon in the business world, both a friend of mine and a constituent. Mr. Jim Gray is here visiting from Calgary, and I would ask him to rise and please receive a warm welcome from this Assembly.

Bill 24 **Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004**

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure for me to stand and discuss the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004. The focus of interim supply is to make sure that the government has operating grants when they've not yet completed the budgeting process.

I guess one of the things that's really difficult as we go about talking with Albertans about interim supply is focusing on the kind of debate around: what expenditures are there? I know that the normal answer to that is: well, wait till the budget. But if we're supposed to vote on this judiciously and in the spirit of appropriate government recognition of expenditures, we need to have the detail that's associated with being able to say that these are the types of expenditures.

As an example, in Learning we've heard all kinds of announcements, pronouncements, expectations being set out by the government to deal with changes in expenditures within the Learning budget, but also we need to know, in order to see how that works, what is the appropriate level of mix. As an example, the government has been talking about basically a \$500 million boost to the education and health budgets. Well, how much of that is going to go into the Learning budget as opposed to the Health budget? How much of it is going to go towards the implementation of the Learning Commission's report? These are the kinds of things that we have to be able to look at in terms of: are these interim supplies in line with the budget, or are they in effect not going to reflect relative increases or relative decreases in line with what we can see in the budget?

There's been a real debate about postsecondary education. How much of the money is going to be used there to provide assistance? Students are talking at length about the additional costs of education, the impact that this has on their ability to borrow money, the ability that they have to, in effect, get out and make sure that when they get finished with their education, they're not burdened with unbelievable debts, financial obligations that prevent them from participating as fully as they'd like to participate in the context of the benefits that come both to them as individuals but mostly to us as a society from a population that is properly educated.

3:10

There's approximately \$29 million going to Municipal Affairs. How much of this is going to be out there in line with the new Roles, Responsibilities, and Resources discussions? Will that reflect any of the new agreements that are there? Is it going to outline some of the things that are associated with the approach that the government is taking toward providing a new sense of participation by the order of government that's closest to the people of Alberta? We need to make sure that this kind of approach is put in place.

The question that comes up in my community most of all, you know, is: what is going to happen to the expenditures for seniors? The seniors lost both their dental and optical benefits, or some of them, in recent budgets. Will they be restored through this program? Is that going to be part of the focus that will be there for seniors?

The focus also that comes up in a number of other discussions would be: will there be dollars in the budget and are they included in this interim supply to initiate and expand the investigation of complaints by all Albertans about abuse of elders? You know, the elder abuse situation is really getting to be critical when we look at it from the point of view of the number of concerns that come to our offices and get raised about: are seniors getting proper care? Are seniors being looked after appropriately in their homes and in care facilities? These are the kinds of things that individuals want to know and want answers to.

When we see just major lines with departmental expenditures, we don't know where these are going, so how can we comment on them appropriately when individuals ask us? They're not in a position to accept the answer: well, let's wait for the budget.

We also noticed with interest the fact that the Solicitor General has requested an interim supply that is much higher in proportion to what was in the interim supply budget in the last three years. Well, what's going on in the Solicitor General's office that necessitates such a significant increase for interim supply? Will this be used to initiate and start a program for policing standards, provide more support to local communities for policing so that they can put that into their budget? What was the rationale behind trying to make sure that the Solicitor General had such a significant increase in budget for the interim supply component this year when it hasn't been there in other years?

The same kind of an argument is there for Sustainable Resource Development, where we see \$52 million being allocated in interim supply to that ministry. How much of this will be available for fish and wildlife officers? Is it there now so that they can be put in place, in effect, for the summer season when their duties and responsibilities associated with monitoring and checking fish licences and appropriate catch limits will be there? Is that one of the reasons that we do have the additional dollars in Sustainable Resource Development?

The other question that comes up and a number of people have asked is: how are we making out on Dutch elm disease? Will there be additional dollars in this interim supply to support the fight on Dutch elm disease? Mr. Chairman, I've had a number of calls from

individuals in the Medicine Hat area who are leading this debate across the province to contain Dutch elm disease. They're watching with interest to see whether or not these dollars are available for them. You know, when we're dealing with interim supply, there should be a signal sent that says that, yes, these are the kinds of things that are there to plan so that we can put in place the long-term programs that are necessary to implement new initiatives or change initiatives in the upcoming year. When you just have a block number for a ministry, you don't have the same kind of ability to plan.

The same goes for all of the different aspects that are there for the areas of wildlife, wildlife management. Are we going to be able to look at new initiatives, new programs, that have been requested by communities, by the fish and wildlife associations? That's important as they go through setting up their summer programs, and that's what's critical right now. We're getting into the summer season, summer planning component.

I guess the area that also has to be looked at is Transportation with \$367 million. How much of it is going to be used for construction? How much of it's going to be used for road maintenance? Which areas are going to be targeted? The appropriate regional needs aren't reflected here in the sense of which highways will be given maintenance.

I've travelled the province an awful lot in the last year in the responsibilities that I had, and we'd look at a lot of areas where you see road maintenance going on and other places where the road seems to be really not as well looked after in the sense that you see roads that are really heavily used, starting to break up, yet there's no maintenance going on to the same level that you see in other areas.

Why is it that those roads are being maintained, resurfaced, redone in some ways when in other areas that isn't happening? Is this a reflection of negotiations with local governments, local priorities? We need to know that so we can judge whether or not this interim supply is appropriate and does reflect the kind of initiatives that will be undertaken during the construction and maintenance session.

The other thing is traffic safety. We've heard a lot of requests for additional traffic safety initiatives and how that's going to work, how that's going to offset our auto insurance increases. We need to put money into public traffic safety to help to in many ways reduce the increases that are being reflected in our insurance. This is one of the initiatives that we see our neighbour to the west has done when they've had a component of their auto insurance that has the opportunity to spend on the public safety, the traffic safety initiatives, and get the feedback directly to the auto insurance system by having reduced premiums.

So you get a direct cost-benefit trade-off, but when you've got two different agencies dealing with cost benefits – you know, the cost is associated with your auto insurance – where do you go from there when they don't have the option to undertake traffic safety? We have to make that assumption and that decision in terms of the public expenditure on traffic safety, yet we don't get any of the benefits by having lower premiums reflected in that same decision-making process.

Yes, we are all taxpayers. Yes, we are all insurance payers. But there's no direct relationship in the decision-making process. We've got two independent decisions there when that kind of a decision should be a joint decision about if we put more dollars into traffic safety, then we save money in our auto insurance. Yet that's not reflected in this budget. So how do we make those judgments? How do we go out to Albertans and sell them appropriately on the benefits that are coming by having this interim supply?

I guess the thing as I conclude, Mr. Chairman, is the fact that as we look at the interim supply process, the very fact that we do this

is a reflection of the government's inability to bring together a budget that can be voted on, can be implemented in time for the fiscal year. You know, why is it that we keep moving the budget back, keep moving the approval of business plans back?

3:20

I know that there were a number of health authorities and school boards that were well into the second half of the fiscal year before they had their budgets approved. Yet how do we expect them to make critical decisions about their expenditures when all we give them is broad outlines in an interim supply and say: go to it. When the final budget is still two months away, what is it that they can do in terms of their planning so that they can get their budget submitted for approval to the minister? They don't know the parameters under which they're working.

If we're going to have prudent fiscal management in the province, we've got to have timeliness associated with that. We have to be able to make sure that as the budgeting process is put in place, the signals are sent out to the agents that use the dollars that are allocated by those budgets so that they have time to plan subject to their fiscal year. School boards start basically in July with the next school year, yet we're not going to give them an opportunity to have their business plans approved until very late in their planning process, sometimes even on into the start of their new year.

So I think it's appropriate that as we debate interim supply, we do raise issues about priorities; we do raise issues about do we have appropriate planning capacity so that we can make sure our dollars are used prudently. There's a waste of public dollars if these agencies go ahead planning expecting some kind of an allocation.

I talked a few minutes ago about the government saying that there's going to be \$500 million available for education and health. What if the education system assumes that some of that's coming to them and finds out that it's not the same as their expectation? They've wasted a lot of public dollars doing planning that in effect was misdirected because of misinformation or not full information, which we could be giving them in this interim supply process. We could be telling them if there are new initiatives that they can work with, if there are changes in priorities that they need to work with. That should all be reflected in this interim supply.

The argument then comes: does this pre-empt the budget? Well, no, it doesn't pre-empt the budget. It tells us that there are processes in place to start planning, and that's what's critical if we're going to be fiscally responsible and fiscally prudent in this province. We've got to have the signals out there so that proper budget planning can be undertaken so that we can have a reflection of the needs of the agencies that are going to be doing the expenditure planning on our behalf.

You know, Mr. Chairman, this probably wouldn't have been an argument that would have been relevant 10 or 15 years ago when most of that kind of planning was done under the auspices of the ministries. But each time we move to create new authorities, new agencies, new arm's-length managers for us, we have to be responsible and treat them fairly by giving them a sign of their budget in time for them to do planning, in time for them to make appropriate adjustments so that they can in effect guarantee the delivery of quality services or quality goods based on their relevant mandates.

Mr. Chairman, it's important that we work through these kinds of things on a continual basis because if we don't, we're going to in effect end up with inappropriate expenditures, misdirection by decision-makers at the different levels. If the process isn't going to work, what can we expect then except frustration, except these agencies saying one thing at the committee level, yet here in the Legislature we're debating and making decisions based on different assumptions?

With those comments I think I've used up most of my time that's available, so I'll take my seat and we'll let the debate go on. I may be back if discussion leads to a good give-and-take. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to be able to have another opportunity to address the debate around the interim supply estimates through this Committee of the Whole section debate on Bill 24, the Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004.

I've just been going through my file that I keep on sort of questions that I always mean to ask that aren't urgent enough, particularly, to get up in question period but are issues that I would like to see addressed. Part of the issue for me around interim supply is granting this money without a lot of discussion about how it's going to be used, just that it's a special warrant. So I do have some questions that I'm going to put on the record. If the ministers don't have the time to answer me now, then I invite them to please do it in writing. It does range across a couple of different ministries.

One of the questions that keeps coming up for me – not often, but a couple of times a year two or three different people bring it up – is the question around the cost of blood glucose monitors, test strips, and insulin paraphernalia for type 2 diabetics and the question about why type 1 diabetics are covered for these additional costs but type 2 are not. It can be a significant amount of money.

Now, if you're on AISH, for example, or I think even if you're receiving SFI, particularly the medical portion, you can receive some assistance with this, but I think there's a cap on it. If you're not low-income and sort of desperate and suffering, you're on your own. Yet there are a number of other areas where there are additional accommodations for a particular illness, and you can often find that those are covered, or they're covered through a program like Aids to Daily Living or something, but never these.

I'd like to sort of refresh and get a current answer from the minister on this. I think the last time I asked was several years ago. So the question for the Minister of Health and Wellness is: why are the blood glucose monitors, the test strips, and the other testing and monitoring products associated with type 2 diabetes not covered by Alberta Blue Cross when they are for persons with type 1?

For the Minister of Community Development, again, a couple of update questions here. The federal government and Quebec and, in fact, I think even in Manitoba and perhaps B.C. there's been serious consideration – and in Quebec I think they passed it – on enacting provincial status of the artist legislation. Now, the Minister of Human Resources and Employment did do some work on cultural workers and did start to identify that there are a number of gaps that our artists fall through as they try and move through life. So it identified them but didn't offer any solutions to the problems. Part of it is that we have to go at this in a holistic manner and look at all possible programs and areas, sectors that the ministries touch on to be able to form a co-ordinated response. That's what status of the artist legislation, in fact, covers.

So it's a large undertaking. It would take some time and a lot of consultation, but given that cultural workers are such a fast-growing sector of the economy – for example, they employ more than 900,000 people, at least 5.2 per cent of the Canadian labour force, more, in fact, than agriculture, forestry, mining, and oil combined. The average annual income of most professional artists is less than \$20,000. I can vouch for that.

So this is a fast-growing sector. There's a large number of people involved in it. They contribute far wider than their own sector. I think if the government's legislative agenda is a little thin, which I

think it is, there's something that they could really sink their teeth into and start to work on. So I'd like an answer back on that.

3:30

There's been some promotion recently around the Alberta motion picture industry. The minister with the pompoms, the cheerleader for economic development, has discovered the Alberta motion picture industry and is cheerleading for them. Excellent. Glad to see that. However, I don't know that we've ever gone back and really looked at the choices this government made in the early- and mid-90s, the effect that it had on the sector. That's when they shut down the AMPDC, the loan fund that they had in place.

After quite a bit of lobbying, I think in '99 or 2000, they were able to get a labour credit that was put in place, and the industry started to rebuild itself. It still has not achieved back the level of activity that it was at when the AMPDC was closed down, and I'm wondering if the minister responsible has ever really looked at the whole larger picture and what effect the choices made had on the industry and where we could best go next. One of the things the industry has said to me is around not only these labour credits but also a tax credit. So where is the minister on that exactly?

Right now the Alberta Foundation for the Arts will not collect nonpaper archives. We're a pretty creative bunch here in Alberta, and we've got some really cutting-edge artists, and not all of our work is produced neatly quantifiable on paper with ink or pencil or in the form of a painting. So for those that are doing work on the Internet or doing multidisciplinary work or where they've archived their work through a video or DVD, the AFA will not accept these archives. So we have no way of keeping track of this work.

Part of both the joy and the tragedy of live performing arts is that it's live; you've got to be there. If you're not there, you've lost the opportunity to join in the performance. We often do in the theatre take archival videos just to be able to preserve some recollection of what the live performance was like. We do have theatres that merge with others. They close down; people leave town. All kinds of things happen, and we have right now no central collection agency that will keep this work.

At this point I don't think the Provincial Archives of Alberta is accepting it either, so we're losing it. You know, it's in cardboard boxes in people's basements, and they leave town and it's gone. It's thrown out and we've lost it forever. So I'm looking to see whether we could get some processes in place to start keeping and accepting nonpaper archives.

Also around that area I think one of the most important things that the Minister of Community Development could be advocating for right now is to increase the minimum wage because artists subsidize their art for all of us. We get to benefit from cheaper art prices because the artists are subsidizing the art, but the way they're doing it in a lot of cases is working for minimum wage, and an increase in the minimum wage would be one of the most concrete ways to help the arts and cultural sector that I can think of right now.

I can raise the rest of these issues when we actually have a Community Development debate, but those were some that I thought I'd get the minister thinking about.

A while back in question period I raised a question with the Minister of Seniors about what the basis was for the amount of money that the Department of Seniors decided below which a senior would qualify for assistance and above which a senior would not qualify for assistance. I asked if it was tied to the LICO, the low-income cut-off. It's not; the numbers aren't the same.

Neither is it tied to the market-basket measure that is available, which is another measurement and one that the government is accepting in other areas. It's essentially for a market basket of food,

the same sort of items, plus things like rent and telephone rental: how much does that cost? Once you establish those base costs for those items, you have an idea of how much it costs to live in a given centre. You know, as we expect, some things are more expensive in rural areas and some are less expensive. Same for living in the larger urban centres. But it does help to set the level of assistance that people require by examining what's in that basket of goods.

So I'm pressing the Minister of Seniors once again to see what the connection is between this or whether he would consider looking at the market-basket measure as a way of setting that rate for seniors. Right now it seems to be completely arbitrary but not connected to anything that we can discover. So either answer the question about how he's arriving at that figure or let's start to talk about connecting it to something that people can understand, because right now it's not connected to anything.

I've been working a lot with students. I have a number of postsecondary students that live in my constituency, and of course I've been really working hard on trying to encourage more youth voting – that is, between 18 and 30 – for those people to come out and vote.

As I spend more and more time with those particular groups of people, I get more information about what are really the barriers to their advancement. It's around a couple of things. Certainly, the university students are very clear. There needs to be an increase in the university base operating grants. I'm hoping that that's going to be considered or that that's included in this interim supply or in this budget that's coming. The planned 2 per cent increase does not meet the requirements of the University of Alberta, which is the postsecondary institution that I'm most connected to aside from Grant MacEwan College. The U of A is expecting another shortfall, which will have to be made up likely through tuition fees.

The students ask for a tuition freeze, and I certainly support that, but I would really far prefer to see a reduction in tuition fees. I'm willing to enter into the debate about having the first year or two of postsecondary education completely paid for anyone that's interested in engaging in it. I think that's where we need to be looking if we're going to be pursuing things like the four pillars that the government has right now. One of them is about learning and innovation, and I think that if we're going to pursue that kind of thing, we need to start looking at accessibility to postsecondary education institutions. So it's not just about university, it's not just about colleges, but we're also talking technical institutions and NorQuest and places like that.

Aside from the actual sort of dollar costs of the tuition, there's the subsistence costs of the rent and food and the other costs for the students attending postsecondary institutions. Their ability to get enough from loan programs is not keeping up with their costs, and that's another area that we need to be looking at. I am quite distressed when I hear a lot about students working 19 and 20 hours a week at a part-time job that really is part-time and still trying to carry a full load of three classes or more at university. I don't know how they're doing that, and I don't know that they're getting full value for money out of their university when so much time and attention has to go towards working. Not that students shouldn't work; that's part of your university experience. But, boy, 20 hours a week is a huge haul.

The students are also requesting that we eliminate the parental contribution requirements for the student loan program – and that came up in the Canada-wide study that was discussed earlier in question period done by heritage scholarships, I think it was – and to improve the remission system to benefit all students, not just those who qualify for high debt loads. So a couple of points are being raised there.

3:40

We've had the traditional leak from the government to the media

starting out with little dribs and drabs about what we can expect tomorrow. We've heard already about increased funding of policing costs to municipalities. Good. I quite despaired that I was going to have to keep talking about all of that for the next year, but that one looks like it may have been accomplished. I think mostly what I was seeking there was a fair and understandable funding formula. What we had was pretty schizophrenic, so I'm glad to hear that that's coming. One of the notes that I had in my file of budget questions to ask was around AUMA's call for the province to pay their fair share of policing costs, and it sounds like that's going to happen.

I have a question around Lacombe. Several small Alberta communities are facing the loss of their specialized transportation, like handi-vans or – what's the one in Edmonton called? – transportation services for people with disabilities. This has become quite costly for small communities to continue to fund. The demand, the volume increase, has happened, and also the actual costs of operating, you know, gas prices and other things, have become very expensive for these smaller communities, but the provincial and municipal support for activities like this has decreased.

Once again we're at a question of equality. Do we really mean it when we say that we want as many people as possible to participate in the life of the province? I think sometimes the government does in fact mean that, and at times like that I'm going to press them and say: well, what that really means in very concrete terms is support for things like handi-vans or specialized transportation for persons with disabilities.

One fellow that I have heard from was suggesting that if the government were considering reducing the aviation fuel tax in order to promote travel and tourism and the well-being of the Calgary and Edmonton international airports, would they consider reducing the taxes on gasoline and perhaps redirecting some of that toward some of these volunteer-based organizations? His point is that volunteers from about a hundred small agencies take the time and money out of their pockets to support Albertans with transportation needs related to illness, disability, or advanced age, but the provincial support for specialized transportation has not increased since 1994.

I agree. I think there are a number of institutions that the government has failed to keep up to speed, and it's resulted in a poor quality of life for Albertans. When we're in a province that's as wealthy and as blessed as we are, we should be able to bring everyone along with us. There should be no need for us to leave any Albertan behind, and I think that's what's happening here. So those were some of the concerns that were raised by Paul Siller around support, both provincially and municipally, for that sort of thing.

Some time ago, a couple years ago, I had talked a lot about funding for seniors' community centres because I felt that they were contributing to lower health costs eventually for seniors because we had increased mental health, and we had increased mobility from seniors that were out attending and participating in these seniors' centres. The Minister of Seniors did take me up on this, and he, in fact, I think, did a study on it. Then I think there was supposed to be money, but that was the year that the price of oil dropped, and the budget got cut, and that was the last anybody heard of it. It didn't reappear in the budget we're in now, and I'm wondering if it's going to reappear in this budget. I think there's a lot to be said for that kind of preventative medicine, if you want to look at it that way.

I also would like to check on where we're at with the wage disparity between the nongovernment and government sectors. I'm referring specifically to groups like the Council of Women's Shelters, the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families, Hope Mission, the Alberta Association of Rehabilitation Centres, organizations like that, where the services that their staff are providing are very similar to services provided by government staff.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[The clauses of Bill 24 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 22 Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Having followed the debate in second reading on this bill, there were a number of questions raised by members in debate, and I just wanted to take the opportunity to respond a little bit to some of the issues that were raised. One of the issues that was raised by a number of speakers, at least two I think, was the whole question of the unique identifier number that's provided for in the bill.

The concept that's provided for is that each elector would have a unique identifier number that would be particular to the election process. In other words, it wouldn't be the social insurance number or some other number. It would be a unique identifier number. That concept was put forward by the Chief Electoral Officer as a way of assisting them with the management of information relative to electors so that they would have an easy way of moving information around, and that's about the best explanation I can give as to why it's necessary.

If you could put it into context, you may have, as I mentioned in the House the other day, a situation where there are two electors with exactly the same name. In fact, they might even live in exactly the same house. You need a way to distinguish between the two of them for the purposes of the records.

This unique identifier number is not another way to turn Albertans into numbers instead of people. It has none of those sinister connotations or contexts. It's not a precursor to an electronic voting program or any of those things that were suggested.

It is purely and simply – and I've had the opportunity to have this again confirmed with the Chief Electoral Officer because it was his recommendation that brought this forward – an administrative tool to be used by the Chief Electoral Officer to identify electors to make sure that they only show up on the electoral list in one spot and that when they move from one riding to another, their information can be tracked and taken with them to the other database and those sorts of things. So, essentially, it's a distinguishing number for the sole use of Elections Alberta to differentiate Albertans, particularly if they have the same name or perhaps even sometimes the same address, and that happens in Alberta. We're a large population. As I say, there's nothing in it at this stage. There's been no discussion with respect to electronic voting or changes in that way or using this electronic identifier for any broader purpose.

There were questions raised about the increase of the fee, the deposit, with respect to running for office. In the existing act the deposit was \$200. The Chief Electoral Officer recommended that it be raised to \$500. I did give an explanation of that, but I'll do it again quickly.

The concept that was being raised is that the Chief Electoral Officer wanted to have one more tool to encourage compliance with

the Election Finances and Disclosure Act. So by raising the deposit to \$500, which is still a rather modest sum of money for anyone who is seeking office, then half of that deposit, or \$250, would be returned to the candidate on the same basis as the deposit was returned before. I believe that any candidate that wins 50 per cent of the winning candidate's votes has their deposit returned, so in this case it would be \$250 returned and the other \$250 returned when they filed their election finances disclosure as required by law. That was the purpose that was put forward by the Chief Electoral Officer in terms of why there needed to be an increased fee and what it was to be used for.

3:50

Edmonton-Gold Bar raised a question with respect to special ballots and whether a signature would no longer be required to get special ballots and how many special ballots are utilized. The changes that are being proposed here simply add to the ways that people can request special ballots. Right now you can request a special ballot by telephone or by fax, and in an electronic age it seems appropriate and prudent that you can request a ballot by e-mail. All the tests that the Chief Electoral Officer has in place with respect to ensuring that the ballots are going to the appropriate people would still be the case.

I know that in my constituency and I'm sure in many other constituencies when elections, for example, are called in March, as they often are in this province, you may have – for that matter, it wouldn't matter what month of the year the election would be – constituents in many corners of the world. They have the right to vote, but they may not in fact be back here.

I know that in my constituency sometimes people are located in Arizona. They haven't come back yet from living down there for a portion of the winter. In many other cases I know that we've had people who have accessed special ballots from Lebanon, from India, from various other parts of the world.

It's the democratic right to vote. We should try and make it as easy as possible for people to vote. That's the concept of adding the process to allow a request by e-mail. In a 28-day election I might say that when people are located all over the world, it's often difficult to have requests come in by courier and have the ballots delivered back out by courier and have the ballots come back in by courier within that 28-day period and get them back in time for the election. So going to the electronic process certainly will assist in that regard.

In answer to the question about how many, that's a difficult thing for anyone to predict. In the 2001 election there were some 11,100 special ballots issued. Who knows how many that would be in the future? But the important question is not how many ballots; the important question is: how do we make it as accessible as possible for Albertans to cast their ballots in an election?

There were some concerns raised about access to apartments and multifamily dwellings. Of course, one of the reasons for the amendments to the Election Act that are being proposed is to allow enumerators and to allow candidates greater access to multifamily dwellings or gated communities or other places where the front door is behind some other security barrier.

The specific question was asked as to why the fine wasn't going up, and I guess the only real answer to that is that nobody has really addressed their mind to the fine needing to be higher than a thousand dollars. A thousand dollars is a significant fine. The answer truly is that there was no significant push from anybody to increase the fine. The real push was to make sure that the right to have access was dealt with when all sorts of circumstances have changed and we find different types of communities where access isn't available.

That may be a subject of further discussion from people, but a thousand dollars, really, in the scheme of things is a pretty significant fine. So I would concur with the Chief Electoral Officer that it's not really something that there was any push to increase.

Publishing of expenses. Right now expenses are published in a newspaper usually some considerable time after an election at a time when they may or may not be of interest to very many people, but the change will allow them to be published on the web site. I think there are significant advantages to having them published on the web site. One of them is that it's not just a one-day wonder, but it's there for people. It's accessible by people over time. In order to access the publication in the newspaper, you have to buy the newspaper on the day that it's published, and if you want to have access to that information, I guess you'd have to tear out the sheet and keep it someplace.

If it's on the web, most people know how to access the web now. In this province we can advise that the majority of homes, the majority of people are on the web now, and it's very accessible that way. Of course, it's always accessible through the Chief Electoral Officer, through Elections Alberta, if anybody wants to get the information. But rather than put out a considerable sum of money to publish that in newspapers across the province, it's available on the web site. If anybody can't access it there, they can certainly get help to access it through their local library or by contacting the Chief Electoral Officer directly. It's a way of expanding the availability of the information rather than contracting it.

In terms of the increased donations to candidates and to constituency associations, Elections Alberta simply put it forward as something that hadn't been changed in nearly 25 years and postulated that it was something that we may want to look at. But I have to say to the House again that Elections Alberta and the Chief Electoral Officer did not make the recommendation to increase the contribution limits. They indicated that as we're looking at the act, that's something that we may wish to look at, and in fact members of the House had from time to time raised that issue with me specifically. So when we did look at it and saw that it hadn't been raised in 25 years, it's appropriate to raise it now. I again indicate that that's just for candidates and for constituency associations. We didn't raise the \$15,000 limit for political parties.

That, I think, deals with most of the questions that were raised and, hopefully, answers concerns that people have about the Election Act.

I know that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar tabled in the House the other day a letter to the Privacy Commissioner with respect to the unique identifier number and asked for the Privacy Commissioner's comment. The Privacy Commissioner has responded and has copied myself and the Chief Electoral Officer with a response. If I may paraphrase the response, it essentially indicates, as we were aware, that the register of electors falls within 4(1)(d) of the freedom of information act, and therefore it's excluded from the application of the act.

He then goes on to deal with a number of other items, to provide comment, but one of the statements that he makes is that

it is preferable that the Chief Electoral Officer assign a unique identifier number for identification and verification purposes rather than use identifiers that already exist for other purposes such as social insurance numbers or Alberta health care numbers.

I'm sure the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar may wish to table this letter as it's a response to the letter that was written by him, but I think it deals with the concerns that may have been raised about privacy issues or about somehow there being yet one more bureaucratic way to reduce Albertans to a number.

I would want to end by assuring the House that I'm very satisfied

that that's not the intention of Elections Alberta and the Chief Electoral Officer. What they really need is a way to keep data about electors clear and identifiable and unique and to make the changes because Albertans are mobile people and do move around and to be able to track that information in an appropriate way so that when we have an election, Albertans are on the electors list, do have eligibility to vote, and have access to vote in the most appropriate ways and are encouraged in fact to vote.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I think this might be the single most interesting and important piece of legislation that we do this spring sitting. I'm hoping that it doesn't pass too quickly, because I think it's important that we allow enough time for people in the community out there to catch on to what we're discussing and be able to get in on the debate. I know that both the Liberal opposition and the ND opposition have tried to contact some of those smaller political organizations out in the community and get feedback from them or establish a feedback loop.

The problem, of course, is it's a volunteer-based activity at that point. They are very small groups; they don't have paid staff. For them to take the time to be able to go and get the information and think about it and get a group of them together, that takes time. It's longer than a week, and legislation has been passing through here very quickly because at this point it's just members of the opposition that are commenting on it.

I'm hoping that we'll be able to keep this debate alive long enough to bring in that input from other people, to be able to hear back from some of those smaller political organizations who will be affected by the changes being considered in Bill 22.

4:00

The identifier number. I know there's an amendment coming on that, and there'll be a more thorough discussion on it a little further on.

One of the things that I find very interesting in my constituency of Edmonton-Centre is that I'm sort of bookended by seniors and by students. The students, the younger people, are really tuned into the use of the Internet and the use of computers. They are there. They understand it in a way that I never will because they grew up with it. There was a computer in their home, in all likelihood, before they could write. They just get it. They understand how to use that as a tool in a way that other people don't.

Frankly, some of the other people that are not particularly comfortable with that technology are seniors. The regular use of a home computer and the whole concept of the Internet for many of my constituents came into being after they'd retired. So their interest and willingness in taking on a whole new technology at that point was pretty low.

I have one of the most wired constituencies in the province. No surprise. It's downtown Edmonton, and people living in the apartments and condominiums that I have are pretty keen on using computers and on the Internet and even beyond that now where you get into wireless technology, fibre optics, that kind of thing. So I'm looking forward to that debate.

What I'd like to talk about right now – I'd like to put an amendment on the floor. I believe that I've sent copies of the amendment to the table, so they could be distributed at this point.

The Deputy Chair: Do you mind just holding on for a couple of minutes while the amendment is being circulated?

Ms Blakeman: Sure. Just signal.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we shall refer to this amendment as amendment A1, and I believe the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre is moving this on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ms Blakeman: That's true. That's exactly true. The Member for Edmonton-Centre is moving this on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

This amendment is proposing to amend section 4 of the bill by adding in a long section. Section 4 is essentially setting out that the Chief Electoral Officer can provide guidance and supervision respecting conduct, enforce that election officers be fair and impartial, issue to election officers any information and guidance, and following each enumeration, general election, and election under the Senatorial Selection Act, by-election, or plebiscite, et cetera, prepare and distribute a report. So it's about sort of general information and control of elections.

What's being suggested here is that after clause (b) in section 4, which is adding in references to plebiscites or referendums, we have a section.

(4) On or before January 1, 2005, the Chief Electoral Officer shall prepare a report on electoral reform to be submitted to the Standing Committee that

(a) provides recommendations regarding the implementation of a citizens' assembly on electoral reform,

the idea there being that it would be comprised of one male and one female from each electoral division; in other words, with 83 currently in Alberta, a man and a woman from each of those 83 constituencies. They would form a citizens' assembly on electoral reform, the idea being that they would examine different electoral systems and provide recommendations on changes to Alberta's electoral system.

When the report is provided to the standing committee, the standing committee would furnish copies of it to all Members of the Legislative Assembly and to the Clerk and make the report public. This is a really exciting idea and one that is very timely as well.

I was just reading an article in *Maclean's* from January 26, 2004, *Power to the People*. It's talking about a very similar process that's taking place in B.C. right now called the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. The B.C. government is committed to implementing whatever this citizens' reform comes up with, even if they don't particularly like it. So that's pretty brave of them.

They talk about it in terms like they're "a new social tool in democracy." B.C. is not the only one looking at this. According to this article, Ontario and Quebec, Yukon, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island are looking at it. All of them have or are starting or just finished either a citizens' initiative or some other consideration of electoral reform. In one case it was a retired justice. In Yukon they have a senior adviser on electoral reform.

So there's definitely a feeling from Canadians that they want to see some changes. The time is coming, and I think that a perfect way of doing it is to have the impetus come from the ground up. My feelings for the Reform Party are not warm, but I will certainly give them credit for having started out of grassroots. They spent a lot of time in town halls across Alberta just saying to people: what is it that you want? What is it that's important to you? I think that's what the basis of democracy is, and I'd like to see a similar process in place. So I'm grateful to my colleague for Edmonton-Gold Bar for having come up with the suggestion to incorporate this citizens' assembly into Bill 22.

I've spoken before in the Assembly about my concerns that we

reach out and capture the younger voters, who are not engaging in democracy at this point. They're not voting, and neither are they learning to vote as they get older and get more interested in how government and government changes, policies, and programs affect their lives. We need to engage these folks. Frankly, when I retire, I really want the people that are running the world to be good legislators and good citizens and really up to speed on democracy. Those are the generations that are coming behind us. So where are we failing here? How are we not engaging those folks? I would hope that if we had a citizens' assembly, we would also be looking to have a fair number of them be younger voters that can talk to us about what engages them.

They're really interested in following and getting a lot of information, which is what web sites are really useful for, because you only have to put the information up once. You don't have to keep distributing it and printing it. The costs are very low, and once you have the information on the site, anybody can go and read it. It can stay up there for years, and you don't have to do anything to it. So it can be quite cost-effective that way.

They're also interested in things like web blogs. It took me a while to figure out that they just weren't slurring words together. Well, they are: it's a web log, and then it's talked about as a blog. It does things like follow a candidate who sort of puts up a diary almost, and people can follow along and read every day what people are doing and even have a conversation with them in sort of a chat room or an instant text-messaging way. So I think that the use of the computer and bringing some new technology into the system is part of what we need to look at with electoral reform, but most importantly I think that the first thing we've got to do is look at things like proportional representation and how we would move into implementing a system like that if that's the system that we're most comfortable with.

4:10

I know that there are others who are interested in debating this motion, and whenever I hear of government members who are interested, boy, do I ever want to encourage them to get up and speak to it. So I will urge all members to engage in this discussion. I think it's pretty exciting, and of course I'm urging them to support the amendment.

With those words, I will make way for others to join in the discussion. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I get started, I want to commend the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for making this very interesting, timely amendment to the legislation that's before the Assembly at this time. When this legislation was being debated, it struck me that we're debating legislation that has significant import in our democratic process, changing our electoral system, not changing it in a wholehearted way but in an evolutionary way, to improve what we do in our democracy here in Alberta around the edges.

In the time that we're doing that, there are areas in the world where people are literally dying to achieve what we take for granted. So perhaps because it's of such major importance around the world, it's something that we should have a closer look at and say: well, why is it that it's something that is so easy and seemingly so unimportant to us? We take it for granted, but it's so important to people around the world.

I think that Canadians are waking up to the fact that democracy evolves. It's not static; it evolves. Our democracy has evolved over

500 years, when first people in England sat around on the green lawn, and that became the genesis of the Westminster Parliament, of which our Legislature is a part. So it evolved over 500 years. Change isn't something that we should be afraid of. Change is something that we should accept, and change is in fact coming to the electoral process in Canada. Change will come to the electoral process in Alberta. It's inevitable, and it's inevitable because Alberta leads the country in so many different ways.

As the Member for Edmonton-Centre indicated in speaking to this motion on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, there are at present five full-fledged electoral reform commissions underway in Canada as we speak. By far the most ambitious of these electoral reform commissions underway is the constituent assembly in British Columbia. The gutsy move there is that the government of the province of British Columbia is obligated to take the recommendations without change to the people at the next general election in British Columbia. That will take place in mid-March of next year.

The results of the constituent assembly are scheduled to be tabled in the Legislature of British Columbia in mid-December of this year, and there is no limit to what those recommendations might be. The recommendations will come to the Assembly by way of a constituent assembly.

The constituent assembly was picked at random. Two persons representing each of British Columbia's constituencies came together, young and old, men and women, people of different ethnic and demographic backgrounds, some with little interest, some with no interest, some with great interest. They came together, and what happened is what usually happens in a situation like this. When you ask the best of people, you generally get it.

So this opportunity asked the best of the people that came together. It asked of them: "Look; when you come together to do this very important work, we expect you to work in the interests of British Columbians. What you do is going to have import for generations to come, so give it your best." They're supported by a professional staff and by experts drawn from around the world with different experiences in the political process.

Just as Canada and Alberta do not have a lock on everything that's good and wise in anything, including health care, we should look around the world to examine best practices, import those so that we can make what we already have which is good better. So should we also look around the world at other jurisdictions to see what works and what works better than what we have today.

One of the major concerns that all mature democracies have is citizen involvement, particularly citizen involvement of young people. They're tending to tune out the political process, and that's not healthy. It's not a very good measure of the health of our democracy. As a matter of fact, the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada has made the statement – and I'll have to paraphrase it – that if you measure the health of the democratic patient that is Canada by the participation rate, particularly of the young, then our democracy could use a lot of help, a lot of medicine. It's not particularly strong.

Therefore, I think that the intervention of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is very worthy, it's very timely, and it's a very, very important intervention because, in my opinion, the people of Alberta are not going to want to see our province and ourselves standing at the sidelines as the other provinces in Canada and the federal government consider democratic renewal.

I think that perhaps democratic renewal is a more descriptive term than democratic reform. It's really democratic renewal. You and I and those of us in this room and in other parliaments are the stewards of the parliamentary process in trust for generations to come.

This motion, in my opinion, is strong enough and worthy to stand

on its own and should be a stand-alone motion, not attached to another bill but worthy of debate in its own right. I don't think there's anything more important than the capacity of the democratic parliamentary process to engage young people, people of a wide variety of demographic backgrounds and interests, in the political process. In our country and in our province I think it might be true that even at election time perhaps as many or as few as 3 per cent of Canadians are actively involved in a political organization. Considering the fact that politics touches every aspect of our lives, we need to engage more people in a meaningful way in the political process. I think that the amendment that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar advanced today does just that.

Now, there are of course many, many tributaries on this river of electoral renewal. There are mechanics: electronic voting, permanent voters records. There are the considerations as to the perception of fairness in the electoral process: mixed proportional representation, run-off elections, first past the post. There are many people who feel that the current system gives us the best stability. There's citizen involvement, citizens' initiatives, referenda. Of course, that brings in other issues. [some applause] I hear a member across the way clapping at the notion of citizens' initiatives and referenda.

4:20

These are populist ideas that are of course two-edged swords. We need to ensure that what we have is judgment, not just opinion, because those of us in this room are charged with exercising judgment in the common good. How are individual rights and minority rights protected and considered? If we consider the impact of minority rights, where then does the majority get the imprimatur to govern?

What is the role of political leadership? Is political leadership doing an opinion poll, finding out what is the most popular thing to do, and then following that? Is that leadership? Is it a principled adherence to party platform? Do you dance with the gal that brung you?

How is it that members of this Assembly may from time to time vote in concert with a government motion even though they may have spoken against the government motion? Where does party discipline and party leadership strengthen a party or weaken it? These are all considerations that must be I think debated and debated honestly and openly and with candour from all sides.

I some time ago read an interesting book by William Safire. The title of the book – and I recommend it to anyone interested in this – is *The First Dissident*. In that book William Safire transposes today's political discourse into the Book of Job, the idea being: where does one get the presumption of the strength or the right to govern? The gist of it is: to thine own self be true; that the role of political leadership is that we should listen carefully to what we hear, to our constituents, and then from what we've heard aggregate interests in the common good and then articulate a vision from what we have heard that inspires us to be more together than we are as individuals.

That's, in my opinion, what the true role of political leadership is. It's not to find a small, narrow self-interest, divide and conquer. It's to aggregate interests in the common good and then articulate a vision that calls us as individuals and as citizens to something great, to greatness, that we should be more together than we are as individuals.

So how do we go about doing that if our society is based on individual rights from a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, if we have a common law base which has worked well for us because it allows for ambiguity, questions that need not necessarily be answered today but will resolve themselves in the fullness of time, which is essen-

tially what the common law is? So in order to become a rights-based or a constitutional democracy now that we are giving strength to the Supreme Court, we become a rights-based society so that our individual rights – our individual rights – trump the collective rights and the good of the community.

Look at the tensions that that has brought to our country. These came in, just sort of evolved. It's been – what? – 30 years or so, and we're gradually working through those tensions. I think that in the first 10 years of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms there were something like 200 or 300 Charter challenges. Last year there might have been two or three. So a lot of these things sort of work themselves out in the fullness of time.

But the basic point is that it's not a sign of weakness to consider the electoral process or electoral renewal. It's a sign of strength. It's something that our parliament, our Assembly will sooner or later be charged with doing. In order to feel part of the whole, just as our province needs to feel part of the whole – and that's what leads to the alienation that we're constantly regurgitating – so must minorities in our province, whether they are linguistic or political minorities, feel part of the whole. Unless we find a way to engage citizens equitably, representing political strengths that may or may not be in concert with our own, we are also going to have to resolve the notion of equitable relationships within this Assembly representation.

I hate to do this, but I'm going to inflict a quote from our dear friend the late Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. He said that every – and believe me; I see smiles to my left over there, to my far left – individual has the unfettered right to bring others to their point of view, but if they do not bring others to their point of view having had the unfettered opportunity to do so, then they have the obligation to join with the majority so that we aren't forever going back and reconsidering what has already gone past.

So a minority must have the unfettered right to bring others to their point of view, which is what this is all about. Then having been successful, they are now the majority. If they're not successful, they are the minority and have the obligation to join the majority. The majority then gets its imprimatur to govern because that minority feels heard, feels secure and comfortable within that circle.

That's how our democratic process works. A minority gets the opportunity to bring others to their point of view. If they're successful, they become the majority. If they're not successful, they join with the majority and go on to something else in the full knowledge that their rights are respected.

That's why we in Alberta have yet again another opportunity to lead our country. As a matter of fact, some members would know that tomorrow I'll be on my way to New Brunswick to represent Alberta at the New Brunswick electoral reform commission, in which I will be sharing with them some of my experiences in our Chamber, the way that our government involves backbench MLAs.

An Hon. Member: There are no backbench MLAs. We're all private members.

Mr. McClelland: Well, private members. I'm corrected. We're not backbench; we're private members involved in the development of policy.

An Hon. Member: Hold your head high.

Mr. McClelland: Hold my head high, I'm told.

We have a lot to be proud of in our province. We lead the country in so many ways. Any time anyone ever wonders about what our province has brought to our country and to the world for that matter, they need only think of the Famous Five. Remember that it was

right here in this Chamber, right here in this city, right here in this province the very first woman ever to be elected to a parliamentary Assembly in the British Commonwealth. That was right here in Edmonton in 1912. So we have a tremendous amount to offer our country. One of the things that we can offer our country is an openness and a capacity for electoral renewal that will bring new generations to the table politically.

We should remember that democracy evolves; it's not static. We should be wary of change simply for the sake of change. Our democracy evolved over 500 years. Change, in my view, to something as sacred as our Westminster democracy should be evolutionary in nature, not revolutionary. We need time to adjust to whatever change we might accommodate, and, democratically speaking, we're fairly young. Not young as democracies go but young as civilizations go. We should take measured, careful steps on electoral reform and renewal, but we shouldn't be afraid to take the steps. Every long journey begins with the first step. Parliamentary renewal and reform is part of a long continuum. It's part of our heritage, a part that we should be proud of and we shouldn't fear.

Once again, I commend the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for bringing this very important issue to the table. I think that it is worthy of debate in its own right as its own stand-alone bill, and I look forward in the future to many debates on this very, very important issue.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

4:30

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and participate in the debate. I believe this amendment that was presented by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on my behalf will be called amendment A1. I recognize the eloquent remarks from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, and certainly it is a speech which I'm going to review in *Hansard*, and I hope many others do as well.

What we are trying to do with this amendment – and I think it's a pressing issue. We can certainly talk in the future of having further democratic reforms or renewals. Renewal is much better than reforms.

When I looked at the original bill, Mr. Chairman, it came to me that this is an ideal time for a discussion on democracy in this province. There is a democratic deficit in this province. There's no doubt about that. You have some entrenched practices which certainly don't enhance democracy. We have, for instance, the standing policy committees, where opposition members are behind a rope, behind a red braided rope, and they can't participate. That is not in the interests of democracy. We were talking about British Commonwealth jurisdictions. I tell parliamentarians that this is the practice in this province; they're in disbelief.

We can look at other changes that this side of the Assembly has proposed, the changes to the Public Accounts Committee and its procedures which would all be enhancing democracy, not reducing in any way or means members of this Assembly's participation or the people who have elected them.

I said earlier this afternoon in a private member's statement that many jurisdictions are looking at democratic renewal in one form or another. This province certainly has had a very interesting history in regard to direct democracy. It is interesting to note that at one time, up until the middle of the last century, we had a process of not proportional representation, but some scholars do call it proportional representation. It was certainly a different process than the one we have now. We had recall.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, that's right. We did.

Mr. MacDonald: We did have recall, and the sitting member that was recalled was none other than – I believe it was Premier Aberhart. So recall was no longer fashionable. The farmers down around High River recalled the Premier, and it didn't go over too well.

In the past we've had various forms of democracy, and they have worked. We have changed into the system that we have now, so what I'm saying is that we could change again. We only have to look at our neighbours to the west and the citizens' assembly that they have implemented to discuss electoral reform.

Now, this citizens' committee has two citizens from each respective constituency. They're holding over 45 public hearings through the province in May and June, and all interested citizens are advised and welcome to come. The citizens' assembly was created, again, by the government of British Columbia with the support of the entire Assembly. It is an independent, nonpartisan assembly of citizens who will meet to examine the province's electoral system; that is, how our votes determine who gets elected to sit in the provincial Legislature.

The citizens' assembly, with one man and one woman from each of B.C.'s 79 provincial electoral districts plus two aboriginal members, will, as I said earlier, have a wide-ranging discussion through a series of public hearings. Members for this commission were picked by random draw from a pool that reflected the gender, age, and geographic makeup of British Columbia.

This initiative – I have to tip my hat to them – is certainly unique. I don't know of anywhere else in the world where such power has been handed to a group of citizens. I don't think we should be afraid of this process in this province. I don't think we should be afraid to have a committee like this struck, and I don't think we should be afraid of what they may decide. I think it would be good for the Assembly.

Now, this group in B.C. is going to study many different proposals. They may propose changes to the system, but any changes they propose will be put forward in a referendum question at the time of the next provincial election, which is going to be May 17, 2005.

Now, should we have fixed dates for elections in this province? Should we have fixed terms for the Premier? Should we have fixed terms for the Prime Minister? We have talked about this in this Assembly before, and I certainly have no problem with that. I could certainly live with that.

To pass, the referendum in British Columbia would have to be approved by 60 per cent of all voters and by a simple majority of voters in 60 per cent of the 79 electoral districts. If the voters endorse a new system, the government has indicated that it will be in place for the following provincial election in 2009. Now, that could only be a guideline for the proposed amendment A1 that we're looking at here.

Let's, Mr. Chairman, look back at the controversy that occurred over the boundary redistribution. Edmonton lost a seat in this for no justifiable reason. In fact, we should have held onto our seat and probably should have gotten another seat as well, but we didn't. What was given to the city in 1997 or 1996 in the last redistribution was taken away by this commission. How that commission came to that conclusion is beyond me. There was an interim minority report written by Ms Bauni Mackay.

When you have controversies like this, when you have the elimination of an inner-city seat in Edmonton, in this case Edmonton-Norwood, that is an indication to all of us that we need to look at alternatives. This amendment, Mr. Chairman, amendment A1, is such an alternative.

We could even go forward again, and if we wanted to have gender

balance in this Assembly, we could have a man and a woman elected from each constituency. We could reduce the number of constituencies, but a man and a woman would be elected in each constituency. The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat is shaking his head, but perhaps we should have gender balance in this Assembly. Perhaps we should become the first parliament to have gender balance in the Legislature. Citizens would simply be eligible in each constituency to vote for a man and a woman on the ballot.

4:40

Now, the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar may have some concerns about this in regard to what happens with people with alternative lifestyles. Well, he can get up and he can debate the whole idea. That's his prerogative. Participate in the debate like the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. We need more distinguished elegant voices like the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford's in the Assembly.

With an Assembly that had gender balance, perhaps we would have different views on a number of issues: public education, public health care. I'm going to bet – and people can correct me – that a lot more mothers visit the classrooms of this province than fathers. Fathers are usually working away from the home. We have a high percentage of the workforce that works out of town. Mothers know firsthand classroom conditions because of the visits to the classrooms.

Women are also the primary caregivers in families to elderly family members. As a result of that, they visit hospitals and doctors perhaps more often than male members of the family, and they have a different understanding of how our public health care system does or does not work.

Those are just two examples. Perhaps with a simple amendment like that we would have gender balance in this Assembly, and perhaps we would have better laws, and as a result of that we'd have a better democracy. Now, this is one idea that perhaps could be debated across this province if we were to vote in favour of amendment A1.

I don't think, in conclusion, Mr. Chairman, that we can wait for another time. Now is the time to implement real democratic change in Alberta. The government may not see anything wrong with the system, but others do. When I travel, when I go to rural Alberta and I go to Calgary, democratic reform is one of the issues that citizens want discussed, and they express frustration over this first past the post system that we have.

Perhaps this commission – let's call it a commission – could look at having proportional representation. Proportional representation is certainly something that this member could adjust to. I think, in fact, we would strengthen democracy. The more different voices that are heard in this Assembly, the better off we would be. We could hear, for instance, the voices of the environmentalists through the Green Party. We could hear the voices of the Alberta Alliance and Social Credit. I think those voices would add to this Assembly and add to the political debate. So, in that case, I think the more the merrier, Mr. Chairman. All this could be discussed if we vote for this amendment.

I would urge all hon. members in the interest of democratic renewal in this province to please consider this amendment in a positive light. Vote for it, support it, and we, too, can improve our democracy.

There are too many good ideas to be discussed by one speaker, so I will cede the floor to an hon. colleague. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I did want to just

get up and make a couple of comments, and I'll be brief so that my colleague from that side can also participate in this discussion.

I did want to say to start off with that I, sadly, won't be supporting this amendment, but I wanted to make some comments about it, and I wanted to start off by saying that every recommendation that's in this bill has come to us from the Chief Electoral Officer, who went out and did quite a lot of work to come up with things that he believes would make the election process more effective, more efficient, and more fair to people that not only work in the polls but people that need to go vote; for example, people that want to vote in an advance poll. The rules will be much more simplified now so that we can accommodate those people that are going to be away or may just know that they can't get there that day. There are a lot of really great things in this bill that I would hope that people would support.

Specifically to the amendment and the idea of yet another commission – and you know what? Maybe down the road at some point we should be looking at all of these things, but I do want to make some comments.

When you talk about recall, the first thing that comes to mind is the fact that Premier William Aberhart was the one that was in fact subject to a recall petition. In British Columbia, where they brought in this rule, the very first thing that everybody tried to do was go after Gordon Campbell. I'm not sure that the effect of this is actually that they've done something wrong or that they don't deserve to be MLAs any more as much as it is that it's an opportunity for everybody to play games with the system.

I really resent that because it's very difficult as an individual to give up a big chunk of your life to run for office and try and come here only to have somebody that didn't win an election against you in your own riding all of a sudden start playing games with the electoral process. I think there's a lot of risk in that, and there's a lot of downside, and we need to be very careful when we talk about that.

Another issue that was raised was gender balance, and I don't even know what that means. My God, we live in the 21st century in the most modern province in the entire world. Nobody can compete with us on anything, and to think that the only way that we can get women in here is to have some kind of gender balance is offensive to me as a woman. I ran against five men and won. I've had no problem doing that three times in a row, whether it was a nomination or an election, and if I run again and if I win again, it will be against other men, and I don't care. I don't care that it's against men.

I believe I have a message, and my message to my constituents is that I am going to come here and I am going to work myself practically to death to try and do everything that I can to meet their needs, to do the things that they've asked me to do. Whether it's to try and deal with mould in a school or to deal with an overpass at the north end of Airdrie or lights at Bearspaw, I do exactly what it is they ask me to do.

I don't need anybody out there making it easier for me to get here. I worked hard to get here. I want to believe that I deserve to be here and that somebody didn't hand me a gift and say: okay; you go because you're a woman. No. I want to go because I'm the right person for the job, because I work hard, and I have a right to be here. This is not a Third World nation. This is the most modern nation in the world, and we have so much to be proud of. [interjection] I'm just responding to you, hon. member, because you're the one that brought it up.

When you talk about term limits, let's be very clear. There are term limits. The limit to a term is when an election is called. Every single time there's an election called, which have been miraculously four years apart here in Alberta, the people then go to the polls and they decide if they want you back or not. The idea of having a term limit is to get rid of somebody that you can't get rid of because

you're not good enough to beat me. That's the reality. So when you get a good candidate and he beats me, my limit is up. That's it. There's no need for there to be a law that says that Carol can only be there for four years because it would be much better for Airdrie-Rocky View if she wasn't there. The people of my riding will decide. You don't need some arbitrary, unilateral law that makes that decision.

Proportional representation, with all due respect, is for parties who can't mount a good campaign, that don't do a good job for four years raising funds to get enough money to run an election properly in this province or anywhere. [interjection] Oh, and the big unions aren't in your pocket, Mr. Mason.

Mr. Mason: They're really small.

Ms Haley: Really small little ones. Yeah. Well, nevertheless, in every other part of Canada the unions support the left-wing parties. They don't support us, and they never have. [interjection] You want to get up and give a speech? Can I give mine first? Would that be okay?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I just wish to caution on a couple of things. It would help if the debate goes through the chair, and secondly, I hope that you will respect the tradition that we have of not mentioning people by name.

4:50

Ms Haley: I will not do it again, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: You may proceed now, hon. member.

Ms Haley: Thank you. With regard to proportional representation generally speaking that is just something that is absolutely not necessary in Alberta. People here choose which party they want to support. They choose which party they want to belong to. They can buy a membership, they can make a campaign contribution, and they can run.

I ran against five or six parties; they are all out there. It is not my fault if the people didn't vote for them. I do not know why I have to feel bad that the people of Alberta supported my government and my party. That is how elections work. In the next election it might be vastly different, and that is okay too because that is democracy at its absolute best.

So, you know, Mr. Chairman, with all the greatest respect in the world to my colleagues across the way I will not support this amendment. I would strongly encourage my colleagues not to support this amendment. One day, when all calmer heads prevail, perhaps we can have an intelligent discussion on why there should be electoral reform or what path it should take if, indeed, it should take anything other than what we've got. Winston Churchill said it best when he said on watching parliamentary democracy: it may be the worst system in the world, but it is better than anything else that there is out there. I believe that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I'm pleased to rise to speak to amendment A1, which has been put forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I will be supporting this, not because I have agreed with every possibility that's been raised by that hon. member or others for the ultimate outcome of this but because I believe that it is a good process.

I don't think that there's any advantage in this discussion to personalize this in the sense of taking it as an attempt to drive out any particular member from this Assembly. Nor do I think it's valuable to politicize the discussion by talking about the party in power and its ability to raise more money than the other political parties. I don't think that's what this is about at all.

One of the advantages of the British parliamentary system, Mr. Chairman, is that it is not carved in stone in the sense of a rigid constitutional description of how the system is exactly supposed to work. Its greatest strength is that it is an evolutionary system that changes with the times. It's not based fundamentally on fixed and permanent rules but on traditions, and those traditions have been allowed to evolve. Where the system will break down and stop being a progressive democratic system is when we try to fetter it and to say that it's been this way for the last 20 years, the last 50 years, or the last 100 years and we don't want to see any further change to the system.

I think there are a number of very good ideas that can be brought forward. I agree, believe it or not, with the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View on some of her criticisms of some of the ideas that have been put forward as potential outcomes. I particularly think that recall has been abused.

The most recent example of that was in the situation in California, where for very political reasons related to the role of California in the American presidential elections, this was undertaken and extremely well financed by large right-wing organizations that have millions and millions of dollars to spend on this. It was them that organized the recall of the governor of California and his replacement with a movie actor of some renown but very little political experience. So I agree with that issue.

I'm not necessarily committed to term limits. I certainly think that ultimately it's the voters that should determine who represents them and not some arbitrary rule.

I also have some considerable problem with the idea of citizens' initiatives. We can see how citizens' initiatives have hamstrung California and prevented the government from either increasing taxes or cutting many of the services. It has reduced the ability of the government of California to effectively put in place political agendas, which is what politics is all about.

In fact, Mr. Chairman, I would say that California has become the poster child for the failure of the three Rs that were so famous a number of years ago. If I can recall all of the Rs, I think they were recall, referendum, and – what's the other one? Well, it's initiatives, but I don't know if there's an R word for that.

California has, I think, shown people that were rushing to emulate some of the American political experience that it's not all that it's cracked up to be.

Let's take a look at some of the things that could come out of it. One of the most significant changes that I think is on the political horizon in Canada and partly because of what the B.C. government has done is the whole question of proportional representation. Believe it or not, there's a system called mixed member proportional representation that allows the seats in an Assembly or a parliament to be allocated according to the popular vote in the same proportion but also to include geographical districts or constituencies or ridings within the Assembly, so people are represented geographically but in the same proportion as the vote was as a whole.

This is something whose time has come. It's only a matter of time. I don't think it will be long before this is implemented someplace in Canada, and it may well be in British Columbia. It's a far more democratic system than we have now. You know, people that are in favour of it here in Alberta, because it has increased the representation of the governing party, have at the same time been

very critical of it in the federal system because it's had the same effect with the federal Liberal government in Canada.

The point is, Mr. Chairman, that you can't just decide these issues depending on which particular party is advantaged by it in a particular jurisdiction at a particular time. You have to look at it in a broader sense, in a more objective sense, and I think that's what we need to do. I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is right that the place would be improved by a greater range of voices.

Another aspect that I would like to deal with is the aspect of fixed election times. I cannot for the life of me understand why we have a system in which the Premier or the Prime Minister, the leader of the governing party, gets in their sole discretion to determine the election date. That's not fair to the other political parties, and it's not fair to the public. The public has a right to know when the elections are going to be. That system has been in place in other countries, and it's in place right here in Alberta because, of course, we have fixed election days for municipal elections and always have had, and that works just fine.

The only reason for the system in which the Premier or the Prime Minister can call an election is to give an even greater advantage to the governing party than they already have. It's not sufficient that they just have their hands on all the levers of power and all the resources of the community, but then they get to pick an election at a time in which they have some specific advantage and their opponents have a disadvantage. That's just not the right way to do it, and there's no good argument to be made for that as a constitutional position. So unless the government actually falls on a question of confidence, I think there are lots of reasons to have fixed election dates.

5:00

There are any number of other things, I think, that could be developed or considered by a commission along the lines which are suggested in this amendment. I think that the experience of British Columbia is a very interesting one. It's not a question of election, and it's not a suggestion, as the Member for Airdrie-Rocky View suggested, that it's reverse sexism because it's not an election. Nobody is suggesting, I think, that the principle of one man, one woman would be applied to a Legislative Assembly because that would be taking away rights from the voters, but I do in fact think that in this case, where people are not elected, it makes sense and has considerable merit.

The last point I want to make, Mr. Chairman, has to do with election finance, because that was also raised by that hon. member, and there needs to be a lot of attention paid to this. Again, if we look at the United States example, we see the role that money has begun to play in politics, where it is absolutely the most dominant factor, and enormous sums are spent on elections. This, of course, empowers those people who have a great deal of money, and that in itself is a political decision.

We have the spectacle, I guess I would call it, of the Democratic Party in the United States going through the primary system where the criteria seems to be that people are knocked out as the primary season progresses by their inability to continue to raise funds. That means that you have these large financial contributors, mostly large corporations and the packs that are organized by special interests, basically betting – they're speculating financially – on which candidates are going to win. As the primaries and the caucuses progress, they shift their money to people that look like they have a greater potential to win, and they cease funding people who can't.

That's not the kind of system that I think produces any sort of democratic result. That is shifting the ability to select the presidential candidate from both parties in the United States into the hands

of monied interests, and that is wrong. That is not in the interests of democracy. In fact, it's contrary to the very concept of democracy.

We have this situation in Canada as well to a much lesser extent, but clearly there is a need for some sort of reform of election financing in Alberta perhaps along the lines of that adopted at the federal level, where they have passed a law which prohibits donations from corporations and unions. They've followed the model set in Manitoba.

Now, Mr. Chairman, politics is about the interests of people. It's not about the interests of corporations, and it's not about the interests of unions. It should be about the interests of people. Whether they sit on a corporate board or are a shop steward in a plant, they have rights as citizens and they have obligations to participate in our democratic process as citizens, and I believe that has got to be reflected in how we finance and pay for our politics. So if the federal government can do it, if Manitoba can do it, if they can eliminate funding both by corporations and unions, then I think they are taking a major step at putting the power back in the hands of the people to direct our democratic system, and that's really what it should be all about. So I appreciate that.

I certainly appreciated the comments of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. I would just express a fear, however, that if it's defeated here, if the amendment to the bill is defeated, we may never see a separate, stand-alone motion come forward with any prospect of success. That is based, unfortunately, on my experience in this place.

I would urge all hon. members who want to see a further development and evolution of our parliamentary system to support this motion. If it were passed, it would unleash the evolutionary process, which I think is latent in our parliamentary system. I think that only a progressive evolution will really meet the needs of Alberta's citizens into the 21st century.

So I would commend the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for introducing this amendment, and I will fully support it, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise and add a few comments. I encourage all members to vote against the amendment as proposed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and I have a few comments with regard to the arguments that have been spoken in favour of this amendment.

Firstly, with respect to fixed elections I think it's important that we as legislators understand a very simple matter of constitutional law. Under the British parliamentary system, we indeed do not elect our governments; we only elect our legislators. The government is chosen by the Lieutenant Governor or the Governor General. Typically, it's the leader of the party that holds the most seats in the Legislature or in Parliament, as the case may be, but as citizens in a British parliamentary system we do not directly elect our governments. We elect our legislators and our legislators only.

This is a fundamental difference between the British parliamentary system and the American republican system. In the United States of America, where there are fixed-term elections, it's the second Tuesday of every fourth November that an election is held. But they have the ability to directly cast a vote in favour of the executive member of their choice, whether it be a governor or whether it be the President. So the systems are different.

We have inherited 800-plus years of British parliamentary tradition where the prerogative for calling an election, with all due respect to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands, does not rest with

the Premier and does not rest with the Prime Minister. Ultimately, it rests with the Governor General or with the Lieutenant Governor, as the case may be.

Students of Canadian history will recall a situation in the mid-20th century when Lord Byng denied then Prime Minister Mackenzie King the ability to dissolve Parliament and call an election. Historians have referred to this incident as the King/Byng thing. It was an interesting anecdote in Canadian constitutional history. Prime Minister Mackenzie King, just having had an election and having won a minority government, lost a vote of confidence in the House and went to the Governor General and asked for Parliament to be dissolved and to go back to the electorate to seek a fresh mandate. Lord Byng – incidentally, his wife, Lady Byng, has an NHL trophy awarded after her, but I digress – declared that since a federal election had just been held, he was going to use his prerogative and the prerogative that rests in the Crown and not call an election.

He asked the Leader of the Opposition of that day, a man by the name of Arthur Meighen, to attempt to form a government. He did attempt to form a government, and similarly lost a vote of confidence in the House. He went to the Governor General. They did dissolve Parliament, called an election, and Mackenzie King was returned with an overwhelming majority.

The point of this story is that it created a bit of a constitutional crisis in Canadian history, and both legal scholars and political scholars have commented on it. It reinforces one simple fact: we do not elect our governments, we only elect our legislators, and it is the prerogative of the Crown or the Crown's representative to decide when an election is appropriate.

It is appropriate under certain terms or in certain situations that a Premier or a Prime Minister, as the case might be, should visit with the Lieutenant Governor or the Governor General and petition that the Legislature be dissolved. For example, the most common one is when a government loses a vote of confidence. An equally important one is when the government is about to embark on what is seen to be a digression from a certain policy, that might require a significant amount of public debate.

5:10

If a government feels that it's going to introduce legislation that might be controversial or might be deemed a marked departure from the former way of doing things, they may feel the need to seek a fresh mandate. Often a Premier or a Prime Minister will change through a legislative term, and often the new Premier or Prime Minister, as the case may be, may feel obliged to seek a mandate from the people before he or she introduces legislation that may be a departure from its predecessor.

I think we see that in Ottawa right now where there's a new Prime Minister, and I think quite legitimately that Prime Minister feels the need to seek a fresh mandate from the people. So he may this spring – and we've heard rumours of this – seek a fresh mandate, and we will have a parliamentary election or at least a House of Commons election well in advance of four years of the previous one, which was called in November of 2000.

So I think that fixed elections are a bad idea. There are situations when it is necessary to call an election, so I'm certainly in favour of leaving that prerogative with the Lieutenant Governor or the Governor General and the Executive Council, which provides him or her with advice.

With respect to term limits I similarly have some problems. I believe that fundamentally they're antidemocratic. If you're told as a member of the Assembly or as a member of the Executive Council that you can only serve two terms or three terms regardless of your

capabilities, regardless of the job that you've done, and most importantly, regardless of how the people judge the job that you've done, you've created an inherently antidemocratic system, where the people might want candidate A or Premier A to continue into a third or fourth term but are prohibited by statute from returning that individual to their respective office. That is completely undemocratic.

We as legislators must be careful that we always attract the most capable and the most competent people to positions of higher office. If the population is comfortable that a certain individual has been placed in that office and if they wish to continue to be put in that office, certainly they shouldn't be prohibited by a statute of that Legislature from continuing to carry on. So I certainly do not agree with term limits on any member of the Legislature or any member of the Executive Council.

I just want to say, Mr. Chairman, a couple of comments about proportional representation. I think that we must always remain mindful as legislators that we have inherited 800-plus years of British parliamentary tradition. The first past the post system has certainly been inherited from the British House of Commons, and it is used with mixed success in virtually all Commonwealth countries and all provinces within those Commonwealth countries. I think it has served us well.

We've heard some suggestion that we'd be better off going to a proportional representation system or that we'd be better off going to a mixed system where some members were elected by proportional representation and some were elected by single plurality seats. I would submit to you, Mr. Chairman, that those experiments for the most part have failed other jurisdictions. Any members who have followed European politics, especially western European politics, will see nothing but complete instability within the Legislatures that have elected representatives to the Legislature by proportional representation systems.

I had the opportunity to tour Northern Ireland on a parliamentary mission approximately two years ago with the Speaker and about seven or eight other members of this Assembly. It was quite fascinating to see how proportional representation worked in Northern Ireland. I didn't make notes because I didn't know I was going to be speaking to this. The Irish Parliament elected at least eight or nine different parties to a Legislature that had about 50-some members. Of course, no party had anywhere close to a majority. So the executive was chosen from four parties within that Legislature; you had a coalition not of two but of four parties.

Well, this Legislature was so dysfunctional. It was hamstrung virtually from the beginning and in a matter of six or eight months passed the grand total of, I think, zero pieces of legislation, could not get a budget passed, and basically all it ever debated was whether or not Northern Ireland should stay in the United Kingdom or whether it should form its own independent state, which was not part of its constitutional mandate. They were supposed to run highways and roads and hospitals.

The point of this anecdote is that Stormont, the beautiful House in Belfast, was so dysfunctional that it was ultimately closed down by the secretary of state for Northern Ireland in London because it just could not operate. Northern Ireland went back to direct rule under Westminster, under the Parliament of London, because this Parliament was such a disaster.

Other states have tried it. We've seen proportional representation in Germany and in some of the other western European states, and I think their experience has been similar. Proportional representation leads to a multiplicity of parties, it leads to instability, and often the Legislature is hamstrung and cannot pass legislation. Governments fail with great regularity, and those that survive find that their

ability to pass legislation is handcuffed. So I'm not a proponent of proportional representation.

Finally, with respect to recall and citizens' initiative, I do agree with the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. I think California has shown that these very well-intended and philosophically admirable positions and experiments work better on paper than they do in practice. Certainly, special interest groups and those with a lot of money are able to dominate citizens' initiatives. Recall legislation? I cannot support it. Those of us who are elected to these Legislatures are occasionally called upon to make tough, difficult decisions, and if each one of those decisions individually is going to be subject to that kind of scrutiny by our electorate, we'll be scared to take on the tough choices because the stability of our position will be called into jeopardy.

I think the system, for the most part, works as it is. We're called on to make decisions. We're here. We're paid well to come and to read the material and to listen to the debate and to thereafter cast an intelligent vote either for or against a motion or for or against a piece of legislation.

I think it's most inappropriate that you elect a legislator, have him or her come here, listen to the debate, read the briefing materials, and then have each one of those individual decisions potentially subject to recall by a member of the public, who presumably is not as informed as the member because presumably the member is informed because that's what they're paid to do. I do not believe in a system of democracy where one group of individuals are paid and charged with making legislation and another one actually has the ultimate rule.

We have to be accountable, and we have to be judged, and that is why we go to the polls every four, every four and a half, every five years, and we have the electorate decide on how the government has performed and how the legislators have performed, not on single pieces of legislation or on single pieces of initiative but on the totality of that legislator's record or on the totality of that government's record.

So this system is tried and true. We inherited it from Great Britain some 800 years ago. It has quirks, it has problems, but I think for the most part it works.

For all of those reasons I will be voting against the amendment to Bill 22.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

5:20

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise today to speak to the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, and talk about some of the issues that I see as being significant. What I want to do is just kind of address the whole issue of whether or not this amendment to the bill is appropriate, fits in.

I think we need to look initially at a lot of the arguments that were made by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford in the sense of this is something that has a real appeal to it, that the scope of this amendment in itself shouldn't even be debated here in this Legislature in terms of what changes in our democratic system should be initiated, talked about. That's the kind of mandate that this amendment should give to this citizens' commission, and that way we can then allow for the true evolution of our democracy to be determined by the people of this province.

I sat and listened to a lot of the debate where the people would come up and talk about specific characteristics that may need change or may not need change and whether or not it's good or whether or not some particular aspect of our current democracy is not good.

This is the kind of thing that we shouldn't be doing here as part of the debate on this amendment. What we should be doing is: is it appropriate for us in the context of an election statutes amendment act to be asking for a citizens' group to be formed so that we can effectively go out and truly bring together the debate about specific characteristics of our democracy and whether or not they are good or bad or need to be changed?

This is why it's so important that we look at this in the context of: are we in a position to evolve our democracy? I agree with the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. You know, we shouldn't be calling it electoral reform. We shouldn't be calling it anything, because what we're trying to do is take a good system and make it even better. We're trying to make it evolve into something that suits the needs of our citizenry so that they feel enhanced by it, they feel that it is their democracy, and they feel that it is the kind of process that makes their decisions be reflected in the actions of the Legislature.

When we start talking about individual aspects of what should be changed and what should not be changed as part of the debate about supporting this amendment or not supporting this amendment, we, in effect, are pre-empting the prerogative that we're trying to assign to this committee. So I think that we need to look at it from the point of view of: do we want our democracy to be constantly evolving to meet the needs, meet the expectations of Albertans?

I really want to focus on the concept of expectations because we have to make sure that Albertans have the opportunity to say: this is the process we want to follow; this is the process that we would be excited about allowing to make our decisions. This is the kind of thing that would encourage them to go out and increase their participation, encourage them to in many ways accept the actions of their legislation. You know, so many times we hear people say: well, it didn't speak on my behalf.

I think this goes back to the comments that were made before, that in the end democracy means that everybody gets to express their opinion, but once the decision is made, democracy can only thrive, democracy can only move forward when the minority says: I had my say; I had a chance to have input; now we have to move on. That's what's so critical about a true reflection of evolution of our democracy.

Mr. Chairman, if we weren't in a position to try and make our democracy work more effectively for us, instill confidence in that democracy in a broad base of Albertans, why would we even have Bill 22 here? If we're going to say the current system absolutely works, we don't need changes, then why do we need the bill?

By bringing forward Bill 22, we are saying on behalf of Albertans: we think the electoral process can improve. So we have an election statutes amendment act to improve that system, to evolve that system into something that in effect reflects both modern communication mechanisms, modern technologies, the dynamics of our society now. Do we need an ID number that follows us so that if we do move from

one part of the province to the other, we don't end up with the potential to vote twice?

You know, that's the kind of thing that this bill is talking about. It's talking about an evolution in our democracy. Yet what we're saying now with this amendment A1 is: yes, but Albertans should be the ones that are coming forward, being consulted, being brought into the position of making their – their – democracy work. What's so important is the buy-in of the citizenry, the buy-in by all of the people out there so that when they do go cast a ballot, they feel that it's their system, it's their approach, it's their process, it's their government when they're done. That's what's so important about the idea of this citizens' assembly that we've been talking about. It lets them bring forward the whole broad spectrum of the kind of issues they want to talk about.

We can sit here and make a list, and Albertans can take things off that list; they can add more things to it. But the most important thing is: let's not bog down in a definition of whether or not certain aspects of our democracy need to be improved, need to be changed, need to be redone right now.

Let's basically say: the important thing about this amendment is that it will give citizens in our province a chance to come forward and be part of a change, part of an evolution in our democracy, because nothing, Mr. Chairman, should be considered so immovable, so absolute, that it doesn't need to be reviewed, that it doesn't need to be dealt with in the context of expectations of our citizens and the opportunities for democracy to function. So that's one of the things that we have to make sure of, that we keep moving, that we make sure that citizens are brought into this.

By having two individuals from each constituency come together, we're really giving a grassroots contact to this process. We're giving a process that appears to be, and in fact would be, more independent than we could deal with here. In some of the discussions we've already heard that the first reaction that kind of reflected through the floor was: oh, protecting our own turf, protecting our own ideas, protecting our own position. If we have people outside this Legislature talk about the changes they want to be put in place in our democracy, then what we will have is in effect nobody saying that there's any kind of a self-interest, there's any kind of a self-preservation in it. That would reflect how to deal with this kind of change, this kind of an approach.

We have to make sure that this amendment gives Albertans that chance to be participatory.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, as per Standing Order 4(3) the Committee of the Whole now stands adjourned until 8 p.m., at which time it will reconvene.

[The committee adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 23, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/23

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to some order.

Bill 22 Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: On this bill we have at the present moment an amendment, amendment A1. This is an amendment that has been moved by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Dr. Nicol: I just wanted to conclude the comments that I was making at 5:30. In a sense, this amendment provides us with an opportunity to go much beyond the scope of revision in our election process that Bill 22 does. In effect, it puts down at the constituent level the power to come back to Albertans and say: "This is the new structure we'd like. This is how we'd like to see our democracy reinvigorated," whatever the appropriate term is.

We had some debate this afternoon about whether or not we should call it democratic renewal or democratic reform. I think the more important thing is that what we've got to do is talk about democratic enhancement, make people feel that it's really part of their process. I'd like to see us support this amendment so that Albertans can choose the aspects of their democratic process they want to discuss and they want to see changes on.

So vote for this amendment and give Albertans that chance to in effect start a dialogue. What they end up with is determined by the wishes and the input of Albertans rather than those of us saying: let's talk about recall or let's talk about proportional representation or let's talk about other things. Let's open the process up. Let's not put those kinds of parameters on it. Let's let Albertans decide through a true citizens' consultation. This amendment provides them with that opportunity, so I hope everybody agrees to support the amendment. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wish to say a few words with respect to this amendment that has been proposed. I think the proposer of the amendment, while having a very good idea to explore through a committee or a group of people to look at electoral reform, spent all his rational capital when he tried to explain what he envisioned this committee, if you will, or this standing committee would come up with. I think he's quite preemptive and presumptuous, in fact, in deciding what he thought would be the topics discussed by this committee.

My objection to this amendment is that it is a good place but out of time and out of context. Yes, we are dealing with a bill, Bill 22, that suggests electoral reform and amendments to the process which we already have in place. It sharpens, it redefines, and it clarifies, at the request, I might add, of our Chief Electoral Officer, a number of points that we do need to address to make a good system even better.

However, this amendment suggesting that there be the establishment of a standing committee is not appropriately placed, I feel, in this particular act. We have heard suggestions from a number of people. I've had the opportunity to travel on a committee around the

province looking at strengthening Alberta's role in Confederation, and indeed we have heard some suggestions by a number of Albertans who would give this very direction or who would like to see this happen. However, I feel that there is a broader context in which we wish to speak to not only electoral reform but also how we represent ourselves, how we create policy, and how we, of course, as legislators are vested with the mandate to legislate for the people of Alberta by listening to them, by getting direction from them, and by truly representing their positions.

So I'm going to vote against this amendment simply because I think that it has merit, but it has merit in a broader context. When we deal with the issue, we'll have an opportunity to give more timely feedback to us and to Albertans, and we'll create a broader discussion that can ultimately be enacted upon should there be recommendations coming from that committee that would indeed adjust or change the way in which we do perform our elections within this province.

Having said that, I just wanted to say to the House and to the Assembly and also to have on record the fact that while I do believe this is an exercise that has great merit, I would look forward to it, but I do not feel that amending the current bill as we have before us today is either timely or appropriately placed in context. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm surprised to hear that the Member for St. Albert is against electoral reform and in particular is against electoral reform as has been put forward by B.C., which is exactly what this amendment has been modelled on.

I was in B.C. last year and was able to participate in the discussions there in the parliamentary conference on this particular issue as B.C. presented the reform that they were going forward with, which is exactly as outlined in this particular amendment. At that stage, they had done the study and the looking at how they wanted to move forward and were at the stage where they had developed the criteria for developing the citizens' assembly and were going out and searching for the people to participate in it.

Since that time, we have seen that B.C. has gotten outstanding reviews on their approach to electoral reform, and they also believe within the government, and even the opposition parties in B.C. are supporting the move, because they see that it is moving forward in an area that is of grave concern to most people and certainly to people in this province if what I've heard on the doors is any judge of what people are thinking.

I would ask the Member for St. Albert where but in a bill that talks about election statutes amendments and the kinds of changes that we need to move forward on now and in the coming years to talk about a citizens' assembly on electoral reform than here. This is in fact the most appropriate place. If we wait until we get all the feedback from that firewall committee and the government decides what they're going to do on it and how much more they're going to study, we're going to waste thousands and thousands and thousands more dollars and be no further ahead than we are right now. People out in the community are desperate for electoral reform. I certainly hear that, and this would definitely move it one step forward.

The member may not like what the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar or other members of this Assembly put forward as their suggestions in terms of how that would roll out, but those are merely suggestions, and as we all know, at the end of the day it's the government who decides the structure and the format and how the decisions will be made. I would hope that they would keep an open mind and think about all suggestions that were brought forward.

I am finding it surprising that members of the government are not

supporting this amendment when we have heard for the past decade or more how supportive they are of political reform in general and how I have seen in their election campaigns that that has been a key component of what they promised to the people of this province. So here's a chance to step up to the plate and play, and I would expect that at least some members would be prepared to do that. I certainly am, and I'm certainly prepared to support what I think is a very strong and very good amendment.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat.

8:10

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just to say a few words in support of amendment A1. I think the world of electoral systems is changing rapidly. If you watch our neighbours to the south, there have been all kinds of innovations in their electoral processes: voting by computer from home – they've been trying to use the Internet in places as a way of encouraging voters to take part in elections, trying to use technology that will make more rapid the results on election night and more accurate results. There are a variety of innovations of electoral schemes being tried elsewhere, and I think the intent of this amendment would be to have Alberta at least look at proposals and then to examine the merits of those proposals.

The outcome, Mr. Chairman, could well be nothing. The committee could meet. They could make their recommendations, and the Legislature, which will have the final say, could decide not to engage in any of the suggestions. So the outcomes I don't think are predetermined. That would be the work of the committee based on proposals that came before it. It's an experiment in democracy, in trying to reform the system that would give an opportunity for all Albertans, all interest groups to put forward their ideas, and hopefully the result would be an improved system or a system that accurately reflects the wishes of the electorate.

I think it's a good amendment, Mr. Chairman. It's nonpartisan in its intent, and the result would be a nonpartisan committee. Eventually the government with its majority would be the one that made the decisions. I think that there's little for the government in terms of risk and much for the province to gain in adopting amendment A1. I support it, and I hope colleagues in the House will do so too.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd just like to spend a few moments talking about this amendment because I think that in substance this amendment is a very intriguing and very interesting approach. Given what we know about what's happening with democratic reform, democratic renewal, or discussion around concerns about how the democratic process in this country might be renewed so that more people would take an interest in governance and the government structures and processes, the concept might well be one that could be embraced in order to see what we might do with respect to the concept of democratic renewal and reform within this province. However, the bill that we have under discussion, Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, is in my view not the place for this amendment.

The Election Statutes Amendment Act is about the instructions for the Chief Electoral Officer with respect to the operations: the running of an election, the rules surrounding elections, what the guidelines for elections are, in fact the set of rules and regulations

and the how-tos with respect to the operation of elections. That's what the Election Act is.

It's not an electoral reform act; it's not about democratic renewal. It's about the chapter and verse of appointing returning officers, appointing executive assistants to returning officers, appointing enumerators, having enumerators getting access to buildings, about candidates getting access to buildings, about how people become candidates, all of those things which are in essence what anybody who is interested in running for an election needs to know and what anybody who is in charge of running an election needs to know. That's what the Election Act is about, Mr. Chairman.

The amendment is about a different topic on the same subject. Obviously, it's about elections, but that's where the similarity between the amendment and the bill that we're debating ends. This is about an entirely different concept and an important concept. B.C. is going through, as we've heard, a process of looking at electoral reform and having a citizens' assembly. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford this afternoon gave a very interesting dissertation on what's happening across the country with respect to the process of examining the way we elect representatives in this country and how we might engage in electoral reform. In fact, we've been, I think, in quite vigorous discussion in this House on this very topic.

So in voting against this amendment, it's not to say that this isn't an important concept or isn't an important idea to carry forward but only to say that it doesn't belong in the Election Act. In fact, I think we would be well advised to consider and watch very carefully what's happening right across this country in five different jurisdictions now, that we know of, that are looking at reforms, and we should learn from them. Although we take great pride in being out front and running strong with respect to many initiatives, we don't always have to be, and when other people have taken the initiative, we ought to learn from them, and we ought to watch what they're doing and see what they are doing right and see what effect they're having.

I think that's a position that we're in right now, where we need to watch and learn. We need to be instructed by what's happening across this country, to participate in the discussion, as the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford is doing, on national committees, and to proceed carefully into the process of looking at how our democratic institutions can be renewed for the 21st century.

So while I applaud the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for bringing forward this proposed amendment on this very important topic, I would recommend that the House vote against the amendment and that we look forward to how we might participate in the discussion on democratic renewal, which is happening right across this country as we speak.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to briefly comment on amendment A1 to Bill 22 before the House.

It looks to me like the amendment, although it's different from what's in the bill, in no way runs counter to what that kind of bill is supposed to do. What we are trying to do is to change the election statutes of this province for obvious reasons. We want to update, of course, that which presently exists in the form of provincial statutes but to make some departures if necessary.

We are in the 21st century, and we shouldn't shy away from thinking of some new ways about how to not do minor tinkering to improve the existing arrangements but to seek some major improvements in the way we hold elections, in the way we call upon our citizens to express their will, and to present alternatives to them to

seek different electoral systems and make choices between them. There's nothing wrong about offering the citizens of this province choices between different electoral systems, and what this amendment does is provide precisely those kinds of alternatives so that citizens themselves can be empowered to make informed choices.

8:20

I did pay careful attention to the arguments given by the Minister of Justice and Attorney General when he on the one hand said that the ideas contained in this amendment are interesting, that they seem worth our attention, yet argued that they don't belong in this bill. I don't see why or how one could argue that. If there are no formal, procedural problems with introducing this kind of amendment to the bill, then I think it's an appropriate time and opportunity to debate precisely this kind of important change in the bill so that it can provide Albertans with real choices. The fact that some other provinces, at least one province, have undertaken this kind of procedure doesn't mean that we have to wait until they get the results.

What this amendment is asking is that we consult with the citizens, provide citizens the ability to consult with each other and then offer their advice, their recommendations, their alternatives for further action. So I think the amendment is an important one. It deserves the support of every member in this Assembly, and I'm very happy to extend my own support.

When I spoke on this bill, Mr. Chairman, in second reading, I in fact raised the issue of proportional representation as one important alternative that we need to consider. What this amendment will do precisely is create an opportunity and a forum whereby citizens of this province will have an opportunity to look at proportional representation as an alternative to the first past the post kind of arrangement that we presently have in place.

The difficulty with this bill is that it doesn't really offer that kind of opportunity for citizens to make their choices, to at least study carefully those alternatives before making a final choice between either A or B, between the first past the post kind of electoral system, that we have had in this province for the last nearly hundred years – well, we did have, I think, up until the '50s some sort of proportional representation in this province. It's not something new in that sense, but it's a question of re-examining that possibility given that we know the flaws of the first past the post model of elections.

I think it is important. It is incumbent on us, indeed, to provide Albertans with an opportunity to examine carefully, to examine as part of a community forum different choices, and then make recommendations and move on from there to change the elections laws and statutes of this province. So I support this amendment, Mr. Chairman.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar I would like to move the following amendment: that Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be amended by striking out section 34. We have copies of the amendment for distribution.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, this amendment will be known as amendment A2.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Amendment A2 would have us strike out section 34 of Bill 22, which states: section

61(1)(e) is amended by striking out “\$200” and substituting “\$500.” The effect of the amendment would be to leave the nomination fee at \$200. The reasons for the amendment, I think, are clear. If the goal is to invite as wide a range of people as possible to take part in the elections and to offer themselves for public service, then any move that makes that more difficult, such as increasing the amount of money that they have to raise, I think is a move in the wrong direction.

I mentioned before, when we were debating this at second reading, Mr. Chairman, that one of the great things about elections in our province is that you can take part in them and be successful without raising huge sums of money. We have, I think, to this point a rather open system with respect to people being able to participate without spending an inordinate amount of time or in some cases what might be an impossible amount of time trying to raise dollars just to take part in the election. The amendments as proposed in Bill 22 I think would be a deterrent for some people and will make it just a little bit harder for everyone that's seeking to run for public office.

One of the things that I think we have created is a culture almost of trying to keep elections affordable, and section 34 moves us in the wrong direction. We would all agree that one of the greatest services that a citizen can provide is to offer himself or herself for public office. In most cases I think it's a mark of a citizen who has great concern for the public good and is willing to sacrifice time and in most cases family and in many cases their occupations to take part in public policy debates and decisions through elected bodies and in this case the Legislature of the province. So we're opposed to anything and any movement that would have the effect of chilling or in any way making individuals feel less likely to offer themselves because of a fee that has to be put up before they can be entered in nomination.

8:30

Now, I realize that a number of people indicated that a \$300 raise is not that much in the scheme of things, but I think that if you look back at the costs of some of the campaigns that were run in the last two or three elections, you will find that the amounts spent by some candidates were very, very modest. They were campaigns where \$500 would have made a difference.

It's for that reason that I urge members of the Assembly to support amendment A2. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak to amendment A2, that proposes to strike section 34 of Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. Section 34 of this bill seeks to amend section 61(1)(e) by changing the amount of the election deposit for provincial elections from \$200 to \$500. I'm very pleased to support this amendment. As a matter of fact, my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands had this amendment ready to go forward in his own name.

The reasons for opposing section 34 of Bill 22 and, therefore, seeking to strike that section are as follows. One of the concerns that the New Democrat caucus has is the low level of participation of young people between 18 years and 24 who turned up to vote. This is the age group where no more than 25 per cent of electors or citizens decided to go to the polling booths to vote. We do not want to make changes in our existing statutes which govern election requirements that will further discourage particularly this young group of people.

Increasing the deposit from \$200 to \$500 is a 150 per cent increase in the deposit. Adding another \$300 on top of the \$200 that already exists as a deposit requirement may seem small to us in this

Legislature or to people who are not in this Legislature but are well established and have good incomes, but there are lots of Albertans who are at a stage in life where they don't treat this kind of increase as slight, as something that is not substantial. I think that when they notice this kind of change, when they come to learn about this change, they will say: aha, you see; they don't understand our constraints, the constraints under which we live. I think that they would be discouraged from presenting themselves as candidates in the elections.

Certainly, even in political parties where there may be broader support and, therefore, financial resources for candidates to rely on, there is a problem. Those people who may very well want to run as independents, who don't have the assurance of support from a political party, would find it even harder.

Why would we want to make changes in the existing legislation that would in my view certainly discourage some citizens, particularly those who are of a younger age, those who already find elections either not a matter of interest to them and, therefore, don't turn up even to vote or those who may want to participate but may find that these financial requirements and considerations prevent them from presenting themselves and taking part as candidates in the democratic process, of which elections are a very important element and event?

So let's not make it either an established adult's game or a rich man's game. I think elections are for everyone. Democracy is for everyone, regardless of what our incomes are, regardless of our capacity to pay for various requirements of the Election Act to take part in elections.

I would therefore ask my colleagues in the House to vote for this amendment. If they did, the outcome of that kind of decision would be that we would keep a candidate's nomination deposit at \$200 rather than seeing it increase by 150 per cent, jumping to \$500 for this purpose. So, Mr. Chairman, I urge my colleagues to give serious thought to supporting the amendment, the point of which is to keep a candidate's deposit at \$200 and not let it go up to \$500.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I understand the logic and the concept being put forward by the hon. members in moving and supporting this proposed amendment. I would point out, as I did at the beginning of the discussion in Committee of the Whole, that the rationale for section 34 that was put forward and was recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer was to expand the purpose for which the deposit was actually in place. The second purpose which is being added here is so that there is an inducement to candidates to comply with the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act by filing their financial statements after the election is done.

I would point out that the argument that section 34 actually increases the deposit and, therefore, could have the effect of denying people the right to run or is a 300 per cent increase is actually fallacious for these reasons. First of all, the deposit that a person might actually lose if they were not successful in obtaining 50 per cent of the winning votes in an election is being increased \$50, not \$300. By that I mean that the deposit is going from \$200 to \$500 under this amendment, but half of that is treated in the same manner as the original deposit under the old act. That is to say that half of that, or \$250, is returned to the candidate if they meet the threshold rules in the same manner as the \$200 deposit was returned under the old act. So the deposit which would be returned to the candidate if they achieved that threshold test is \$250. It used to be \$200. So if they don't achieve the threshold test, the additional cost to the candidate is \$50.

8:40

The other \$250: there's no risk, no risk whatever to a candidate. It's completely a hundred per cent refundable to the candidate as soon as they comply with the law and file their financial statement. So this should not be a barrier to any candidate running.

The recommendation from the Chief Electoral Officer is to increase the deposit and put in that second clause. It shouldn't be a barrier because it's only a \$50 additional risk to a candidate. Quite frankly, any candidate getting into a contest and wanting to put forward their views will find many different ways, I'm sure, to do it, but at least some of them are going to cost more than the \$50 increase in the deposit.

I think that the sentiments that are being expressed about making sure that everybody has the right to participate in the process are very noble, but the increase in the deposit, I would submit, is a valid increase and a valid amendment that the Chief Electoral Officer wants for good reasons to make the electoral process function more smoothly. So I would ask members of the House to reject this amendment.

[Motion on amendment A2 lost]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to rise and attempt to improve this bill in some other respects as well. I have an amendment here. I should perhaps read it into the record and then send the original to the table and have it distributed.

The Chair: Send us about five copies including the original, please.

Dr. Pannu: Okay. Mr. Chairman, I'd like to move the following amendment on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands: that Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be amended in section 8 by striking out clauses (c) and (d) and by striking out section 10. So there are two sections that this amendment proposes to either strike in full or in part.

Reasons in support of proposing this amendment, Mr. Chairman, are quite compelling. Section 8 in clauses (c) and (d) introduces a new kind of requirement, which says that the electoral officer may assign, in respect of each elector whose information is contained in the register, a unique and permanent identifier number consisting of numbers or letters, or a combination of numbers and letters, to be used to assist in distinguishing an elector from another elector or verifying the information about an elector.

So that's clause (c).

In clause (d), Mr. Chairman, Bill 22 reads as follows: in subsection (5) by striking out "and" at the end of clause (e) and repealing clause (f) and substituting the following.

- (f) the unique identifier number assigned under subsection (4.1), and
- (g) any other identification number assigned by other persons who provide information under this section to the Chief Electoral Officer to assist in distinguishing a person from another person or verifying the information about a person.

Now, these are the two clauses of section 8 that the amendment proposes to strike.

I'm going to turn to the reasons because they are compelling, I think, Mr. Chairman. In our judgment, in the judgment of the New Democrat caucus, this kind of assignment of an identifier number would increase the likelihood of a voter being identified not only for strictly election purposes as defined and as seen desirable by the Chief Electoral Officer, but that information could leak out, could in

fact be stolen, or could become public for whatever reasons. If, as I argue, the chances of that happening would increase with the specific permanent identifier number being assigned to individual electors, I think it will discourage more and more people from participating in elections, from turning out on election day, going to the polling station to vote.

So it is this very serious concern that we have heard Albertans express to us with respect to this change that's being proposed by way of Bill 22 that causes us to come forward with this amendment, which would be amendment A3, I think.

The reasons for proposing that section 10 be struck out are identical, the same reasons, because section 10 returns again to the use of the permanent identifier number. I think the allocation of permanent identifier numbers increases the likelihood of the information that must remain confidential remaining confidential. So why increase the risk of violating both the important confidentiality and privacy of individual citizens and electors?

Secondly, why increase this risk if it's likely to mean that it's going to be perceived by our electors, who already have a variety of other reasons not to turn out and go and vote on election day, as yet another reason, which is in my view a very, very appropriate one from their point of view. If it's going to increase the likelihood of their being identified as people who have voted this way or that way, then why even bother participating in the election process?

So it's for those reasons, Mr. Chairman, that I think it would be wise on the part of this Assembly, it'll be appropriate for the members of this House to vote for this amendment. If this amendment is voted in, that will assure voters, citizens that in the judgment of this Assembly there's nothing more important – nothing more sacred, I was going to say – than our commitment to preserving their confidentiality and privacy as they participate in the provincial elections in this province.

So I would urge members to vote for the amendment. Thank you.

8:50

The Chair: The hon. member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've thought quite a bit about this particular amendment in terms of whether I should support it or not. On the one hand, I think that at some point in time we have to look at different ways of ensuring that the most number of people are allowed to vote in elections as possibly can, and specifically all of those who wish to vote, whether they are residing at their specific location on the voting day or not, whether they would normally be available during voting hours or not. We have to find some way to facilitate the changes that we've all seen in our own lives in terms of being busier and being more mobile and not always being resident in the area that we are normally assigned to as a main residence.

So, on the one hand, I see the need to move toward some sort of an identifier where we can do different types of voting in the future, perhaps computer voting, perhaps phone voting, whatever. That's a debate that we need to have.

On the other hand, having been elected three times and now having gone through four nominations, I know first-hand the kinds of difficulties that one can encounter with lists. The one thing I do know first-hand to be absolutely true is that if a list can be wrong, it will be wrong. Whether you're using information from a telephone book, as is one of the suggested criteria here in this bill, or, as another criteria, using any other information obtained or available to the Chief Electoral Officer, one of those being conducting a door-to-door enumeration, I know the inherent, built-in inaccuracies of those systems.

In Edmonton in any given constituency the turnover yearly

because of housing prices has been around 25 per cent, so telephone books are between elections practically useless. If you use the federal lists, we've all seen at the federal elections how inaccurate those lists are and the long, long lineups of people who have some inaccurate information attached to their name on that particular list. I have helped to co-ordinate door-to-door enumerations in the past and have seen the errata sheets that fall out of those. The kinds of problems associated with getting accurate information at the door is also a huge problem.

So when we take a look at this bill and we understand the kinds of inaccuracies that are inherent in the existing databases that we have and we go to section 11, distribution of lists of electors, 18(1)(c) and then subsections (a), (b), (c), (d), (e), (f) on page 5, you'll see the number of potential inaccuracies that there are.

We've seen it. We've seen every time I've had to use a list that in transcribing, the residential address becomes wrong; the postal code becomes wrong, the mailing address. The surname can be typed in wrong. The given name and middle initials can be typed in wrong. The telephone number of the person can be typed in wrong. The gender of the person can be inaccurately entered. The year of birth can be inaccurately recorded. Imagine the kinds of people who could be disallowed from voting if they go with their identifier number and it doesn't add up to the information that's on the list. I just see too many problems.

Until we can get the issues ironed out of how to correctly identify people and record accurate information about them and then keep that information accurate given the kinds of mobility that people have these days, I'm not going to support any identifier mark. I asked this question the other night – I got some answers from the Minister of Justice on it, which were very helpful but not as complete, I don't think, as I need – in terms of future uses of this. Until we actually see that this government or any other government can actually protect the privacy of people, I'm not in favour of identifier markers being given to people for any purposes, including this one.

I would hope that my mind could be changed in the coming years, Mr. Chairman, because I think that likely this is the way we will be going in the future, but I'm not convinced at this stage that the information will be accurate enough. We haven't heard what an acceptable error margin is for these lists and how they expect to correct the problems that are definitely going to occur, not possibly occur but will definitely occur.

Until I have those answers and until I have more confidence in a system that can track people accurately and protect their privacy accurately, then I can't support this part of the bill, so I will in fact be supporting this particular amendment.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was most disappointed to hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie because in listening to what she had to say, I thought that she was creating all of the arguments why she would be supporting the concept of the unique identifier number and not voting for the amendment, and then she ended up in a sprint of twisted logic reversing her logic and rationale to arrive at the wrong conclusion.

In fact, the concept of the unique identifier number, again I hasten to add, is not an invention of mine as sponsor of the bill or of the government as sponsor of the bill, keeping in mind that the Chief Electoral Officer is an officer of the Legislature and operates from the direction of the Legislature through its Legislative Offices Committee. The request came forward for the concept of including

the unique identifier number precisely to deal with the issues that the hon. member was talking about, and that is to make sure that you can have a unique file on each individual for the purposes only of having accurate elections lists and not confusing people who may have the same name who perhaps even live at the same address or have the same name and live at different addresses.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie was actually going through exactly the process that I thought would lead her to say that we ought not to support the amendment. That is to say that having gone through elections and having gone through nominations and knowing the processes that worked, although these lists wouldn't be available for nominations – I would hasten to add that these are for election lists. But having gone through the nomination process, she knows probably as well as anybody in this House how lists of electors are compiled and how they can be confusing when there's more than one person of the same name and certainly more than one person of the same name even at a certain address. It's very, very difficult to ascertain first of all whether the people on the list are eligible to vote and whether the right person is intending to vote and whether that person has voted.

What we ought to be doing, in my humble submission, is letting the Chief Electoral Officer have all the appropriate tools that he needs to make sure that the election lists are full, complete, that he can keep accurate information, that he can keep track of a very mobile population for the purposes of making sure that election lists are full, complete, and accurate and that he doesn't lose information that he should be keeping on a particular individual.

Now, this is a unique situation, Mr. Chairman, in that I don't think there are very many people in the House who believe that governments of any nature should keep files on citizens. To the extent possible citizens' information should be their own, and information should only be collected for appropriate purposes and only used for the purposes for which it's collected. I think we would all share that view in this House. I know that past members of the Liberal opposition, one that I met this weekend who is now the Privacy Commissioner of Saskatchewan, were strong advocates for the privacy of personal information. And in this House we passed the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. There's a strong adherence to the concept that we should not be collecting information that we don't need as a government and that when information is collected, it only should be used for the purposes for which it was collected and those sorts of things.

But the Chief Electoral Officer situation is different in that first of all he's not government; he's an officer of the Legislature. Secondly, it's his job to collect information about an individual to ascertain whether or not they are eligible electors and, having collected that information, to create an electors list and to make sure it's accurate and to make sure that all electors who are eligible to be on that list are on that list and to keep track of that information. As we have a growing population and as we have a mobile population, that's a more and more difficult job.

He has requested one simple tool to allow him to do that job. That simple tool is to be able to take an individual's file, however he keeps it, presumably electronically, and attach a unique identifier number which would be that person's number. He doesn't want to use their social insurance number. He doesn't want to use any other number. He wants to be able to create a file number which he can then use to track that individual and to keep that individual's information and move it to whatever polling district it ought to be in when that person moves, to identify which John Smith it is that's moving, those sorts of pieces of information.

9:00

There's nothing sinister about this. There's nothing big govern-

ment or Big Brother about this. There's nothing in this which portends or suggests that anybody is going to a new system of voting. There's been no suggestion of new systems of voting. In fact, I indicated earlier in response to the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's comments on second reading that that was specifically not the situation. I again, at the beginning of the Committee of the Whole today, indicated that I had gone back and reconfirmed and had been advised that in fact there's no consideration at this time with Internet or on-line voting or any of those other things.

It's simply an administrative, an internal process to help ensure the accuracy of the list of registered voters, something which I think all Albertans have an inherent interest in being done properly, something the Chief Electoral Officer has said will help him in that task, a tool that we ought to allow him to have. So I'd ask members to vote against the amendment.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have two questions for the Minister of Justice on this amendment and the information that he just shared with us. One is that you haven't answered the question of how you expect to be able to protect the integrity of these numbers. Electronic information is not safe. We don't have the kinds of safeguards available, I don't believe, at this time to protect the personal information. So that's one question.

The second question that you haven't answered is: how are they going to correct the errors, and what percentage of errors do we anticipate there to be from these lists? They are not going to be foolproof, and we need to know for those people who have got some error attached to their identifier that there's a process where they can still vote and have that information corrected in a timely fashion.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, as I've indicated on at least two other occasions in debate on this bill, first of all, the unique identifier number has nothing to do with the elector's ability to vote. They're either on the voters list, or they're not on the voters list. If they're not on the voters list, they get to be put on the voters list in accordance with the provisions of the Election Act, which allows the person to become a voter. The fact that they have or don't have the unique identifier number, which allows the Chief Electoral Officer for his own purposes to determine where that file goes and to take information with that that's attached to that number to different places in his database, has nothing to do with the eligibility of a person to vote.

Now, if a person's information is incorrect in the Chief Electoral Officer's database with respect to the election records, again that has nothing to do with whether there's a number attached or not attached. If their information is incorrect, it needs to be corrected, and it's corrected in the same manner as it is now under the Election Act. Nothing changes. In other words, they can be enumerated. If they're already on the list because the Chief Electoral Officer has obtained their information from some other source, then they would be asked, when the enumerations happen, to verify the information, and those corrections can be made at that time. They can examine the election list.

The indication to me was that the unique identifier number wouldn't be a public number on the voters list. I'm not sure of that. But even if it is, it is just one more piece of information which is of no value or interest to anyone else other than the Chief Electoral Officer so that he can tag his file to the number, and when he gets an indication that John Smith has moved from Edmonton-Whitemud to Edmonton-Ellerslie, he can take that package of information over to the other place.

We're in an electronic age. We have new ways of moving data and keeping data and holding files. It used to be a filing cabinet with a file and a list. Now it's a computer. The fact that they use computers and the question of whether the computer is secure or nonsecure has nothing to do with whether there's a unique identifier number attached. It's either secure or nonsecure, and with or without this unique identifier number the same concerns that the hon. member raises will be there. So I'm not sure I understand the concern that's being raised with respect to a simple administrative tool that the Chief Electoral Officer has asked for, what the possible concern with that might be.

I'll leave it at that, Mr. Chairman. I can't explain it any more clearly. I'm not inventing this. It's a request that we've had, and as I'm told and as I've tried to put forward to the House, this unique identifier number will simply be there, attached to an elector when they're enumerated or when they're put on the list for the first time. When that elector moves or changes in some way, that identifier number will be the way that the Chief Electoral Officer moves them through the system. But the system will exist with or without the unique identifier number.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Chairman, I have a question on that explanation. So the individuals will have their unique identifier number so that if they move, they go in and they trigger their own identification with that unique identification number. That's when the Chief Electoral Officer grabs hold of this part of the data sent from Edmonton-Ellerslie, I think was the example you used, and moves it over to Edmonton-Mill Woods. Is that how you explained it? What if the individual does not know their unique identifier number? How do they go about clarifying that this name, et cetera, is to be removed from this section and put in that section? This is a whole process that I see really has a lot of potential but also needs a little bit of understanding as we go through this, because it's quite easy for people to move around and end up being on this continual voter list that we're trying to develop without ever being taken off in an old location.

I can give an example, Mr. Chairman. I register always in Lethbridge, yet when I came up here to my apartment, at the last election here was a little form underneath the door saying: please register. I was called three times asking why I hadn't registered, yet I was registered in Lethbridge. So, you know, what do we do with that kind of a situation? Would I have to put my unique number on here so that they could check and say: "Whoops. Sorry, Ken. You're already registered in Lethbridge"? That's the kind of, I guess, usefulness that we could see for this kind of number, but unless the individual who has the number is forthcoming, what value is it? If I don't put the number on it when I'm in Edmonton, they just have to assume that it's a different individual with the same name because that doesn't work.

It's quite possible to have the same name. I lived in an apartment building in the United States when I was in school, and I kept getting mail for a Ken Nicol in the next apartment building, at 214 instead of 216. I went over there one day, and yes, there was an individual there with exactly the same name, spelled exactly the same way. How do we differentiate those kinds of things?

So this is the kind of thing that if we're going to have those numbers, that helps, but also if we don't each take the responsibility to identify ourselves with that number when we do move an address, how do we keep the records clean? All we've done is created more confusion because there's an expectation of that clean record, but there's no mechanism to carry it through. So I would like to have an explanation on that if possible.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Chairman, I'm going to be really frank and say that I don't have the slightest idea how the Chief Electoral Officer is going to implement the use of the unique identifier number. What I do know is that the Chief Electoral Officer is a well-respected, highly paid individual. I hope he's highly paid. I really don't know how much he's paid. I shouldn't say highly paid; I have no idea how much we pay him. But he's an officer of the Legislature, and we task him to run elections, and we task him to tell us what tools he needs to run elections, what structures he needs to run elections, and what things will make his job easier so that he can make sure we have fair and impartial elections in this province. One of the things he said that would make his life easier is if he had a unique identifier number that he could attach to electors' names so that he could determine one elector from another if they had the same names or if they moved from electoral district to electoral district.

I've got a job to do. I'm a legislator. I'm Minister of Justice and Attorney General, and I'm on a number of various committees, and we set policy. One of the things I don't do is interfere in the management of my department. We hire deputy ministers to do that. One of the things that I should not and cannot do is interfere in the operations of the Chief Electoral Officer. So when he comes and says: here are some things that we ought to do to make the Election Act work better and here are some details – it's one of the few acts that has this kind of detail, one of the few acts that specifies with such degree of codification exactly what happens, whether he can hire an executive assistant. There's good reason for that, I'm sure. One of those good reasons is that people ought to know with a great deal of clarity exactly what the election rules are.

I can't answer the question of what precisely a unique identifier number is. But because I can't answer that question precisely is not a good reason not to trust the Chief Electoral Officer when he says that it would be a very good tool for him to use in making sure that we have accurate election lists. So once again I would ask the people to take his advice and defeat the amendment because it's not a sinister object, it's not another way of turning Albertans into numbers, it's not another way of collecting personal information that the Chief Electoral Officer or government ought not to have; it's simply to be used by the Chief Electoral Officer as a way of keeping the election list straight.

9:10

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I find the debate to the amendment that I moved very, very interesting. One learns more as one listens to every bit of statement that's made.

No one is suggesting that the Chief Electoral Officer's credentials are in question. We have before us a piece of legislation that's come to us as a piece of legislation. We have to make a judgment on it. Our Chief Electoral Officer has made a recommendation. It's our job when that recommendation takes the form of a piece of legislation to examine it carefully and ask questions that are pertinent in our view to the change that's being proposed.

The Minister of Justice has acknowledged himself that he doesn't exactly know the reasons and the various uses that the Chief Electoral Officer wants to put this information to or may choose to put this information to. So since he doesn't know, does he want us to use that as a good enough basis to vote for the proposed legislation?

We are asking serious questions about serious changes that are being proposed. I'm sure the Chief Electoral Officer would not have asked for this change unless he had very strong reasons. The

minister has not been able to spell those reasons out for us. On the other hand, we have raised some important, pertinent, serious questions about what this particular section proposes to achieve and do.

If we don't have the reasons that are persuasive enough and the minister can't provide those reasons, then it's too bad. I have sympathy with him. We're not asking him to interfere in the Chief Electoral Officer's decisions; we're asking him to shepherd this legislation through this Assembly by offering clear, persuasive arguments. He has failed to do that, so I suggest to you, respectfully, Mr. Chairman, that the Assembly ignore the appeal and the basis on which the appeal has been made, that we trust someone else. I think we have to trust our own collective judgment in this House.

So I ask members to vote for the amendment. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A3 lost]

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Chairman, I've got one more amendment here that I'd like to move on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I would like to move on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands that Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be amended by striking out section 90.

The Chair: You have moved amendment A4; have you?

Dr. Pannu: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. We'll just wait a moment until a few people get a copy of it.

Dr. Pannu: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Section 90 of Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, increases the amount of contributions that can be made under the Election Act by individual persons, corporations, trade unions, employee organizations to registered parties and to candidates. The existing legislation puts those limits for contributions to constituency associations at \$750 to any registered constituency association and \$3,750 in the aggregate to the constituency associations of each registered party.

Section 90(1)(a)(ii) increases the limits from \$750 to \$1,000 and from \$3,750 to \$5,000 in the case of a registered constituency association and a registered constituency association of each registered party respectively. It also increases the ceiling from \$1,500 to any registered candidate and \$7,500 in the aggregate to the registered candidates of each registered party. These numbers are changed to \$2,000 to any registered candidate and \$10,000 in the aggregate to the registered candidates of each registered party.

It seems to me, Mr. Chairman, that these increases would make the playing field even more uneven than it is presently. We have information provided by the Chief Electoral Officer's office over the previous elections which clearly indicates that the parties in this House do not receive the corporate or individual donations and contributions in amounts that in any way look similar, thereby making it a very uneven contest based on just the amount of money that's available.

9:20

Certainly, the Progressive Conservative Party is the prime beneficiary of the existing arrangements. The new arrangements that are being proposed by way of this bill in section 90 would increase that advantage very unfairly to the Progressive Conservative Party at the expense of the competitiveness of the elections process. After all, it's the funds that make the election machines go, and given our

knowledge of how the contributions in this province work with respect to party in power and parties in opposition, I submit that the considerable increases in the ceilings with respect to both contributions to candidates and political parties for election purposes will simply make that situation much worse.

So for that reason, I am happy that we have brought this amendment before the House and, certainly, would like to ask other members to support this amendment so that the proposed change is struck out, thereby keeping the existing levels of contributions where they are now, thereby preventing further inequality in the monies received for election purposes by the political parties in this province as they enter the election period.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is another amendment that I'm definitely supporting. It's always struck me how easy it is for government members to raise money and how tough it is for opposition parties to do the same. Here we see in this particular Election Act the government moving forward to make their job even easier in terms of what the limits are for fundraising.

I would be much happier if we set a spending limit for elections that would allow more people to participate in the process rather than fewer. This truly does become an old white man's game at some stage because that's who traditionally has the most access to money. That's a process that needs to be stopped, not enhanced or promoted, and that's what we see through this act: limits just get higher.

I don't ever want to see us go to an American-style model, where you can't even start a nomination campaign if you don't have access to a hundred thousand dollars or more and then talk about election campaigns that are in the hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars. That doesn't allow people to be a part of the process.

It should be a duty for all of us who have been in this system to promote greater numbers of people to run regardless of the political background that they come from because that is where we will get the best government, and that is where we will get the most representative government: from a greater number of people participating in the process. When we see campaign donation limits being increased as they are in this particular act, we see people distancing themselves once again from politics and politicians. What does a person have in common with people who are going to be spending \$2,000 or \$10,000 or \$1,000 or \$5,000 or \$15,000 on campaigns? Very little if anything at all.

This does nothing to help us move towards solving the problem of a new age group of completely disenfranchised voters, Mr. Chairman, and I'm talking about young people. When we take a look at those who are under the age of 30, what we see now is that huge numbers of them don't vote. In fact, seldom do more than 30 per cent of them vote. Why is that? They're disenfranchised for a number of reasons, and not the least of those is how they see these big-money campaigns rolling out. This particular act facilitates that. The amendment attempts to correct that by striking out section 90.

When we see the kinds of dollars that are being increased here, potentially you can spend about \$5,000 more in any particular campaign through the various categories. Candidates, constituency associations, the party system itself: all of these things are being changed now. The limits change during the writ time, so people can give increased limits to a constituency or to an aggregate of a number of constituencies.

For the individuals the only thing that doesn't change is how much can be given to each registered party. I think people would be

surprised to learn that the amount of money that companies can give to registered parties now is \$15,000 a year. It's a huge amount of money, and it's enough to directly influence some parties and some candidates. That's exactly what we have to get away from.

I'm supporting the federal changes that have been made, which put caps on how much money companies and individuals can give to parties, to associations, and to individuals. The federal changes have completely reversed, flipped, how money can be spent. Now the limit is \$1,000 for corporations not just to a candidate but during a whole election period.

So that's very interesting, Mr. Chairman, because under these changes not only can you give \$2,000 to candidate A, but you can also give it to candidate B and C and D and E and F if that's where your pocketbook will stretch if you're a company or an individual. Under the federal rules that amount is capped at \$1,000 total, so if you want to give it to all those candidates, you've got to split that \$1,000 up between all of them. That means you have very little influence on decisions that that candidate, if successfully elected, will be making in the future. That's the way politics should be run. That is not the way this government is going in terms of how we see the increased limits happening here. I can't support that, Mr. Chairman. So I'm very happy to see this particular amendment come forward.

In fact, I think that just striking it out isn't enough. I would like to see an amendment come after this that reduces all of those limits. Let's see how that looks for more people being able to get involved in the process because many people now, particularly women, Mr. Chairman, are unable to run because they simply can't raise the money.

I'd like to speak for a moment about a club that we organized some years ago to address this particular situation. Fifteen years ago two people were very concerned in the Edmonton area about policy resolutions not being supported that directly impacted women. So those two people started a club here in Edmonton called the Edmonton women's policy association. That club was a subgroup of the Liberal Women's Commission. The Liberal Women's Commission is a commission for all women who are members at either the federal or the provincial level. You automatically become a member, if you want to be, when you buy a Liberal membership. Under that commission clubs can be formed for specific objectives.

This club was initially formed 15 years ago to bring forward policy resolutions at conventions that were particularly important to women. They dealt with all kinds of issues: lots on the social side, lots on the protection side, and a lot of them dealing with justice issues. That club formed 15 years ago, and I joined that club 14 years ago. As soon as I heard about it and saw the kind of work it was doing, I joined it.

What we found after going through a couple of conventions at both the federal and the provincial level is that you could get the resolution on the floor, you could get the resolution passed, but until you could get the politicians sitting at the table to act on it, it never had any effect at either the federal or the provincial level. Then what we realized was that not only do we have to develop good policy resolutions, but we have to elect women as politicians so that we have our voice at that table helping to make those decisions. So we went out and started to form SWAT teams that would go out and work for different candidates who supported our particular mandate. What we found was that primarily those were female candidates, and what we found then was that there weren't very many female candidates around.

9:30

So we started to develop some research into why that was. One of

the primary reasons for that was that those women couldn't raise any money, Mr. Chairman. They just didn't have access to resources the same way that male candidates did. At that time, then, the club decided that, well, in order to get these great policy resolutions put forward that we're developing and in order to support the women candidates in ridings where they actually have a chance to win, we better start raising some money for them, because that's the final barrier for them to get there.

Twelve years ago we started having an annual brunch on International Women's Day, a very significant day for women across this country and an excellent time to get people together in a venue where we could promote issues that were important to women across this country and bring in keynote speakers that identified with the issues and would support them and promote them and also at the same time provide the fellowship of having women with like-minded ideas getting together and giving them a chance to get to know each other and talk and look for issues for them to support, to listen to the keynote speaker, and also be able to raise some funds. We've always kept the ticket prices reasonable so that more women than less could come, and we've always encouraged people who couldn't attend to donate their tickets so that those who couldn't afford to come could also be able to come.

Now, keynote speakers over the years, Mr. Chairman, have been very varied. They've been federal and provincial politicians, they've been male and female, and they've come forward and talked about a variety of issues that are very important to us, not the least of which are some of the barriers that women face in politics and how in many ways we've seen some changes over the past 15 years, but in many ways we also haven't.

It was my great privilege this past International Women's Day to be the keynote speaker, Mr. Chairman. That was a real honour because I've seen that club grow, and in fact it's grown and developed in parallel to my own political career. So it was a real honour for me to be this year's keynote speaker. What I did talk about was the women in politics who have been mentors and role models and some of the great things that we have learned about politics and running but some of the barriers that are still out there. So it was very nice to be able to get up and speak. We had about 350 women at that particular brunch. I think the biggest selling brunch that we have had was when Paul Martin came to speak. That was prior to him being Prime Minister, and at that brunch we sold about 750 tickets.

What happens with that money is that the club puts it into an investment plan, and we keep the money separated for federal and provincial candidates. When the elections are called, then we take that money out and divide it amongst those women in Edmonton and the Edmonton area that are running and deliver it to them the day the writ is dropped. That's a very significant day for us to deliver that money, Mr. Chairman, because, as we who have run in campaigns all know, most of your expenses in a campaign are up front. We know that we have to pay the rent, we have to install the telephones, we have to pay the deposits, we have to order a brochure, we've got to get those signs up there, and those are all upfront costs.

So it's very significant for members of the club to be able to walk into a woman's campaign office on day one and hand them a cheque. Traditionally for provincial politicians it's been around \$800 because at the provincial level we have more women running than at the federal level. Traditionally at the federal level it's been about \$2,000 per candidate because there are fewer running. That's a significant amount of money, Mr. Chairman, and it is very much appreciated by those women who are candidates and by those who are operating their campaign offices.

One of the ways that we've been able to promote and support

women candidates over the years is through this club. It's now in its 15th year. It is the only fundraising event that is held annually on International Women's Day in the federal party, and it is widely recognized. The model is looked at by many different associations across the province, but none have been able to duplicate it to this stage.

I have to say that the core group of women that organize this club is about 15 people. They work very hard, and they work tirelessly. But when elections come, the club attracts many more people, 200 to 300 volunteers who form the SWAT teams and go out and telephone and door-knock and otherwise help people run their campaigns.

I have to say that I have had the good fortune of having executive members of that club run all of my campaigns, Mr. Chairman, whether they've been nominations or elections. We've had key people in that group come out and devote their time to my campaigns, and as a result I believe I've been successful because of their assistance. In fact, in this upcoming campaign my nomination chair is a past president of the club and my campaign chairman is a past president of the club, and they're all still actively involved.

We're now at the stage where we're mentoring young women to come in and take the reins of leadership and raise the bar for us in terms of the next level that we get involved in. So that's been an amazing process to be involved in.

Mr. Hancock: A point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader is rising on a point of order I can only guess.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On relevance. I've been listening intently on this women's policy club. I think I've heard about the executive for the last 15 years and the value of the policy club and all that sort of thing, but I haven't heard one iota about the amendment, which is about not raising the fundraising limits. I heard "fundraising" a couple of times, but that's about as close as she got.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on the purported point of order.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, it's too bad that the minister only started listening halfway through, because certainly I did talk specifically to this amendment and to the changes it's making in fundraising and about how it's relevant for people who can't raise the money, which is the real problem with the changes in this act as it stands. If he would just have a little patience and let me finish, I would conclude by talking about those specifics as well.

The Chair: Well, as they say, coincidence and convergent thought. The chair has been wondering how this was relevant to A4, and I'm glad you've explained that to us right now. Truthfully, the earlier part certainly was dealing with the material of section 90. It's all very interesting about the club, but if you could sort of bring that back to the essence of amendment A4, that would be helpful, I think.

Debate Continued

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. While I would like to talk at greater length building my case about the club and why it is replacing some of the discriminatory practices that we would

otherwise see attached to women candidates and their inability to raise funds, I will return directly to how the problem is perhaps not understood by government members, who want to oppose this amendment.

By raising the limits that any particular individual or company can spend on a campaign, we disenfranchise many people, and particularly we disenfranchise those people who otherwise have a hard time raising money. Those, as I said, Mr. Chairman, are primarily women or fringe candidates who don't have parties of recognition behind them. We have found in our party ways to try and mitigate those problems by the fundraising through the club and other kinds of sources, but it only hurts us even more and once again hurts us if we raise the limits for the fundraising in this particular instance.

So I once again say that I support this amendment. I do not like the part of the act as the changes are implied here. I urge all members of this Assembly, and particularly all members of this Assembly who support women moving forward in politics, to support the amendment.

9:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to say a few words about the amendment with respect to section 90. The increases are \$500 for a candidate, \$2500 for candidates, from \$750 to \$1,000 for a constituency association, and from \$3,750 to \$5,000 for constituency associations. The donations to parties remain the same as they were previously, at \$15,000.

Campaign contributions have always been a source of controversy and concern. I think that it's fair to say that in our province there's been increasing concern over special interests and funding candidates at election time and the role that money plays in decision-making in the province. We propose, for instance, a lobbyist registration so that the kinds of inferences that are affecting politicians in the province are transparent and up front for everyone to see. Our caucus believes that changes to the act should have been brought forward. Our present policy would ask that individuals, corporations, and unions could donate more than \$5,000 a year. That's the policy as it's outlined by our party at the present time.

So I think clearly the thrust is to reduce the amount of money that can be donated. At the same time, we have suggested that the amount of money for constituencies would not change. We've also indicated that the money for the donations to individual candidates would not change. So the amendment is more consistent with what we have proposed as a party, and the proposals in the bill move in a direction quite opposite from what we think is healthy for election financing in the province.

The same arguments, I think, may be used for this section as were used in trying to argue against the increase in the amount of money that people are required to put down for nominations. I think we are wise to promote and to try to foster a political culture where big money and big dollars don't become a major influence in campaigns and in the election of people to the Legislature. The danger of that, I think, is all too well apparent from campaigns south of the border and the amounts of money required to run for political office in some jurisdictions. Some positions in the States, people elected to decide public business, have turned those elected officials into full-time campaign money raisers, and it certainly has distorted the whole political process.

These numbers in section 90 are certainly not of the same magnitude as some of those south of the border, but they are moving in that direction when we start increasing the amounts, even as modest as some of these increases are. I think that it was wise to

leave the donations to a political party at \$15,000. It's the only sum that hasn't been changed in the act, but the others are creeping up, and it's that kind of creep that will eventually see us, I think, regretting that we didn't see fit to put the brakes on the increases when they came forward, as they have in Bill 22.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I would urge members of the Assembly to support the amendment and to ensure that campaign financing remains much as it is. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to conclude debate.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to just add a few comments in support of the amendment. When speaking on this bill at second reading, I drew the attention of the House to the direction in which the federal legislation has moved relative to the ability of parties and candidates to raise funds.

It's refreshing to note that all of the parties represented in the House of Commons agreed some time ago to reduce political party dependence on big money – big organizations, corporations, labour unions, and others – and felt that it will greatly serve the democratic process to make election campaigns undertaken by political parties independent of big corporate donations, labour union donations, and will free political parties from the need to depend on big money, whether it's coming from individuals or groups or corporations.

So we have now national legislation which enables elections run by registered political parties to be funded from public funds, thereby freeing all political parties from undue possible influence by powerful players, be they banks, be they corporations, be they labour unions or other groups. This, I think, is a very desirable kind of development at the federal level, and one would hope that we would move in a similar direction if we agree that independence of political parties from special interests and powerful entities or groups is important for the health of democracy in our province and in our country.

That's not what this bill tries to do. Particularly section 90 of this bill, Mr. Chairman, in fact entrenches further the ability of special interest groups, corporations, rich and wealthy individuals or other special interest groups to be able to fund the elections by selecting a party of their choice in a way which I think is detrimental to the health of the electoral process and certainly to the health of democratic processes in this province.

9:50

I would hope that we don't want to increase the influence of and don't increase the dependence on special powerful interests by making changes in the elections statutes which will further strengthen the ability of special interests and powerful groups to influence election outcomes or election campaigns because they have the ability through large amounts to fund campaigns to influence the election outcomes.

That's why this amendment is so important, and that's why section 90 of this bill is a matter of such grave concern not only to me, not only to members of the opposition parties in general but to citizens, and citizens are becoming very cynical about the fact that election campaigns can be bought and can be influenced in very consequential ways simply with the power of money that corporations or special interest groups can throw at election time in the direction of political parties of their choice, and we know which political party is their first choice in this province. That's very clear from the official records in this province. It's the party in power. The Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta is the greatest beneficiary of such big donations coming from a very small number of powerful

special interests, sometimes big money, sometimes corporations, sometimes other organized groups.

So it is for that reason, Mr. Chairman, that the New Democrat caucus has been very happy to move this amendment which will strike section 90 so that we maintain whatever balance there is in the existing legislation. In fact, I urge all parties in this House to move towards taking steps similar to the ones that all parties in the House of Commons have agreed to take to reduce the dependence of political parties on these big donors and big donations and provide public assistance which is fair and appropriate for us to run our elections.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just briefly with respect to the amendment. The amendment, as we've heard, proposes to delete section 90 of Bill 22 and by doing so would then leave the act as it is. So with respect to contributions to registered constituency associations and registered candidates the limits would be as in the existing act.

Now, the existing act was passed, as far as I can recall, in 1980, and there's been no change to those limits since 1980. The changes that are being proposed here are relatively modest. They're a 33 per cent increase in the amounts, from \$750 to \$1,000 in one case and from \$3,750 to \$5,000 in another, relatively modest in amount given that it's been that since 1980, which by my calculation in math is about 24 years, so I don't think it's untoward to increase those limits.

I think it behooves us to point out that no increase has been made to the limit of \$15,000 to each registered party. That's been kept the same, so I think the protests about how it affects those in government as opposed to those who are in opposition or otherwise are really a bit of a stretch. The bottom line is that every now and then you have to revisit and modernize legislation. You have to keep it current. You have to take a look at it, and in this case, where the limits were set some 24 years ago, it's not untoward to revisit those limits and put in a relatively small increase given the period of time over which this stretches.

I would suggest that there's nothing nefarious or untoward about section 90 as it's proposed in the act. In fact, it's quite reasonable. It doesn't move it to unrealistic limits. It doesn't go any further than simply making those changes.

Quite frankly, I think that there's another good reason not to adopt this amendment, and that, I believe, is that it's not quite so simple as simply to make that amendment. There also would have to be corollary amendments made with respect to the receipt side. In the member's haste to deal with this, unless he maybe has some other separate amendments that he intends to bring forward to deal with the other portions of it after this particular amendment has been passed, he's missed out the corollary amendments which would be necessary to make this amendment effective.

So in its current form, certainly, and also because of its substance I think the House should deny this amendment.

[Motion on amendment A4 lost]

The Chair: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We've had a wonderful day of debate on elections. I think it's been enervating for all of us, and it probably behooves us to go home and reflect on the wonderful debates, so I would move that the committee rise and report Bill 24 and report progress on Bill 22.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports Bill 24. The committee also reports progress on Bill 22. At this time I would like to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:59 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 24, 2004

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to other members of the Assembly two visitors seated in your gallery. The Hon. Scott Smith, MLA for Brandon West, is the Minister of Industry, Economic Development, and Mines for the province of Manitoba and is also charged with the administration of the Manitoba Liquor Control Act and the Manitoba Lotteries Corporation Act. Minister Smith is in Edmonton to attend the eighth annual Canadian Gaming Summit and Exhibition being held from March 22 to March 24. Alberta is proud to have had the opportunity to showcase our dynamic and well-regulated gaming environment to the hundreds of conference participants who are attending from all parts of Canada and from around the world. Attending with Minister Smith is his special assistant Greg Merner. I'd ask our visitors to now rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group of students and their parents from Connections for Learning, which is a home-schooling group. Mr. Curtis Currie is the teacher with parents Mrs. Jannie Jamieson, Mrs. Carmen Martin, Mr. Brian Shaw, Mrs. Lorie Saito, Mrs. Susan O'Reilly, Mrs. Alma Carter, Mrs. Diana Nelson. I'd ask them and the students to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 97 very energetic and bright students from the Gibbons school. They are accompanied by their teachers, Mr. Don McIntyre, Mrs. Rhonda Hruschak, Mrs. Kristine Wilkinson, Ms Sheligne Connolly, and Mrs. Nikki Maurer; also, aides Mrs. Jamie Hamilton, Mrs. Charlotte McLean, Mrs. Lorie Chrétien, and Mrs. Kathy Larson. Accompanying them also are parents Mrs. Tricia Hurst, Mrs. Debra Becker, Mrs. Susanne Hedstrom, Ms Gail Badke, and Miss Teresa Tychy. They're seated in both the members' and public galleries. I'd ask them to please rise and receive this warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to

introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly five exceptional people from the Lac La Biche-St. Paul constituency. Geraldine Bidulock is the constituency treasurer. She is accompanied by her uncle Bob Prozni. Along with being family members, they have a very unique connection. Later today I'll be making a recognition on organ donation, and Geraldine and Bob are examples of a direct result of a successful transplant effort. Geraldine is among those brave and selfless people who have donated an organ for transplant, and her uncle Bob is, I know, the most grateful recipient of her gift. With them today are Jerry Bidulock, Robbie Prozni, and Reverend Adelina Pecchia. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon, and I would ask them to all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly somebody who probably doesn't need an introduction, and that is the reeve of Brazeau county, the county in which I live. He's also the vice-president of the AAMD and C. I'm going to ask Mr. Bart Guyon to stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly an individual that keeps my days very busy in Calgary-Buffalo. As well, her interpersonal skills are second to none in dealing with constituents. I'd like to ask Kathy Holdaway to stand – she's in the members' gallery – and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Snelgrove: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's an obvious sign that the condos in the area need spring cleaning as I can see that we're joined in the gallery today by the wife of the Calgary-Buffalo MLA. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly Mrs. Sherry Cenaiko. Would she rise and accept the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to introduce to you and to all assembled a good friend and a long-time volunteer and a member of the executive of Calgary-Egmont, Mr. Bill Williams. Bill's involvement goes all the way back to when Dr. David Carter was sitting in your chair, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask Bill to stand and receive the warm and traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a very special guest seated in the members' gallery. As the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul has introduced the family members and an organ donor, this individual that I'd like to introduce, Mrs. Georgina Prozni, is the mother of the donor. The Prozni family, as you know, has been synonymous with the community of Willingdon and has been in that area for well over a century. I'd ask Georgina to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly four staff members that operate the land-use operations of public lands. They manage over 170,000 active files.

Dr. Taylor: How much?

Mr. Cardinal: A hundred and seventy thousand active files. The members are Glenn Selland, John Begg, Margarete Hee, and Gerry Haekel. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the balance of the Assembly two wonderful people, Jennifer Diakiw and her grandson Matt. Matt is at the Legislature for the first time today. Jennifer had the thrill and privilege of working here years previous, and as a note of interest Matthew's grandfather was the architect of the Jubilee auditoria, built in 1955. I'd ask them both to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my privilege to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two Edmonton public school board trustees. They're sitting in the public gallery and will be joining us later on again in the House for the budget speech. They are Trustee Lynn Odynski, representing ward C, and Trustee Jean Woodrow, representing ward E. Both these trustees have been instrumental in the development of the Council of School Councils, a joint initiative between their respective wards whose aim it is to strengthen the relationships between school council members, trustees, and their representative MLAs. They will be joined by, I know, other council members and trustees later on during the budget speech. I would now request them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you for recognizing me, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce a few spouses and friends of some of our members who are here with us. They're a little shy to do it themselves. I'd like to recognize Mrs. Jan Marz, wife of our member from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, as well as Angeline Goudreau, wife of the MLA for Dunvegan. I think it's kind of special that his brother Paul is here as well to see him in action. Would they please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Oral Question Period

Calgary Health Region

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, despite two more needless deaths in the Calgary health region this government continues to deny Albertans what is needed most: a fully independent public inquiry. Instead, the government hangs its hat on the Health Quality Council and the region announces that an out-of-province medical officer will help

with its internal review. These are nothing more than band-aid solutions for what has become a gaping wound. To the Premier: given that nobody currently looking into this incident has the mandate to conduct a fully open and public investigation, will the Premier tell us why his government is so reluctant to order a fully independent public inquiry?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is not true. Quite simply that is not true. There are a number of investigations that can be taken and will be taken in many cases relative to this very, very unfortunate incident. Like the hon. member I'm saddened and disturbed by the news of these deaths, but there are a number of investigations underway that will bring answers to the families and to all Albertans, and they are unbiased, open, and transparent investigations.

First of all, the medical examiner's office investigation is underway and will likely refer the two cases to the Fatality Review Board. This board is entirely independent, is a judicial if not a quasi-judicial board that operates in an open and transparent way. If the Fatality Review Board recommends to the Justice minister that fatality inquiries be held into one or both cases, I suspect that the Justice minister would accept that recommendation and do what is appropriate. Fatality inquiries, if one is to be held or two are to be held, are open processes chaired by an independent judge.

Mr. Speaker, there are many courses to conduct a full, a complete, an open, an honest, and a transparent investigation and adjudication of these two unfortunate incidents.

Dr. Taft: To the Minister of Health and Wellness: how can the minister claim that the Health Quality Council's investigation is independent when its members include a former government MLA, a current government MLA, and a senior officer with the Calgary health region?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I want to again outline for the hon. member what the purpose of the review by the Health Quality Council is, and that is to look at this from the perspective of a system-wide basis. Now, there are other adjudications that may be in respect of the assessment or the finding of accountability of individuals within the system.

Again, I want the hon. member to understand and I want all Albertans to understand that there will be accountability for individuals involved in this, but just as important if not more important is to try and prevent this from happening in the future. That's the reason why the Health Quality Council is involved: to look at the best practices across Canada for the handling of materials that contain potassium. We think, Mr. Speaker, that this is a very, very important part because we want to learn from these particular circumstances and employ then the best practices for ensuring that it does not happen again.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there have been two near deaths and the lessons weren't learned, two deaths and the lessons weren't learned, and a number of other inquiries and investigations, will the Premier commit to calling a public inquiry under the Public Inquiries Act into the situation at the Calgary health region?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I've already answered that question. There are many processes available, many of which are being used. They are open processes, and they are transparent processes, and they are judicial processes. If you have at least three or four streams of

investigation and adjudication, why would you add, at great expense, another stream? Just to satisfy the opposition? Just to satisfy . . . [interjections] No. The public will be satisfied. The public will be able to hear, will be able to participate if they have evidence to present to any of these tribunals.

In addition to the investigations that have been mentioned – and I notice that the leader, not the leader but the . . .

An Hon. Member: Wannabe.

Mr. Klein: . . . wannabe leader. The real leader is here today.

The Speaker: I think we'll move on.

Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

SuperNet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The SuperNet's costs continue to rise for the taxpayers of Alberta. The minister tells us now that the \$193 million has everyone hooked up to the door. My question is to the Premier. Why hasn't this government told Albertans that the \$193 million will get the SuperNet to the doorsteps, but the libraries and municipal buildings will still have to pay more to get connected?

Mr. Klein: I am not sure what the hon. member means by "more to get connected." More than what? More is very subjective. More than what? More of less or less of more or more of more?

Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Doerksen: Well, Mr. Speaker, as has been explained in the Assembly before, the Alberta SuperNet builds the highway over which traffic can move. That highway, as the member quite rightly points out, connects the schools, the libraries, the hospitals, and government buildings. Just like you have at home, the telephone company brings your telephone service to the door. You still have to pay money to access that network, and that's not uncommon. That has not been anything unusual. Through many budget discussions in this House on the Alberta SuperNet that's always been the case. It's been perfectly clear.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, back to the Premier: why does the \$3,000 per year SuperNet connection not include basic Internet service?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will have the hon. minister answer relative to the specifics related to hooking up to the SuperNet.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, perhaps I'm not being clear on this point. Let's talk about the earlier discussion we had in the Assembly about municipalities and the \$4,000 grant that was announced by the Minister of Municipal Affairs just a few days ago that lets the municipalities join the highway, which is something that they find beneficial. So digging the conduit or providing the wireless connection to the municipalities is the \$4,000. The monthly charge to have access or access to the data like you would pay for your telephone line or your high-speed Internet service at your home is the monthly charge that is the responsibility in this case of the municipalities.

1:50

Ms Blakeman: And you still don't have Internet.

My final question back to the Premier: did the government understand that they were getting Alberta taxpayers into a project that costs them to build the highway, that costs them to hook up the entrance to the highway, and that costs them to get connected, to have a car to drive on the highway. You got us into all of that. Did you know that? I don't think so.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I think that the hon. minister outlined it adequately. We built the highway. If someone wants to connect to the highway, that's entirely up to them, but there is a cost for a connection to the highway.

Ms Blakeman: More.

Mr. Klein: I don't know what she talks about "more." More than what? There's never been a highway before. I'm confused as to: more than what? More than before they had the highway that they couldn't connect to? You know, go figure.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and the Minister of Economic Development would also love to supplement if you would permit them.

I, frankly, am at a loss for words at what to say. This provides us a lot more than just the Internet, Mr. Speaker. This is part of the confusion. The benefits of having a classroom in Rainbow Lake connected to the University of Alberta connected to La Crête connected to Drayton Valley are all possible now with the Alberta SuperNet. You can do video conferencing that is much more than simple access to the Internet. This brings us into the 21st century in a major way.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta businesses are hitting the highway and leaving the province because of electricity deregulation. Power bills for a glass fibre plant in Leduc have more than doubled to \$1.5 million a year, and the plant has lost up to \$400,000 in production due to constant power outages. With electricity deregulation costing the plant \$2 million more each year, the owner is now looking to move out of the province to a place where power is affordable and reliable. My first question is to the Premier. What feeble excuses does the Premier now have for this \$8 billion electricity boondoggle when we see so many businesses complaining about the cost of power and the reliability of supply?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm not receiving a lot of cards and letters on the reliability of supply. I'm receiving none on the reliability of supply because if we have one thing in this province, we do have the energy. We have the power.

Relative to these people that the hon. member alludes to in the context that hordes and hordes of people are leaving the province, well, hordes and hordes of people are coming to the province. All one needs to do is turn one's ear to the highways leading to the north, particularly the oil sands up north, where there's about \$50 billion worth of new construction underway, and trucks are moving, and the railways are talking about building rail services up there. The highways are as busy as they possibly can be.

I haven't heard about anyone leaving the province. When you look at everything overall, including power rates and the stabilization of power rates, the secure supply of power, the low taxes, the

Alberta advantage generally, Mr. Speaker, there are far more people coming to this province, notwithstanding this feeble Liberal opposition, than will ever, ever leave this province.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that no one will ever build an electric train to Fort McMurray because they know it will be too expensive for sure, again to the Premier: how many Alberta businesses and industries will be forced to flee from this province and relocate to other provinces like Manitoba or British Columbia, where electricity is much cheaper, before this government comes to their senses and unplugs electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have never in my life heard such nonsense. We are doing just fine, thank you. You know, because the Liberals like the old way of doing things and because they're so tuned in to socialistic systems, they can't accept something that is new, is innovative, is effective, and it works.

Relative to the situation today with respect to businesses either coming or going, I'll have the hon. Minister of Economic Development supplement.

Mr. Norris: I'm getting the signal to be short, Mr. Speaker. With such an abundance of good news it'll be tough. I have to say, being of Irish descent, that my mother always told me to consider the source. I'd say to the hon. member: you have to start telling the truth.

Here's the reality. Bankruptcies in Alberta were down by 28 per cent compared to the rest of the nation. The business migration was somewhere in the neighbourhood of 300 new businesses into the province of Alberta, clearly not what the hon. member says. In the first 11 months of the year 2003 the number of business bankruptcies in Alberta was at – and listen for it – an all-time low. Coincidentally, big surprise, the number of new business start-ups in Alberta was at – listen for it – an all-time high. Clearly, the member is absolutely incorrect.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: since our electricity bills are at an all-time high in this province, why is this government continuing with such a destructive economic policy, which is the fostering of electricity deregulation?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, this is so typical of the Liberals. They sit there, and they listen with their duffs. I'm sure they do because they don't listen with their ears. The hon. minister just went through the list of why people are coming here in droves. Far, far more businesses are coming here to take advantage of the Alberta advantage than are leaving, for sure.

This hon. member should be proud to live in Alberta, where we have, thank God, an entrepreneurial spirit, a spirit of free enterprise, and where we have the courage to do things differently and do things in an efficient and an effective manner. That's why this province is prosperous today.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Tax Policy for Armed Forces Personnel

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is home to one of the largest contingents of military personnel in Canada, based at a number of locations including the Edmonton Garrison, the Cold Lake air base, and CFB Suffield. Often these men and women in uniform are asked to leave their families and serve in dangerous

missions in world trouble spots. My question is to the Premier. Does the government plan to follow the lead of the federal government and exempt our men and women in uniform from paying provincial income tax on their military salaries during the months that they are serving overseas, and if not, why not?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's an interesting question and certainly one that I hadn't contemplated. I will take that under advisement and consult with the provincial Finance minister.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Is the Premier at liberty to give us an estimate as to how long this might take?

2:00

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll discuss it with the hon. minister as soon as I possibly can. Hopefully, an answer will be provided either this week or next week.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Should the government decide to exempt military personnel from paying provincial income tax while serving overseas, will this apply to the beginning of the 2004 taxation year so that it can match what is being done by the federal government?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the question is hypothetical because I don't have the answer to his first question. Once that question is answered, perhaps I'll be able to answer his third question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Opening of U.S. Border to Live Cattle

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents as well as the rest of our Alberta residents are still very concerned about when the U.S. border will open to Alberta beef. They were glad to hear the recent announcement that Canada would be accepting beef from U.S. states that are low-risk for bluetongue and anaplasmosis. They were even happier to hear about the Premier's and the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's trip to Washington to present Alberta's case directly to the USDA. My first question is to the Premier. How successful was Alberta's trip to Washington?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess the success of the trip will be when the border opens. If – and I underline the word “if” – everything goes according to plan and we aren't hit with an unexpected case of BSE either in the United States or Canada, then the border will likely open at the end of June. That will be for young cattle, cattle under 30 months, live cattle. That would be a welcomed first step.

The meetings, I believe, went very well indeed. This time around it was necessary to be aggressive, because little did we ever imagine that a second case of BSE would surface in the United States or in Canada.

An Hon. Member: You should have known.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, this hon. member sitting over there said, “You should have known.” Would this hon. member ever know and

tell me when the next case is going to occur? Can he tell me this now, today? If he can't tell me, then keep his trap shut.

Mr. Speaker, in Washington we heard nothing that would change our belief that the U.S., too, wants our borders to open soon. We heard that from the cattle industry. We heard it from the political side, and we heard it from the administration side. We presented our comment submission on the proposed U.S. role directly to the undersecretary of the United States Department of Agriculture. I have found and I'm sure the hon. minister found as well that face-to-face meetings are infinitely more valuable than speaking to someone over the phone or simply writing a letter.

Mr. Speaker, this trip was more than just presenting our comment submission. This trip was about positioning ourselves as a province and as a country, to explain and receive concurrence that our industries are fully integrated and that after things get back to normal, we need to work together as countries and as beef-producing areas to convince the international community of the quality and the safety of Canadian and American beef.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What was contained in Alberta's comment submission?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, first may I say that the Premier did an absolutely outstanding job of meeting with the cross-section of people in the U.S. that were important to hear our submission. Our submission talked about the highly integrated nature of the North American cattle and beef industry, certainly a relationship that benefits not only producers but processors and consumers on both sides of the border. That was recognized by all that we met with.

It was important to discuss again the measures that we have put in place and to hear from the U.S. people that we met with that they recognize that we have put in place very extensive measures to reduce the risk of BSE including our expanded surveillance, which they are also doing, including the removal of specified risk materials, which they are also doing, and, of course, talking about the ban that has been in place since 1997 on ruminant-to-ruminant feeding.

Mr. Speaker, it was important for us to reiterate to the U.S. that we support the USDA in using science as the basis for making the decision. We've been saying that since the beginning, and it was important that we reiterate that Canada is a minimal risk area and that the borders should open.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is for the same minister. How was the CFIA announcement on bluetongue and anaplasmosis received?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, this has been an issue that has been a point of contention, I would say, between the U.S. industry and the Canadian industry for some years. We were in the process of introducing a pilot project in 2003 that would have seen the first cattle move into the province in what is considered a vector season. Unfortunately, with the case of BSE that pilot project was halted.

I can tell you that in discussions with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and with politicians in the U.S., the opening of our country to beef from 39 states in all seasons of the year was very well received. Certainly, it goes a long way to proving once again how integrated the Canadian and U.S. beef industry is.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Access to Information Application Fees

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday in the Legislative Assembly the hon. Minister of Government Services stated in question period not once but twice that Alberta has the lowest fee for access to information across Canada. My first question is to the Minister of Government Services. Given that application fees for access to information in Canada range from a low of \$5 in New Brunswick to a high of \$25 in Nova Scotia and at the federal level again to a low of \$5 and our application fee in this province is \$25, how can the minister say that we have the lowest fees across Canada for access to information?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, my comment yesterday was exactly correct. The initial fee is \$25. Subsequent requests that go up to \$150 are assessed by the department, and that assessment can go down to \$25, so that just proves that my statement yesterday was true. Twenty five dollars after assessment is the fee, and that is the lowest in Canada.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, I'm astonished that he doesn't understand his own legislation, Mr. Speaker.

Again to the minister: will he reduce the initial application fee in this province from \$25 to what the federal government has, which is \$5? Why don't you reduce those fees, which are really taxes?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, that would not be a very good move because the average cost to handle each FOIP request is over \$45 in this province.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that access to information legislation is a means by which people get that information from sometimes reluctant government hands, why is this government taxing information that should be readily provided in the public interest not only to the Official Opposition but also to other Albertans?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, I'm quite surprised at the hon. member's third question, because this particular legislation has been reviewed twice and this hon. member sat on both of those committees. It would have been very appropriate if during that process this particular individual who sat on those committees had brought that forward at that time. The actual report, that was brought and placed in this House, where it was debated, actually provided the basis for amendments to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. That's the process, and that's the way he should approach this.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

2:10 Organized Crime and Gang Activity

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have recently met with distraught constituents who are concerned about organized crime, gangs, and drugs in our communities. Some constituents see suspicious activity and are afraid to let their children walk down certain neighbourhood streets by themselves. Some have heard that there is a dealer and pimp who has said to those who owe him drug money: bring me a 14 year old and I will cancel your debt. My questions are for the Solicitor General. What is the government

doing to address the issues of organized crime and gangs in our communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to say that anyone with information about criminal activities in this province should be giving that information to the police.

As for the question of gangs and organized crime we know that gangs are a breeding ground for organized crime, and we know that organized crime is a problem crossing all boundaries, all communities, and a part of society. It's no longer a big-city problem.

This government is not standing idly by. First, we provide the Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta with \$2.4 million in annual funding. Secondly, we established the integrated response to organized crime unit, which is known as IROC, which is directed by senior RCMP members, members from Calgary and Edmonton. This is really a first in Canada, and I'm very, very proud of what they're doing. They're up and running. Police are targeting key players and crime bosses through the co-ordinated efforts of CISA and IROC in addition to the actions already taken by all the law enforcement agencies in the province.

Mrs. Jablonski: Again to the Solicitor General: can you tell me whether or not organized crime and gang activity is growing in this province?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, crime in general is going down in Alberta. It is down in Canada and in most other western industrialized countries. Crime stats, however, do show increases in organized crime activities partly due to our booming economy. So to answer her question, yes, gang and organized crime activity seems to be increasing. We understand how Albertans want to have safer communities, and law enforcement is a high priority. Without being specific, we're going to be dealing with the budget in a couple of hours, and we're going to have good news for the policing community in this province.

Mrs. Jablonski: Finally, to the same minister: what should people look for and what should they do if they suspect that there's a crystal meth lab or grow operation in their neighbourhood?

Mrs. Forsyth: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I encourage the member and any other person to be very, very careful if they suspect a home in their area is being used to make meth. If you suspect something, contact the police. Obviously, do not make contact with the residents of the home or go around investigating the home. It's important to call the police.

There are signs that people can look for if they're suspicious that there's a meth lab next to them, and that is an unusual or strong odour similar to fingernail polish or cat urine. Look at the garbage that's being disposed of; are there large quantities of cold medicine, antifreeze, drain cleaners, lantern fuel, coffee filters, batteries, duct tape, and large glass containers? Are the windows blacked out? Is there unusual traffic at night? All of these are signs that a meth operation could be next door. Again, contact your police.

Private/Public Partnerships for Hospital Construction

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, last week members of the government were unfamiliar with a report that was tabled in this Assembly on November 26, 2003, which was titled *Why P3s Don't Work*, and *What Will*. My question today is to the minister of health. Given

that this report clearly states that "the P3 model for public hospitals is likely to lead to . . . a deterioration of the quality and extent of universal service," how can this minister condone using P3s for hospitals?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. Please remember that we're not into a debate here.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there is a certain philosophical element to this, I would suggest. The reality is that when an individual goes into a facility seeking health care services, the operative questions that will be on the mind of such an individual are: does this place have the people and the equipment and the skills to diagnose me and treat me so I get better? Nobody is going to ask: "I wonder what the rate of return on this building is. I wonder if this is owned by the regional health authority. I wonder if this is a P3 project." That is far removed from what the concerns are of individuals who are ill and need access to the health care system.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is important that we look at the recent report prepared by the Conference Board of Canada that examined OECD countries in the world. It assessed that Canada has the third highest cost system in the world but only gets middle-of-the-pack results, around 13th in the world, in terms of outcomes. We do have a good health care system. I don't want Albertans to think otherwise. But the reality is that there are other places that are getting better outcomes. Our responsibility as a government is to examine these systems from around the world, and if we're prepared to import physicians from other parts of the world, we should also be prepared to import the gold-medal standards of best practices, including innovative ways of looking at how our health care system is provided through P3s.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that the report states that "it is reasonable to expect P3 hospitals to be at least 10% more costly than their public sector equivalents," why does the Premier believe that P3 hospitals won't cost Alberta taxpayers more?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again the hon. member does not understand or refuses to understand the whole concept and the process relative to P3s.

First of all, this government is not saying by any stretch of the imagination that P3s are the end-all and the be-all. We are saying that this is another tool that might be used to get needed infrastructure on stream, whether that infrastructure involves municipal buildings, schools, hospitals, roadways, or whatever else. If a P3 works and if it can be demonstrated through a very detailed adjudication process that the project will be a good project and it will save taxpayers' dollars, then we will consider it and likely go ahead with it. If it can be shown that the project is of no particular benefit to the taxpayer or to the government or to the people of this province, then it won't go ahead. We'll find another way of doing it.

So, Mr. Speaker, there is nothing wrong whatsoever in reviewing and looking at P3 proposals and putting them to work if they work. If they don't work, they won't happen.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier: when will this government actually hear the concerns of Albertans, of prominent economists, of relevant organizations and other governments and reject the P3 model for essential public services such as health care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, P3 projects for essential public services and other public services will be rejected if they don't work. I have seen examples of P3 projects that work in the health care system.

[interjection] Well, I have seen a proposal that works. In my mind it works. Maybe in his mind it doesn't work, but in the minds of the people involved with the project – and I'm talking about one in the U.K. – it works.

Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs respond.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I should have ruled these questions out at the beginning. They just lead to debate. The purpose of question period is to deal with policy, so I apologize for the last five minutes or six minutes.

We're now moving on to the hon. Member for Wainwright, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

2:20

Rural Education

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Learning Commission's is an excellent report that ensures that the urban education system works, but while the report deals with the urban issue of class size, it does not address the rural issue of double and triple grading. In fact, nowhere in the report are unique rural education issues around transportation, program inequity, lack of specialized services, and the effects of declining enrolment addressed at all. My question is to the Minister of Learning. What plans does the minister have to address these unique problems faced by rural boards in delivering quality education in rural Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member has raised some very good points. The Learning Commission received a lot of accolades across the province and, indeed, right across the country for the work that it's done. One of the disappointments, though, that has been voiced to me is exactly what the hon. member has brought up, which is the rural school issue. There are not a lot of things in the Learning Commission about rural schools.

I will add, though, Mr. Speaker, that included in the funding formula which was actually suggested and recommended by the Learning Commission are a lot of specific things that deal with the exact issues that the hon. member asked. Small schools by necessity will now become a type of grant that will be given to those areas where they have small schools. The small schools are such that, realistically, because of their location you cannot close them down. You cannot close a school because there won't be another school for, you know, 30 or 40 miles. So that's certainly one of the areas.

Another thing and a very important thing, Mr. Speaker, that we will be doing, in subtle reference to another question that was asked today: the SuperNet will play a very important role. Indeed, the SuperNet has been funded in my department for the last two years and actually will continue to be funded for the next 20 or 30 years within my department. As a matter of fact, in the funding formula it has been recommended that these funds be enveloped.

So, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has an excellent question. Rural schools are something we continue to work on and continue to work for because those challenges faced by rural schools are considerably different than challenges faced in urban areas.

Rural Economy

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, this government has deliberately destabilized growth in rural Alberta during the Klein regime.

The Speaker: Please, please. It's against the rules to mention people's names.

Ms Carlson: I withdraw that, Mr. Speaker.

By centralizing control and removing local offices, rural communities have lost infrastructure, jobs, and new dollars into their communities. To the Premier: why did your government do this?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we didn't. You know, I don't know how often – perhaps the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East gets out into the country from time to time. I imagine he does because he understands it. I don't think that many of these other members get out into the country, but I do, and the majority of the government MLAs either live in the country or get out into the country. I'm talking about the rural areas of Alberta, real Alberta, from High Level to Warner, from Banff to Medicine Hat, from Oyen to Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Speaker, we travel around, and when I travel around to communities in this province, I see a tremendous spirit: a spirit of confidence, a spirit of commitment, a can-do spirit. I see communities that are vibrant. I see people going to their work, their jobs, working in the fields, volunteering in their communities. I see the vibrancies and all the activities going on in the curling rinks and the hockey rinks and the community halls and the church basements. This province is very much alive and, indeed, is very much alive in the rural areas.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, my second question goes to the Minister of Economic Development. Given that this question comes from a constituent in central Alberta, can he tell us how removing local offices has helped economic development in rural Alberta?

Mr. Norris: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, I guess that, much like the Minister of Gaming the other day, I'm very flattered that you asked a question. I thought that you forgot about me.

I'll answer the question in a number of different ways, Mr. Speaker. There was some rationalization done in the ministry of agriculture, which I think she's referring to – and the minister might want to comment – but to offset those, that were very rational economic decisions, our department along with the minister of agriculture and the members for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and Wainwright have coauthored a strategy for rural development called the economic blueprint for rural development. It talks about the things you're speaking to, about how to have a healthy rural Alberta, because this government does identify how important that is.

Other initiatives, Mr. Speaker, that the member should know about that are specific to rural Alberta are the SuperNet, which we had a lively discussion on earlier; our regional economic alliances, which identify grouping together regional economies and cities and towns into economic alliances to help promote them and stop the us versus them mentality; and, of course, our tourism initiative, that's been incredibly successful, to recognize that rather than coming into Calgary and Edmonton and moving on to British Columbia, we would like people to go east and maybe see the Lac La Biche Mission or maybe see the Ukrainian Cultural Centre or go see the Dinosaur Trail or any number of other opportunities that are all in rural Alberta. We've spent an awful lot of time developing those projects, so the member should just come to Public Accounts next week and find out.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: are we going to see some dollars dedicated in the form of the hotel tax to tourism initiatives that can be run by the associations themselves rather than the government?

Mr. Norris: Well, clearly, if I answer that question, Mr. Speaker,

I'll be killed. I just want to say yes, but as you're well aware, the budget comes out tomorrow . . .

Some Hon. Members: Today.

Mr. Norris: Oh, today. Clearly, I'm still in St. Patrick's Day mode, Mr. Speaker.

To answer the hon. member's question, as a department and government we have identified tourism as one of the most important industries that we have. It's our fourth largest, employs some 120,000 people, generates about \$6 billion in sales, some \$700 million or \$800 million in revenue to this government. Every particular member in this House knows the importance of it. So I thank the hon. member for the question.

One of the ways that we're looking at getting some kind of sustained funding is the hotel tax. I don't have an answer for you, but I can tell you that the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, the Member for West Yellowhead, the Member for Banff-Cochrane, both of the members from Calgary who are on the committee are supportive of it, and we will bring it forward, and because this government is so forward-thinking, I would suspect that the answer will be, hopefully, yes.

The Speaker: See what you've done, hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Education Survey

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Ministry of Learning is circulating a questionnaire to parents asking them how satisfied they are about the quality of education their children are receiving at schools. Many parents have called us to express their frustration and to deplore the fact that while the questionnaire does ask how satisfied they are with teachers, principals, and the school environment, nowhere are they asked how satisfied they are about the government's own policies which negatively impact schools and classrooms, issues such as class size, user fees, and fundraising. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Why are only local schools and teachers being evaluated, while parents are being denied the right to evaluate the provincial government's own role in the learning system?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This was a questionnaire that was put out not just to be a random questionnaire. This is a very important element of the accountability pillar of our new funding framework, and this questionnaire will provide the baseline for responses for now and into the future. This is a questionnaire that will be given to parents and teachers and students over the next 10 to 20 years. This will provide the baseline.

Included in the questionnaire are some of the questions that the hon. member has raised, but there are also questions that relate to class sizes, questions that are related to the government's role in general. Mr. Speaker, I must emphasize that the reason and rationale for this questionnaire was to be able to report back to the constituents from the school boards. We are indeed the ones who are putting it forward.

This is the first of its kind probably in North America. It certainly is the first of its kind in Canada. It's something that we may have some growing pains with – there's no doubt about that – but it will

provide a very good baseline for information now and well into the future.

2:30

Dr. Pannu: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is the minister holding school boards, local schools, teachers, and principals to a standard of accountability to which he is not prepared to hold himself?

Dr. Oberg: I find that question absolutely hilarious, Mr. Speaker. Each and every day that I come in here, I am held accountable for the actions of 980-some employees within my department. I am also held accountable for about 64, 65 schools boards that are around the province, and indeed I'm often held accountable for each and every one of the schoolteachers in this province. So that notion is absolutely hilarious, and it's something that, realistically, the hon. member should have known better.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. My second supplementary to the same minister: will the minister redesign the survey questionnaire to include questions about class size, user fees, and parent fundraising, or does the government wish to continue to avoid parents' scrutiny by failing to ask these questions?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, the rationale behind the questionnaire, as I stated, was to improve the outcomes of learning by setting a baseline as to what was actually happening in the classroom. We are talking the classroom. That's where children learn. I think the hon. member has something that he's quite mistaken about. We are looking at what is actually happening physically in the classroom. We're using this questionnaire as a baseline. It is something that will be moved on well into the future and probably will provide us with information that is extremely valuable when it comes to assessing exactly what the school boards do.

Mr. Speaker, there have been several groups of parents, of teachers, of students who have been asked to fulfill this questionnaire, and the information will be made public. It will be made public by us. It will also be made public by the school boards. So this is a very, very important element of the accountability pillar of the new funding framework.

The Speaker: Hon. members, as an addendum to yesterday's question period I believe the hon. Minister of Transportation wants to supplement an answer to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry. It was in response to the question and answer there. So under our rules if the minister wishes to proceed, you, sir, will have an additional opportunity to ask a question and for a response as well.

The hon. minister.

Transportation Department Survey

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response to a question asked yesterday by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, I am pleased to table five copies of a letter that has been sent to a resident of Medicine Hat. That letter answers all of the questions raised by the hon. member plus additional information.*

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. Thank you for that, Mr. Minister.

*See p. 638, right col., para. 4

One question: would the minister also table copies of the survey that was sent out to various people around the province?

Mr. Stelmach: I can provide a sample of the survey, but I can't provide the thousands of surveys that were sent to all Albertans. I can certainly table a copy of the survey that went out to Albertans. This survey is to gather client satisfaction. We include that information in our annual report, that goes out to all Albertans at the completion of the fiscal year.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds I'll call upon the first of seven who will participate today.

Before calling on the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce a very interesting group today. They are called the Willow Creek home-school support group. They're from various different areas in my constituency as well as the constituencies of a couple of other MLAs. They're spread out quite far geographically. There are 35 home-school students ranging from I believe kindergarten to grade 12, there are 17 home-school support group parents, and their field trip leader, who sort of organized the trip today, is Mrs. Ute Stiller. So I would ask if this very distinguished group would please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two couples that drove all the way up here from the great heart of Alberta, central Alberta, to take part in the budget speech. First of all, I'd like to introduce Gary and Linda Yargeau, who are no strangers to politics. Gary is a town councillor with the town of Penhold, and Linda was a school trustee, I think, for about five terms before regionalization for the county of Red Deer and now still advocates for children working for Diamond Willow children's services.

Dennis and Sherry Cooper are also with them. Dennis is also a town councillor for the town for Penhold. Together they own Skyways Aviation at the Red Deer airport. Sherry is also a pilot instructor and, I understand, is one of best pilots of their fleet. I'd like them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and introduce to you and to members of this Assembly a good friend and constituent, Louise Kidney, who is here visiting with us today. She's also been working for the past couple of years on an exciting project that's been talked about in question period, the SuperNet, and has done some excellent work. She could tell you some great things if we had the opportunity to tell you about SuperNet. If Louise would rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Recognitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Organ Donor and Transplant Awareness

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise in the Assembly today to bring awareness to an area of extreme importance to all of us: organ donor and transplantation programs. We are all aware that just yesterday our good friend and former colleague Mr. Peter Elzinga underwent surgery to donate a kidney for transplant. It comes as no surprise that this man who has served Albertans for so many years continues to give with this most personal and important gift to another human being.

Alberta is a leader in transplant surgery, but there is a chronic shortage of donor organs. It is imperative to honour those who have given life to others by educating ourselves about donation, making a decision about donation, and sharing that decision with our families. Transplants save lives, and I encourage all Albertans to consider making life-saving differences to someone in need. The gift of an organ is truly a gift of life, a gift that we all have the capacity to provide.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Families of the Miners of Hinton

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the families of the miners of Hinton and area. That's why I am elaborating on the Elk Valley Coal Partnership's important announcement to develop the Cheviot Creek mine south of the town of Hinton.

I'd like to bring to your attention the families that have worked for Cardinal River Coals for over 30 years. A majority of them enjoy the area and have had to leave the community to find employment. A lot of them would like to retire in the area and have left behind their wives, children, family, friends, and relatives while they seek employment elsewhere. As their husbands are usually away for two weeks and maybe back for two weeks, you can see the disruption in the family unit. As well, a number of these workers have been great supporters of local community groups, involved in such things as being hockey coaches and volunteer firefighters.

This is great news for the families of Hinton and surrounding areas and especially for those who have sought employment outside. I'd like to thank Elk Valley Coal Partnership for taking the initiative to finally proceed with the Cheviot mine.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

2:40

Jaylene Norris

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to recognize one of Alberta's Great Kids, 15-year-old Jaylene Norris of Red Deer, who was presented with the Great Kids award on March 12, 2004, by the Premier, Colleen Klein, and the Minister of Children's Services. Jaylene has overcome many struggles and challenges in her young life, and with the encouragement and love of her foster family, her social worker, her teachers, and the Boys and Girls Club of Red Deer, Jaylene has transformed herself into a helpful, considerate, caring, and dedicated young lady.

Jaylene began to see life differently when she became a counsellor in training with the Youth and Volunteer Centre. Although Jaylene wondered what she could possibly have to offer other children, she ignored her insecurities and went to camp to help with seven to nine year olds. For the first time in Jaylene's life others depended on her for help and encouragement.

Jaylene is now a volunteer at the Red Deer handicapped riding association and the Red Deer Native Friendship Centre. She was one of 38 high school students across Canada recognized by the Foundation for the Advancement of Aboriginal Youth with a bursary for academic achievement, contributions to community, and leadership qualities.

Jaylene is a Great Kid who has demonstrated that everyone has much to offer. She's an inspiration. Congratulations to Jaylene for being the best that she can be, and congratulations as well to the Friske family in Red Deer for being a big part of her success.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

World Theatre Day

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This Saturday, March 27, is World Theatre Day. Created in 1961, World Theatre Day is particularly meaningful in Alberta, where our theatre community thrives. I'm especially proud to salute the thousands of Albertans who make their living in the theatre, and I'm very pleased to acknowledge the remarkable roles played by actors, technicians, volunteers, and, of course, audiences and the other artistic teams in more than 235 live theatre groups in Alberta.

Here in Edmonton we support more live theatre per capita than anywhere else in North America, and our very own Vern Thiessen is the winner of this year's Governor General's award for drama. Vern just happens to be a constituent of Edmonton-Centre. He wrote Canada's World Theatre Day message this year, and here's an excerpt: "As parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, we have a personal duty to inspire respect for the playwright, actor, director, designer, and educator, and the risks they take."

This Saturday we honour these extraordinarily talented people who bring us such wonderful theatre. Thank you.

Edmonton Oilers

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, our Edmonton Oilers have proven once again that the Alberta spirit is alive and well in their hearts and in their fans, a spirit that Albertans are famous for, a spirit that won't ever let them give up. The same spirit drove the Oilers to win the last five games and gave them a chance at the western division of the Stanley Cup playoffs. The team has shown true grit in its skate towards the playoff run. Our hockey heroes will have to continue without error to stay ahead of the St. Louis Blues and the L.A. Kings. Both teams want the prize as much as Edmonton but lack our Alberta spirit.

As all of us long-time Oiler supporters know, Edmonton's home team will wage the battle to hang on to their precious playoff spot with fierce determination and skill. Northern Alberta will see tonight a spirited and exciting matchup as their Edmonton Oilers take on a classic rival from past playoffs, the Dallas Stars. I hope, Mr. Speaker, the Stars fade tonight.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Bob Wasylyshen

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to recognize the tremendous work and successful career of Edmonton's former police chief Bob Wasylyshen. On March 12 Bob retired from the Edmonton Police Service. Before becoming chief of police, Bob succeeded in many important positions, including field training officer, sergeant, staff sergeant, superintendent, and deputy chief of the investigative services bureau. Throughout his 32-year

career Chief Wasylyshen spearheaded numerous reforms in police investigation including the use of DNA evidence in crime scenes and the introduction of photoenforcement technology in traffic operations.

Bob Wasylyshen was appointed chief of police by the Police Commission on September 22, 2000. Building community partnerships had always been one of his major overriding goals during his time in office. It's been said that Bob Wasylyshen exceeded expectations as chief of police because of his keen understanding of policing from street level up to the executive offices.

His retirement is well deserved, and his presence with the Edmonton Police Service will be missed. Building a reputation and ensuring the well-being of the Edmonton Police Service were the most important goals for Chief Wasylyshen. Regardless of who becomes the next chief of police, they will have large shoes to fill.

I wish my friend Bob Wasylyshen all the best in life after policing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

David Thompson and Capital Health Regions

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the co-operative work done by the David Thompson and Capital health regions in opening an expanded renal dialysis unit in the Wetaskiwin hospital and care centre. This facility provides seamless service to patients from not only the David Thompson and Capital health regions but surrounding health regions as well. In this expanded facility more patients will experience the benefits of dialysis closer to home.

Since its opening in 1987 this dialysis unit has done over 26,000 dialysis treatments on 220 patients. This specialized health care that is occurring outside urban centres is extremely important for the sustainability of our health care system and for the health of rural patients. The co-operation between David Thompson health and Capital health is seen through this facility as Capital health runs the program in David Thompson's facilities.

I would like to publicly thank the CEOs of the David Thompson and Capital health regions, John Vogelzang and Sheila Weatherill, as well as all board members, whose co-operation benefits the province of Alberta as a whole.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of Alberta Learning's parent survey 2004, which parents complain has failed to ask the most important questions on the state of education, such as the teachers' and kids' learning conditions, class sizes, fundraising, and overall funding.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table this afternoon on behalf of a constituent of Edmonton-Gold Bar, Benjamin Atkinson, his opinions on photoradar and what he would like to see us do to make it better.

Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document

was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mrs. Nelson, Minister of Finance: pursuant to the Alberta Capital Finance Authority Act, the Alberta Capital Finance Authority annual report.

Speaker's Ruling

Amendment to Motion for a Return 10

The Speaker: On Monday, March 22, there was a point of order raised by the Government House Leader. Essentially, the point of order was that since the Assembly had passed an amendment to Motion for a Return 10 and approved the amended Motion for a Return 10, then other motions for returns should come off the Order Paper although they had not been explicitly dealt with. The discussion of this point of order and related matters is found at pages 611 to 617 of *Alberta Hansard* for that day.

The Government House Leader's argument was that to consider the other motions for returns he cited in light of the decision on Motion for a Return 10 would mean that the Assembly was considering the same issue on repeated occasions and cited paragraph 558 of *Beauchesne's*, the sixth edition, as authority for that proposition.

On this point the chair finds that the amended Motion for a Return 10 that was approved differed from the wording of the other motions for returns that the Government House Leader indicated were similar. In the chair's view the amendment would have to be virtually identical to the wording of the other motions for returns for such a rule to be applied.

Therefore, the chair finds that the motions for returns referred to by the Government House Leader in his point of order that were not expressly dealt with by the Assembly – namely, 14, 15, 18, 61, 62, 70, 71, 72, 73, 103, 122, 123, and 146 – will remain on the Order Paper.

Speaker's Ruling

Private Members' Business

The Speaker: The chair is very much aware that Monday afternoons are private members' time. In dealing with written questions and motions for returns, it is the chair's view that the greatest leeway should be afforded private members, consistent with the rules and practices under which these items of business are conducted.

2:50

The chair is not oblivious to the fact that there is a certain angst about the time devoted to dealing with the many written questions and motions for returns that there are on the Order Paper. When there are difficulties or problems encountered like this, the chair's view is that the primary responsibility for resolving them should rest with the House leaders.

The chair is reluctant to get involved in a situation where unique approaches to the rules and practices are being proposed. It is your Assembly, hon. members, and it is to you that the responsibility falls for dealing with the business of the Assembly.

The chair would point out that based on the chair's research to date, Alberta has a unique way of dealing with written questions and motions for returns that was adopted in 1993 to accord private members and the Assembly a greater role in this item of business. In the chair's view addressing the issue of the Assembly's consideration of written questions and motions for returns brings in some of the basic principles of parliamentary law; namely, "to enable every member to express opinions within limits necessary to preserve decorum and prevent an unnecessary waste of time." Members may wish to acquaint themselves with paragraph 1 of *Beauchesne's* and page 210 of *Marleau and Montpetit*, where the basic principles governing the operation of parliament are discussed.

Now, hon. members, in order to adequately prepare us all for the

Budget Address by the Minister of Finance this afternoon, the House is recessed until 3:30 this afternoon.

[The Assembly adjourned from 2:51 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.]

3:30

Orders of the Day

Transmittal of Estimates

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I have received certain messages from Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, which I now transmit to you.

The Sergeant-at-Arms: Order! Please rise in the gallery.

The Speaker: The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province and of certain sums required from the lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

Please be seated.

Government Motions

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, before moving Government Motion 13, I now wish to table the 2004-2005 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates as well as the 2004-2005 government and lottery fund estimates. In addition, I am tabling the government's consolidated fiscal and business plans for Budget 2004, as required under sections 4 and 7 of the Government Accountability Act. Also provided for the information of the Legislative Assembly are business plans for each ministry, which must be made public under section 13 of the same act.

Budget Address

13. Mrs. Nelson moved:

Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, in just over nine months Alberta will begin to celebrate its 100th birthday, and what a remarkable hundred years it has been. Like most landmark birthdays, celebrating our province's centennial is an opportunity to look back at the amazing changes that have taken place since the early settlers ventured out west to break ground and build a new future. It's also an opportunity to look ahead and to envision Alberta's next century. As Premier Klein said, let's "make sure Albertans enter the province's second century with the same spirit of hope, determination and confidence as the Albertans of 1905 had when [our] first century began."

Before I get into the details of this year's budget, I want to take us back where this all began, and that's with Alberta's very first budget. Picture this: Edmonton, May 7, 1906. The hon. A.C. Rutherford, then called the Prime Minister of Alberta and also Provincial Treasurer, stood not in this building but a few blocks away at McKay Avenue school and delivered Alberta's first budget. Looking at that budget today, two things are striking: first, the simplicity and how small the numbers were and, second, the parallels between then and now.

Fiscal responsibility seems to have been bred in the bones of Albertans. Alberta's very first budget was balanced; in fact, they

projected a surplus of \$283,373.32. This year I'm proud to tell you that Alberta's budget is balanced for the 11th straight year.

Back in 1906, Mr. Speaker, when Alberta was brand new, one of the top priorities was infrastructure: building roads and bridges, building schools, digging ditches and water wells, and building the very first normal school for teachers. Investing in Alberta's infrastructure was critical at the beginning of Alberta's first century, and it is just as critical as we approach Alberta's second century. Look through that first budget and you'll see a line item outlining an investment of \$140,000 for the construction of this beautiful building, Alberta's Legislature. Imagine what \$140,000 would build today, and then imagine the foresight they had in designing this wonderful legacy.

Even in 1906 Alberta's leaders were looking at value-added agriculture and how to build a strong agricultural economy. Back then they invested \$250,000 in creameries to launch the province's dairy industry. Today we're struggling to deal with the impact of BSE, to get the borders open, and to rebuild confidence in Alberta's food industry. Mr. Speaker, we will succeed.

Education was another big priority in that first budget, just as it is today. But back then they spent the whopping sum of \$200,000 and had ambitious plans for 800 schools by the end of the year. Today \$200,000 would pay for about two classrooms, and we have thousands of them across the province.

One striking difference is in health care. You'll see today that health care is taking up more and more and more and more of our provincial budget, and its costs are growing at a dramatic rate. Not so in 1906. The entire budget for what was then called hospitals, charities, and public health was \$33,500, and it warranted only one line in the budget speech.

Taxes. There was no such thing as personal income taxes, but – and here it comes – Premier Rutherford served notice that it would be right and proper to tax lands outside school districts for school purposes, and because most of the other provinces received revenue from corporations like insurance companies, banks, loan companies, and telephone companies, he could see no reason why Alberta shouldn't as well. So corporate taxes were launched.

Much to my surprise, even then they were talking about Ottawa and guns. In this case the budget set aside \$1,200 for the Provincial Rifle Association to go to competitions in Ottawa.

Mr. Speaker, it's fun to look back at the numbers and see how things have changed since our province's early days. But to me, the most important lesson in Alberta's first budget comes in this quote from Premier Rutherford. He said:

We have no pessimists in Alberta – a pessimist could not succeed. We are optimistic and always look on the brighter side of affairs, and so long as we keep progressing in the future as we have in the past, we will, without a doubt, become the great premier Province in British North America.

In 1906 there was no room for pessimists in Alberta, and there's no room for pessimists today.

Albertans are mavericks, people who look challenges square in the face and see hope: hope for better solutions, hope for a better future for ourselves, our families, and our province. That was true in 1906, and it's certainly true today. Mr. Speaker, optimism and hope for the future are what this year's budget is all about.

3:40

This is a budget for Albertans. It's the budget that Albertans have asked for through countless meetings, letters, e-mails, phone calls, and consultations. Albertans want their children and young people to have the best education we can provide, and they'll get that with this budget. They want their health system to be there when they

need it, and this budget will help make that possible. They want strong and safe communities, a thriving economy with jobs for themselves, and a strong future for their children right here in Alberta. They want to make sure that their children get a safe and healthy start in life, that family violence becomes a thing of the past, and seniors and people who need help get the support they need. All those expectations are addressed in Budget 2004.

Frankly, Mr. Speaker, this is a budget that would only be possible in a province like Alberta. We have choices that are simply out of the question in any other parts of the country. We are a prosperous province, a province blessed with an abundance of resources and driven by the hard work of determined Albertans. The obligation of a prosperous province is to invest wisely, not to squander resources but also not to refuse to spend money where there are pressing needs and the opportunity to build a better future. That's the goal of Budget 2004: to seize every opportunity and to put our province on route and on course for an unparalleled success in our second century.

Let me now turn to the big picture and the highlights of Budget 2004. With this budget we will spend a total of \$22.6 billion. That's an increase of 6.1 per cent in operating spending for government programs and services. We expect the province's total revenues to be just under \$23 billion. That's a 9 per cent decrease from the current year's budget, primarily because like most private-sector forecasters we are assuming that the price of oil and gas will return to more sustainable levels this year. As announced, the amount of resource revenues we can spend each year on programs will increase from \$3.5 billion to \$4 billion this year. That's an amount we are confident that we can sustain.

In 1906 Premier Rutherford served notice to corporations to get ready to pay taxes to support essential government programs. Today I'm serving notice that for the fourth straight year taxes for Alberta's businesses will go down. The general corporate tax rate will drop from 12 and a half per cent to 11 and a half per cent. That's one step closer to our target of 8 per cent. The small business rate will drop from 4 per cent to 3 per cent. Together these reductions amount to savings of \$142 million this year for businesses, businesses that drive Alberta's economy and create lasting jobs for Albertans. We will also take steps to enhance Alberta's reputation as a business-friendly jurisdiction. Legislation dealing with income trusts and unlimited liability companies will be introduced this year.

Mr. Speaker, businesses are not the only ones to benefit from tax changes this year. Thanks to indexing of our 10 per cent single-rate personal tax, Albertans will save \$150 million in personal income taxes this year alone. School property tax rates are going down by 2.3 per cent, saving Albertans and Alberta businesses about \$20 million. Since 1993, Mr. Speaker, our government has dropped education property tax rates by over 27 per cent. So overall Albertans pay the lowest personal and business taxes in the country, and there's still no sales tax.

Mr. Speaker, our record on debt repayment is unparalleled. In the early 1990s our province was burdened by a crippling debt of \$23 billion. My fondest wish would be to stand here today and say that by the end of this year Alberta's debt will be gone, but that would be speculation, and budgets are not about speculation.

By March 2005 our debt will have dropped to just under \$3 billion, a drop of nearly 90 per cent. That puts us within striking distance of eliminating the debt, a truly remarkable achievement. I can tell you that if – and I say "if" – resource revenues are considerably higher than our forecast, my vote and the Premier's vote will be to seize the opportunity and hand Albertans, especially young Albertans like my son Troy, the best gift we could give, the gift of a debt-free province.

Mr. Speaker, I know that many people looking at today's budget will say that the forecasts are too low: how could we expect oil and gas prices and our resource revenues to drop when things are looking so good? Most industry observers expect energy prices to go down. The question is when and by how much. Because energy prices are always an unknown factor, our forecasts may be too low; they may be too high.

The reality is that with Alberta's new fiscal framework our budgets are no longer tied to the ups and downs of oil and gas prices. We don't need to watch the daily news wondering what impact the latest shock will have on our budget. We have protected Albertans against those shocks. Spending \$4 billion from resource revenues is the limit. That's all we can or will spend in the budget.

The only difference that the price of oil and gas makes is at the end of the year, when we have some real choices to make. If oil and gas revenues are higher than we expect – and I truly hope that they are – we have two choices and only two choices: we can put more money on the debt, or we can invest more in assets including capital.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot underestimate the strength of this new fiscal framework. Not only does the sustainability fund protect us from ups and downs in resource revenues, but it also allows us to respond to emergencies when they occur. This past year alone the sustainability fund was there to provide assistance to farmers and ranchers, to cover the extraordinary costs of last year's forest fires, and to shelter Albertans from high natural gas prices. This new fiscal plan works. It works for Albertans today, and it will keep working for Albertans as we begin the next century.

Another concern some may have about today's budget is the level of spending. It's a lot of money, and for someone like me who keeps a careful eye on the bottom line, I have to admit that it gives me some pause for thought. But I am convinced of two things. First, we are investing wisely in things that matter most and will help build a better future, and second, to quote Premier Rutherford: there are no pessimists in Alberta. We are confident that Alberta's economy will continue to grow, creating jobs and prosperity for Albertans and for our province, and with the continuing strong growth we will be able to afford this level of spending now and in the years to come.

3:50

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, we're not going to leave Alberta's future prosperity to chance. Last week our government unveiled a comprehensive 20-year plan to build a strong future for our province. The plan is built on four key pillars: unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in the global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. Budget 2004 is designed to address each of these pillars and to put Alberta on course to a bright and prosperous future.

Today I want to highlight four key areas that underpin our plans. First, on learning. Our strategic plan commits us to be leaders in learning, and action on that commitment begins today. With Budget 2004 program spending on basic and postsecondary education will increase by 5.7 per cent to \$5.3 billion. In basic education an additional \$216 million will be spent in 2004-2005. The vast majority of that funding will go directly to school boards to be spent in classrooms across the province.

A new funding framework will be implemented giving school boards the flexibility they need to meet local priorities and local needs. Our approach is not to tell school boards how to spend the money, but we are confident that with the increases provided today, they will take positive steps to address parents' number one concern, and that's class sizes.

The first priority should be making sure that children who are just starting school have the opportunity to learn and succeed in classes

where they are not lost in the crowd. Our government has stated its commitment to implement other key recommendations from the Learning Commission report and further plans will unfold in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr. Speaker, the importance of education doesn't end when students graduate from high school. In a highly competitive global marketplace success depends on a qualified, highly-skilled, and productive workforce driven not just by hard work but by ideas, creativity, and innovation. With Budget 2004 we will provide an additional \$85 million in ongoing funding to colleges, technical institutions, universities, and apprenticeship programs across the province.

On top of a base funding increase of 4 per cent, increased access funding will create up to 2,000 new spaces over the next four years in high-priority program areas. Funding for scholarships, bursaries, and grants will increase by over 10 per cent, and close to 28,000 students will benefit from scholarships in 2004-2005 alone. We will also invest \$39 million to reduce students' debt load and reward them for successful completion of their programs.

Budget 2004 also begins our government's new investment in the future of Alberta's children. Through the Alberta centennial education savings plan our government will join with families across the province in investing in registered education savings plans for each and every child born or adopted in Alberta starting in January 2005.

Let me turn from education to the second big area in this year's budget, and that's health care. In Budget 2004 health will continue to take up the largest share of total government spending. This year alone spending by Health and Wellness will increase by 8.4 per cent, to a total of \$8 billion.

Mr. Speaker, increasing costs in health are causing alarm bells not only here in Alberta but all across the country. Our Premier has led the charge, warning Albertans that the future sustainability of our health system is at risk if we continue to pour more and more money into the status quo. Premiers across the country unanimously have said that unless there are major changes, Canada's health care system as we know it will not survive the decade.

The health care spending path we are on today is simply not sustainable. In the last nine years spending on health has more than doubled. More than 50 cents of every additional operating dollar in this year's budget goes to health care. That can't continue. In the past three years our government has taken good steps to renew and sustain our health system, but our message to Albertans, to the federal government, and to all Canadians is: something has to give.

We're spending more and more and more money on health care, and I have no doubt that you will hear in the weeks and months ahead that it isn't enough. If an increase of 8.4 per cent is not enough in the province of Alberta, how can other provinces expect to sustain their health systems?

Mr. Speaker, this is a national issue that will be played out in every province across the land. Yesterday's federal budget provided some welcome cash but no long-term commitment to sustainable funding. Canadians deserve better.

We're not waiting for the federal government. Once again Alberta will take a strong leadership role, trying new ideas and implementing new solutions to keep our health system on a sustainable track. As Premier Klein has often said, we should put up road signs welcoming people to Alberta, saying: welcome to Alberta; be prepared to think differently.

Albertans can expect to hear more this year about new ways to renew and sustain the health care system. I encourage them to consider each of the ideas with an open mind and with a fresh willingness to embrace change because that's the only way we will preserve and protect Alberta's public health care system.

The third area I want to highlight is our capital plan. All forecasts point to continued strong growth in Alberta's economy. In fact, we expect Alberta's economy to grow by 3.6 per cent in 2004. That translates into close to 43,000 new jobs this year and the lowest unemployment rate in the country. It also means that more people are choosing Alberta as the place to invest and to build their futures.

All that is good news to an already prosperous province, but it also means additional strain on Alberta's infrastructure. For that reason, our new capital plan will increase our investment in essential capital projects to \$6.5 billion over the next three years, an increase of \$900 million. Mr. Speaker, that level of capital investment is not matched anywhere in Canada.

With that investment we can assure Albertans, though, that new schools will be built and others will get the renovations that they need. New spaces will be added to universities, colleges, and technical institutes. Leading-edge health facilities, long-term care centres, and new health equipment will help give Albertans access to quality health services. Alberta's network of roads and highways will be expanded and improved, and money will be invested in important capital projects including parks, housing, water and wastewater treatment, centennial projects, and community facilities.

4:00

Mr. Speaker, the final area I want to highlight today is communities. I've heard it said that everything that's important happens close to home, in communities where people live, work, and raise their families. A key part of Alberta's new strategic plan is to make Alberta the best place to live, to work, and to visit, and that starts with safe, secure, and vibrant communities. In recent months we've heard about the fiscal challenges faced by Alberta's municipalities, and today we're introducing a package of initiatives to address some of those concerns.

The first is policing. Provincial support for policing programs will increase by 50 per cent this year to a total of \$174 million. As a result of that increase, municipalities with populations under 5,000 will no longer pay for policing costs. That's a direct benefit to an additional 20 small communities across the province. Thirty-seven million dollars will be spent on new per capita policing grants for larger municipalities, and additional funds will be available to address other critical policing issues.

Important changes will also be made this year to ambulance services. Our government has received several reports indicating that ambulance services are health services and should be integrated with the health system. During this year we will begin the transition. We will consult with municipalities and health regions and develop plans for shifting responsibility for ground ambulance services, and by 2005-2006 funding to health regions for ambulance services will increase by \$55 million. The good news for municipalities is that this will free up money they can spend to meet other pressing needs.

Work is also underway on a new rural development strategy. While our government works hard to reopen the borders and restore confidence in Alberta's food industry, the impact on many rural communities has been devastating. This year our government will build on the work done by two MLAs, the hon. Member for Wainwright and the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, to develop a comprehensive Alberta strategy for rural development.

On top of those initiatives, Mr. Speaker, municipalities will also receive \$934 million over the next three years for transportation projects, supported through the municipal share of gas taxes and other provincial grants; increased funding for Alberta's centennial celebrations to support community, cultural, and historic facilities; additional capital funding for projects such as water and wastewater treatment projects; and interest-free loans to improve energy

efficiency. Mr. Speaker, that package of initiatives may not solve all the challenges faced by municipalities, but it will go a long way to free up essential funds and relieve the burden on local taxpayers.

As usual, there is never enough time to highlight all of the many initiatives in our government's annual budget. I can tell you that additional funds are also included for expanding programs for children, implementing a comprehensive approach to preventing family violence, improving maintenance enforcement, supporting people with disabilities, and providing much-needed assistance to seniors and to people who need our support. I encourage all Albertans to review the budget and find out more about these important developments.

So, Mr. Speaker, let me close today by summarizing the highlights of Budget 2004. It's a budget for Albertans, a budget that reflects our hopes, our dreams, and our optimism for the future. It's a budget that will provide our children with the best education and the best opportunity to learn, succeed, and build their futures. It's a budget that invests heavily in our health care system but also positions us to explore innovative approaches and seize the opportunity to secure a sustainable future for health care. It's a budget that will see new schools, new buildings on postsecondary campuses, new health facilities, new roads and highways. It's a budget that keeps Alberta's taxes the lowest in Canada, and it's a budget that puts us firmly en route to a prosperous and successful second century.

Mr. Speaker, it's a deep honour and privilege to serve Albertans and to present the province's 99th budget. Budgets reflect the hard work of a team of people working countless hours behind the scenes. Today I'd like to extend a special thanks to one member of the team, Alex Fowlie. He's here today with his family. He has been instrumental in 17 straight budgets, and now he thinks he's going to retire. Treasury Board meetings will never be the same. I don't know that we'll let him go, but we ask everyone to thank Alex for 17 years.

Mr. Speaker, like Finance ministers before me I stand here today filled with hope about the future of our province and confident that our budget plans will help secure the kind of future we all want for ourselves, our family, and our province. As Premier Klein has often said, given a choice between the past and the future, Albertans will choose the future every time.

Albertans began our first century with their eyes on a better future. They were filled with hope, ready to take on tough challenges, and confident that they would succeed. That same confidence, that same spirit of optimism and determination, remains a hallmark of Alberta today. Premier Rutherford was right: there are no pessimists in Alberta, not then and not now. We have become the great province Premier Rutherford envisioned back in 1906. Now we are en route to Alberta's next century, and I have no doubt that it will be even better than the first.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the House adjourn until 8 this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:10 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 24, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/24

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

Bill 24 Appropriation (Interim Supply) Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've spent a considerable amount of time talking about appropriation, interim supply, but now we have the budget before us and the opportunity to get into Committee of Supply on the real estimates.

I'm not sure that we need a whole lot further debate, so I move third reading of Bill 24.

Ms Carlson: Oh, Mr. Speaker, you know, I was going to talk for just a very, very short amount of time, but the Government House Leader goads me into a longer speech.

It's the absolute travesty of having to deal with appropriations when we have the budget before us. How foolish can that be for a government that can't organize its time? Here they need more money again because they can't bring financial budgets before us in a timely fashion. They've only had three months, Mr. Speaker. How long does it take, when they start preparing for these budgets way back in November? It's hard to imagine, hard to believe, but year after year we go through the same thing.

Mr. Speaker, I just throw up my hands in disgust, and I'm going to vote against them.

[Motion carried; Bill 24 read a third time]

head: **Government Motions**

14. Mr. Hancock moved on behalf of Mrs. Nelson:

Be it resolved that the message from Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, the 2004-05 offices of the Legislative Assembly estimates, the 2004-05 government and lottery fund estimates, and fiscal and business plans, and all matters connected therewith be referred to the Committee of Supply.

[Government Motion 14 carried]

Gun Registration

15. Mr. Hancock moved:

Be it resolved that since the mandatory registration of all nonrestricted firearms is an unnecessary intrusion on the property rights and cultural heritage of Albertans, fails to discourage criminal activity involving firearms, and has wasted an enormous amount of money, the Legislative Assembly of Alberta recommends that the government of Alberta urge the government of Canada to introduce amendments to the Firearms Act of Canada and the Criminal Code of Canada to remove the requirement for the registration of all nonrestricted firearms.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is an issue about which many Albertans and, I'd suggest, many Canadians feel very, very strongly. I'd like to thank the members whose efforts led to the development of this resolution: the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmr, and the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster. Those three members since last fall have been tasked with the job of reviewing everything the government of Alberta has done with respect to opposition to the gun registry to find out, first of all, if we've done everything we can and, secondly, to offer new suggestions about how we might take this travesty off the table.

Put very simply, Mr. Speaker, the federal firearms regime does not work. It does not reduce crime, it does not enhance protection already in place for police, and it does not provide safer communities.

However, the mandatory registration of long guns has done some things that I'd also like to highlight today. Registration has cost the taxpayers of Canada nearly \$1 billion, and there's no sign that the bleeding is going to stop. The results achieved are not even remotely proportionate to the resources allocated. Registration has further alienated western Canadians and particularly those Albertans for whom firearms remain an important part of their traditional heritage.

Finally and probably most importantly, firearms registration has unnecessarily made criminals of those Albertans and those Canadians whose only offence is the failure to comply with an unnecessary, ridiculously expensive, and ineffective system to regulate firearms in Canada. This government has not and would never encourage Albertans to break the law. However, based on principle, otherwise law-abiding Albertans have not registered their firearms and, therefore, could face prosecution.

As the members of this Assembly and all Albertans should know by now, the provincial government has opposed the registry since Bill C-68 was first introduced into the House of Commons of Canada in 1995. This legislation created both the Firearms Act and amended the Criminal Code. With the Criminal Code changes certain offences if committed using a firearm received harsher penalties. This is something we clearly supported. This is something which has a direct and real impact on community safety.

Further, changes resulted in firearm licences replacing the former firearms acquisition certificate system. While many people don't support the concept of licensing, at least it involves screening and training and the requirement of mandatory courses and ensures that those who possess firearms will know their responsibility and handle them safely.

As well as licensing, however, Bill C-68 required all firearms to be registered. Unlike the old registration regime which was limited to restricted firearms, primarily handguns and some military weapons, this change required all long guns to be registered. Costs for the registration regime immediately began to rise, and because of a series of delays and changes in the system and retooling the system, registration only came into effect at the beginning of 2003. So you can see just in the time frame between 1995 and 2003 how much time and effort it's taken the federal government to bring in a totally useless system.

Under the old firearms acquisition certificate system Alberta and other provinces administered the firearms legislation by virtue of an agreement with the federal government. Because of our opposition to the registration regime being established under the Firearms Act, this province withdrew from the administration of the firearms legislation. The Firearms Act as federal legislation allowed the federal government to continue the administration directly in the event that any province – and other provinces have followed our suit – refused to do so.

In addition to this, the province also proceeded to challenge the constitutionality of the Firearms Act both at the Alberta Court of Appeal and subsequently at the Supreme Court of Canada. Unfortunately, on June 15, 2000, the Supreme Court ruled that the Firearms Act and the amendments to the Criminal Code were valid and within the mandate of the Parliament under the Constitution as part of the federal government's authority to make criminal law.

It was at this time, Mr. Speaker, that the government of Alberta established its long-standing policy on prosecutions as it relates to firearms, a policy that remains in effect today. Under this policy Crown prosecutors will continue to vigorously prosecute firearms offences that adversely affect community safety, such as the use of firearms in the commission of another offence, possession of a firearm for a purpose dangerous to the public peace, or possession of a prohibited or restricted weapon.

Alberta Justice will not prosecute the noncriminal offences contained in the Firearms Act, such as not having a registration certificate for a firearm. We've taken the position that this is not appropriate legislation. It is federal legislation, and we can legitimately say to the federal government: if you want to enforce that legislation, if you want to use the public's resources to that effect, enforce it yourself.

Finally and most importantly for our discussion today, on the direction of the Attorney General Alberta prosecutors will not prosecute anyone for possessing an unregistered firearm whether under the Firearms Act or the Criminal Code if that is the only offence with which they are charged, and there's an important distinction here. The federal government, if they want to prosecute, if they want to enforce firearms legislation, can do it under the Firearms Act. Then we don't have to choose to prosecute.

In our view, as the Premier reiterated a few weeks back, this government has no quarrel with the concept of gun control. We've had gun control in this country since the early 1900s. We've controlled access to and use of handguns, automatic weapons, and those sorts of weapons, but it must be effective gun control. It must be gun control which reduces crime, and the federal registry system has nothing to do with gun control or safer communities. It's simply not in the public interest for the provincial government to pursue charges in cases where an individual's only offence is the failure to comply with this bloated and ineffective registration system.

Some people might suggest that the Supreme Court case was years ago and that Alberta should move on to other issues. Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not good enough. The costs continue to rise. The federal government has made little or no attempt to fix the problem. It's our position that the registry regime is beyond fixing. It's simply not possible to salvage this enormous waste of taxpayer dollars, and that's why today through this resolution I rise on behalf of Albertans to renew our call to abolish the firearms registry for nonrestricted weapons.

8:10

Albertans' views on this subject are very clear, and the government shares those views. Although the Supreme Court decision is in the past, through initiatives like this resolution our committee is exploring other ways to keep pressure on the federal government. For instance, the members of the committee and I met recently with the Member of Parliament and Minister of State Albina Guarnieri, who has been tasked with reviewing the registry on behalf of Prime Minister Martin. The members and I used that meeting to renew our call to abolish the registry.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank these members for their work on this issue, their commitment to this issue, and for representing the many voices of their constituents and many other Albertans, which has been outstanding, to say the least.

Apart from the waste of money, Mr. Speaker, some people may not be convinced that the registry is completely ineffective. For instance, some might be of the mindset that although it's ridiculously expensive, every bit done to prevent gun crime is a step in the right direction. Although that is the line that has been sold by the federal government for many years now, Albertans aren't buying it. Let's be realistic. Criminals, those who do harm to others, those who commit armed robberies, those who illegally possess weapons because they're involved in the drug trade, have not, will not register their firearms.

The very fact that thousands of illegal guns are on the streets in Canada this very minute amply demonstrates that the registry does absolutely nothing to keep firearms out of the hands of those who use them for criminal purposes. In many cities it's simply far too easy for a criminal to illegally purchase a firearm, and that's why greater efforts are needed to stop the illegal gun trade in Canada and especially the illegal trafficking of weapons from the United States.

It makes me absolutely apoplectic when I think of the impact that a billion dollars could have had on the illegal gun trade, the effect that a billion dollars could have had on making our communities safer, and the effect that a billion dollars could have had on reducing crime. A billion dollars has been spent on registering law-abiding Canadians rather than being invested in promoting safer communities.

As my colleague the hon. Solicitor General and all members of this House will agree, we need to do everything we possibly can do to protect our police officers in their line of duty, the people who truly make our communities safe, and this is one area that the federal government has tried to point to when discussing the merits of the registry system. If only it were true. Mandatory registration does absolutely nothing to enhance the protection offered to police.

All persons who have firearms must be licensed under law. When police go to a call, the essential information they need is that a firearm may be present at the scene. Licensing already provides this information. All registration provides is which particular firearms may be present. Again, because of the nature of the registry system, because of the boondoggle that it has been, and because of the ineffective process that they've undertaken, the registry itself provides no satisfaction, no cover for a police officer. In fact, I would submit, Mr. Speaker, that no self-respecting police officer would rely on the registry, when approaching a house or approaching an individual, to tell them whether or not guns were present.

As Alberta's Justice minister for the past four and a half years I've dealt with this issue since the decision of the Supreme Court of Canada came down. We've seen the federal government's cost projections rise from year to year. We've spoken out at federal/provincial/territorial ministers of justice meetings asking for the registry to be scrapped. But in recent months the frustration of Albertans has boiled over and in some cases led to fingers pointing back at the provincial government and at this minister. Some have voiced their concerns that Alberta has changed their position, that it has or could prosecute individuals charged with registry offences. Much of this problem, Mr. Speaker, lies in how the federal government drafted the legislation with registration charges existing under the federal Firearms Act and the Criminal Code.

Some of us have suggested that because prosecutions under the Criminal Code are within provincial jurisdiction, we should or could deny a federal prosecutor the authority to proceed or that Alberta should or could intervene to stop any prosecutions that could take place. I'd like to remind you that we're not talking about numerous cases, with obviously only one case of significance coming forward so far.

Interfering in any criminal case because we continue to dislike or

oppose federal legislation is simply not an option and would be highly inappropriate. For obvious reasons criminal prosecution decisions must not be made at a political level. The courts have strongly rejected instances when laws are applied to some and not others or ignored altogether because those in office choose to ignore them. Such actions would be contrary to our constitutional obligation to uphold Canadian law and contrary to the belief that most Albertans have in the equality of the law and the equality of individuals under the law.

To point a finger at Alberta is misguided when only the federal government can abolish the gun registry. Only the federal government can prevent licensed gun owners from being charged or prosecuted for possessing an unregistered gun. That's why the focus must remain on Ottawa. As we've done since day one, Alberta will lead the opposition to these laws and fight to have them abolished. That's what we're doing today with this resolution. This is but the next step in our government's efforts to have the firearms registry scrapped and those resources put to community safety rather than this crazy registry.

The Prime Minister has called for a review. The Minister of State is conducting the review. This Assembly should tell them in the strongest possible way that it should be an honest, effective review which does more than just review how the registry operates or is implemented but reviews the very rationale behind the registry and comes to an honest, direct conclusion: the registry should be scrapped.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly a pleasure for me to rise in the Assembly this evening to offer my comments to the debate and discussion of the firearms resolution introduced by the hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Speaker, this resolution recognizes that the mandatory registration of all firearms interferes with the cultural heritage of Albertans and poses an unnecessary intrusion into property rights while failing to discourage criminal activity. Therefore, the resolution recommends that the Alberta government urge the federal government to introduce amendments to both the Firearms Act and the Criminal Code in an effort to remove the requirement that all firearms must be registered.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly support the resolution put forward by the Minister of Justice and believe it is an important initiative for all Albertans. This resolution is also consistent with the sentiment expressed by a number of citizens from across this province. As chair of the committee mandated to review the federal gun registry, I have thoroughly examined the issues surrounding Bill C-68 and the Firearms Act. Bill C-68 is the strictest gun control legislation in Canadian history as it requires all gun owners to be licensed and register their firearms.

There are many strong arguments from which to oppose the federal gun registry and support the resolution put forward today. Mr. Speaker, the federal gun registry makes the possession and ownership of a firearm a privilege rather than a right. The registry is an intrusion on the property rights of all Canadians. Registration under the Firearms Act modifies the ownership of firearms and shifts it from a right to a privilege because firearms are personal property.

The right to property is a fundamental right in Canadian history. The right to bear arms is an historical right of all Canadians and is affirmed by section 26 of the Charter, which states that "the guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed as denying the existence of any other rights or freedoms that exist in Canada."

Mr. Speaker, this resolution recognizes Alberta's historic use and possession of firearms. The gun registry threatens the important heritage of Canadians to own guns. The responsible and lawful use of firearms during settlement and currently by ranchers, farmers, hunters, and trappers is a significant part of Canada's multicultural heritage. Canadians have traditionally owned guns, and furthermore Canadians have used them responsibly. The use of firearms in activities such as hunting, trapping, recreational target shooting, and firearm collecting plays an important role in Alberta's cultural, social, and economic heritage.

8:20

The Firearms Act potentially violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms through various sections. However, it is section 27 of the Charter that expresses that "this Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians." The use of firearms has served to continue an integral component of our cultural heritage. Alberta residents should have the right to own, enjoy, and use firearms in a responsible manner. No law should infringe upon this heritage or the historical rights relating to the use of firearms.

Mr. Speaker, the gun registry has not served to control the criminal use of firearms in our communities. The Firearms Act has not saved lives as it promised. Essentially, registration introduced by the Firearms Act has criminalized a significant number of Canadians. The federal firearms legislation considers firearm owners as potential criminals. The possession of a firearm without a licence holds a Criminal Code offence. The gun registry regards law-abiding gun owners as more dangerous than violent criminals, who are prohibited from owning weapons.

The registry will not be effective in that criminals will not be compelled to register their guns. Therefore, police are only knowledgeable of where innocent gun owners live and not criminals. I then question how beneficial this registry will be in tracking criminals' weapons. Furthermore, there's no guarantee that the information reported on a registration is even accurate.

Mr. Speaker, we must continue to question the perceived benefits of this program. The Firearms Act is not supported by any hard evidence that it will serve as a public safety measure or Criminal Code initiative. Crime rates have not decreased since the inception of the federal government's registry. Furthermore, there is no credible evidence that supports that this program will deter violent crime.

The costs of the gun registry have also escalated out of control. It is apparent that this program has exceeded its original cost expectations. The expense of the gun registry has continued to climb from the projected estimate at the introduction of the program in 1995. The program's initial costs were projected at less than \$2 million. However, in December of 2002 it was revealed that the program would cost at least \$1 billion by 2005, and while the present calculations remain incomplete, Mr. Speaker, it is clear that the program has experienced drastic cost overruns through a number of unforeseen expenditures.

The funds allocated to the gun registry could be better served in other areas. Our communities would be safer if the money from the billion dollar registry was focused on fighting known criminals. This money could be put towards an increased presence of RCMP officers to fight real crime. This financial support could be afforded to any program that would assist Canadians instead of an unwarranted intrusion on the property rights of responsible firearms owners that makes them criminals.

Mr. Speaker, there is an inherent problem with the federal gun

registry in that it may not apply to all Canadians equally. The Firearms Act requires all Canadians, including aboriginal peoples, to obtain a licence and register their guns. However, we are now seeing problems come forward as aboriginal groups who are opposed to the registry have grounds to file lawsuits and seek exemptions from the federal program based on provisions outlined in their land claims agreements. In 2002 Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, a group overseeing the Nunavut land claims agreement, filed a lawsuit against the federal government. This lawsuit is based on the fact that the gun registry goes against an understanding that the Inuit are able to hunt, trap, and fish without being subject to licensing or fees. It is unclear how many cases may arise to challenge this program based on similar grounds.

Mr. Speaker, it is section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which mandates equality for all Canadians. Furthermore, the Criminal Code must apply to all citizens equally. Therefore, if the exemptions result through court rulings for specific aboriginal groups, then the gun registry would be extremely unfair in applying equally to all Canadians. For this reason, I believe that all Canadians should be exempt from the registry.

The federal Liberals themselves are unsure of the outcome of this program and are now backtracking their steps. The federal government is recognizing the flawed approach to the registry. The Liberals are attempting to make adjustments to the gun registry and have now launched a review of the firearms legislation. They are seeking feedback from Canadians across the country.

The government is searching for alternatives that would essentially reduce the costs while increasing the effectiveness of this initiative. I believe that the best solution would be to abandon this program and repeal the registry. Mr. Speaker, the federal government is already acknowledging some of the problems; however, reversing the course of action on this initiative would prove to be the best solution.

The Firearms Act is the strictest gun control legislation in Canadian history. It requires all gun owners to license and register their firearms. However, it is proven that the gun registry does not work, and no matter how much money is spent, it does not appear that it will have an impact on real criminals. Mr. Speaker, gun control programs need to be cost-effective and focused on reducing the criminal use of firearms. The federal gun registry has not proven to be an effective tool in discouraging criminal activity involving firearms. The registry has cost taxpayers an enormous amount of money and has not improved the public safety in our communities. Alberta needs the continuous leadership role in questioning the federal government and urging the elimination of the registry as the best solution to addressing the problems of this program.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend the hon. minister for bringing forth the firearms resolution. This initiative has my full support, and I encourage all members of this Assembly to stand behind this initiative. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to have an opportunity to rise and speak to this particular motion. Since this idea of a registration process was first introduced in 1995, my colleague from Lethbridge-East and I were the designated spokespeople for our caucus on this particular issue. Certainly, at the many, many forums and different arenas that I was asked to speak at, I was very pleased to say that I have always supported gun control, but I have never supported the gun registry.

Now, many of my constituents don't like that stand, and I'm sure that many in the future won't like it either, but I have always said to them that I will represent their views and vote my conscience, and that's what I expect to do this time too.

I have a very good reason, I believe, for truly believing that the registration process is a flawed process, and my greatest concern about it is that it gives police a false sense of security about what lies behind the next door when they face it. I remember vividly 17 years ago when an estranged husband came after his wife and two children and the police were called. The estranged husband was also a policeman, so they were able to go to his locker at work and see that his service revolver was locked away. So they told the wife that there should be no worries, that he didn't have a revolver with him. She said: it isn't the one that's locked in the locker that you have to be worried about; it's the one that he has at home that has never been registered.

So the good news about that story is that there were no serious outcomes, but since that day when my children and I safely escaped from what was a very tough situation, I've always believed that we can never have any police officer out there dealing with a situation where there's a false sense of security or mothers and their children, or anyone else for that matter, being in fear for their lives. Particularly now that my son is grown up and is himself going to be a police officer, I do not ever want him to go into a situation where he doesn't believe that there could be a dangerous weapon around the corner or behind the door.

So I believe that a registry gives a false sense of security in some circumstances and will never support it. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, and then Red Deer-North.

8:30

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also would like to begin by thanking the hon. Minister of Justice, the MLA for Edmonton-Whitemud, for bringing this motion forward and especially for giving me the opportunity to sit on the gun registry committee. It's been a very educating and enlightening experience.

I echo the comments of my colleagues when I say that we need to put an end to the gun registry as soon as possible. Any initiative put forward by this House to do just that is one that I will support.

I want to say at the outset that I do not resent the motivation for a safer society that initially underlined the gun registry. What I do resent, however, is that in the realization that the gun registry has not worked, the federal government has continued to pump money into it instead of admitting it for what it is: a white elephant.

Today's provincial budget, Mr. Speaker, adding \$58 million to policing in Alberta: that will make safety communities. But wasting \$1 billion on a useless registry – imagine, just imagine how many RCMP we could hire to fight real crime. This registry survives for political reasons, not for practical reasons.

Just think about the gun registry. First it was to be a \$2 million – \$2 million – registry. Next we found out that the federal government allowed the cost to soar to more than \$1 billion. Now we hear that the cost could actually be closer to \$2 billion. I am beside myself, Mr. Speaker. So are most taxpaying Albertans. The only thing we can say is: what a waste. Just think about it. All the money that I and all of my family and friends and all of their families and friends will ever pay in tax in their entire lives wasted, wasted on a useless registry. It doesn't make me very happy when I see how much money I pay to the federal government in tax, to think that it's all been wasted on one useless program.

Mr. Speaker, it's not just a waste in terms of dollars spent, but I think it's a waste because of the aims. The aims of the program are not met. I further contend that the gun registry program will never meet the aims sought by the creators of the program. What are those aims? Well, the aim, it seems, was to curb gun-related violence. That's a worthy goal.

The program was born out of a very real public anger and grief over the shootings at l'école Polytechnique, which took place in Montreal on December 6, 1989. On that day, Marc Lepine walked into l'école Polytechnique and deliberately aimed fire on 14 young engineering students, all of whom were women. The shooter was angry at the perception that the women were stealing his opportunities at a successful career, and he obviously held some deep-seated resentments towards women in general as well as deep mental problems, Mr. Speaker.

Now, the public was justifiably horrified. The incident laid bare that gun violence does exist and that when mixed with an offensive and intolerable political stand like the one Marc Lepine held, the ramifications can be horrific, fatal, absolutely unacceptable.

But what happened afterwards is a classic story of what happens when politicians attempt to provide a political solution to a very real problem. Instead of taking a clear-eyed look at the problems of December 6, 1989, the federal government targeted one aspect; that is, that Marc Lepine used firearms. They made a sweeping law that put all of the duck hunters and farmers and law-abiding gun owners into the same category as a monster like Marc Lepine. Yes, they were all firearms owners, as if that in itself is a bad thing.

As you can imagine, a lot of resentment has grown amongst gun owners, especially rural owners like the people of Drayton Valley-Calmr. Mr. Speaker, most people are not criminals. They don't have severe mental problems, and they don't have an eternal hate for women. Most people are not using their guns for anything other than practical purposes. Most are using their firearms legally, or at least they were before January 1, 2003. Nobody likes to be branded a criminal. Nobody likes to be treated as though their government doesn't trust them, and that's what the very existence of the firearms registry does.

These Albertans who want the registry to end do not want to see an end to all firearms safety measures. No. They've talked about safe storage requirements. They agree with proper licensing and safety tests prior to allowing somebody to purchase a weapon. Mr. Speaker, we've had these kinds of things in place for years when it comes to restricted and prohibited weapons such as handguns.

What most people don't agree with is that the government needs to know in which closet the gun is held in their farmhouse. They resent the fact that they became criminals on January 1, 2003, simply by doing nothing. That's right, Mr. Speaker. If they had long guns that they did not register by that date, then they became criminals.

I know this personally because I happen to be one of those people. I can remember very early in the new year there was a certain protest going on in the Legislature, and myself and another hon. member from this Assembly attended that public gathering. What happened, Mr. Speaker, was that I became very inspired to fight the registry. I decided that I was going to stand with this group of Albertans and try to send the message to the federal government that this was wrong and that we were not going to take it, that we were not going to put up with it. I went public to my own local newspapers, and I told them that I didn't agree with the registry, and that because most of my constituents didn't register, I wouldn't either.

Well, I'll tell you what, Mr. Speaker: I think it was about a week or two later that the local staff sergeant of the RCMP, who happens to be my next door neighbour, fully dressed in all of his uniform, came walking into my MLA office one Friday. He called me by name — I can't say it now — and he said: we have a problem. He said: if you don't register your firearms I have no choice but to charge you.

Now, had I known then what I know now, I would have said: and then what will you do with the other 10,000 of my constituents who we know have not registered their firearms?

Mr. Griffiths: Did you say that?

Rev. Abbott: I said that had I known that, I would have said that.

Instead, what I did, Mr. Speaker, is I did the right thing by my constituents so that I could be their voice in the Legislature, and I went and I registered my long guns. I registered them, and, really, what a silly, silly process.

If I explained to you some of the questions that were on that form in order to obtain the licence and to go through this whole registry hassle, you would be absolutely outraged at the invasion of privacy and at some of the questions that are asked. They want to know how many common-law partners or spouses you had in your entire history, people that you've lived with over a certain length of time. [interjections] The answer for me is one. They want to know about all of your mental history. They want to know things, Mr. Speaker, that nobody else could ever get away with asking other than these people with the gun registry power in their hands.

It's just an absolutely foolish process, but I went through it because I wanted to be able to be a voice of reason in the Legislature and to stand up for my constituents and to do the right thing. So here I am, Mr. Speaker. I'm on the gun registry committee. I'm hoping that we do more than just this resolution, that we find some ways to challenge this constitutionally, because that's what we need to do.

I want to share a little story, Mr. Speaker. It's a very good illustration of what happened on January 1, 2003. Imagine if you owned an automobile. Let's say you were licensed, you had that automobile registered, and you drove it around for, say, 20, 30 years, maybe even 40 years. I know one man that drove the same truck for 50 years. Let's say that you drove that automobile around for a certain length of time and then you decided: "I like that old automobile. That's become a real sentimental thing to me. In fact, it's become a collector's item in the eyes of many. I'm going to go park that on the back forty, and I'm going to save that and maybe give it to my grandchildren someday."

Well, Mr. Speaker, if you then became a certain age and allowed your licence to expire and you never bothered to renew your registration of that automobile and you had it sitting out on the back forty, no problem. You're allowed to do that; that's your property. The federal government can't say anything. They can't say: hey, you're now a criminal because you've got that automobile sitting out on the back forty that's not licensed or registered. No, they can't say that. But you know what? If that were a gun, they could say that.

That's right. The minute you let your licence and registration expire, if you don't hand that gun over to the federal authorities to be destroyed, then you have become a criminal. What kind of a law is that?

8:40

Mr. Snelgrove: Stupid.

Rev. Abbott: Well, the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster said the word that I was thinking, Mr. Speaker. It's not a good law.

I'll tell you this, Mr. Speaker, in closing. One of the great things that the current prime minister said when he was coming into office was: we are going to put an end to western alienation; we are going to start to listen to the west; we're going to include the west; the west wants in; well, they're going to be in under my leadership, under my regime.

Well, you know what, Mr. Speaker? This is Paul Martin's chance to listen to the west and to begin to put an end to western alienation. In fact, I want to send a message along with the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie and the Member for Lethbridge-East. Take this

message to Ottawa: "Can the registry of nonrestricted firearms. All it does is cause western alienation. Don't try to fix it; just delete it."

One of the best buttons we have on our computer is the delete button. I wish that the Prime Minister and the minister of state responsible would use the delete button and can the registry and get rid of it. I know that I am speaking on behalf of the majority of my constituents and, in fact, the majority of Albertans.

With that, I will take my seat. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, comments or questions?

Rev. Abbott: Uh-oh.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I heard that "uh-oh" over there, Drayton Valley-Calmar.

First of all, a comment, Mr. Speaker, and it's this. He nearly convinced me to change my vote. It's a good thing he stopped talking when he did.

And now my question: how does the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar ever in his wildest dreams think that he is a reasoned voice in this Legislature?

Rev. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, as the member opposite knows, I don't speak very often in this Assembly and I don't say very much. But the odd time that I do speak up, I hope that it is with reason and I hope that it is on behalf of my constituents.

I must say as a compliment to the hon. member opposite that when she was giving her speech this evening, I was thinking: why did the Liberals push her into the backbenches? She is such an intelligent, bright person that she should be up there in the front benches, like she was previously.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The next speaker is the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like first of all to thank the committee that worked so hard on bringing this resolution forward, and I'd also like to thank the Minister of Justice. I think he read my speech. And I'd like to thank the speakers that have spoken so far.

Like the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie I am in full support of gun control. However, I do not support the ineffective, inefficient, and costly firearms registry. If anyone here was able to see the documentary by Michael Moore called *Bowling for Columbine*, they'll realize that he struggled to understand why with over 7 million guns in Canada we only registered in the year that he made his documentary 165 deaths by gun while the United States during the same time period registered over 11,000 deaths by gun.

I think that the answer is in the Canadian people themselves. They are the type of people that are nonviolent, and people who legally own their guns and now possibly illegally own their guns don't use them to kill people. That's not the purpose of guns for Canadians.

So with the two issues I'd like to talk about gun control for a few minutes, and that is to say that prior to the firearms registry the gun control laws of this country were excellent. They were the best in the world, and I support those fully. They required that every firearm have a trigger lock. So you had to have a key to unlock your trigger to begin with. Every firearm needed to be locked in a cabinet. So you had to have the key to the cabinet to get into the cabinet to get the gun and then have the key to unlock the trigger. Also, you had to have the ammunition locked in a separate compart-

ment in a separate room away from the firearms themselves.

I believe that those kinds of gun laws and the registration of handguns and semiautomatics and automatic weapons were also excellent laws in this country. No one in this country complained or argued about whether those guns laws were acceptable or not because they were, and we as Canadians accepted those gun laws.

However, the firearms registry is a separate topic, a separate issue. It's cost us billions of dollars, and as has been said in this House tonight, those billions of dollars could have been better spent on policing and crime control. We know that in Alberta alone we have 29 known gangs. I was very pleased to see today in the budget a 50 per cent increase in the policing budget. We need that here in Alberta because of the gangs that we have. We need that money to help us solve crimes here in Alberta more than we need to spend money on a firearms registry that does not work.

I think that the money could also be used for programs such as helping people in the areas of domestic violence and bullying. A lot of the deaths, especially the deaths that have happened in school, have happened because of bullying. If we had programs where we could help people deal with their anger and with their isolation, those are the programs that would make us better people, far better than a firearms registry makes us. In Red Deer we have something that's called the batterers' program. It's 75 per cent successful in changing a person who has been a batterer to being a better person.

Mr. Speaker, we have to remember that it's not guns that kill people; it's people who kill people. Criminals don't register their guns. Now, if I thought for one minute that the firearms registry could actually protect women and children, I would consider supporting it, but as has been said in this House this evening, there is nothing to prove that it has been efficient in any way. It hasn't stopped women and children from being killed. Other than making good citizens criminals, this registry has not achieved what it set out to do.

The other issue that was mentioned tonight that I think is really important is for police officers to know ahead of time, when they're going to the site of, say, a domestic violence complaint, whether or not there are guns in that home. I think that licensing the person, which was part of our gun control prior to the firearms registry, is very effective and far more effective and less costly and more efficient than a firearms registry. So I agree with the licensing of the gun owners that was in place before.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, is that if we really want to do something about crime, if we really want to protect the people of Canada, then I think we should have stronger penalties for the illegal use of weapons, firearms being one of them. Perhaps our justice system needs an overhaul. Perhaps the corrections system, the Canadian correctional system, needs an overhaul. Maybe those are some of the things that we should be looking at rather than a firearms registry.

To echo what my hon. colleagues have said this evening, I think the smartest, most logical, and best solution to the cost of the firearms registry is to eliminate it completely, and that's what I would support. I want to thank this House for supporting Motion 15.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to this motion on the gun registry. I've listened to a number of the speakers, and I kind of wonder what I think at some times. When I went through this whole process starting almost 10 years ago, trying to discuss the relevance of gun control, the relevance of the components of gun control, you had to put into position a series of weights about what

is relevant. You know, when you start talking about gun control, there are all kinds of different aspects of it that have to be considered.

Now, we've heard discussions about a lot of it tonight, about whether or not we should be in effect prohibiting the absolute ownership of particular styles or particular kinds of guns. That, in effect, is in itself a degree of a registry where you say: we don't care; you can't have that one. So, you know, gun limitations.

I think most Canadians, most Albertans that I've talked to do support the idea that we don't really need weapons of war in our kitchen cabinets. With the assault weapons, these kinds of things, if you need to use them, if you want to experience them, the place to do that is at a gun club or at a facility. That, I think, has been pretty well accepted by a lot of Albertans that I've talked to.

8:50

Then you get into the idea of what constitutes the rationale behind dealing with gun control. Well, it's to reduce the threat or the possibility – possibility is better than threat – of death by accident or on purpose; you know, deliberate homicide. We have to look at those kinds of things, and here we see the idea that we want to in effect create a deterrent, so stiff penalties. I think every Albertan, every Canadian supports the idea that we have to have a deterrent for individuals who use guns in the commission of a crime, any kind of a crime, because no matter what you think, there is always the option and the possibility of an accident and, in effect, the crime going further than you thought, and we end up with a death or an injury. In that context, we have to look at it from the point of view of what constitutes reasonable aspects of gun control.

As I was going through the debate when we started all this in the early '90s, I began to think about what is reasonable and effective. I've lived in a number of other places in North America and around the world where they've had gun control, where they've had gun registration, where they've had stiff gun penalty laws. I guess that when I decided how I was going to approach gun control, I went out and I supported the whole idea that we have to make sure that we don't create an opportunity for automatic weapons that are war weapons to be commonly available in the community. That I didn't accept. I accepted very strongly that one of the best ways to deal with the reduction of crime, injury resulting from the use of a weapon, a gun, in crime was to in effect create a deterrent through stiffer penalties.

When we started talking about the federal proposal for a gun registration, I began to ask myself: well, is this cost-effective? I looked at all of the jurisdictions that I could find evidence from that had gun registries, gun ownership lists, whatever you want to call it, because they all call it a little bit different, and you couldn't see a real relationship between the identification of individuals who owned guns, the number of guns they owned, the kinds of guns they owned and any effective crime control.

So I questioned: how do we get a cost-effective system here that works? Under all of the investigation that I did, it became very clear to me that if we're going to put dollars into a program that relates to the reduction in the possibility of injury or crime with a gun, the best thing to do was the first two components because there's no evidence that registries really do provide us with a cost-effective mechanism under the larger umbrella of gun control.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

Mr. Snelgrove: Just say it clearly, Ken. Spit it out clearly.

Dr. Nicol: I'm going to get there. The member over there says: spit

it out; say it clearly. I've got to put the rationale in. I want to explain to the House how I came to this.

I listened to some of the members tonight talk about: well, it's part of our culture; it's part of our heritage. Mr. Speaker, I've lived in enough different areas of the world, and I've lived almost 60 years in Alberta. I've seen our culture, I've seen our heritage, and I've seen our expectations as a society change. So I'm not going to say: because we did, we must. That to me is not enough of an explanation for why we shouldn't have a gun registry.

What's more important is: is this good public policy? Through the rational approach that I've described to you, I cannot through any means that I've been able to determine justify dollars in a gun registry, because it's not an effective mechanism to do what we want: reduce the use of guns in criminal activity.

So I don't think that we should be having a registry. I think that the federal government, as it goes through this review, should start to talk about what is a cost-effective use of our public dollars, and they'll all come to the same conclusion, that this is not a good use of public dollars because it doesn't lead to an effective reduction in the use of guns in the commission of crimes. That's what our objective is.

Let's do as the members across here have said. Let's put more money into policing. Let's put more money into the other deterrent programs. That's the way we'll be able to reduce the use of guns either willingly or unwillingly in the commission of a crime.

The registry hasn't proven to be effective, and I don't think we should have one in Canada. I'm going to support this motion.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to say that I'm in favour of gun control, but I'm opposed to the registration of long guns. I believe that our public prosecutions of the use of firearms in the commission of a crime too often is waived. In talking with police officers when the debate was more fully and more broadly based in our land, they often said that.

I just want to give you an example of that, because people came out on both sides of the issue. A certain lady – and we don't want to identify her, but we'll call her Mrs. J. Mrs. J. went to the United States and bought two different handguns of different calibre and bought the appropriate ammunition for both of them and brought them back to our province without declaring them.

Now, we've had the registration – and I support it – of handguns for about 80 years. I think that's a good thing. There's no one in this country that needs, it seems to me anyway, an Uzi or a Bren gun or, for that matter, an AK47 that works. They don't need that. So those are restricted weapons along with Bazookas and so on, and they ought to be very much restricted to perhaps military museums or have them decommissioned so they can't be readily put in.

Anyway, back to Mrs. J. She was estranged from her husband, invited him over to her home, and as he was leaving, proceeded to put six shots into his back. He didn't die. Now, there were people that said, "Well, he deserved it," or "He didn't," that kind of thing. There was here the commission of a crime with a weapon. If any of us go out and take our gun, if we have one, and shoot it off within the urban limits, you can be charged with discharging a firearm in an urban area. She was charged, and they waived that. They waived the smuggling. They waived having two weapons, waived having the ammunition and all of the rest of it and shooting within the limits of a city. As the case would be, she was declared unfit to stand trial and so on.

All that I'm trying to get at is that you can have these wonderful rules for registration, and we do, but so often when it comes right

down to it, that gets plea bargained away. It's frustrating for police, and it's frustrating for a whole lot of other people. So it seems to me that one of the problems is not the registration but how we handle that whole issue.

Unlike the hon. member who spoke about having guns, I got my first gun, a beautiful gun, when I was 12 years old. I still have it, a Browning over-and-under skeet gun; it matched my father's gun. So you can see that that was over 50 years ago, and I still have it. In our home when I was growing up, the guns and ammunition were always locked. I never had the key. Even when I was 18 years old, I didn't have the key. All the guns that I have have been locked up and still are. They're registered. I thought that if I'm an MLA and I'm helping to make laws and voting on laws, I cannot break it even though I disagree with it. So like a Boy Scout I did get mine registered. I'm not sure what I can do with that registration.

9:00

I support this resolution. I feel that it hopefully will be an instrument of impressing the hon. members in Ottawa that maybe registration of long guns is not a good thing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to enter into this debate, and I'll try not to repeat too much of what has already been said, but I'll see if I can bring some new arguments to the table.

I, too, would like to speak in favour of this resolution and thank the minister for bringing it forward. I hope that it will be listened to by the federal government a little better than what most of our advice has been listened to by them in the past.

I've watched the evolution or attempts of gun control by previous federal governments of both stripes over the past number of years in an attempt to control violence regarding firearms or to basically register guns for whatever reasons they may have to register them. A lot of people I talk to don't necessarily trust the federal government, that they have only those interests of preventing crime or serious violence by firearms at heart when they're making this legislation.

I believe the federal government has failed to show Canadians where registration of firearms has worked in reducing crime or violence. That's been asked of every government that's tried to put this in, and really there's no place that it's worked. I don't know who to quote, but I understand that one of the papers quoted someone in the government about a year ago, after the registration was brought in: how many guns were registered? The answer was: well, we don't know how many are out there, but 75 per cent of them are registered. That didn't do a lot to help Canadians trust such a government that makes statements like that to bring in something that's good for them.

A question I have is: why are Albertans so opposed to this registration of long guns when they don't seem to be opposed to registration of handguns? I mean, you can have a handgun with a long barrel, that they refer to as a Buntline Special, in a .45 calibre single action or a 24-inch pistol-grip shotgun. What makes one more dangerous than the other because of an inch, maybe, in length? So why are Albertans so opposed to registration of long guns? In talking to Albertans I think it's because it's the registration of all guns when you include long guns.

In recent history, in the lifetime of a lot of people in here, other countries have tried this, and we say: oh, that could never happen in Canada. Other countries since World War II in Germany have said

that it could never happen in their countries either. What happened there after registration was brought in in Germany? As everybody knows, all guns were registered and subsequently all guns were confiscated, making a disarmed population. Some countries have often thought a deterrent to bring such a registration in place was some measure of protection against a tyrannical government trying to disarm the population. If you didn't have registration, that couldn't happen. I think this is what concerns a lot of Albertans, especially the ones that I've talked to. This is not ancient history; this is recent history.

The other thing is that in the last number of years since this whole thing has been brought into place, I've seen an overreaction by enforcement officers in dealing with anything regarding guns. I'll just give you a couple of examples.

Where a hotel was being built in Three Hills, there was an excavation on part of the property and the Richardson's ground squirrels, or gophers, came in, and they were making quite a mess and eating the grass up and digging holes. So the owners . . . [interjection] What's that?

Mr. Mason: Didn't you try reasoning with them first?

Mr. Marz: Yeah, right. The Member for Edmonton-Highlands would think that you would reason with gophers and ground squirrels. That doesn't surprise me. Perhaps he would be adept at that, but most people wouldn't be.

Anyway, the owners of the hotel, which was right on the edge of town, asked one of their friends to come in and see what he could do. They didn't want to spread poison in the area because of public access, and they didn't want a .22 because the range was too far. He said that he had a BB gun, so he took the BB gun out there and was plinking gophers with the BB gun to try to rid them of this. Before you know it, a peace officer had him at gunpoint to drop the gun and step away from it as if he was in the commission of some type of violent crime, you know, conducting himself like a SWAT team.

Another instance is people I know had their homes broken into and guns were stolen. The first thing they were concerned about was: must be unsafe storage. There's a bigger concern about the victim being treated like a criminal than worrying about how to get to the criminal that stole the property.

On a more personal note my own son, who was 17 years old, and his friend, who just turned 18, phoned me on my cellphone as they wanted to go shooting gophers. I said: well, I'll be home shortly. But being young guys like that, they took it upon themselves to go into the locked gun cabinet, where my guns are safely stored, and took out a couple of .22s. They're both trained in gun safety and were looking forward to taking their test to get their FAC, or firearms acquisition certificate, at the time. So they went to my neighbour's place and asked if they could shoot in that pasture, which they were always allowed to do, but they always asked permission each time just to make sure that they knew who was on their property if anybody heard gunshots.

As they were getting out of the vehicle on a highway pullout to cross the fence, an officer and a ride-along officer with him, not a real officer – some people refer to them as wannabes – pulled them over. These officers knew these boys from the time they were born, but they treated them like criminals. They told them to put the guns down, step away from them, spread their legs, and put their hands up against the vehicle. They suggested a whole bunch of charges, including driving with a loaded weapon, shooting from a public roadway, which they hadn't. They weren't loaded. They still had the bullets out.

They did everything they could to frighten these boys to a

ridiculous degree, and they ended up charging both of them with having a gun without a firearms acquisition certificate. That's the only thing they could actually charge them with because, in fact, they didn't. If I would have been with them, which I was shortly after that, because I got home, they would have been with me and my firearms acquisition certificate would have been okay. Most officers of the day probably would have said: you know, when your dad gets home, we're going to have a chat, and I'll take these home for you. But, no, it had to be to the letter of the law.

9:10

The 18-year-old boy was charged in adult court, and he received a three-year suspended sentence, which meant he couldn't travel out of the country for that time, and he had to apply to get these charges stayed after that. My son, because it was days before his 18th birthday, was charged in juvenile court and the charges were stayed.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

To this day my son doesn't have a firearms acquisition certificate or the new licence. He doesn't own a gun. He just doesn't want anything to do with it. His perception of the RCMP isn't as healthy as it should be because he thinks they were overreactive in the way he was treated at the time. I was so concerned about how distraught those two boys were at that particular time that I wasn't sure if they would even commit suicide. That's the degree of fear that was struck into those lads at the time, and this is all over this gun control.

I think it is absolutely wrong that we should be putting these laws into place that have this effect on enforcement officers that think it gives them a licence to go out and terrorize law-abiding people, people who have a law-abiding attitude, not a criminal attitude but a law-abiding attitude, because they're easy prey for the police instead of getting out there and going after the criminal attitude. Maybe that's where the billion dollars should be spent, on training enforcement officers so that they can go after the criminal attitude instead of the law-abiding attitude.

So I think this whole thing of just going after the long guns basically closes the circle where every gun a citizenry has is going to be registered and susceptible to the whim of the government that can disarm the public whenever they want. I can't support the law, although as my colleague that's now in the Speaker's chair said, we're bound by the law as long as it is the law.

Another thing this has done is it has caused neighbours and friends to be suspicious of one another. I suspect, as I quoted before, we don't know how many guns there are, but 75 per cent are registered. That tells me that nobody really knows how many guns there are, and nobody really knows how many are registered. By a lot of estimates some people think that only half of them are registered. So where are the other ones? Well, you know, if I go and visit a constituent and I see a .22 sitting in the corner of a machine shed, that makes me basically an accessory to a crime, and if I say nothing, am I breaking the law? Yes, I am because I have knowledge that it's not safely stored. That's against the law.

Am I to report every time I see something like this? How many of you have seen that? If you go to your neighbour's and he wants to show you something down in the basement and you see some guns hanging on a rack that aren't safely stored because they're not locked in a cabinet, you've just witnessed a crime according to the gun legislation. Are you supposed to report your neighbour for that? So it's making criminals out of a lot of people in different ways.

Mr. McFarland: That makes it hard to get a vote.

Mr. Marz: It does make it hard to get a vote, yeah. There are people out there that chose not to register, and they're not saying anything.

I've been a member of the Trochu Rifle & Pistol club for probably about 40 years. I don't get up there very often, usually about once or twice a year, but I keep my membership up. It's a great sport, although my gun control needing a steady hand isn't as steady as it used to be or my eyes can't line up the sights as good as they used to, so my winnings aren't as good as they used to be. But I still enjoy the camaraderie and the discussions and looking at different people's firearms and enjoy watching young people take up the sport and learn it, and a lot of young people are taking it up and learning this.

I'm absolutely in favour of a system that tests me so that I can show society that they can be comfortable knowing that I am a person who can safely own, operate, and possess a firearm. I can show that, and I'm comfortable with that.

I think I owe it to society if I'm going to own firearms, whether they're four inches long or four feet long, to know how to handle them safely and properly, how to store them safely, and how to use them in a proper and safe manner that's not going to be a danger to the public. I have taken every test that has been the law to take, and I've passed it. So has my wife; she even beat me on the one test by 1 per cent. I think that it's fair and reasonable to test the person to make sure that the person is responsible and safe to own a firearm.

An Hon. Member: Question.

Mr. Marz: You'll have your turn.

I see that my time is up, Mr. Speaker, so I'll sit down, unless I can have unanimous consent to continue. I'd be happy to.

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: You don't have unanimous consent.

The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today, but I feel somewhat strange because to some extent I feel I should begin my speech by saying: I'm an Albertan, and I defied the registry. I feel like I'm at an AA meeting because there are so many Albertans around that have defied the registry.

There are only two people in this province that openly defied the registry and continue to do so. One of them is a decorated war veteran. He served in several peacekeeping missions for this province all around the globe, and he served as a Sergeant-at-Arms of this Legislature for several years. He also served as security for one of our Premiers for several years, Mr. Speaker. I also have to add that that individual, Mr. Oscar Lacombe, was at a rally last night in St. Paul to inquire of people what they thought about his defiance of the firearms registry. In St. Paul 400 people showed up. Four hundred people showed up in St. Paul to shake his hand. Over 300 waited in a line-up to shake his hand; 80 of them were youths. There were aboriginals, there were seniors, there were people of all stripes, there were children there to thank him for defying the registry.

I'm also an individual who defied the registry, for better or for worse, Mr. Speaker. I've had people who suggested that I shouldn't. I've had people from one end of this country to the other who have phoned to thank me for doing that. Whether or not that's good, I don't claim to be any sort of great leader, but I took my inspiration from Gandhi, who said two things: one, that every single individual, every single citizen, has not only the right but the duty to protest a law that they consider to be bad, but they can never once expect to be exempt from the consequences that they'll experience from defying that law until such time as that law is changed. The second

thing he said was to do it peacefully, not by demonstrations, not by violence, but to just say: I will not comply.

Mr. Speaker, I defied the registry because \$1 billion was used when \$2 million was the promise that it would cost. One billion dollars was used to create the registry – \$1 billion. Just to put that into perspective, if you spent \$1 million per day, it would take you almost three years to spend \$1 billion. We're not talking about a difference between \$1 million and \$10 million. We're talking about \$1 million and \$1 billion. If you spent \$1,000 a day, it would take you 3,000 years to spend \$1 billion. Those numbers are almost incomprehensible to the average Albertan.

Not only did I defy it for those reasons, Mr. Speaker, but in February or March of 2003 when the RCMP announced that they're aware of almost 1,000 people in this province that are producing child pornography and exchanging it over the Internet, they also announced at the same time that they do not have the manpower and resources to go after those 1,000 people, who I think anybody in this country would say are real criminals. One billion dollars would have paid for 2,500 police officers for four years that could have spent all of their time ending child pornography production in this country. It could have put at least two MRI machines, not counting operating fees, which could have lasted for a year or two years – two MRI machines – in each federal constituency in this country. That's what \$1 billion could have done.

9:20

I've heard the argument made a hundred times before that if it saves one child's life or one woman's life from somebody who's wild and crazy with a gun, the \$1 billion spent on the registry is worth it, Mr. Speaker. But think of the children's lives it could have saved: \$1 billion dollars to end child pornography. Think of the lives it could have saved to put two MRI machines in every federal riding in this country. That's worth \$1 billion.

It's just wrong. The issue should have dealt with real crime, Mr. Speaker. It should have dealt with real problems. The issue, when it was debated, when it was discussed, deceived Albertans into thinking that this was a crime bill, that this would have dealt with crime.

I am supportive of this motion. I've been supportive of this motion since I first heard about it, since it was introduced in this Legislature, and I've supported every single argument I've heard in this Legislature, Mr. Speaker, but I think that this motion does lack one thing. It doesn't address licensing. There is no law in this country yet that forces any Canadian to have a licence to own property. I've heard people discuss how we have to have a licence to drive a vehicle, and we do have to have a licence to drive a vehicle, but we don't have to have a licence to own a vehicle. We have that vehicle. We can have any property that we want, but we have to have a licence to know how to use it.

I think that the licensing should have been addressed in this motion. It should have addressed having a licence to use a firearm, perhaps to some extent to own one, but the licensing strictly deals with whether or not you get to own a firearm. That's whether or not you get to own property. Whether people realize it or not, the removal of that licence suddenly removes from citizens the right to own that property because they have to have a licence to have the right to own it. Mr. Speaker, I think that's wrong. I think we need to address that more. I think that it needs to be considered more.

I still support this motion, Mr. Speaker, because as Confucius said, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, and I think this is the first step to progress. So I encourage all members to support this motion. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, that last intervention, by the hon. Member for Wainwright, has caused me to rise to my feet and propose some changes to this motion. You know, the concept that someone would quote Mahatma Gandhi in favour of the right to own guns just absolutely is ludicrous, and the suggestion that the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi would be appealed to in this manner I think would make him turn over in his grave.

Mr. Speaker, there are some things about this motion that I believe are true. [interjections] I know you're enthusiastic. I said "some." You have to wait for it. The suggestion that the billion dollar expenditure was a waste of money is something I absolutely agree with. There's no doubt about it that a billion dollars is an enormous amount of money, far more than really should have been the case. It's an example of wasteful government spending. It's an example of mismanagement of public funds.

It's also an example of how people can drive up the costs of a program by a deliberate campaign to thwart the original intentions, and that is also true in this case. There was plenty of coverage over the past few years of organized groups deliberately trying to drive up the costs of this registry by flat out refusal to co-operate with it and attempts to thwart it, but that doesn't excuse the tremendous waste of money that has taken place on this registry. I tend to agree with those members that say that the money might have been better allocated at reducing violence in other ways. I think that's probably a fair statement.

I cannot resist, Mr. Speaker, drawing a comparison to the waste of money we've seen by this government in other areas. That makes this billion dollars pale in comparison. I wish that members that focus on the waste of the federal government and that Albertans and Canadians who focus so much on the waste of the federal government would also hold this provincial government to the same standard, because they often don't. If you look at the costs, for example, of electricity deregulation, you'll find that they are many times greater than the cost of this gun registry, and I believe that a good estimate right now is somewhere between \$6 billion to \$8 billion. Don't forget that before the last election . . .

Mr. Smith: A point of order. Under *Beauchesne* 333 I wonder if the member would entertain a question.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, you just have to say yes or no.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, you are allowed to ask questions at the end under this; are you not?

The Deputy Speaker: Yes, you are.

Mr. Mason: Then I would be happy to entertain questions from the hon. minister or other members at that time.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Mr. Mason: I wanted to indicate that just in the rebates alone for natural gas and electricity in the run-up to the last provincial election, it totalled according to the government's own figures \$4.2 billion. [interjections]

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, just a reminder. We have one

person speaking at a time, and the only member that has been recognized is the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. One of the other members who is wishing to speak again must be reminded that they just had the one shot at it and you've had it. To the other member who seemed to be engaged in it, wait your turn.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Debate Continued

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to anticipate some objections to that line of argument, I will indicate that about half of that went into various rebate programs for electricity. Yes, Albertans got the money, but it went right back to the power companies. The reason that the government brought in this series of programs was because of the outrageous jump in electricity prices which happened, unfortunately for the government, right before the election. So, yes, it went through the chequing accounts of Albertans, but it didn't stay there long. Had the government not meddled in the sensible electricity system we had, these would have been unnecessary.

Since that time, higher electricity prices have cumulatively cost Albertans and Alberta businesses billions of additional dollars, Mr. Speaker. For those members that are outraged by the billion dollar boondoggle of the federal government on the gun registry, I wish that they would turn their compassion for the taxpayer and the wallets of voters onto this government and hold it to the same standard that the federal government has been held to. None of this excuses the federal government at all for the boondoggle that this gun registry has become. It's outrageous, and I don't mean to minimize that or to suggest in any way that we should not be outraged by these costs.

Another question, that I'm less clear on, Mr. Speaker, is the question of whether or not this program has been in any way effective in reducing crime. I think that properly thought out, a registry might have been part of a good series of programs to control crime and the growth of firearms. But I also tend to agree with those who say that guns that are used primarily for hunting or for sport – that is, the long guns – are less of a problem than the flood of cheap handguns into this country from the United States. That is a very serious problem, that is ongoing now, and we have now in this country more handguns per capita than just about any country in the world except the United States.

9:30

Those members who support this nice, open border with the United States ought to consider what exactly we are getting for our money when it comes to this open arrangement with the United States. There are now millions of illegal handguns in this country, Mr. Speaker, and I do believe that the federal government and this government have a responsibility to do whatever they can to stem that flow.

I also believe, Mr. Speaker, that with the growth of gangs across this country, especially in major urban areas, these guns will soon be put to use. There's going to be a ripple effect from that, and more and more people will make use of the guns. It's not that the guns aren't here in Canada; it's that we tend not to use them. We've seen recently in the city of Toronto a significant jump in gun-related deaths, and much of that has to do with gang activity and organized crime. That is coming here as well. I think, quite frankly, that working to eliminate gangs and organized crime is a key element in any responsible government's crime-related strategy.

Mr. Speaker, there are a couple of points with this resolution that I do not agree with, and those are in the suggestion that it "is an

unnecessary intrusion [into] the property rights and cultural heritage of Albertans." I don't know what some members think our cultural heritage is comprised of, but the right to have guns or to have guns that are in some way unlicensed, unregistered and so on has never been, in my view, part of our fundamental property rights or of our cultural heritage. It's certainly true that in rural areas guns form an important part of the economic activity, but to suggest that it's part of our cultural heritage is, in my view, a misrepresentation of the rich cultural heritage of western Canada and of Alberta. As a result, Mr. Speaker, I would like to propose an amendment to the resolution. I'll ask that it be distributed.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, would you move it, and then we'll wait a few minutes.

Mr. Mason: Thank you. Yes. Mr. Speaker, I move that Government Motion 15 be amended by striking out "is an unnecessary intrusion on the property rights and cultural heritage of Albertans."

The Deputy Speaker: Edmonton-Highlands, you may commence.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, as I indicated, I think that there are certain problems with the gun registry as it has evolved, but I don't believe that intrusion into property rights and the cultural heritage of Albertans is among them.

Certainly, New Democrats are very supportive of the efforts to reduce the number of firearms in society. I think that we need to give priority to the reduction of illegal handguns, which are flooding into the country from the United States, but we recognize that there are certain legitimate uses for firearms: protection of people, for example, who may be out in wild areas on seismic lines or something like that, or for hunting purposes, for shooting purposes in clubs, and so on. They certainly have important uses on the farm and so on. Those things need to be recognized and taken into account, and we don't support turning those people into criminals.

This language in the resolution, elevating guns into some sort of cultural icon or to suggest that property rights cannot be circumscribed in some way by the government in the interest of the public good, just doesn't stand up. It's not consistent, and it adds very little to the resolution. So we would propose that this section be struck from the resolution before we vote on it.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: On amendment A1, the hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Hancock: Just a very brief comment with respect to this very essential section of the resolution. It speaks to very many people in Alberta and I think advisedly so, so I would encourage that we reject the amendment.

I'd like just to put on the record and quote some comments that were written in a judgment that was issued in the Provincial Court not too long ago with respect to a licensing application. The front page of the newspapers in our area and perhaps others took one portion of that judgment and blew it up, and it became quite a controversial statement for a day or two.

When I was asked to comment on it, I indicated that, first of all, I wouldn't comment on any of the merits of the case because it was still before the courts, and I won't tonight. But I also said that I couldn't comment in detail, although the language was flowery with respect to that particular section, and that I would hope that people wouldn't take it as a call to have to go out and buy guns to protect themselves. I wanted to read the judgment before I made any further comment.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I have read the judgment, and I'd like to quote a couple of parts from the judgment because it's a very well-reasoned judgment. Again, I'm not commenting on the issue, which was a licensing issue with respect to a particular individual. The judgment says:

It merits judicial notice that the widespread ownership of firearms by ordinary Canadians for subsistence and sport hunting is a long-standing and economically important part of Canada's history and culture.

It also says:

First, one prominent if not fundamental characteristic of a free and democratic society – which s.1 the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms seemingly implies Canada to be – is that citizens of such society generally are “at liberty” or “free” to possess and acquire property without first having to obtain permission from a governmental bureaucrat or the judiciary. In a free and democratic society any exception or deviation from the general rule deserves close scrutiny even though mandated by law.

It goes on in other matters that deal more with the licensing aspect. But it says:

Casual or ambitious administration of the law's exceptions to the general rule could endanger substantially that prominent, socially important, and historically ingrained characteristic of Canadian society.

Mr. Speaker, it is something that may not be historically or culturally important to every single Canadian or every single Albertan, but I think it's well shown in the controversy that this particular registry has raised across this country over the years since it was brought in in 1995 that it is historically significant and culturally important to a great many Albertans, and for that reason we should leave the clause in.

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: Now, if I remember correctly, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands had finished his speech.

Mr. Mason: Well, all except for questions, Mr. Speaker.

9:40

The Deputy Speaker: That's what I was getting to. Thank you.

We did have a certain member – it seems to me it was the Minister of Energy – who was interested in asking a question or making a comment. Are you going to waive that?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I will.

The Deputy Speaker: Yes, you will waive. Okay.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments and then a question to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. It wasn't too long ago in this House where we heard about the unfortunate incident where an RCMP officer was shot by a person that I think perhaps all of us would agree should not have had a gun. We also had a case not long ago in Sundre where an estranged husband with a sawed-off shotgun murdered his ex-wife and her boyfriend. We also know that most women who are killed by their estranged spouses or partners are killed with guns.

We certainly all agree with the comments made by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East that society changes, and one of the things that has changed in our society is the way we deal with people with mental health issues. In Alberta we have many, many more people on the streets now because of the changes in our mental health policies. We also have a situation in the province and in the

country where there is an increasing use of handguns in crimes that are being committed.

So my question to the hon. member would be: what sort of impact do you think the changes in our mental health policies in this province have contributed to the unsafe use of firearms in the province?

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry. I think the hon. member raises a good point, and that is that if you're going to address the question of gun violence in society, you need to approach it from many angles at once. If I can allow myself this terrible pun, there's no silver bullet to solve this problem.

With respect to mental health issues, that's very important. You know, I remember that a couple of years ago a young mentally ill man was shot but not killed by police in Coronation park in Edmonton after he shot a police dog. I remember the outpouring of sympathy for the police dog, you know, and almost nothing about this poor young man with a tortured soul, and I just think that this reflects very badly on the attitudes that we have in our society towards mentally ill people.

I think that the government has deinstitutionalized lots of people for very good reasons and then failed to provide the necessary supports to make sure that they're able to function. I think this has also contributed not just to these instances but also to the growth of homelessness in our communities.

So I believe that if you're going to get at gun violence, you need to have a very comprehensive approach to the whole question. Gun control is a key element of that, but it has to be intelligent gun control.

The Deputy Speaker: The next speaker is the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two points to my argument today, and one of them has to do with the registration itself. I'd like to enter some statistics that are not very good. The system has a 71 per cent error rate in licensing owners and a 91 per cent error rate in registering individual guns. The government admits that it has registered 718,414 guns without a serial number. A gun's federal registration certificate does not include or contain the name of the owner, the model, calibre, or the magazine capacity. There are known to be at least 222,911 unexplained duplications. The government spent \$29 million on advertising the gun registry, including \$4.5 million to Groupaction, which is now under investigation. Pistols have been federally registered since 1934, yet there is no case on record of a handgun being used in a crime by its registered owner. What's reasonable to suggest, Mr. Speaker, is that this has made criminals out of 1 million Canadians, unfortunately.

My argument goes a little bit deeper than the gun itself. My argument is with the bill. Mr. Speaker, this is a copy of the bill, page 1 of 59. The intent of the bill I believe, in all fairness to the government, was to protect Canadians. That would have been accomplished by a one-page bill that said: if you commit a crime and you use a firearm in Canada, you will go to jail for a minimum amount of time, no exceptions. I would think that all of the hon. colleagues here would agree. That should have been able to fit on one page, but we have 59 pages.

Some parts of the bill I find extremely troublesome. I don't believe the average Canadian understands what we're giving up when we allow this kind of legislation. I would like to just touch very briefly on some of the points. We'll start with the investigation. I want to read section 55.(2).

Without restricting the scope of the inquiries that may be made with respect to an application for a licence, a chief firearms officer may conduct an investigation of the applicant, which may consist of interviews with neighbours, community workers, social workers, individuals who work or live with the applicant, spouse or common-law partner, former spouse or former common-law partner, dependants or whomever in the opinion of the chief firearms officer may provide information pertaining to whether the applicant is eligible under section 5 to hold a licence.

I wonder how many of us would get a driver's licence if they had to ask our neighbours and anybody we ever knew. Section 5, for your information, Mr. Speaker, pretty well defines everybody. So if you want to get a licence, they have the right to talk to virtually anybody you have ever met, and I don't believe Canadians want that for this type of registration. This is a little bit scary.

I want to go a little further, to the burden of proof. I believe that it is absolutely fundamental in this society, in any just society, that you are innocent until you are proven guilty. That should be one of the cornerstones, and I believe most hon. members here would agree with that. But let's read this one, burden of proof, section (3) under 75. We're already on page 27.

At the hearing of the reference, the burden of proof is on the applicant or holder to satisfy the provincial court judge that the refusal to issue or revocation of the licence, registration certificate or authorization, the decision or the refusal to approve or revocation of the approval was not justified.

You are guilty if they say you're guilty, and it is up to you to prove to them that you're not. Whether it's a gun or whether it's your own grain or whether it's anything else that you deal with, that is simply not fair in my opinion, Mr. Speaker.

Now, let's talk about the failure to register. We've heard several hon. members talk about the connection between a car, between a gun, whatever. They're all good arguments, but let's talk about what happens when you don't register. Whoa. [interjection] That's what happens.

112.(1) Subject to subsections (2) and (3), every person commits an offence who, not having previously committed an offence under this subsection or subsection 91(1) or 92(1) of the Criminal Code, possesses a firearm that is neither a prohibited firearm nor a restricted firearm without being the holder of a registration certificate for the firearm.

Basically, if you've got a gun, you're a criminal.

9:50

You know what? I have a 16-year-old son who was told by his grandfather, who was diagnosed with liver cancer, that he wasn't going to live very long and would like to give him his shotgun. Now, that might not seem like much to most people. As a young child I grew up hunting continually. His grandfather still hunts to this day. Thank God for a heck of a health care system. He's still here, costing us more and more every day. But when he thought he was going, he wanted to give a very prized possession of his to his grandson.

Well, I don't have all the certificates you need to have a gun. Just a little bit too lazy, I guess, or for whatever reason. He couldn't accept that gun because I didn't have the right documentation in my household, him being a minor, for his grandfather to give him that gun. No. If his grandfather had died without my getting the proper documentation or my son getting to be 18, that gun was gone. Or if we had it in the house, we were criminals. Yes, that's the way it is, hon. members.

To the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, I will never be accused of being the voice of reason, so we don't need a question unless you want to.

But the fact is that the government should have never said: we

know what's best. [interjection] I'll be very quick. Let's talk about what the average Albertan or the average Canadian expects from the police or from people investigating them.

103. The owner or person in charge of a place that is inspected by an inspector under section 102 and every person found in the place shall

- (a) give the inspector all reasonable assistance to enable him or her to carry out the inspection and exercise any power conferred by section 102; and
- (b) provide the inspector with any information relevant to the enforcement of this Act or the regulations that he or she may reasonably require.

That is a novel idea. "Mr. Drug Dealer, will you tell us where your drugs are hidden?" "I don't have to." "Mr. Gun Owner, will you tell us where your guns are?" "I don't have to." Yes, you do, under this legislation.

I will end, Mr. Speaker, by saying that people expect us to do the right thing. They expect that in the position we are in, we will see through a lot of the complications of a system that sometimes seems to be run by people out of touch. I have to bring you back to an article in the *Calgary Herald*. We are expecting people to have to live under these rules of allowing them into whatever part of our house, and here's what the principal of a Calgary high school says: we would need just cause to use the canine services in the belief that a student had an illegal substance in their possession or in their locker. That is a tragedy, that we need to have just cause.

I don't know that that is the legal situation, but if the perception in the public is that we need to have just cause to put police dogs in the schools to find out that our students are using drugs and yet we're obligated to open our houses and buildings to people to come and inspect for guns, that's just wrong. It's not what the average Albertan and certainly the average Canadian wants. I would hope that we send a very strong message from here that says: "We all care about safety, and we all care about having lives that are free. We can move, and we can be safe to go to the store. But we're also free. We're also allowed to own things, to have things we've rightly acquired. And if we don't break the law, don't come looking for us."

Mr. Speaker, this is just a message to the federal government to say: "You made a little mistake here. Could you please fix it? Could you please give back gun owners their decency and their respect and get out of our lives, where we don't need it? Put criminals in jail, and put us back on the road to doing what we do best, which is work and raise our families."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a lively debate, and I want to join in here with a very short debate. I just want to say categorically that I'm against violence and killings, and I do not tolerate criminal and illegal activities. I am for tough, deterrent penalties. I'm for weapons control, being guns or otherwise. However, I'm against the current gun registry program, and I will tell you why in simple terms.

If the purpose of the current registry is to prevent death by gunshot, it is definitely not effective. If the purpose of the current registry is to prevent the criminal element from obtaining weapons, it is again not effective at all. On top of this ineffectiveness, the current gun registry program is costly. It's already wasted millions of hard-earned taxpayers' dollars, and if we do not stop it now, it will cost billions of taxpayers' dollars, which can be used for better, more high priority programs.

Mr. Speaker, I learned a lot of wisdom from my late father. He

was an educator and historical scholar. I remember that he told us as children that prevention is always the best solution. Our family residence was on a beautiful riverbank, and once he told us that the best way to remove things floating down the river is to go upstream and stop people from throwing them in. So I recommend that the hundreds of millions of taxpayers' dollars in the current gun registry be redeployed to prevention activities.

Mr. Speaker, it is also well understood that weapons do not kill, but people do. So the best way to prevent murder and criminal killing is to spend resources in education, in employment creation, in conflict mediation. Another way to deter potential criminals is by having a tough legal system. Let's improve our penalty system to make it a more effective deterrent. In these two ways I don't think it will cost billions and may even save billions.

To conclude, I support this motion in debate, and I recommend that all members vote for it. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that everyone is getting rather tired and would like us to be short, and I will. But I want to be on record as representing our constituents, none of whom ever called in 12 years and asked for any type of legislation to do with registration, gun control, or anything that smells or breathes like this legislation that has been discussed tonight.

I do support the motion that the Government House Leader has brought forward. I do want to thank my colleagues for Cardston-Taber-Warner, Drayton Valley-Calmar, Vermilion-Lloydminster, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, and especially Wainwright. They truly represent what the ordinary people in Little Bow actually say all the time, and I do want to honestly thank them.

There was a comment and a subsequent amendment made that dealt with culture and property rights. Just as an observation from somebody who doesn't stand up and speak an awful lot on a lot of government bills, sometimes it seems to me that people throw forward amendments to motions simply because they just don't want to say yes or no. They want to be politically correct, or they want to be a wordsmith and make it sound different.

Mr. Mason: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: You have a citation?

Point of Order

Reflections on a Decision of the Assembly

Mr. Mason: Basically, Mr. Speaker, I don't know the section, but I do know the rule, and that is that once the House has made a decision, you're not allowed to reflect on it. The hon. member had an opportunity to speak to the amendment and chose not to. He missed his chance.

The Deputy Speaker: Little Bow on the purported point of order.

Mr. McFarland: I'll hit him on another one.

The Deputy Speaker: Well, it is a perfect point of order in the sense that if you're going to reflect on it, it seems to me more in the breach than in the keeping.

Anyway, hon. Member for Little Bow, would you continue.

Debate Continued

Mr. McFarland: The point that I was trying to make is that there

were a couple of comments that took away from the actual motion we're discussing. One was on power deregulation, which I don't quite connect. But in hindsight I would like Albertans to remember that there's no way you should compare power deregulation to a fiasco. The way that my colleague from Wainwright brought the argument forward, I would remind Albertans that this was the government that took a \$23 billion debt and reduced it to a bit below \$3 billion, and that's a lot of MRIs.

10:00

Finally, on the mental health issue, I do have a lot of empathy for people who suffer from illness, but let's not forget to put ourselves in the shoes of the police officers and the RCMP officers out on the street who have to deal with people that have a problem. I'm sure that they've got loved ones at home that would rather they be using their gun as a precautionary measure than be a victim, as three of us who were involved with the mental health review a number of years ago found out, Mr. Speaker.

When we've taken over half of our hospital beds in mental health institutions and put them into communities, what more could you have expected? It wasn't because the government wanted to put the people in the communities. It was the people themselves who felt so inclined to have people that have a mental disability put into communities.

The point that I'm trying to make, Mr. Speaker, is that clearly the committee that looked at that issue a number of years ago identified that those people coming out into our communities needed anywhere from three to five core support services, and they are not being provided. That's a different issue altogether.

I do support this. I just wanted once again to thank the colleagues who brought all the good arguments forward. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise and comment on Government Motion 15. This is when it's fun being an Alberta Liberal, because I get to disagree with my colleagues. We get to have a good debate on things, and we all have a free vote.

I believe in gun control. I believe in the gun registry. I don't believe in waste, I don't believe in poor management, and I don't believe in poor planning. Let me be clear about that. I think that the federal government may well have screwed up this gun registry, but I still believe in a gun registry, and I will continue to support it and support the idea of it.

On the idea that's captured in this motion that somehow guns are a part of cultural heritage, I'll challenge that and say that I'm an Albertan and it doesn't speak to my cultural heritage. If we want to speak about my cultural heritage, if we want to go far enough back and talk about weapons, then I'm talking about a broadsword, and I'm out there in the hills wearing a kilt. Really, what my cultural heritage is as an Albertan would be a plow or a spud wrench or a rig chain, but a gun is not part of my cultural heritage. I want a gun registry, I want gun control, and I want it to work.

Ms Calahasen: Actually, mine is bows and arrows.

Ms Blakeman: That's fine, Madam Minister. You're welcome to get up and speak to this if you'd like to.

There's been quite a bit of discussion that I've heard this evening as I've listened to the speakers about who are the real criminals and that it's not right that certain people are called criminals because of this legislation. I have less difficulty with that. People who break

the law are criminals. If a law was passed that says that you're not to do something and you do it and you break that law, then you're a criminal. So I have less conflict than some of my hon. colleagues in this Assembly about who is a criminal.

I think there are crimes committed by average people using guns who prior to committing that crime definitely would not have considered themselves a criminal or have said that they had any criminal intent. They definitely didn't see themselves as a criminal. They still took a gun and used it on someone. That made them a criminal.

On behalf of the women that are killed by their intimate partners, on behalf of others who believe in gun control – and there are Albertans who believe in gun control; there are Albertans who believe in a gun registry – I will not be supporting this government motion.

I wondered, when I first saw this government motion, whether it wasn't mischief-making on behalf of the government because there's been some talk about: well, all the money that's been wasted on this registry – and I think to a certain extent there has been money wasted on this registry – could've been spent on all of these other things. Really. Yes. And would the members in here have supported spending that money on other things: on mental health support, on domestic violence, on sexual assault programs?

Let's reach even further back if we want to talk about people who find themselves in a position where they're using a gun and they don't seem to have the education or the upbringing to help them make those choices that they wouldn't use a gun in a situation. Let's reach further back. Would there have been support for things like Head Start programs, for things like Success by Six programs, for early childhood education, for full-day kindergarten? Would that support have been from this Assembly? Let's reach even further back. Let's truly eradicate child poverty and any of the other things that we can trace to people who make poor life choices. But I don't think that we would have had that support. I don't think that those choices would have been made instead. I don't think that money would have been directed to these programs.

I've heard people say that the cost was terrible. Well, if that was true, then why did this provincial government make choices that increased the cost of this program nationally? That's a direct result of the choices that this government made, and that increased the cost of this program. So when people get up and go on and on about the cost of this program federally, Alberta made choices that contributed to that cost, deliberately so. And who is taking responsibility for that in this Assembly tonight? No one I've heard so far.

There's been some discussion about long guns and handguns. You know what, Mr. Speaker? I don't care. I really don't care. I don't want to see guns used in the commission of crimes. I don't want to see long guns, short guns, medium-range guns, or torpedoes. I don't care, and I don't think the length of the gun barrel is a distinguishing enough feature to somehow justify not registering the gun. Sorry. Doesn't count with me.

There's also been quite a bit of discussion here that somehow this gun registry program is going to stop people using guns for things they like to use those guns for, that they wouldn't be able to go out and participate in their local gun club, that they wouldn't be able to go out and shoot varmints in the backyard, that they wouldn't be able to go and shoot wildlife. That's absolutely ridiculous. Nothing in this legislation restricts that. It says that you need a firearms acquisition certificate and you're to register your gun. It doesn't say that you can't join a gun club. It doesn't say that you can't go out with a registered gun, with your firearms acquisition certificate in your back pocket, and shoot varmints in your backyard. Nothing stops you from doing those things, so a number of the arguments I've heard here tonight simply don't hold water.

I will go back to where I started. I believe in gun control. I believe in gun registration. I will not support this Motion 15 brought forward by the government. I suspect I'm the only person in here tonight that's probably going to vote against this, but I'm okay with that. I will stand here in support of those Albertans who do believe in gun control and do believe in gun registration, and I'm proud to do that, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: Questions? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yeah, I'd like to ask a question of the hon. member. Given that more people are killed by big knives than are by guns on an annual basis, should we also have a big knife registry? And given that people are killed by ropes and strings through strangulation, should we have a rope and string registry? Given that people are sometime suffocated by pillows, should we have a pillow registry? Given that some people are killed by poison, should we have a poison registry? Where does it end?

Ms Blakeman: I took this debate seriously. I wish you would give it the same respect.

The Deputy Speaker: Do you have another question, Drayton Valley-Calmar?

10:10

Rev. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, this is a serious question. This is the exact thing that Albertans are asking. They're saying: where does it end? Are we going to have to register the family dog because people have been killed by dogs in the past? Let's be realistic. The registry doesn't work.

Ms Blakeman: You have a licence for your dog.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice to close debate.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the passion that's been exhibited in this Legislature this evening with respect to this issue indicates exactly how important it is to Albertans. It's not that there's any Albertan who believes that guns should be used in a criminal manner or that guns should be used for criminal purposes. It's not that Albertans believe that guns shouldn't be treated with respect and treated in a safe and careful manner. It's not that Albertans don't believe that the law should be followed.

I think we've heard from many Albertans and their representatives here tonight that Albertans do believe that gun control should be done properly, that it should be done with a purpose in mind, which is to create safe communities, to make Canada a safer place. Therefore, it should be done carefully and aimed at where it can do the most good, and that is by strengthening the criminal law to make the use of a gun in a criminal matter a strongly punished offence so that people know and understand that we don't put up with the use of guns in an improper way.

But there's also a need to respect the property rights of individuals, to respect the cultural heritage, and while it may not be the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre's cultural heritage – and I can say that it's not my cultural heritage. My ancestors, my father and grandfather, other than participating in a world war were not people who used guns for their livelihood or for their cultural heritage. But the fact that it's not my cultural heritage doesn't mean that it's not an

important part of the cultural heritage of the province and of many people of the province.

The fact that I don't own a gun doesn't mean that owning a gun isn't important to someone else. By basically having been a person who moved to the city, although I grew up in a rural area and did hunt when I was younger, and don't have a gun now, it doesn't mean that there aren't many people who do still want to have guns either for subsistence or for sport or for some other rationale as has been explained in this House, even the rationale that that gun might be an important family heirloom to them, having been passed down from a grandfather or from someone else.

In my own family I'm aware of a situation where, for example, an individual was a chief of police and had a gun that was important to him in terms of his role as the chief of police and passed that down through the family. It's probably not registered, and it's probably not capable of being registered, but it is a family heirloom.

The fact of the matter is that it doesn't impact each of us in the same way, Mr. Speaker; it doesn't mean that it's not important to some people, many people in this country. We ought to urge, and I would hope unanimously, the federal government to revisit the concept of the registry, to take it out of the Criminal Code, to take all registering and licensing out of the Criminal Code, to leave in the Criminal Code those things which are criminal, which is using guns in an inappropriate manner for criminal purposes.

Take the control of guns and the licensing, put that in the Firearms Act, and take the registry and delete, as this motion refers to, the concept of the registry of nonrestricted weapons because that does not serve a purpose. That's what's wasting money. That's what's offending Albertans and Canadians. That money could be used to help create safety in our communities, to help deal with some of the issues that ought to be dealt with and that we ought to be applying our laws usefully to do.

[The voice vote indicated that Government Motion 15 carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 10:15 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Abbott	Goudreau	Mar
Amery	Graham	Marz
Bonner	Griffiths	Maskell
Calahasen	Hancock	McClellan
Cao	Hutton	McFarland
Cardinal	Jablonski	Melchin
Carlson	Jacobs	Nicol
Coutts	Johnson	Oberg
DeLong	Klapstein	Pham
Doerksen	Knight	Smith
Ducharme	Kryczka	Snelgrove
Dunford	Lougheed	Yankowsky
Fritz		

Against the motion:

Blakeman

Totals:	For – 37	Against – 1
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[Government Motion 15 carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:27 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, March 25, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/25

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Deputy Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, as we conclude this week's deliberations and return to our constituencies, we pray that we will be renewed and strengthened in our commitments to better serve our constituency and all Albertans. Amen.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Fabiana Leite. Fabiana is here from São Paulo, Brazil, on a Rotary International youth exchange program. She arrived in Edmonton in August 2003 and will be here until August 2004. She's attending Ross Sheppard composite high school in Edmonton, taking a full load of subjects in grades 10 and 11.

Fabiana is being hosted by the Rotary Club of Edmonton River-view and staying with four Rotary host families while in Alberta. I'm told that she's having lots of fun taking part in many Canadian/Alberta cultural and sporting activities during her visit thus far, and members will note that she's collected a lot of badges along the way.

Fabiana is accompanied by Mr. Chris Gowers, one of her host Rotary families. Chris, I might also point out to the House, is a mediator in addition to his own business at which he earns a living. He's in essence a voluntary mediator with our provincial court mediation program. Our mediators do get a modest honorarium, but it doesn't go anywhere near paying for their time, so I call them volunteers. I'd just acknowledge Chris's contribution in that manner.

Fabiana and Chris are standing in the members' gallery, and I'd ask the House to give them the traditional warm welcome.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's my pleasure to introduce the Timberlea public school from Fort McMurray. In Fort McMurray our city slogan is We Have the Energy, and clearly these students and teachers and parents and the bus driver represent that energy. It's my pleasure to introduce the teachers who are part of the group of 55 that are here today from Timberlea: Gloria Fountain, Tracy Horvath, principal Anthony Warren, as well as Denise Roland and Zeta Norris, along with many parents that are here helping with the trip today and also the bus driver, Marc Pichette. I would like to ask everyone from Timberlea school to rise, the whole delegation, and please extend to them the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have a number of special guests today from the Deputy Minister of Human Resources and Employment's office, and I believe them to be perhaps in the

public gallery. I'd like to read their names, and then at the end if they would all rise, we could provide them with the proper welcome. We have Mr. Barkat Rajwani, Ms Veronica Pysmeny, Todd Zyla, Mrs. Marge Segin, Mrs. Rena Sawatski, Miss Ashley Dawson, Mr. Josh Chatterley, John Bozocca, Mrs. Sharon Wilde, Cynthia Quintal, Christina Dentzien, Gordon Okamura, Janice L'Hirondelle, Bryon Hoy, Susan Sava, Jessica Yan, and Lana-Rae Shade. I hope I've pronounced all of those names correctly. If they would rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a constituent, Mr. Dave Schwartz. He is here to observe question period. Dave is a former announcer with Mix 96, where his radio name was Dave Shannon. He is the voice-over for the Premier's dinners and also does some live announcing, as he will be doing tonight. Dave is seated in the members' gallery, and I'd like to ask him to please stand and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Students from Sierra Leone, the Sudan, and Uganda have chosen Edmonton as their new home, and more particularly they've chosen St. Joe's Catholic school as their school. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of students, and I'm going to name them all. I'd ask them to rise as their names are called: Forty Two Chuang, Alor Arop Deng, Kvol Arop Deng, Solomon Ochen, Bondi Koroma, Yeama Koroma, and Nyogoa Tut. They're accompanied today by their instructors and teachers, Miss Geraldine Dawson and Miss Lorie Taylor. They're all standing in the public gallery. Please welcome them to the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to acknowledge to you and through you 87 guests who are not present in this Assembly right now. They're from Bon Accord school. They're taking advantage of our excellent learning centre that we have here, the School at the Legislature, and also the mock parliament. I thought it would be proper to acknowledge them as being present here today and to have them receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Health Care Premiums

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning the Minister of Finance stated on the radio that she does not find it, quote, offensive, end quote, to pay the health care premium tax. To the minister of Finance: given that half her health care premium taxes and half those of all MLAs are paid for by the Legislative Assembly, will she admit that MLAs who support the government's policy on health care premiums are following a double standard?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, the question that I was asked this morning was: was I prepared to get rid of health care premiums and

send out the bill to Albertans? The response I gave back was that the health care system costs \$8 billion in this year's budget. [interjections] I would ask the hon. members opposite to listen to the answer. The cost is \$8 billion, and it doesn't matter how you shake the cat. The people of Alberta, the taxpayers, have to pay for the cost of the health care system. So whether I take it out of your right pocket or your left pocket, it's still \$8 billion.

Now, I can say that I'll get rid of the little slip of paper that says: here's the invoice for the health care premium. I can hide it in the taxation model like other provinces do. I can play the political game with you, or I can be up front and honest with you and say: the tax is there, and it's coming through to pay for this system, and it's \$8 billion. That's the full cost of the health system, so it doesn't really matter how it's there, how it's delivered. I prefer to see the invoice go out because, quite frankly, my concern over the years is that I get the feeling that some people in Canada believe that the health system is free. It's not. It's \$8 billion this year.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that health care premiums comprise only a tiny portion of her \$120,000-plus salary but a substantial portion of the salaries of ordinary workers, will she admit that these are a regressive and unfair tax?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, we're very fortunate in Canada to have a public health care system, and I, like every person in this province and in this country, have to have that system in place, and we all have friends and families that require that system. Our objective through this whole process – and I'm not going to play this little game with the member opposite – is: how do we renew and sustain the health system so that it's there for the long term for when we need to access that system? That's the fundamental key. The cost of this system this year was a little alarming because what happened this year was that for every additional dollar of increase in spending in this budget, 50 cents of that went to the health care system. That's not sustainable. That has to change.

1:40

The Deputy Speaker: To supplement, Minister, very briefly.

Mr. Mar: Briefly, sir. I only wish to supplement by saying this. As the Minister of Finance has already indicated, the cost of the health care system will be in the magnitude of \$8 billion. The amount that will be coming from premiums is roughly in the magnitude of \$1 billion. But I have said in this House and in other venues, Mr. Speaker – and I want Albertans to know – that if you add up what we get for health care premiums plus all of the personal income taxes in this province plus all of the transfers that we get from the federal government, it still doesn't add up to \$8 billion. So this is an enormous system that we pay for. It's a good system. But to suggest that you can do away with a billion dollars is simply not possible. If the hon. member wishes to propose on the floor of this Legislature or anywhere else a sales tax, then let him do so.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back to the Minister of Finance: why has the minister chosen to hide a billion dollars from Albertans by lowballing natural gas revenues instead of giving Albertans a tax break by eliminating the regressive health care premium tax?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I'm beginning to think that the hon. member opposite is running out of things to complain about. We live in a very successful province economically. Quite frankly, if he would review the fiscal structure that we operate under, he would be well aware of the fact that under our fiscal framework we have set some limits on how much of the resource revenues we can actually spend on programs that we deliver to Albertans, and that number would be \$4 billion.

The issue as to where the forecast is of the price of crude oil or the price of natural gas only really becomes an issue at the end of the year. I no longer have to get up every day and worry that the Minister of Energy is going to come and tell me that there's a high or a low in the oil and gas prices because we've put in place protection against those highs and lows with our new fiscal structure.

So insofar as the oil and gas price forecast, Mr. Speaker, I would ask the House to please entertain an answer from the Minister of Energy on those forecasts because I believe it's very important.

The Deputy Speaker: I think we'll forgo that, as illustrative as it may be. There are other people who can ask the question, and we've already taken a considerable amount of time with this particular series.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Seniors' Benefits

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday's budget was a big letdown for seniors, who have seen their programs cut or reduced over the years and their living costs go nowhere but up. One seniors' group, SALT, is "profoundly disappointed by what is and is not contained in the 2004 Alberta Budget." My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Why in its budget did this government forget about seniors?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I take great exception to that. We clearly did not forget about seniors. They're very, very important people in our province. I personally find it totally insulting that the hon. member would think that. We had an increase in our support for seniors.

I'm going to ask the Minister of Seniors to explain the details of that.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think we should be very clear on this. The budget for seniors this year, I find, is very generous. It may not meet what a lot of folks would like it to meet. I'm the advocate for seniors, and I would advocate for more in the budget if I could, but as has been pointed out, we want to be sustainable. We want to meet the needs of our seniors. We have made remarkable progress in the area of housing, in the area of lodge grants for individual seniors, in the area of long-term care, and for the seniors on our programs. We've got a full \$10 million going into this year's budget that will sustain our seniors' benefits program, the cash payouts.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to also point out that our thresholds for premium payments are very generous in that individual seniors who earn less than \$27,000 pay no premium. Couples who are under \$44,000 pay no premium. Would I like to lift those thresholds? The answer is yes. But it has to be done in a fashion that can be sustained, that is supported, and that we can go on in the future and target the right people.*

*See p. 726, right col., para. 1

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Speaker: Just a reminder, hon. members of both sides, that if you want to ask a question and get an answer from a minister or a minister wants to give an answer to a question that's coming from there, please leave it to the allotted person. We had two or three questions going on at the same time as the hon. Minister of Seniors was attempting to answer his. That's understood in here.

Second question, first supplemental, Edmonton-Centre.

Seniors' Benefits (continued)

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Finance: why didn't this budget restore any of the benefits programs seniors have lost, such as the universal optical and dental program?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, this budget saw a \$21 million increase in support for seniors, and I think that, quite frankly, from what I understand, seniors across Canada find Alberta one of the best places to retire because of the benefit programs that are here in this province.

Again, I'll ask the Minister of Seniors to respond to the specifics of the question, but there has been a substantial increase in support for seniors in this budget.

The Deputy Speaker: Briefly, hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Yes. Speaking specifically to the question of dental and eyeglasses, I might like to point out that anyone on our seniors' benefits program has the ability to recover up to 100 per cent of the costs without the severe limitations of the previous program. The program is not universal, I'll grant you that. However, I have to point out that seniors in this province are the best off of any other province in the country, bar none, including, if you will, the United States.

So let's be fair about this, Mr. Speaker. Would we like to do more for our seniors? Definitely. Are they important? Definitely. Are we going to continue to advocate to improve their programs? Definitely. But let's keep it in perspective. We are doing an awful lot of good for these people.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental, Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again back to the Minister of Finance: given that a budget is supposed to be a plan for how this government will be spending Albertans' money, why is there no plan for the \$10 million of the Seniors budget and how it's going to be spent?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, the plan that was laid out clearly yesterday in the budget not only includes the three-year business plans but also includes a 20-year strategic planning process for our government and for the province. The plans are in fact there.

Now, in the specifics as to the Seniors budget, as the hon. member knows, the benefits program renews July 1. While there's enhancement to go forward for seniors, that will be announced as time presses on closer to the date of July 1 for renewal of the seniors' benefits plan.

The Minister of Seniors may want to supplement that answer.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Student Loan Program

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government sent a strong message yesterday through its budget by demonstrating that while debt is not acceptable for the province, it's encouraged for postsecondary students. While the government balances its books, Alberta students will be forced to borrow almost \$100 million in student loans for the next year. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Why does the government push so hard to become debt free while forcing students deep into debt for their postsecondary schooling?

1:50

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Included in this budget was a \$300 per year increase in the maximum amount of a student loan. Just for the member's information Alberta is the only province in Canada that has actually increased the student loan limit since 1994. In all other provinces it is tied to the federal government in a 60-40 ratio, which has not changed.

The hon. members are talking about more debt, but again they forget what I've said for the last four years when I've tabled four budgets. The maximum amount that they will have to pay back on an \$11,600 loan is \$5,000 per year.

Mr. Speaker, included in the \$97 million that will be given out in student loans is \$39 million of loan remissions that will go to our students this year. We have also increased scholarships and bursaries by \$6.2 million; 28,000 students will get scholarships and bursaries this year alone.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental, hon. leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that remission currently benefits only students who accumulate more than \$5,000 a year in student loan debt, when will this government allow remission for a portion of the student loans of all students?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that that's an absolutely wonderful question for the federal government, which does not have any remission loan program.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister: given that not all parents give financial support to their children for further education, when will this government eliminate parental contribution requirements for the student loan program?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, each and every student has the ability to appeal their student loans. Indeed, each and every year we get students who say that their parents will absolutely refuse to put any money in regardless of the amount of money that the parents make. We look very carefully at each and every one of these appeals, and the majority of appeals, if they are true, will go through, and the students will receive the student loan.

Mr. Speaker, I really must say that the Alberta student loan program is by far the best in Canada. We provide 55 per cent of the student loan dollars. Every place else in Canada it's 40 per cent with the federal government at 60 per cent. Alberta provides 55 per cent, and the federal government provides 45 per cent.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Provincial Tax Policy

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Budgets are about priorities, and yesterday's provincial budget speaks volumes about the priorities of this government. Frankly, other than some election-cycle goodies for municipalities, health authorities, and school boards, there's little or nothing in the budget for middle-class families, seniors, and working Albertans. Meanwhile, the corporate elite, the already well off, and the horse racing set scored big. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Why is the government for the third year in a row hitting up homeowners and small businesses with \$77 million in school property tax hikes while cutting taxes for large, profitable corporations by \$142 million?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member opposite had listened to the budget, he would have recognized that there was not only a corporate tax reduction of 1 per cent, there was also a small business reduction of 1 per cent that came forward, and personal income tax rates that are indexed were protected so that \$150 million would be saved from personal income taxes by all Albertans in one year alone. In addition to that, the school property tax rate was reduced by 2.3 per cent.

I'll ask the Minister of Municipal affairs to respond on that as well as the Minister of Learning.

The Deputy Speaker: Before we go from one to the other, it might be instructive, hon. member, if you are asking a question of a minister, that your seatmate doesn't answer all of the questions. One minister is going to reply – the Minister of Municipal Affairs – and then we'll go to your second question.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, for that enlightenment. I would like to say simply this: the pie is growing. When people come to this province of Alberta, they don't bring the roads, they don't bring their schools, they don't bring their hospitals. It's a wonderful problem to have in Alberta simply because the Alberta advantage is alive and well. I think everyone in this House, including the opposition, agrees with that. Don't they?

I would ask the Minister of Learning to supplement. The Learning Commission recommendations, the work that we're doing in growing the pie in partnership with all of these stakeholders, separates us from every other province in Canada to the point that every other province in Canada is looking at Alberta's tail lights.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. leader. First supplemental.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So it's clear that the government doesn't apologize for increasing taxes on homeowners.

How can the Finance minister's nose fail to grow when by focusing solely on the mill rate, she is trying to fool Albertans into thinking their school property taxes are being cut when the province's property tax take is in fact going up by 5.7 per cent?

The Deputy Speaker: Before I call on the hon. minister, just remember that the question is supposed to be without a preamble and must not be argumentative. Long noses and all the other things are something that really is not part of a legitimate question.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, this can't be that hard to comprehend. Number one, we have reduced the school property tax rate by 2.3 per cent. We've had a migration to this province that is unprecedented, last year, the year before, and expect that we're going to have it again this year. So there will be more people coming into the

province to pay the reduced school property tax rate that I've lowered by 2.3 per cent. So when you have more people coming here and paying into the system, then you collect more money. The base grows. That can't be so hard. The pie, as the Municipal Affairs minister said, gets bigger, but the rate went down.

Maybe the Minister of Learning would like to respond.

The Deputy Speaker: Very briefly, Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Very briefly, Mr. Speaker. I have been in this Legislature as Minister of Learning for very close to five years.

An Hon. Member: How long?

Dr. Oberg: Very close to five years.

Mr. Speaker, over those five years I've heard time and time and time again from the New Democrat opposition about putting more money into Learning, about raising taxes: go ahead and raise taxes; put it into Learning; that's where the money goes. Well, what has happened here today is that we have received \$77 million more tax money because there are more people moving into Alberta. The market assessment has gone up. I can't believe what I'm hearing. The New Democrats are now saying that they don't want that money to go into Learning.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is the Finance minister defying the will of the Tory backbenchers through a sneaky 5.7 per cent increase in school property taxes when a motion was passed two weeks ago in this House, with the support of both sides of the House, urging the government in fact to phase out school property taxes?

2:00

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, to sustain the system, quite clearly there has to be revenue that goes into the system. The vehicle we have today is to put an assessment for the school tax on the property. This budget said: let's not just keep it whole; let's reduce the school tax rate by 2.3 per cent. As the Minister of Learning explained, because there are more people coming to the province and living in the province, they are also contributing to the school property tax assessment on an annual basis. So when you have more people paying, more money is collected. Surely the hon. member opposite can grasp this.

The Deputy Speaker: The Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just think it's important to recognize that we did actually decrease the mill rate for education property taxes. We are looking to see that that tax load is then evenly distributed across the province. To compare it to the corporate income tax reduction is unfair because they don't tell the good story about what happens. When you reduce the taxes to the business community, they actually have a chance to retain more money in their own businesses to create more jobs and more opportunities for Albertans. We see that all the time. More companies are coming here because of those policies, and it helps pay for education.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The 2004 budget for Alberta Human Resources and Employment identified a \$20 million increase

for the assured income for the severely handicapped, or AISH, program over last year. The maximum financial benefit a person may receive through AISH is \$850 per month. My question today is for the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Within the city of Calgary alone there are more than 8,000 people receiving AISH, 450 of which reside in my constituency. Will they be getting an increase in their monthly cheque?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, I want to just briefly talk about the AISH program. In the budget we'll now be providing \$394 million in AISH payments and benefits for approximately 32,000 severely disabled Albertans. Yes, the member is quite right; we have a \$20 million increase, actually about a 5 per cent increase in our budget. But I want to inform the member that asked the question and inform all members of the House and all Albertans as well that these clients will not see an increase in the income level of \$850 per month.

Ms DeLong: Well, if the AISH program is receiving an extra \$20 million for this year, where is the money going?

Mr. Dunford: The \$20 million that we've provided for the AISH program is really going to two particular areas. One, of course, is extremely important, and that is for the medications. The health benefit plan that we have for AISH clients, while not figured into the \$850 monthly income, is a tremendous benefit. Of course, part of the medical card that we provide to them provides for their medications. It's very, very important that we stay up to date with those medications. But as others in the House have indicated, we are seeing substantial growth in the cost, then, of prescription drugs here in this province.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental.

Ms DeLong: Yes, Mr. Speaker. You said that the high cost of health benefits is what's consuming the greater portion of your budget increase. What do you plan to do to ensure that AISH recipients get the monthly income that they need to cover their food and shelter?

Mr. Dunford: There's a discrepancy in the AISH program that has to be looked at. I want to advise the member and again all members of the House that we will be putting together a formal review of the AISH program, and we expect that to be up and running in September of this year.

The fundamental issue that we have to deal with in AISH, though, is this huge inequity between what people can and cannot have in terms of assets and still be eligible for AISH income. What we're finding is a growth in the actual numbers of AISH clients that we have. It's disproportionate to the demographics that are happening here in Alberta. So these and other matters surrounding the AISH program are going to have to be looked at. Obviously, one of the issues that would have to be dealt with at that time, as well, of course, will be the monthly income.

Again, to answer you, Mr. Speaker, and all Albertans, there is no increase in the AISH income support program at this time.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Support for Low-income Albertans

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to show disrespect and neglect for the poor and the unfortunate. After saddling Albertans yesterday with more health

care taxes, recreational user fees, and education costs, this government continues to subsidize the horse racing industry while here in Edmonton 1 in 5 children lives in poverty. Now, with the latest \$45 million injection, the horse racing industry has over the past four years tucked \$130 million into their silks. My first question is to the Minister of Seniors. Given that this government cares more about horses than they do about the homeless, why did this minister allow support for homeless people to go down by almost \$1 million in the budget while the horse racing industry sees an amount of \$45 million set aside for their use?

Mr. Woloshyn: Well, I don't quite follow where the member is going, but I will say this much. In Edmonton and in Calgary we provided sufficient spaces for the homeless so that nobody was left out in the cold. We will continue to meet our obligations and to work with the operators to ensure that the unfortunate people of this province are looked after, whether they be homeless, whether they be seniors or anyone else. That, Mr. Speaker, is about all I can say to that mundane question.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I think that certainly we've got to set the record straight on this, at least the preamble of this. This has become a common occurrence in this Legislature, unfortunately, but in talking to some people who listen to question period, they're not fooling anyone because, fortunately, most people who watch this comprehend these programs better than the people opposite either can or want to.

Mr. Speaker, \$45 million is not being handed to the horse racing industry, an industry which, I might say, employs 7,000 people, many of them just up here in the Member for Edmonton-Highland's area. Seven thousand people employed. The \$45 million can be earned – earned – by the horse racing industry through a racing entertainment centre where there was a commitment to a number of slot machines that would be available, and those proceeds could go partially to the industry. I would remind the hon. members that 33 and a third per cent of that money also comes into this government's revenues to provide programs for all citizens.

Mr. Speaker, to say that this government gives, explains exactly what this group knows about business. This is not an entitlement. These people earn this money, or they don't get it. You wouldn't understand that. You wouldn't get it.

2:10

Mr. MacDonald: This side of the House cares about hungry children.

Now to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: where's the increase for people relying on AISH and SFI? Their supports haven't gone up. Inflation has gone up. While the horse racing industry has seen \$45 million set aside for it, where's the money for the homeless?

Mr. Dunford: Well, that was quite a barrage. Maybe we could take one question at a time over the next week.

Certainly, I've answered in the House today about AISH, and I think our little press conference that we'll have next Monday would be open, and I'd expect to see him there when we talk about what will happen in terms of support for welfare folks.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Final supplemental, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: why, when over

16,000 families in Edmonton earn less than \$15,000 annually, does this government see fit to set aside \$45 million for the horse racing industry and nothing at this date for those families?

Mr. Dunford: I quite liked the answer of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. If the hon. member were to think this thing through, he would understand that that particular industry and the number of jobs that the minister was talking about explains to some extent the kinds of situations that are provided to our clients.

One of the things that will be noticed over time, of course, is that in our budget we are focused and concentrating on skills development training, and through that we'll move these people up in the income levels.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming has indicated that he'd like to supplement.

Mr. Stevens: Supplement briefly, Mr. Speaker. I think that the members opposite, particularly those in the Liberal opposition, ought to spend more time talking to people in their community and people throughout this country with respect to the support that this government provides to Horse Racing Alberta. In particular, I think the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie ought to pay attention.

Dr. David Reid is the chairman of Horse Racing Alberta, and the office of the Prime Minister of Canada wrote a letter to Dr. Reid commenting on an article in *TROT Magazine* showcasing Horse Racing Alberta and its chairman, Dr. Reid, and talking about challenges, including the introduction of slots at the racing entertainment centre and the racing industry renewal initiative.

In that letter from the office of the Prime Minister of Canada the following things were said.

I am delighted that someone with your capabilities has stepped forward to take a leadership role.

... when horse racing in the Province of Alberta seemed to be suffering flu like systems, someone asked "is there a doctor in the house", and who should step forward but Dr. David Reid. Bravo ...

Thank you for your commitment to a wonderful sport.

Mr. Speaker, for the gratification of the members opposite I will obviously table this letter at the appropriate time.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

School Library Programs

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A few years ago there were 550 teacher/ librarians in our schools in Alberta. Today there are 100 or perhaps fewer. School library programs properly equipped and staffed can account for improvements of 2 to 9 per cent in student achievement, a result we all appreciate. The Learning Commission recommended that adequate library/ resource room teachers be available. My first question to the Minister of Learning: as the government has accepted the Learning Commission's recommendation to increase the number of teacher/librarians, what plans are in place to achieve this?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, librarians of any sort are very important. Libraries are a very important part of our Alberta society, and it's an important part that

everyone in this Assembly and certainly most people in Alberta truly value.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the teacher/librarian, as the hon. member has noted, the Learning Commission recommended that there be an increase in teacher/librarians. The Learning Commission also recommended the funding formula, which gives flexibility to school boards.

When you take these two together, what it means is that the dollars should be put in so that the school boards have the flexibility to hire teacher/librarians if that's their priority, and that's exactly what will happen. The school boards will be the ones who put the money to the teachers, to the teacher/librarians, to their priorities about what they see as being important within their education system.

They have asked me for this as Minister of Learning. They have consulted with me on the funding formula, and indeed, Mr. Speaker, the funding formula was just announced today. I hope that some of these dollars will go to teacher/librarians, but I also hope that the dollars are spent in the absolutely best fashion possible for the students of Alberta.

Mr. Maskell: My final question to the same minister: will postsecondary institutions have the necessary resources and support to train teacher/librarians in adequate numbers?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, postsecondary institutions in this budget saw an increase of 4 per cent. This was twice the increase that they were expecting. They also saw an increase of \$24 million for access projects. When it comes specifically to the departments of education, we put out roughly 3,000 teachers a year, and certainly teacher/librarians are an element of that.

Mr. Speaker, the money is there. If the departments of education feel that this is a priority, then that is the direction that they will go. I know that libraries are such a crucial part of the education system that they certainly will be moving in that direction.

User Fees in Provincial Parks

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, in yesterday's budget the government announced a new list of user fees for provincial parks. To the Minister of Community Development: why is this ministry choosing to further cripple school budgets by charging for educational programs in provincial parks?

Mr. Zwodzesky: Mr. Speaker, nobody is crippling any school budgets through these new fees and/or increased fee ranges that we're having to introduce in our provincial parks. They will be treated just like any other field trips are, where if I as a parent wish to have my child go on a field trip, I put in the dollar or \$2 or whatever it is to help make that happen.

Let me just say that the surveys that we did throughout our provincial parks system over the last couple of years firmly indicated that the vast majority of individuals who responded to those surveys said: we don't mind if you're going to put in some new fees or increase some of our existing fees provided that the revenue you earn from those fees goes right back into those same programs. That's precisely what we're going to do.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: why is a province with such a huge surplus charging skiers a nickel-and-dime fee for trail grooming, which is a relatively inexpensive service?

Mr. Zwodzesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, having well-groomed ski trails throughout the parks areas where they are allowed is a very good

thing, and in order to keep up with the pace of demand and the high-quality conditions that people are expecting, we had to review how to keep that particular side of our operation as sustainable as possible.

We are adding some additional monies of our own, but as I indicated in the previous answer, in order to get to the place where we want to be, we want the general public involved with us in this, and they have not objected because they know that those particular small increases, which might range anywhere from \$2 to \$5 only, are by and large quite affordable. Most people who are out cross-country skiing don't mind paying that little increase in the fee as long as they see the benefit that'll come from those revenues going to improve the trails that they are so pleased to enjoy.

Ms Carlson: To the same minister: why is this government spending millions on health and fitness initiatives such as the Healthy U program while implementing user fees that may prevent individuals, families, and schools from enjoying our provincial parks? This is a double standard.

2:20

Mr. Zwodsky: Well, no, there's no double standard here whatsoever. I mean, none of these services come for free, Mr. Speaker, and I think it's important that we have a system that applies to everybody. It is not just Albertans who use these trails and these interpretive centres and these park facilities. We have a lot of others who come visiting our province from other parts of Canada, from other parts of the world, and they are absolutely delighted with the high-quality groomed trails and/or interpretive centres or whatever have you that they experienced in this province.

This is simply one way of helping us to continue providing that service, and as I indicated earlier, it has been arrived at after studying very carefully a lot of the surveys that were responded to.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Electronic Health Records

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Minister of Health and Wellness talked about the benefits of an electronic health record, specifically how this system will help to increase patient safety and reduce duplication. It remains unclear to me how we are reducing duplication with electronic health record development activities underway at the provincial level and at the health region level. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Can the minister assure Albertans that we are in fact building one province-wide system and not nine incompatible or fragmented systems?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, in short, I can say that the answer is yes. There are efforts that are taken at two different levels, but those efforts are being complemented by one another. They are not fragmented. Regional health authorities are developing electronic health records at the local level, but provincially we are also working to link all regional health authorities together plus pharmacies plus physicians throughout the province.

Because the Department of Health and Wellness has been working with stakeholders from the very outset, we have got a collaborative approach that is ensuring that we meet common objectives and common technology standards, which, of course, is critical to ensure that these systems work together with one another.

Mr. Speaker, in short, we are linking systems to make sure that health care providers do have the patient information that they need at the point of care to make the best care decisions for individuals.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental, Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. With each region building and linking their own health information systems, how does this government plan to efficiently and effectively link all the systems together and how long will this take?

Mr. Mar: I wish to say at the outset in answering this question, Mr. Speaker, that governments all over the world are recommending electronic health records to improve patient safety. System users that are already involved in the system have told me about the impact that this has had on the quality of care for their patients. Doctors have been able to avoid invasive procedures. They have avoided duplicate lab tests. They've avoided harmful drug interactions.

We are deploying it province-wide right now, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to report that 4,000 health providers are already linked in to the system. By the summer of 2005 I expect that all regional health authorities, 830 pharmacies, and about 40 per cent of practising physicians in the province will be using the Alberta EHR.

So, Mr. Speaker, this is moving. We're expressing good progress. By the summer of 2005 we'll be able to report even better progress.

Mr. Cenaiko: My final question is to the Minister of Innovation and Science. What is his ministry doing to ensure that all government departments will be systems compatible?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, I think the first point that needs to be made is that whether you're in a corporate environment or a government environment, like we are in, information technology is a tool, a tool for business transformation, and that is the objective of and that is what's happening with the electronic health record. It is an application that transforms the way we deliver health care in this province.

The Ministry of Innovation and Science through a government of Alberta enterprise architecture strives to make sure that we are operating from the same platform, using common systems, common technology, to make sure that we can deliver those business transformation applications effectively and efficiently. To that end, we've also recently assigned a corporate chief information officer at a deputy minister level to ensure that all government departments are aligned with those objectives, and Alberta Health and Wellness is a major contributor and participant in striving toward reaching those objectives.

Ms Carlson: Speech.

Mr. Doerksen: Well, this is a very important question, member.

We are trying to encourage the regional health authorities to work in the same direction because this is an important tool for the delivery of health care.

Private/Public Partnership Projects

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, in yesterday's plan for the 2004-2005 budget the government announced that approximately \$700 million will go towards two identified P3 projects over the next three years: the Calgary court centre and the Edmonton southeast ring road. To the Minister of Infrastructure: does the amount of \$700 million include the annual lease payments and the principal and interest costs of these projects for the duration of the agreements?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I think it's really important to understand

that, in fact, the accounting of the P3s – what the member is referring to is not a cash payment. In fact, both the ring road and the courthouse would actually be – part of it is in this three-year plan, but part of it is out beyond the three-year plan as well.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental, Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what does this ministry anticipate the annual lease payments and principal and interest costs will be for each of these projects per year?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, of course, the ring road is not in this department, but the P3 proposal for the courthouse is. You've heard many times in the House this member trying to talk down the P3 process. Even as late as yesterday I remember that he was asking a question and suggesting that other governments were not supporting the P3. It's really quite interesting because the last time I looked, it was a Liberal government in B.C., and they're proposing P3s. They've got a hospital on the go. The last time I looked, it was a Liberal government in Ontario. They were talking about two P3 hospitals. In fact, the federal government is setting up a secretariat to look at P3s.

Yesterday the member also commented about the quality within the hospital, so I would really be very anxious that the Minister of Health and Wellness supplement my answer.

Mr. Bonner: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the minister has not answered either of the first two questions, could he please tell us which other P3 projects besides the southeast Calgary hospital the government is considering whose funding will come from the remaining \$525 million?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I take exception to part of his preamble in as much as I never answered the first question. I told the member if he was listening that, in fact, the total budgeting for those two P3 projects goes beyond the three-year business plan. As far as the lease payments are concerned, you'll have to talk to the Minister of Transportation on that one. You will know the lease payments as far as the courthouse is concerned once we sign the final agreement. That has not been completed yet. It still has some processes to go through, so we don't know exactly what it's going to be.

On the quality of health provided in hospitals, I would urge the Minister of Health and Wellness to supplement.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I think the actually more interesting question should be asked of the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, who this morning was asking rhetorically on the radio why we don't have a Harvard university type facility here in Alberta or a Johns Hopkins medical centre. So it seems to me that it's actually the hon. member's seatmate who was actually proposing ideas that are far, far more dramatic. The last time that I checked, those were entirely private facilities.

The Deputy Speaker: In the next 30 seconds I'm going to call on the hon. Member for Red Deer-North, then Edmonton-Mill Woods, then Calgary-Currie, and then Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Would the Assembly agree to a brief reversion to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:30 **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly 35 high school students from Ross Sheppard high school, located within the Edmonton-Calder constituency. They've been attentively viewing question period, and we'll be meeting for a photograph shortly. I'd ask them to rise along with their teachers and leaders Rick Magee, James Kosowan, Curt Cummings, and Erin Quinn. They're in the public gallery, and I'd ask all members to welcome them to the Assembly.

head:

Members' Statements

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Red Deer College Kings Volleyball Team

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Red Deer College Kings volleyball team has played hard enough and smart enough to win the Canadian national championship five years in a row. It was the Kings' seventh national crown in the last 10 years. This is a dynasty that sets the pace and that every competitive men's volleyball team is aiming to beat.

The Red Deer College Kings have been crowned national champions five consecutive years. This is the second longest winning streak in CCAA history, one behind the Limoilou Titans from Quebec City, who started their string in 1984. The Red Deer College Kings will make a run at tying Limoilou College next year, when the pressure to win will be even greater.

The number one coach in Canada is Keith Hansen, who has been the RDC head coach for the past six years. He is a former assistant coach with Canadian junior and senior national teams. A great team can only be as great as its coach, and we are honoured and proud to have Keith Hansen as the driver behind this team.

This year's secret to being a championship team is summed up by Adam Roth, a second-year member who accepted the Mazda 2004 Canadian colleges men's volleyball championship trophy and banner. Adam, who is expected to return next year, said: the thing is with this team, everyone can step in and do the job; we have tremendous depth; that's what makes us that much better.

Mr. Speaker, I ask the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to join me in congratulating Matt Harris, Aaron Yasinski, Blake Henwood, Scott Weninger, Mark Dodds, Pav Kucharski, Marc Dickner, Troy Jaggard, Adam Roth, Matt Anderson, Craig Marshall, Mac Kucharski, Dallas Soonias; their head coach, Keith Hansen; their assistant coaches, Trevor Pikkert and Kevin Tennant; and their athletic therapists, Heather Fletcher and Terri Smyth. Congratulations.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Postsecondary Tuition Fees

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's actions speak louder than its words. The government says that it wants Albertans to stay in school and pursue a postsecondary education, but that's not what the 2004-2005 budget tells Alberta students, who have high hopes for some relief from escalating tuition costs. The government spoke volumes to postsecondary students about how it is unacceptable for a province to be in debt while encouraging students to start their careers with a mountain of debt to pay off.

There was so much more this government could have done to help students aside from just letting them borrow more money and more money for their education. This government needs to develop and to adhere to a plan for long-term, adequate, and sustainable funding

for postsecondary education. It needs a plan that will ensure that Albertans have access to an affordable, high-quality education.

The University of Alberta Students' Union has some ideas on how this could be accomplished. They would start with a commitment from the government to freeze tuition and fund the difference in revenue to postsecondary institutions. The students also want the government to increase base operating grants to universities to a degree that would make a difference to institutions like the U of A, which is facing a \$28.7 million shortfall this year.

There are also improvements to be made to the student loans program. I often hear from students whose parents do not contribute financially to their education and who are ineligible for loans due to the parental contribution requirement. In the interest of fairness the parental contribution should be removed. The government could also help students relying on loans for an education by remitting debt over \$5,000 or 25 per cent of any student loan, whichever is most beneficial to the student. This would be a vast improvement to the current program, that only remits a portion of annual debt over \$5,000.

There are many ways in which this government could be helping Alberta's present and future postsecondary students. They would most benefit from a long-term plan, a plan aimed at ensuring that our universities, colleges, and technical schools are affordable, accessible, and focus on the best interests of the students.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Telework

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Industrial Revolution changed our world two centuries ago. Among other things, massive numbers of people in rural areas moved to cities to obtain higher paying city jobs, and rural life was completely altered as a result. Now a new revolution is taking place, creating an enormous economic opportunity to reinvigorate rural areas again, providing city jobs and paycheques to people living and enjoying a country lifestyle. That is not all. It's also the greatest opportunity to enable disabled people to earn a good living with dignity. In fact, this new revolution has a plethora of other benefits for everyone in society today.

It's called teleworking, working from home on your computer, and it is rapidly sweeping the employment world. Because we have the SuperNet, Alberta is uniquely positioned to lead the way in Canada, which is good because Canada is actually falling way behind. According to Bob Fortier, one of Canada's foremost telework pioneers, Canada has finally reached an estimated 1 million teleworkers nationally today, but compare that to the U.S., now at 28 million, up 17 per cent just in the last year alone.

Obviously, teleworking is going to be having major impacts on employee recruitment and retention, even here in Alberta, very quickly if we aren't offering similar opportunities. People don't even have to move any more. The great Canadian brain drain is rapidly becoming virtual.

We do have some success stories. In Calgary we have people working full-time at jobs in Toronto out of their house in Calgary. We have eCampus Alberta and teachers with virtual classrooms with dozens of students right across the country. We have real estate agents who don't go into offices any more, thus avoiding two-hour commutes each day, reducing traffic, saving office rent. We even have doctors diagnosing people on the far side of the planet. Maritimers are leading in distributed call centres, farmwives working out of their own homes answering calls for utility companies around the world.

The opportunities are endless, the benefits profound, but Canada is falling behind. The web site of the Canadian Telework Association and InnoVisions Canada is www.ivc.ca, and it will tell us a lot about what we need to do in Canada and Alberta today. I urge all employers to take a look at it; your business might depend on it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Alberta's Boreal Forest

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Canada contains over a third of the world's boreal forest, one of the three largest frontier forests remaining on the planet. Overall it spans 12,000 kilometres, nearly 11 per cent of our planet's total surface. This makes it the biggest terrestrial ecosystem on Earth and our most prominent symbol of wilderness here in Canada. In Alberta, however, this significance has yet to be fully recognized.

A scientific report released in 2003 entitled *State of Denial* contains a chapter dedicated to the boreal and targets Alberta as a province where rapid drilling for oil and natural gas along with logging are inflicting major damage to Alberta's boreal forest. With industrial activity at all-time highs, Alberta now finds itself at a defining moment in its forest management. As aptly put by Richard Schneider in his book *Alternative Futures: Alberta's Boreal Forest at the Crossroads*, "Given that most of the northern forest in Alberta is publicly owned, the desired future forest is defined by the values held by the citizens of Alberta."

These values are reflected in the Alberta forest conservation strategy, which has as its goal the maintenance and enhancement of our forest ecosystems so that present and future generations can enjoy and benefit from them. Most importantly, this strategy envisions an Alberta with vast pristine forests whose ecosystems thrive thanks to the help and participation of all Albertans.

But something has gone wrong. At present clear-cuts combine with oil and gas activity to create unprecedented scars on the landscape. Our most diverse and productive forest ecosystems are undergoing widespread development resulting in fragmentation by roads, access routes, and excessive logging. This cumulative damage is leading to the destruction of much of the boreal here in Alberta.

Given the state of Alberta's forests and in particular the boreal, the government must start to apply its knowledge to a forest management strategy that reflects sustainability and respect for natural places. Although the boreal forest presents a seemingly endless expanse, it does in fact have limits, and they are now being reached.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: 2:40

Presenting Petitions

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm presenting a petition signed by 157 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to "return to a regulated electricity system, reduce power bills and develop a program to assist Albertans in improving energy efficiency."

head:

Notices of Motions

The Deputy Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do

stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, and 45.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 90, 93, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 106, 107, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 159, 160, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, and 180.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Deputy Government House Leader, I won't ask you to repeat them because you spoke too fast for me to write them all down, but maybe when we get another long list of numbers like that, it would be helpful to say: from 44 to 79 and then 81 to whatever. Anyway, well done.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to table with the Assembly the required number of copies of Alberta Transportation's three-year construction and rehabilitation program. This is to be completed or undertaken between 2004-05 and 2006-07. This is for all provincial highways including the north/south trade corridor and the Edmonton and Calgary ring roads. We're also including the required number of copies of the provincial water management projects for the same years.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to table the appropriate number of copies of the 2002 vital statistics annual review. This review summarizes all births, marriages, deaths, and stillbirths that occurred in Alberta during 2002.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the appropriate number of copies of the Persons with Developmental Disabilities annual report for 2002-2003 as assembled by our PDD Provincial Board in Alberta. Individuals and families and agencies involved in the important work of PDD are obviously very important, and I would draw all members' attention to the important material in these tablings.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter which I referred to in a response to a question during question period. It's a letter from the office of the Prime Minister of Canada to Dr. David Reid, chairman, Horse Racing Alberta.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to table the requisite number of copies of the Northern Alberta Development Council annual report for the year 2002-2003. This is a masterpiece of a document. I'm sure everyone will want to go out and get a copy of it. It is excellent reading.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of a document which is really the news release issued by the Health Sciences Association of Alberta on March 24, 2004, in which the association draws attention to the fact that both this provincial government and the federal government have been guilty of not funding health care either on a predictable basis or on a stable basis.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of a release from the Alberta Federation of Labour. The release, entitled Budget Again Comes up Empty for Average Albertans, expresses the view of the Alberta Federation of Labour with respect to yesterday's provincial budget.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms. Blakeman: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of the document that I quoted from during question period, and that is a document released by the Seniors' Action and Liaison Team in which they are deploring "the repeated efforts by the Alberta Government to claim health care is not sustainable" and expressing their disappointment on what's not contained in the budget, especially around items for seniors.

Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the auto insurance freeze hasn't worked for at least one constituent of Edmonton-Gold Bar, I would like to table a letter dated March 23, 2004, that I received from the hon. Minister of Finance in regard to the insurance policies and the temporary measure of the auto freeze until Bill 53 comes into style.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the requisite number of copies of a very interesting article pointing out the many benefits of electricity deregulation. It highlights the fact that governments that privatize electricity generators provide their citizens with cheaper dependable power and asks why Ontario is headed into the darkness.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the Office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Stevens, Minister of Gaming, pursuant to the Government Accountability Act: the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission business plan 2004-2007.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 7(5) I would ask the Government House Leader to please share the projected government business for the week of March 29 to April 1.

Thank you very much.

2:50

Mr. Hancock: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on Monday, March 29, under Government Bills and Orders at 9 p.m. in Committee of Supply presumably the first item would be the Legislative Assembly estimates and then subsequently the estimates for International and Intergovernmental Relations, day 1 of 24. Time permitting, second reading on Bill 25, School Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 26, Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004; and Committee of the Whole on Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

On Tuesday, March 30, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of Supply pursuant to the calendar tabled, day 2 of 24, designated for the Department of Sustainable Resource Development and, time available, second reading on bills 25 and 26 and Committee of the Whole on Bill 22. Tuesday, March 30, at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders for Committee of Supply, day 3 of 24, the Department of Community Development. Now, that is a deviation from the tabled agreed calendar which I understand has been worked out by the departments involved and the opposition and is acceptable to them. I don't have personal knowledge of that, so in the event that that's not the case, then it would revert to the one that's on the calendar, which is the Department of Revenue. We'll have to ascertain that. Thereafter second reading on bills 25 and 26 and Committee of the Whole on Bill 22, if time permits.

On Wednesday, March 31, under Government Bills and Orders in the afternoon, Committee of Supply, day 4 of 24, designated for the Department of Government Services. Time remaining or available, we might proceed with second reading of Bill 25 or Bill 26, if it has not previously been done, and Committee of the Whole on Bill 22. Wednesday, March 31, at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders under Committee of Supply, day 5 of 24, the Department of Economic Development and, as indicated earlier, bills 25, 26, and 22, time permitting.

Thursday, April 1, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders for Committee of Supply, day 6 of 24, designated for the Department of Environment and, as indicated, second readings on bills 25, 26, and committee on Bill 22, should time permit. At that time it would be anticipated that we would adjourn pursuant to Government Motion 6, agreed to February 18, until Monday, April 19.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Motions**

Provincial Fiscal Policies

13. Mrs. Nelson moved:

Be it resolved that the Assembly approve in general the business plans and fiscal policies of the government.

[Adjourned debate March 24: Dr. Massey]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to make some comments about the budget.

I was interested, Mr. Speaker, that the Provincial Treasurer would draw upon Premier Rutherford for a model for her speech. She couldn't have chosen a much better model. Rutherford was a good Premier – a great Premier. He had great vision. He did a great deal with respect to infrastructure. He had ideas about education, and he even made himself the Provincial Treasurer and the education minister in his first cabinet. He was responsible for the University of Alberta being established in this city.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Rutherford was a great Premier with great vision, and he was a Liberal. I can imagine the anguish in the Public Affairs Bureau as they wrote the speech and tried to turn Rutherford into something other than a Liberal. But a Liberal he was, and a Liberal he stays.

I think Rutherford must be resting a little uncomfortably in his grave today having had a Conservative Provincial Treasurer heap the praise on him that she did yesterday. I couldn't help but note the references in her speech to his vision and his determination that this province would have a good, sound infrastructure system.

If we look at the business plan, Mr. Speaker, of the Department of Transportation, I'm not quite sure that Rutherford would have been happy with a business plan or any kind of a plan that would see the roads in this province deteriorate or would have been happy with predictions that they should deteriorate. If you look at the 2003-2006 projections from the Transportation department, Albertans can look forward to fewer miles or kilometres of highway that are in good condition. The 2001-2002 results indicated 64.2 per cent were in good condition. That department predicts that by 2005-2006 the target will be 61 per cent.

So we're to have fewer miles of highway that are in good condition. The miles of highway that are in poor condition are 11 per cent today, and Albertans can look forward down the road to highways where 16.5 per cent are in poor condition. That wasn't Rutherford's vision.

If you look at some of the other measures, then, with respect to the infrastructure and look at the postsecondary institutions, the percentage in good condition today is 47 per cent. What's the projection? Only 45 per cent will be in good condition in 2005-2006. With respect to government-owned and -operated facilities over 1000 square metres, the percentage in good condition today is 57 per cent; the projection for the future is 53 per cent. The percentage in fair condition today is 40 per cent; projected for 2005-2006 is 44 per cent.

While the budget talked about infrastructure and the money that was going to be put into infrastructure, the plain fact of the matter is that Albertans are going to be driving on highways that are in poorer condition than they are today, and that is directly a result of the planning of this government.

The infrastructure was bad enough, Mr. Speaker, but I think what really struck me was the notion and the comment in the delivery that there was no room for pessimism in 1906 in Alberta and there's no room for pessimism today. I wondered, Mr. Speaker, how the people who are living on SFI and the people who are living on AISH allowances reacted to that. My question would be: why would they be optimistic? What relief do they see from trying to live on \$850 a month or a little more than a thousand dollars a month?

Mr. Speaker, if you look through the report that was delivered to us last week about our incomes in this Legislature and our expenses and then compare that to what we're asking fellow Albertans to live on, it's almost obscene.

An Hon. Member: Aren't you double-dipping?

Dr. Massey: Double-dipping, he says. You may want to look at your own benches: the minister of intergovernmental affairs, the other minister at the end of the bench there, a couple of other people in your caucus.

Dr. Taylor: Don, I don't even have an academic pension like you do.

Dr. Massey: That was because you weren't any good.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Minister of Finance had the floor yesterday, and she was given the courtesy to deliver her budget without interruption. I hope that we can accord the same courtesy to the Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

3:00

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The fact of the matter is that we sit here and we enjoy very, very comfortable salaries, and there are people in our constituency offices every day struggling to pay power bills, struggling to put food on the table, struggling to try to make a living and try to raise their families. Most of them, through no fault of their own, have fallen on really very difficult times. The fact that our compassion is so limited has to be very, very disturbing. There have been pleas. There have been committees struck. There's been a lot of talk, but there's been little action with respect to those individuals.

If you look at the rates, they've barely changed since 1993. A single parent with two children under 11 gets a little over a thousand dollars a month and a severely handicapped a little over \$800. Mr. Speaker, those are disgraceful in a province as rich as this one is.

People on income support programs, Mr. Speaker, have 40 per cent less purchasing power than they had in 1993. Think of that. Think of your own budget having a drop of 43 per cent and the impact that that would have on your lifestyle. Income support rates were reduced almost 20 per cent in 1993, and inflation over the last number of years has further reduced the value by 20 per cent.

A key recommendation in the low-income review was that rates should be increased. The current benefits just do not meet the needs of those Albertans who have to rely upon them. Even the Mazankowski committee on health care recommended that the government ensure that the appropriate financial assistance is available to support children in poverty and low-income homes. We have to remember that it is really the children who end up suffering from these low rates, children who have no part in the decision-making, children who have by accident of birth found themselves in poverty. They are the people that we're ignoring.

The Minister of Human Resources and Employment accepted the principal recommendations of the low-income review committee to increase rates but so far has cited budget restraints for that not happening. I think that if you look at the polls, there is overwhelming support for making sure that we look after children who are living in poverty, and government action to that end I think has wide support. So the support for people on SFI and AISH was a jarring note in yesterday's budget, Mr. Speaker.

But there were other concerns. The postsecondary learning system has been drifting for the last 10 years. From the dramatic cuts that that system took, a 20 per cent cut in 1994, the institutions have never really recovered. If you look at that trend, 20 years ago a dollar that a student put into the postsecondary system was matched by \$10 in government support. Today for every dollar that a student puts into the system, it's matched by \$2.34. Mr. Speaker, I think that that speaks volumes about the kind of support, the withdrawal of support, that students and institutions in our province have suffered.

The students have made overtures to the government. They've put forward suggestions. They've told us about the kinds of difficulties they have in terms of having to complete programs over a longer period of time because of taking on part-time positions.

I hear often from the Minister of Learning about the loans that they have and how the remission programs make sure that they won't graduate with more than \$20,000 of debt. That's just not true, Mr. Speaker. The debt that the minister talks about is the public debt, the debt in the loans program. It says nothing about the private debt that many of those students are carrying – debt to family, to banks, credit card debt – in an effort to try to get what we encourage them to get, the best possible education, knowing full well that certainly they'll benefit. But the real benefactors are every individual in this province when we have better engineers, when we have better medical personnel, and when we have those professions filled with the most competent people that we can possibly produce.

So students and the institutions find themselves in difficulty. For the institutions there's not much choice. The funding from the province is inadequate, and the alternative for them is to raise tuition – it's the only other source – and go to private enterprise to try to get the funds they need.

I worry about them going to private enterprise, Mr. Speaker. Private enterprise doesn't invest in university and college and postsecondary research without some notion of payoff. I worry about the public research agenda when institutions are forced through the lack of funding to rely more and more and to curry favour more and more with private industry so that they can offer the courses and programs and conduct the kind of research that we expect of them.

Students have tried several times, I know, to work with the government to come up with some better solutions, but they were disappointed yesterday in the budget, Mr. Speaker. They believe that the government could have taken some actions. They believe, for instance, that they could have funded a tuition freeze. Tuition has tripled for students in the past decade, a rate that's far in excess of inflation. It's affecting participation rates, and it's also affecting who and how many students get into programs.

I talked to one of the executive members of one of the student groups, who indicated that she had made her decisions about postsecondary education partly, and for a good part, on trying to get a cheap program and a short program. She wanted a program that she could get into and get out of as fast as possible and that would cost her as little as possible. I'm appalled, Mr. Speaker, that we would have young people in our province using that kind of criteria to select a profession that they're probably going to be part of for the rest of their life. It's the wrong criteria. It's the last thing we should be asking students to do.

They suggested that we eliminate the parental contribution requirement for student loans. Not all students receive support from their parents while attending university, and there are various reasons for that. Some parents obviously can't afford to help. If you look at the recent study by the millennium scholarship fund, it showed that in fact Alberta families who earn over \$100,000 contribute less to the education of their offspring than do families who earn less than \$55,000.

A number of students have made the point that they have little connection to their families, that once they were 18, they were considered on their own, and they live an independent life. Yet when they go and apply for a student loan, the criteria that affects them is one that demands some parental contribution. It's a roadblock in the way of accessible education for some young people in this province.

3:10

An increase was one of the other suggestions, of course, and this, I think, affects mainly Alberta students who have to move into one of the urban centres for their postsecondary programs. It's the whole business of the cost of daily living. At just over \$700 a month for a student living away from home, the loans program just doesn't offer enough money for a student to study in this city or in Calgary.

I think that one of the things they ask – and if they're going to be borrowing the money, it should be honoured – is that at least the costs should reflect the cost of living. If we're asking a student from the north to come down to the city and to survive on the proceeds of student loans, we could at least expect that these loans would be issued with and would reflect some of the costs that those students are going to face when they get here.

They also would like the remission program to benefit all students and not just those who qualify for high debt loads, and that seems like a reasonable request, Mr. Speaker. The program would better serve Alberta students by allowing for those who have less than \$5,000 a year in debt to have a portion of that debt remitted. It would only seem fair that we treat all of those postsecondary students equally. The suggestion from the students at the U of A was that the debt remission over \$5,000 or 25 per cent of the loan, whichever is the greatest benefit to the student, might be a reasonable proposal.

They've also made a plea, because they get deeply involved in university and college and technical institute budgets, for the increase in base funding for the institutions. The U of A is facing a \$28.7 million shortfall this year alone. If you look at the astronomical rise in the energy costs that those institutions are facing, you can understand why students are so concerned that the base funding be looked at and revised. So students are left out of this budget, Mr. Speaker, and I think that they feel a little resentful that that has been the case.

The Learning budget is an interesting set of proposals. The minister today, following on the heels of the budget, announced a new funding formula, and I guess that what goes around comes around. The formula isn't really very new. In the early '90s before the . . .

Mrs. O'Neill: I can't believe it.

Dr. Massey: Well, you better believe it. Just listen.

Mrs. O'Neill: Don, you weren't around in the early '90s.

Dr. Massey: Where do you think I was?

In the early '90s the government put restraints, started enveloping the funds to school boards, and I remember sitting in this House, Mr. Speaker, while the government talked about how school boards were not spending the money properly and that there was a need for enveloping. So administration was enveloped.

Mr. MacDonald: Was the Minister of Energy in the Deep Six then?

Dr. Massey: Well, I think he might have been.

The programming component was enveloped, and that was done because these boards couldn't be trusted to spend the money properly. Well, the enveloping is gone, and now we're back to saying that school boards can spend as they see fit. Mr. Speaker, I agree with that. I think that's a good move. But as good as a funding formula is, it's no good at all if there aren't proper funds to put in place.

Mrs. O'Neill: It's a spending formula, not a funding formula.

Dr. Massey: I'm going to get to it. Don't get excited, St. Albert.

One of the things that the Learning Commission didn't address and what the funding formula still doesn't address is the base funding. The base funding still increases, as it has historically, by a certain percentage every year: 2 per cent, 3 per cent. There's some determination made of how much the Learning minister can put forward and how much is deemed an appropriate increase. It's an archaic system, Mr. Speaker, and it has been abandoned in other jurisdictions and very, very quickly.

Mr. Speaker, when we went back to the mid-90s, what the government did because of the inequities was take taxing authority away from school boards to bring all the money to the central government and then redistribute it on a per pupil basis. That, I think, was a move that most people applauded because of the inequities. We had jurisdictions like the county of Strathcona with a huge tax base spending way more per pupil on the students there than was the board, say, in the Peace River country, where there were fewer resources. We had huge inequities across the province, and students got funded, again, by accident of geography and not because of any rational relationship to the program costs.

The government saw that problem. Frankly, the trustee associations of the day – and I was part of those – have only themselves to blame for that, because there was a problem that had been around for . . . [interjection] Did you want to speak? I'll sit down. The Member for St. Albert wants to get up.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, I really do not like to interject at a time when the hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition is responding to this very important subject. As I indicated before, the Minister of Finance had the floor yesterday, and all courtesies were accorded to her so that she could deliver her address without interruption. I hope the same courtesies can be extended to the leader as well. Please do that.

The hon. Interim Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Debate Continued

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, as I was saying, part of the problem was that the trustees of the day didn't address it. It was a \$30 million problem at the time, and it wasn't addressed.

Other systems elsewhere are not, looking at a shift in financing, thinking about the number of dollars being put into the system but the number of dollars needed to ensure some specific outcomes. Adequacy funding is being heralded, I think particularly in the States, but Ontario has made some recommendations with respect to moving to an adequacy funding formula. Adequacy, as I indicated before, was really predicated on the resources that the government had. So we had a 12 per cent cut in 1994 and then a 5.7 per cent increase this year.

Adequacy would turn things around. What adequacy does is look at schools and ask: what do you want to achieve? A number of jurisdictions have had to define that. The state of Wyoming decided that for their system students must leave high school with entry to some sort of a postsecondary program, qualified to enter some kind of a program. They have to be able to get into a vocational program. They have to be able to get into a postsecondary program of some kind. They have to be eligible to get into a continuing education program. So that, for them, is adequacy.

The state of Oregon has used as their definition of adequacy a series of reading tests at the high school level that all students must achieve. States like Maryland have 28 objectives that they have

indicated need to be met before students graduate. They start from that objective, and then they work backwards and say: "Now, what is it going to cost us? What do we need to do to reach those objectives?"

3:20

They have a number of ways of trying to determine that. They use an expert committee, and in some cases, Mr. Speaker, other jurisdictions have used statisticians to try to come up with a number. Other jurisdictions look at some of the most successful school districts in the country and say: how much did it cost them to get the kinds of results that they've obtained for their students? So a variety of ways of trying to determine what is adequate, and it means a major change in how schools and school systems operate. It's predicated much more on diagnosing and tracking of individual students. It means that schools have to change their organization, but it does provide schools with resources.

I looked at the Oregon model, Mr. Speaker. The requirements for teacher librarians, the requirements for counsellors, the requirements for summer school and for tutoring programs to make sure that youngsters meet the objectives have resulted in a great deal of increased funding. Again, I look at what we have and at the subsequent announcement today by the minister, and I'm left with the feeling that we can do better.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

There are a number of other pieces of the budget, Mr. Speaker. I was waiting, as I think all parents were, to hear about the Learning Commission. We've had in this gallery every afternoon and every evening, I believe, since this session began, parents from Education Watch. I spoke to them yesterday after the budget. They were disappointed. The parents were disappointed because they had expected that there would be an itemization of the Learning Commission. They were looking for the dollars that were going to be attached to class size reduction. They were looking for the dollars that were going to be attached to kindergarten for children at risk. They were looking for . . . [interjection]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I'll put the hon. Minister of Environment down on my list.

Sorry, hon. leader.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. They were looking for the dollars that were going to be attached to the implementation of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit policy framework. They were looking for the dollars that were going to be attached to the access to technology in schools. Since the Learning Commission made its report, they have been waiting and watching for the budget that came down yesterday. They were expecting that they would be able to see the dollars that were going to be dedicated to the recommendations of the Learning Commission outline so that they could track them. As I said, Mr. Speaker, they were disappointed because that didn't happen.

One of the fears, of course, is that somehow or other their expectations are not going to be met. We won't know probably until September whether the money in the budget, given inflation and other factors, will see the restoration of the thousand teachers that were set free last year as a result of the government not funding the arbitrated teachers' settlement. I doubt very much if the money is there to do that and to make any huge inroads with respect to classroom size, particularly at the K to 3 level. [interjection] I hear someone say: well, then it'll be the school boards' fault. That's exactly what I said at the press conference this morning the new

funding formula was going to result in, that the government members would now be saying that it's the school boards' fault. So it doesn't take long, Mr. Speaker.

Parents expected some definition and some dollars attached to it so that they could see the differences in their classrooms. There are a number of trustees resting a little uneasily today, Mr. Speaker, because the expectations are being raised so high that delivering to those expectations in September is going to be very, very difficult if not impossible for many of them. So the Learning part of the budget that addressed the Learning Commission concerns I think is a disappointment.

There are other sections. The health care tax I think has been spoken about enough. It's a tax that remains in place, an unnecessary tax.

There's the Gaming part of the budget. Mr. Speaker, I know that it makes many government members uncomfortable, but the money that's spent on the horse racing industry is up 22 per cent, from \$37 million last year to \$45 million this year. To Albertans it is one thing that the general public has great difficulty with. Here is a government that indicated that they were out of the business of being in business, and they're right back at it, picking winners over losers with respect to industries and business in this province. If you look at it, over the last number of years there's been \$133 million piled into the horse racing business. When you put that number against the failure of the government to increase the very, very meagre allowances for SFI and AISH recipients, there's something wrong with our priorities.

The gambling revenues now, Mr. Speaker, are almost double the royalties of crude oil, synthetic crude, and bitumen and coal combined. There's been a dramatic shift in our province in terms of the attitude toward gambling and our dependence on it, and I don't think it's a move for the better.

The Solicitor General's budget finally, after years and years of pleading, has put some money into the police forces of the province. I think that that's long, long overdue. It's something that the municipalities have been asking for and also for a new funding formula for municipal policing. What the Solicitor General, of course, didn't do was help out Alberta's corrections system. They certainly didn't get much of a raise.

We're still waiting from the Solicitor General for the policing Alberta MLA review, the corrections review, and the victims of crime fund review. We've been waiting some time for these reports, and it's difficult to make some judgments about the budget, Mr. Speaker, without those reports before us so that we can judge how adequate the funding that's being proposed is.

It's interesting, Mr. Speaker, that the standing policy committees got a raise of \$15,000 over last year, and the money going to these committees is now \$627,000. That's a lot of money for those committees, that are government committees, and if you look through the payments to MLAs, one suspects that they're used for reasons other than making public policy.

The Public Affairs Bureau, Mr. Speaker, again, up to \$14.7 million. That's a lot of public relations. That's a raise from \$13.8 million last year.

Ms Haley: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: Point of order. Do you have a citation, hon. member?

3:30

Point of Order
False Allegations

Ms Haley: Yes. *Beauchesne* 380 under allegations. I want to put

on the record here that there's an allegation being made that these SPCs, the standing policy committees, which are advisory bodies to ministers, are doing something untoward or unprofessional. You know, the reality is that the vast majority of the money that the member is citing is about staff. It's not for anything untoward. These are policy directions for ministers and their portfolios, and each one of these SPCs deals with two or three or four portfolios. So I just think that it's important not to make unfounded allegations in here.

The Deputy Speaker: On the purported point of order, first of all, I need to ask the hon. member for the citation again. I'm sorry; I didn't hear it.

Ms Haley: It was just a handwritten note: allegations under *Beauchesne* 380. But if I'm wrong, I apologize. I'll look for the proper citation. But that's what I'm talking about.

The Deputy Speaker: Okay.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Well, it's not *Beauchesne* 380. I'm not sure what the concern that's being raised here is. Is the concern that we were inaccurate in the amount of money that we've said now goes to the committees? Is there an inaccuracy? I don't think so. It's \$627,000. Those are directly from the budget books. That does represent a \$15,000 increase from those same committees last year. That's not inaccurate.

The Deputy Speaker: I think, hon. member, we're getting into the debate. It would seem to me that, one, the citation isn't found by the chair. It seemed to me that it was a clarification as opposed to a point of order.

Ms Haley: Mr. Speaker, I apologize. Standing Order 23(h), (i), (j) will work good. Twenty-three is a good one; I like 23(h). Okay? Allegations. You know, I just want them to realize that when they say things and they put them on the record, they should be accurate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Well, 23(h) is making "allegations against another member," and she hasn't laid out what she believes the allegations to be or who the member is specifically that this was done to, so there is no point of order here, Mr. Speaker. There's not much I can respond to.

The Deputy Speaker: The chair would agree with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre that (h) "makes allegations against another member," where it's clearly identified. But the member, if I heard her correctly, the second time round said (h), (i), and (j), so that's three. The second one is "imputes false or unavowed motives to another member." I take it that she was feeling – this is an interpretation – that there was some allegation there.

Anyway, it would seem to me that it's not a point of order but a point of clarification. So we'd ask the hon. interim leader to continue.

Debate Continued

Dr. Massey: If I've offended the member opposite, I apologize and withdraw the remarks.

I was talking, Mr. Speaker, about the Public Affairs Bureau and how we can possibly be spending \$14.7 million on public affairs programs. That is really, really a lot of taxpayers' dollars, and you have to wonder what kind of value we're getting for it.

A number of other issues, Mr. Speaker, that I think we can talk

about. The Justice budget was a disappointment. The courts in our province still aren't going to get the raise that they definitely and desperately need.

I had one other, but I don't seem to have it on my desk right now, Mr. Speaker. So with those comments I'll conclude.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and respond to the budget speech delivered by the Minister of Finance yesterday afternoon. I thank her for her work and for her speech.

Mr. Speaker, in the 15 minutes that are available to me, I'll try to cover some important points. It's difficult, clearly, to be comprehensive in my remarks. That being said, after four years of playing Scrooge, the Tory government is trying to play Santa Claus with the voters as the next provincial election nears.

Budgets are about priorities, and yesterday's budget speaks volumes about the priorities of this government. At the top of this list of priorities is getting re-elected. In other words, this budget is about conserving Conservatives, Mr. Speaker. That is why spending, at least in a few areas, was ramped up as we approach the next election, only to have the taps turned off after the election, as has happened not once but several times over the last 10 to 15 years. Sadly, this election cycle spending is as predictable as leap year. In this province Santa Claus comes down our chimneys only once every four years, but even then he only comes down some of our chimneys. This province is in the enviable position of being able to provide stable, predictable funding to important programs every year and not only in a pre-election year.

As is the case every year, the bottom line in Budget 2004 can't be taken seriously. Every year the Tory government estimates modest surpluses of only a few hundred million dollars in its budget. But, Mr. Speaker, when the actual surplus is reported 15 months later, it ends up being several billion dollars, and that's the case year after year after year for many years now. Budget 2004 is no exception to this well-worn pattern. This year's budget shows a paper surplus of only \$300 million in the fiscal year 2004-2005. Anyone who believes that this will be actual surplus when the books are closed next year must also still believe in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus for that matter.

Total government revenues in the coming year are once again seriously underestimated. There's \$2.3 billion less revenue estimated for next year than forecast revenues for this year. Oil and gas revenues in the next fiscal year are estimated to be \$2.7 billion below what they are forecast to be this fiscal year.

Since under the government's fiscal framework only \$4 billion of oil and gas revenues is transferred to program spending and given that oil and gas revenues this year will be around \$7.5 billion, well, I think it's pretty obvious that the government's game plan is to cynically continue using debt elimination as a means to achieve two political goals, Mr. Speaker: (a) to dampen expectations of Alberta seniors, middle-class families, and postsecondary students and (b) to use this as good news of a debt-free Alberta a few months or weeks before going into the next election. It just occurs to me that there's a third objective here; that is, to paint this as some sort of legacy for the Premier as he prepares to leave office. Now, I guess it wouldn't be so bad for the Premier to have a legacy except that the question has to be asked: at whose expense?

While there are a few good things in this budget, on the whole it's a huge disappointment. Working Albertans and middle-class families deserve a better deal than they are getting in this budget, Mr.

Speaker. Just look at how one sided the revenue and taxation measures contained in this budget are.

The government will keep lightening the pocketbooks of typical Alberta families by \$1,056 per year in the form of health care premium taxes. It doesn't matter whether you make \$35,000 a year or \$350,000 a year; you pay the same \$1,056. This is a real flat tax, Mr. Speaker, if one wants to understand what a flat tax is. This is a most regressive and unfair tax imposed on hard-working and middle-class Alberta families and Albertans. It's a bad tax. Even the Alberta Taxpayers Federation is urging that this regressive, unfair, lump-sum health care premium tax be scrapped. However, it wasn't. Whether you are a senior on a fixed income or an average working family trying to make ends meet, you just have to keep on paying.

3:40

Meanwhile corporate taxes continue to be cut. On April 1 this year the general corporate tax rate is being reduced from 12.5 per cent to 11.5 per cent, permanently reducing government revenues by \$142 million over the period of the next 12 months. Alberta already had the lowest corporate taxes of any province. This is an unnecessary giveaway, pure and simple. It's shameful that this government keeps taxing seniors for health care premiums so that it can pay for another tax cut to corporations.

Despite very misleading government spin to the contrary, in reality provincial revenues from school property taxes will go up 5.7 per cent in year 2004-2005. Homeowners and businesses will be paying \$77 million more, not less, in school property taxes starting this spring. Mr. Speaker, this is the third straight year that the Finance minister and this government have broken their 2001 promise to freeze total revenues from property taxes at the \$1.2 billion level. The continuing rise in education taxes also stands in contradiction to the motion sponsored by the Member for Wainwright which just passed in this Assembly two weeks ago. Albertans, especially seniors on fixed incomes who still live in their own homes, will be outraged by the government's duplicity on the matter of school property taxes.

Surprisingly for a pre-election budget, 25 new user fees for such things as outdoor recreation, parks programs, and the maintenance enforcement program are also a feature of this year's budget. Eleven other fees for parks activities and insurance services are being significantly increased, while the new fees and fee hikes for things like cross-country skiing in Kananaskis Country and provincial park programs mostly hit average Albertans.

The insurance levies are puzzling given this government's own concern about the affordability of coverage. These new levies threaten to make insurance even less affordable for drivers, homeowners, and small businesses. Talk about shooting yourself in the foot, Mr. Speaker.

While there is mention made that some royalty giveaway programs may be reviewed, there are no specific changes announced in this budget. For years, Mr. Speaker, our Auditor General has raised the alarm about the fact that many of the government's royalty giveaway programs, including the Alberta royalty tax credit, do not have objectives that allow Albertans to assess whether they represent value for money. So instead of action to address these failings, we simply get more delays in addressing the \$400 million-plus in royalty giveaways. This is a huge amount of money that could be freed up to freeze and reduce tuition fees or eliminate health care premiums.

Moving to the spending side of Budget 2004, I'll begin by acknowledging a few positives. Certainly, one of those is the restoration of municipal policing grants for large centres and the commitment to pick up all of the policing costs for municipalities

with populations below 5,000 people. Mr. Speaker, \$58 million is being added in total for provincial policing support, and this is badly needed. Yet, at the same time, the government is taking back much of the increase in policing grants by reducing unconditional municipal grants. The city of Edmonton, as an example, estimates that over one-half of the increase in policing grants is being offset by reductions in municipal unconditional grants. Thirteen million dollars has been set aside for transferring governance and funding for ambulance services in 2004-2005, increasing to \$55 million in the next year. While there is some concern about the governance changes for ambulance services, especially its impact on those municipalities with integrated emergency services including fire, paramedics, and ambulance services, certainly everyone welcomes the increased funding support in this area.

Budget 2004 is giving Albertans a first glimpse at the huge cost of the so-called public/private partnerships, or P3 projects. The total cost, the full cost, of the Calgary courthouse and Edmonton south-east ring road projects is \$703 million, a huge sum of money, Mr. Speaker. However, there is no evidence whatsoever that P3s can be built for less money. All of the available evidence suggests that they will cost more.

The government P3 strategy is completely lacking in transparency. The government has hand-picked a P3 review committee dominated by developers, real estate lawyers, and a few other Tory-friendly folks. Mr. Speaker, here we are on the verge of signing an agreement with a P3 developer for a new Calgary courthouse, and Albertans are left completely in the dark as to whether it would have been less costly to have built the same project using conventional public financing.

This lack of transparency is simply unacceptable, Mr. Speaker. The whole P3 exercise threatens to become to the Klein government what NovAtel and MagCan were for the previous Getty government.

Moving to education, Mr. Speaker, support for K to 12 will go up 5.8 per cent, including implementation of a new funding framework, which is long overdue. While the Learning minister talks a good game about being committed to implementing these recommendations, quite frankly there's not enough detail provided to determine whether these increases will be sufficient to implement the class size recommendation of the Learning Commission.

A lot of groups representing parents with children in schools think that the funding falls short. I will certainly be returning to this when we deal with the Learning estimates in the Committee of Supply.

In the postsecondary area operating grants for postsecondary institutions go up 4 per cent next year. At first blush this doesn't look bad, but when you really break down the numbers, this won't even be enough to cover enrolment increases and inflation, so as a consequence tuitions will continue their inexorable rise by going up yet another 6 to 10 per cent next year and beyond.

Moving to health spending, yesterday the Finance minister made much of the fact that the planned 8 per cent increase isn't sustainable and that increases will have to be much smaller in future years. It seems to me, Mr. Speaker, that when it comes to health care, Albertans are being set up. There will be increases in health care spending before the election only to bring the hammer down in the form of user fees and delisting after the election.

With all of the disadvantages of loss of income that come along with illness, the last thing these Albertans need is more out-of-pocket charges, but unfortunately that's exactly what sick, injured, and elderly Albertans will get if this government gets its way on its so-called health care reform. User fees, delisting, and two-tier health care will be brought in for ideological reasons, Mr. Speaker, and without one iota of evidence that they will do anything to make the health care system more sustainable. In fact, if you look south of the

border, while the government's share of the health care dollar may go down, total health spending will escalate as never before.

Now, I want to move to those Albertans who got lumps of coal instead of gifts from the Santa Claus in the Tory government budget. There are lumps of coal in this year's budget for Alberta's senior citizens. In the past decade according to figures from the Alberta Council on Aging Alberta seniors have on a net basis lost some \$650 million in government benefits. In recent years they have lost universal eye and dental benefits, have seen the copayments on their drug coverage go up, got hammered with 50 per cent increases in long-term care fees, and, finally, like everyone else, got smacked with a 30 per cent hike in health care premiums.

Seniors who were hoping for a tiny bit of good news in this pre-election budget went away empty-handed, Mr. Speaker. Not enough on health care premiums when scrapping them for seniors would only cost \$90 million. Obviously, not a high enough priority when there are corporations to feed with \$102 million in corporate tax cuts.

3:50

The news in this budget is even worse for the disabled and those on welfare. Once again, there are no increases in monthly benefit levels for those on AISH or social assistance. With only one small increase since rates were cut in 1993, this budget means that these low-income Albertans and their children will keep falling ever deeper into poverty.

Meanwhile, while there is nothing for poor and disabled Albertans, the annual subsidy to the horse racing industry is going up 22 per cent, from \$37 million to \$45 million per year. Keeping race horses well fed is obviously a higher priority for this government than keeping children well fed. I wish this government would put people before ponies, but it's not to be.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Comments? Questions?

There being no further speakers, the hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wonder if we might now just adjourn debate on this particular item this afternoon.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that we call it 5:30 and adjourn until next Monday, March 29, at 1:30 in the afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 3:52 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 29, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/29

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Hon. members, at the conclusion of the prayer would you please remain standing for the singing of our national anthem.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Now, would you please join in the singing of our national anthem in the language of your choice. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I am actually thrilled today to rise and introduce a former neighbour and her accompanying guests. Anne Eastham is a well-known community advocate, a Guide leader, and a stalwart in our community. She and her husband, David, have made it a privilege and a lifetime to do community service. Today they are here with James Eastham – and in a moment I'll tell you why they are here – and Deven Doucette. A page in this Assembly, a beautiful young girl that's grown up to be a wonderful young lady, Beverly Eastham, is the object of their attention this afternoon. So on behalf of this Assembly, on behalf of Beverly I'd like to welcome her mother, her brother, and a friend. Please join me in that welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly an honour for me today to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two very special people in my life. Seated in the members' gallery is my lovely and devoted wife, Linda, whom I welcome today. With her is our daughter Mrs. Candice Bullock, who is visiting with us today. Her mother and I are very proud and happy to have Candice with us today. I would invite them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I wish to introduce to you and through you to Members of this Legislative Assembly 53 visitors from Tofield high school. The sheer number of them visiting today has put them in both galleries, both in the public and mem-

bers' galleries. They are accompanied by a group leader, no stranger to this Assembly, who has brought many, many students to this Assembly for a visit, Mr. Fred Yachimec. Another teacher is Rick Bobier, and parent helpers are Sandra Borton and Lynn Sharpe. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a frequent guest of this Assembly. He is a former constituent, former board member, and, I hope, a continuing supporter. I'd like to ask Gary Horan to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to introduce to you three members of the staff in my department who are involved in the communication of all the great news that our department has to offer. I would ask Cheryl Robb and Sheri Segin and Chris Bourdeau from communications of Community Development to please stand and take a very well-deserved bow and receive the thanks of all members here for the work you do.

Sorry, Mr. Speaker. I neglected Jennifer Mikula. If she would stand as well. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. the Premier, did you have an introduction?

Mr. Klein: No. He just did them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of people who've worked very hard over the last five weeks. They're here in the public gallery today to honour the Member for Edmonton-Riverview as he takes his place as the new leader for the Alberta Liberals and the Official Opposition. I'd like to ask them to rise as I call their names, please: Jeanette Boman, who would also be known as the partner of the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, his son Spencer Taft, Darryl Youzefowich, Kristin Murray, Dan Carroll, Barb Krahn, Shannon Sampert, Marie Carlson, Kieran Leblanc, Rick Miller, David Coumoyer, Kim Miller, Kevin McLuckie, Shannon Leblanc, and the rest of the Taft team. They've risen. If we can please give them the appropriate welcome for joining us in the gallery.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm truly delighted today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House some of Edmonton's most vibrant, witty, and charming activists, known as the Raging Grannies. They bring style and humour to political struggles facing Albertans, Canadians, and the world. As I read their names I would ask them to please rise and remain standing until I ask the House to give them a warm welcome. They are seated in the public gallery: Betty Mardiros, Kathryn Sinclair, Marg Stephen, Annette Hik, Elvira Leibovitz, Virginia Daniel, Louise Swift, Linnie Chamberlin, and Gretchen Brundin. I'd now ask the House to give them a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly two St. Albert constituents who I see are in the public gallery, Ken and Sandy Kordyback. They are both teachers in St. Albert. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the House two constituents of mine who are seated in your gallery. Dave and Cheryl Andrews are the proud parents of the Speaker's page in the Legislature, Greg Andrews. I would ask that they rise and please accept the warm welcome of this House today.

1:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, earlier today I received a letter from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, a letter informing of his resignation of his position as the Interim Leader of the Official Opposition. In his letter he requested that the newly elected leader of the Liberal Party of Alberta, the Member for Edmonton-Riverview, be recognized as the Leader of the Official Opposition. I will therefore recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview as the Leader of the Official Opposition of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta and now call on him for his first introduction.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Actually, most of the guests that came today who I was going to introduce have already been introduced. But there are a couple who I would like to single out in particular, and those are Beth Kordyback and Alison Willard.* Would they please rise and receive the warm welcome of all members of the Assembly.

Thank you.

head:

Oral Question Period

Rail Link to Fort McMurray

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, NovAtel, Swan Hills, Gainers, the Magnesium Company of Canada: this government has a history of pouring millions of taxpayers' dollars into projects that become financial flops. Now Albertans are wondering if the Premier's latest project, the railroad to Fort McMurray, will be another money pit for the taxpayer, kind of like Homer Simpson's Springfield monorail. My questions are to the Premier. Alberta taxpayers want to know: if this is an economically viable project, why isn't the private sector paying 100 per cent of the bill?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, before answering that question, I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview for his decisive victory in this weekend's Liberal leadership vote. In our democratic society there is perhaps no greater honour for elected members than to be chosen as leader of the parties they serve, and I know the hon. member will lead his party with skill and passion and distinction. So on behalf of my colleagues in government it is my pleasure to welcome you, hon. member, to the position of Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition and to wish you well in your endeavours.

In response to the question, Mr. Speaker, there was an announcement today in Fort McMurray, as I understand it. Basically, our involvement at this point is to participate in a feasibility study to determine if in fact such a rail line is warranted. Beyond that, if it is

warranted and the decision is made, then a functional study will have to be undertaken, and of course there will have to be consideration as to the participation, if any, of the government. So this project has a long way to go yet.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why are the taxpayers footing the bill for a private-sector feasibility study? Aren't you just getting back into the business of being in business, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, this is in accordance with our policy, and that policy, as the hon. member points out, is absolutely right. The Financial Administration Act prohibits this government from becoming involved in the business of being in business. However, it is the policy of this government to participate in projects whereby infrastructure can be provided to accommodate major resource developments, in this case the oil sands.

Mr. Speaker, this speaks to the whole issue of not only rail transportation but the government's obligation down the road to do something with the vehicular transportation corridors, i.e. highway 63 and highway 881. This is truly a public/private partnership. Down the road there may be an opportunity for the government to become involved, and it might not be cash. It might be right-of-way, or it might be other ways to participate with the private-sector partners, those being the oil companies operating in the north – Syncrude, Suncor, Shell, CNRL, and others – and, of course, the railway company.

So, Mr. Speaker, this project has a long way to go. That's why we are participating now in the feasibility study to see if it makes sense.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Well, if the Alberta government does contribute taxpayer dollars to the feasibility study, how will the Premier ensure that those funds do not flow right back to his former chief of staff, who is the head lobbyist for this project?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, my chief of staff is not the head lobbyist for this particular endeavour. I think that on the surface the project has some merit, but that remains to be seen, and the feasibility study will determine that.

Relative to the flow back of money that is impossible. There will be a committee of ministers to act as the point people for the government's involvement. That committee is being headed by the hon. Minister of Economic Development and tourism. It involves the Minister of Municipal Affairs, one of the MLAs for the constituency; the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, the other MLA who's involved in the constituency; the Minister of Transportation, of course; and the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. So, Mr. Speaker, there are five ministers involved in overseeing and making sure that any government dollars are spent appropriately and in the right places and for the right reasons.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's launch of health care reform is sounding more and more like its launch of electricity deregulation. It's working hard to create artificial crises

*These spellings could not be verified at the time of publication.

instead of addressing legitimate needs and making a host of promises that will never come true. Just like the government threw the electricity system into turmoil through its fumbled management, the government is throwing the health care system into needless turmoil too. To the Premier: will deregulated health care offer the same poor service and higher cost that deregulated electricity has brought to Albertans?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we are saying is indeed what all Premiers and ministers of health are saying across the country, including the federal government, Liberals, Conservatives, and NDs alike. That is that the health care system as we know it today, the status quo, is simply not acceptable, and it needs reform as well as more dollars. But more dollars, as I've said before, represents one small piece of the puzzle. It needs substantial reform.

We have a program laid out relative to the steps we propose to take to bring about reform, and with respect to those specifics I'll have the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness respond.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, this provincial government is quite interested in learning from other jurisdictions throughout the world what works in their health care systems. We live in a multicultural nation. We live in a multicultural province. We benefit from the fact that people come from all over the world to live in this province, to live in this country. If we take advantage of health care professionals that we recruit from around the world, we should also be prepared to entertain the ideas that they bring with them from the health care systems in places like France or Sweden, Italy or New Zealand.

So, again, Mr. Speaker, our plan is to first lay out for Albertans to see what our current system is like in terms of its sustainability. I think that the Premier and others across Canada have come to the conclusion that it's not sustainable. Then we need to import ideas from around the world and ask: what will make sense here in this province? What can help make our system sustainable?

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back to the Premier: how does the Premier explain that his government is now spending more per capita on health care than 10 years ago, yet we have fewer hospital beds, we employ fewer RNs, and we have longer waiting lists? Where is the mismanagement?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, what the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition says is not entirely true. More procedures than ever are now being accommodated. We have more MRIs, more joint surgeries, more heart surgeries, more treatments for a variety of ailments and injuries than we ever had before. But the simple fact is that health care costs are due to a number of factors arising in every jurisdiction in the country, to the point where some Atlantic provinces now are seeing 50 per cent of their total provincial budgets consumed by health care spending.

Mr. Speaker, I said previously that the health care system as we know it today is simply not sustainable and changes need to be made. There is nothing wrong with looking at the best practices and taking the best out of various countries and other jurisdictions that rank higher than Canada in the delivery of health care services. What is wrong with that?

You know, this province has always had the courage to do things differently, and we've always had the courage to admit that maybe other jurisdictions do things better and to look at what those jurisdictions are doing and to do the same thing here. Mr. Speaker,

we want to do what is best for the taxpayers, what is best for the patients, and we want to do it at a price people can afford.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the Romanow commission in fact did look at jurisdictions across Europe, many of the ones that have been listed by the Premier and the Minister of Health and Wellness, why don't they just accept the recommendations of the Romanow report?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there were no recommendations relative to best practices used in other jurisdictions, no recommendations as to how those best practices could be implemented. The key to the Romanow report was to close the so-called gap between federal government spending on health care, which averages about 16 per cent, I believe, of total health care costs, to 25 per cent. That is the key to the Romanow recommendations, and when the Premiers and the health ministers meet, they talk about closing the Romanow gap. There's very little, if any, discussion whatsoever on any other components or aspects of his report.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Police Services

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on Friday the Solicitor General released a response to the Policing Alberta MLA review, a report which has cost tens of thousands of dollars and truly failed to deliver for many Albertans the answers to the concerns they had. My questions are to the Solicitor General. After two years of waiting, why did the Solicitor General fail to one way or another address the issue of photoradar on Alberta's highways?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the hon. member. I think this government has done a fine job in addressing what was important to Albertans, and that's \$58 million of new funding to help municipalities in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Solicitor General: given that the police feel that they can't clear their names and Albertans don't see resolution in cases of police wrongdoing, why didn't the Solicitor General take concrete action on the civilian oversight and police-investigating-police issue?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, I'd like to say that I take exception to that remark and that I think the police in this province do a very good job. Secondly, when she talks about citizens' oversight – and I've read some of her comments in the *Journal* – I don't think she really understands what citizens' oversight is about.

We are currently looking at all of the models available to us, Mr. Speaker, and there are two issues that I think have to be clearly identified. The first one is general complaints in regard to the police. There is a process in place that works very well for the citizens in this province. If they have a complaint against a police officer, they have the ability to have a complaint, and the chief of police at that particular time deals with that complaint. If they do not like what the chief of police comes back with, they have the ability to go to the Law Enforcement Review Board, which is an independent body from

government, to deal with that complaint. The Law Enforcement Review Board does a fantastic job for the citizens of this province.

One of the things that the hon. member is bringing forward is: how do we investigate serious complaints involved with the police? That could be an accident that has happened. It could go with criminal charges. One of the things that we're looking at at this particular time is that if an incident like that happens, it goes directly to my director of law enforcement. He then has the ability to call an outside police force and let them investigate, or if they need a special investigation team, then we will do that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Solicitor General: since it took two years for the Solicitor General to deliver the government's response to this report, how long do Albertans have to wait for the corrections review and the victims of crime consultation report?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has asked this question before. I had told her to please be patient because those reviews have financial implications to her. The police report was released on Friday, and she can stay tuned for the other two.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Insurance Costs

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Small businesses told this government last September that rising cost for business and auto insurance is their number one concern. A survey done by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which I will table at the appropriate time, shows that over half of their Alberta members experienced insurance rate hikes of at least 20 per cent last year. Meanwhile, the Insurance Bureau of Canada has reported that insurance industry profits were up 673 per cent in 2003. My question is to the Premier. Why has the government done nothing to address the number one concern of small business, namely skyrocketing insurance costs? Doesn't this government care about small business?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I really take exception to the last part of his comment. Of course we care about small business. That's why we lowered taxes for small business.

If the truth be known, the whole government initiative relative to insurances was launched because of the concerns of small business, particularly those who use vehicles, plumbing outfits and welding outfits, and those involved in apprenticeship programs. Basically there were a number of complaints to this government that these small businesses couldn't hire people between the ages of 16 and 25 because their insurance rates would go sky high. So we took action. We took very definitive and very positive action to make it illegal for insurance companies to penalize good male drivers between the ages of 16 and 25, whereas under the old rules those people were penalized simply because they were between the ages of 16 and 25 and because they were male. There was no reward for being a good driver. Now there is. That to me is positive and definitive action.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given the Premier's evasive reply and his failure to address the real insurance issue, not auto insurance, why has the government failed to act on

the CFIB's call for an independent review of the insurance industry as a whole and the government's failure to regulate it?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we weren't getting complaints vis-à-vis other forms of insurance; i.e., home insurance, building insurance, life insurance. The bulk of the complaints were over automobile insurance, PL/PD.

Relative to other insurance I'll have the minister respond. I don't know whether it would be the hon. Minister of Finance or the Minister of Government Services or both.

2:00

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, clearly, hon. members opposite know, as do Albertans, that we have been focusing on the issue that was brought to us by a number of our small businesses and a number of young people who were involved in apprenticeship programs or training programs where the price of automobile insurance was prohibitive and was keeping young people from entering some of the trades. This was a real concern in a province that's growing as rapidly as Alberta is growing and desperately needs young people entering trades, that they were not able to be hired because of the price of automobile insurance.

This led us into a very long, protracted review of automobile insurance in this province. As you know, we appointed the Member for Medicine Hat to head up an implementation team to bring forward recommendations that would provide Albertans with accessible, affordable, and comparably priced insurance so that they would not be precluded from entering some of the programs that were there. This has been a long process, Mr. Speaker, and I believe that we are on target and on track to being operational, finally, with the co-operation of the industry that works within this province to have a new structure to present to Albertans this summer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that no one over there has apparently read the CFIB report, will the Premier support the New Democrats' call for an all-party Legislature committee to review skyrocketing insurance rates for small business and the nonprofit sector, and if not, why not?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is correct; I haven't read the report. This is a national federation, as I understand it, and what the hon. member is talking about is obviously not exclusive to Alberta or peculiar to Alberta but is a problem across Canada. I would suggest that he contact the appropriate federal authorities through, perhaps, Mr. Layton, who heads his national party, to see if something can be done on the national scene.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Education Property Tax Rate

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In last week's budget this government announced that the mill rate for education property taxes was going down. However, discussions with stakeholders have reported the opposite to be true. My questions are to the Minister of Finance. Can the minister please explain this inconsistency?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, in the budget that I tabled here last week, we did clearly indicate that the property tax rate would in fact go down by 2.3 per cent insofar as the school property tax rate within the province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I can say that the hon. member may be confusing the issue of the additional dollars that would be collected overall in the province because, quite frankly, we have more people living in the province today, this year than we did a year ago. We have a huge migration of people that come to this province on an annual basis, and as such there is more money that is in fact collected. We've said many times that people come to Alberta, but they don't bring their roads and their schools and their hospitals with them, so they participate in the taxation base in the province of Alberta willingly because this is a place of choice.

So we did lower the burden by reducing it 2.3 per cent, but there are more people who are paying the school property assessment.

Mr. Vandermeer: Can the minister please explain why in 2001 the government promised Albertans that we would cap revenue from education property taxes at \$1.2 billion and now with the recent budget we've moved away from this policy again?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, three years ago when we introduced a budget, we recognized that the migration to this province was large – there was construction going on – and as such the impact and the stress on our education system had to be addressed. Clearly, the direction was in fact to capture the growth, freeze the mill rates or reduce them and capture the growth of the province from the migration here, and that's what we've done. But that's not new. This is three years old.

Mr. Vandermeer: In light of all this, why does this government expect municipalities, who are already hard-pressed for adequate funding, to collect provincial education property taxes and send it in?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the vehicle that we have today to collect dollars for support of education has been through the local property assessment. Now, I know that there have been talks of other mechanisms, but this is the vehicle that we have in place today.

Now, I can tell you – and the Minister of Municipal Affairs may want to supplement my answer – that municipalities had an awful lot of initiatives in a package that went forward to help them address some of the pressure points that they were facing this current year. I think they received a tremendous benefit from this year's budget package, and I would ask the Minister of Municipal Affairs to respond to some of the initiatives in that package.

The Speaker: I think we're going to move on. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Support for Low-income Albertans

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to look after the interests of millionaires and forgets about the interests of the poor and the unfortunate of this province. The horse racing industry and government spin doctors receive an increase any time they seem to ask for it, it appears, but again the poor and unfortunate do not. My first question is to the Premier. Given that the Premier spends on occasion more in a restaurant for one meal than some welfare recipients get in a month, when will this government increase the benefit package for welfare recipients and also those who are on AISH?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the preamble is very offensive, provocative, untrue. As a matter of fact, for lunch today I had one of those microwaveable things. From time to time I do take people out for lunch but don't spend that much on myself at lunch.

An Hon. Member: What about the orange juice?

Mr. Klein: The orange juice was \$2.70 a glass, which is not unreasonable. It's only unreasonable for the Liberals, who I'm sure at their convention this weekend were spending a lot more per glass of orange juice than \$2.70. I'm addressing the preamble because the preamble was, as I said, unnecessary, provocative, and offensive, Mr. Speaker.

The money that the hon. member alludes to relative to horse racing, the \$45 million, is not a taxpayer handout to the horse racing industry. These are funds raised from slot machines at racing entertainment centres located at horse racing tracks. The \$45 million is what we estimate the industry will receive this year. It is not a subsidy. It is the proceeds that the industry will earn by opening and operating a racing entertainment centre.

I will add that this money helps support the horse racing industry, which employs, I understand, about 7,000 or 8,000 people, many Albertans, many of whom, relative to racing in Edmonton, reside in the constituency of Edmonton-Highlands and other constituencies around the racetrack.

Mr. Speaker, approximately one-third of the revenue from these racing entertainment centres goes into the Alberta lottery fund, so it comes to government, and it supports other programs such as community-based programs, health programs, education programs.

So this is not, as the hon. member suggests, a \$45 million handout by the government. This is something that was negotiated with the horse racing industry and does a tremendous amount of good relative to employment and a tremendous amount of good relative to facilitating various community endeavors.

2:10

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'd like to remind you all that as I look at the agenda for the next two months, this being March, going into April and then into May, I see something like 29 to 30 days being devoted to the debate of the budget. This is the question period.

The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: can the hon. Premier live on \$855 a month? That is the maximum amount that one of the 8,000 people in Calgary living on AISH gets. Can you live on that amount?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it's not a matter of whether I live on it or not. I do not apply, nor am I a beneficiary of the program called assured income for the severely handicapped. I am not a recipient of that particular program, which, by the way, is unique in Canada.

Relative to the program itself and the funding for that program I'll have the hon. minister responsible for that program respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The AISH program, that has been in this province now for probably 20 years, has evolved over time. There have been changes to the benefit level. More importantly, what the hon. member asking the question seems to refuse to acknowledge both today and in previous questions regarding this particular matter – he wants to ignore the flexibility that we've put in the AISH system. There are people on AISH that every once in a while will incur an emergency situation. When that happens, we have the flexibility inside that program to move that person temporarily off AISH onto some other type of program and deal with the matter and then, of course, have them back on AISH.

People in this province like AISH because, just as the Premier mentioned, it's assured income for the severely handicapped, and it's meant to provide, then, for the kinds of things that they face and that they have to endure. Mr. Speaker, families help out as well. You ought to be clear on this.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier. Given that since 1997 this government has increased spending by over 50 per cent, why have AISH and SFI recipients not received even an increase that will match the increase in the cost of living? Why are you neglecting the poor of this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I can allude generally to the philosophy and the policy of this government. That policy is to provide help wherever necessary to people who are on SFI or, indeed, on AISH. We help them obtain employment. We put in skills upgrading programs, job retraining programs. The hon. minister had the opportunity to announce today a program that addresses specifically those on SFI, and I'll have him elaborate on that program.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We did in fact announce Alberta Works earlier today. In that system what we are doing is bringing a more individualized approach. We are going to work with all of the people that come forward looking for our assistance. We're going to deal with them on a more individualized basis, and we're going to deal to a great extent in terms of need.

Now, no one would deny that there's some income that's going to be required and there are going to have to be shelter allowances. We know all that. But if anyone fixates on the actual income itself, I believe that they're in danger of asking us as a government to basically keep these people inside a welfare wall.

What we in Human Resources and Employment have said is that we're going to bring forward benefits, benefits that are in kind in many cases, things that support the person as they try to move, then, from dependence on government to independence, as most Albertans want. They want to be self-reliant. We're trying to help with that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Funding for Policing

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In last week's budget, which was tabled in this Assembly, the Solicitor General or her department was identified as allocating significant new funding to municipalities for policing costs. My understanding is that the amount quoted was \$16 per capita. However, there seems to be some confusion as to how that money is to be allocated. So my question is to the Solicitor General. Is the \$16 all new money for policing for each municipality?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I indicated earlier, the government under Budget 2004 includes \$58 million in extra funding to bolster the police services in Alberta. I have to say that it's a 50 per cent increase and brings our total funding for policing to \$174 million for 2004-2005. This increase includes reallocating the 16 and a half million dollars from the unconditional municipal grant program to policing programs. Municipalities required to pay for policing will get, as indicated, a \$16 per capita grant for policing,

which does not include previous funding but is now directed to policing. For example, hon. Member for St. Albert, the old unconditional grant that you had previously received was approximately \$287,000. Now provincial money for policing in St. Albert is about \$849,000, or an increase of about 195 per cent.

Mrs. O'Neill: My first supplemental is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. In the previous allocation of unconditional grants to municipalities are you aware that each municipality allocated the full amount to policing, or are they variable around the province?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the \$16.5 million that has been distributed to Alberta municipalities, both urban and rural, in the past was going to the municipalities as unconditional grants. Wherever municipalities chose to use it was their own decision. I can say that a large majority of those municipalities used them specifically for policing. So, ultimately, at the end of the day, in meeting with both the rural association and the urban association, which is the AUMA and the AAMD and C, it was considered that a chunk of money, that the Solicitor General has talked about, would go directly into policing based on a top priority that was identified by their citizens in the individual municipalities.

Mrs. O'Neill: My second supplemental is back to the Solicitor General, Mr. Speaker. With respect to more funding for policing will some of it go to crime prevention measures within respective communities, or will they be province-wide programs?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's a good question. Crime prevention and restorative justice are also vital as we keep our communities safe, so in the budget we've announced another extra \$1 million for crime prevention and restorative justice, which will help, we believe, keep the communities safe, and they can apply for a grant.

Mr. Speaker, if I may, we are also continuing funding for our IROC, which is the integrated response to organized crime, which is an additional \$5 million so that they can deal with organized crime, which is affecting communities all over the province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Support for Low-income Albertans

(continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is again to the hon. Premier. Given that 1 in 5 children in the city of Edmonton grow up in poverty, when will this government cut its excessive travel and communications budget, take the \$50 million in savings and reinvest it in those children?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, our Minister of Children's Services is here. I don't know if that figure, 1 in 5, is in fact true. Edmonton is approximately 1 million people, give or take. What he's saying is that 200,000 children are living in poverty. That is absolutely astounding. That is unbelievable. I think that the hon. member doth exaggerate a lot, a tremendous amount. That is unbelievable in this day and age in this city in particular. I travel this city. I have never seen 200,000 impoverished kids. Never. Never. Never.

That reminds me of a statement that was made by, well, an interim leader. I think there were about nine leaders of the Liberal Party across the way including the one we have right now. One of the Liberal leaders made this outrageous statement, and she was a

respected . . . [interjection] No, no. She was well respected, but she talked about all of these people like every one was living in a dumpster. This hon. member is making the same kind of statement, a grossly, severely, inaccurately exaggerated statement.

Relative to the real situation I'll have the hon. minister respond.

2:20

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, quite specifically for children in need we have a child need program, but this is the government that five years ago spent \$467 million. In this budget that was just announced, five years later, this government spent on children's services \$740 million, higher than anywhere in the country.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that 8,000 Calgarians receiving AISH have seen no substantial increase to match inflation in that city, why does this government continue to support the horse racing industry and leave those recipients on AISH wondering where their next meal is going to come from or how they're going to pay their rent?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I've already set the record straight relative to the horse racing industry and the 7,000 or 8,000 people that that industry employs – many of those people wouldn't otherwise be employed – and how they have to earn the money they get and how it is not a government handout.

Relative to the situation with respect to AISH the hon. minister responded, but I'll have him respond again if he so desires.

Mr. Dunford: Yes. Thank you. Perhaps for the benefit of the hon. member and other members, Mr. Speaker, they need to be advised that we will be organizing and carrying out a formal review of AISH come this fall.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: given that this government wants recipients of AISH and SFI to be more self-reliant, why does that not apply to the horse racing industry? Why is that industry not self-reliant? Why does it need \$45 million?

The Speaker: Well, actually, there are three questions there.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it's revenue generated by the horse racing industry. All we have done as a government is allowed through legislation or regulation the vehicle for them to raise revenues. So the hon. member is comparing apples and oranges and pears and grapefruits and grapes and everything else he can, but that is so typical of the way they operate. It is a philosophy of creating confusion or, better said, a philosophy of not knowing what they're talking about and thereby creating confusion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Rail Link to Fort McMurray

(continued)

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As indicated earlier, there is much interest and discussion throughout the province about the proposed northern rail link to Fort McMurray and the oil sands. In the Lac La Biche-St. Paul constituency this project has also instigated conversation and questions. My first question is to the Minister of Transportation. How will this proposed rail link affect our current highway system and the current project scheduled for highway 881?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Thursday last the government of Alberta tabled its three-year construction and preservation plan for the Ministry of Transportation. Included in that plan are I believe seven projects on highway 881, six projects on highway 63 north of Fort McMurray, three projects on highway 813, and numerous other very badly needed highway projects in that part of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the Minister of Energy. Why are we considering this rail link proposal at this stage of the oil sands development?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's a good question because the oil sands are actually going to be the new royalty base for this province. If you look at the mining projects, the magnitude of the mining projects that are going on up there, we need to provide safe, reliable, dependable transportation that moves fabricated product, vessels, and items of such size and magnitude that cannot be normally moved through normal highway transport means by rail. This in fact could increase productivity and lessen the Crown's exposure to cost overruns. If you think that by 2017 some 3 million barrels per day may be produced up there, the benefit to Albertans at roughly today's oil prices would be in the neighbourhood of a billion dollars a month.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the Minister of Economic Development. What economic development could we expect from a project of this magnitude if it was to go ahead?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you're aware, we returned from Fort McMurray this morning, where the project was reviewed and announced that the government will partake in it.

I wanted to correct an erroneous statement made by the opposition before I answer the hon. member's question. This study is in no way committing the government to anything other than looking at the 30-year horizon of transportation challenges that are facing that area in highway 881, highway 63, and the rail links. To make some loose association to MagCan, NovAtel, and things of that nature is just preposterous. This is a great opportunity for Albertans to sort of tackle the problem that's coming out of that massive economic spinoff that's going to come there.

The bottom line of all this, Mr. Speaker, is that we anticipate about \$55 billion worth of projects to be going ahead now or in the future. The economic spinoff that is generally accepted is about 20 per cent of that, so for that northeast region you could be looking at about \$11 billion worth of potential economic spinoff. As a prudent government we have to do everything in our power to make sure that that investment is not only maximized but takes place and doesn't go to Venezuela or somewhere else.

Edmonton Ring Road

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, on its own web site this government states that the southeast leg of the Edmonton ring road would cost \$225 million under the public model. To the Minister of Transportation: what is the estimated cost of the southeast ring road extension as a P3 project?

Mr. Stelmach: The cost of the project will be better determined once we proceed to the next stage of the request for proposals. As I mentioned earlier, there were six companies that had answered the request for qualifications. We boiled that down to three, and the next stage will be proceeding soon.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister: what are the estimated annual lease payments and the principal and interest costs of this project expected to be?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I believe that what the hon. member is trying to get at – and once again the opposition is opposing all kinds of public/private partnerships, whether they make good economic sense or not. I'd mentioned in this House that when we get to that particular point, when we have looked at the project and the kinds of proposals that come in – I've also said in this House before that we also have some cost comparison models, public cost comparison models, we can use. We have projects in Calgary of equal size and also the southwest leg of the Anthony Henday, which has quite similar construction interchanges and bridges and some of those other issues that we have to deal with on that particular leg. So those two will be good cost comparisons to see if we're getting a good investment on behalf of the taxpayers here in the province.

2:30

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: how can this minister allocate hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to a P3 project without knowing the cost?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, when we put out a highway to tender, we don't run out there and say, "Well, you know, this highway from Edmonton to Calgary is going to be \$200 million, and the closest company to come to \$200 million gets the contract." We don't do business that way. We actually put it out for a request for proposal, and we get the best deal, the best value for the dollar. We won't know that until such time as this portion, the next stage of the request for proposals, comes forward. Then those particular companies will tell us how much they're going to pay, what will be the annual lease payments.

But over and above, Mr. Speaker, now is the time for innovation, when companies come forward and rather than using maybe straight steel on some of the interchanges, maybe a mixture of steel and concrete in terms of getting another better value because right now, you know, steel has increased by at least 30 per cent. Those are some of the cost drivers we're dealing with recently. So I believe that at the end of this period, in about six months, we'll have some good news for the hon. member and all Albertans.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on Thursday last an exchange of questions between the Minister of Seniors and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre occurred. I believe today that the Minister of Seniors would like to supplement an answer, which would allow the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to ask an additional question.

Seniors' Benefits

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You're right; on Thursday I did indicate some figures, and I'd like to clarify my answers.

A single senior whose income is up to \$23,440 and a senior couple with an income of up to \$37,880 receive a full premium exemption. Single seniors with incomes between \$23,441 and \$26,960 and a senior couple between \$37,881 and \$44,920 receive a partial premium exemption. The total result, Mr. Speaker, is that

approximately 58 per cent of seniors receive either a full or partial exemption.*

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Blakeman: Well, I continue on my earlier question, which is: what is the minister doing to work with his colleagues to eliminate all health care premiums for all seniors?

Mr. Woloshyn: Well, Mr. Speaker, my position on that issue is on the record. I will continue to work with my colleagues to ensure that we can get whatever programs we can to enhance seniors' programs in this province.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds I'll call upon the first of seven members to participate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Alberta Scene

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to recognize Alberta's artists, our arts organizations, and supporters of the arts, all of whom contribute so much to the vibrancy of our great province. In this regard it was my great pleasure recently to join our Minister of Community Development at the Citadel Theatre for the announcement of Alberta Scene. Hosted by the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Alberta Scene will showcase over 600 of our province's artists and arts organizations at 94 events in 19 venues over 13 days during April and May 2005. Artists from all disciplines across Alberta are invited to submit an application to attend, which can be downloaded from www.albertascene.ca.

Alberta Scene will attract even more national and international opportunities for our artists during Alberta's centennial year, and in the fall of 2005 the National Arts Centre orchestra will tour several Alberta communities thanks to EPCOR.

Promoting our province through the arts is a great way to salute and thank the dynamic art sector of Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Lesa Stringer

Mr. Lord: Well, Mr. Speaker, Calgary-Currie is certainly the constituency of champions. Recently I introduced my musician friend Lee Mayes here, and you may know Malcolm Mayes, the *Edmonton Journal's* outstanding political cartoonist. Well, my constituent is their cousin. You may have heard of Reuben Mayes, the Saskatchewan phenomenon, arguably the best football player to ever come out of Canada, and my constituent is Reuben's little sister. Pierre Lueders, world champion bobsledder, brother-in-law of our minister of economic affairs, is this lady's coach.

She's Lesa Stringer, a proud mother of three. She is also second runner-up for the Mrs. Calgary contest and a Nike and P & G model. But never mind her good looks and public speaking abilities; what she's really famous for is her athletic abilities. A Canadian national track and field champion, winner of numerous honours, she now has her sights set on winning gold for Canada in the 2006 Olympics as one of our top national women's bobsled team athletes.

So far she has three American Cup second place finishes, she finished fourth overall in the World Cup, and she broke two international start time records, thus helping qualify the first-ever Canadian women's bobsled team that got into the Olympics.

Way to go, Lesa. Calgary-Currie and all of Canada are proud of you.

*See p. 702, right col., para. 12

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Raging Grannies

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week the Premier confirmed that he has dire plans for health care in Alberta, plans that will usher in a two-tiered health care system. Well, I'm proud to stand and recognize the Raging Grannies, who fight against health care privatization using good humour, wit, and dedication. The Edmonton chapter of the Raging Grannies has a dozen or so members who can be seen in their trademark eye-catching hats and granny clothing singing their own brand of politically conscious satire.

The Premier told the federal Tory convention that the Grannies like to protest and would attack his plan for a two-tiered health care system. Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier was right on this one. But far from being mere placard-waving protesters, I know them to be true crowd-pleasers and favourites among Edmontonians, the vast majority of whom support a public health care system.

Mr. Speaker, it's truly an honour to recognize the Raging Grannies and to thank them for their unwavering defence of public health care and their campaign for the implementation of the Romanow recommendations in order to further strengthen and transform our health care system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Taryn Penrice

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great honour to rise in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta to recognize one of Alberta's Great Kids, 18-year-old Taryn Penrice of Red Deer. Taryn was just 13 years old when she was diagnosed with T-cell leukemia and admitted to the Children's hospital in Calgary in critical condition to begin two years of intensive cancer treatment. Although doctors feared for Taryn's life, she was able to make it through and managed to inspire all those around her.

Taryn decided during her battle with cancer that she wanted to help others. In May 2003 she organized a head-shaving fundraiser at her high school, Hunting Hills, that raised over \$14,000. Her greatest fundraising accomplishment to date was a golf tournament called Golf a Kid to Cure, which she organized with two of her friends and raised \$76,000 for cancer. Taryn hopes to organize an annual Golf a Kid to Cure tournament, and this year she hopes to raise \$100,000.

Thanks to her loving, supportive family, her strength, and her dedication to others Taryn has already made a big difference in this world and was recognized on March 12, 2004, by the Premier, Colleen Klein, and the Minister of Children's Services for her achievements.

I would ask all members of this Assembly to join me in congratulating Taryn for her personal victory over cancer and for all the great work that she does for others. She's truly one of Alberta's Great Kids.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Lamont High School Boys Curling Team

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Transportation, the MLA for Vegreville-Viking, I wish to recognize and congratulate the Lamont high school boys team on winning the provincial gold medal in curling. The gold-medal team

consists of skip Nick Koroluk; third Jason Starko, who is the minister's grand-nephew; second Colin Sheptycki; and lead Chris Cholak; coaches Rick Koroluk and Joanne Martz; and teacher/adviser Irene Hackett.

Mr. Speaker, this team won their league in Lamont, the zone finals in Lac La Biche, and the provincial championship, which was held in Drayton Valley, Alberta. I hear that in typical curling fashion this game was a nail-biter all the way. I would ask all the colleagues to join the minister and I in congratulating the Lamont high school boys team.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

2:40

Calgary's International Avenue

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure to rise and speak about a group of people who have brought an innovative approach in urban community planning. I want to recognize the key players in this process: graduate student Gian-Carlo Carra and Professor Robert Kirby of the U of C, Alison Karim-McSwiney and the staff of the International Avenue Business Revitalization Zone, and the FGL Society, the city planning staff, and the caring community leaders, residents, and business owners in this area.

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, this area is well known in Calgary as International Avenue, a stretch of 17th Avenue in the southeast of Calgary from Deerfoot Trail to the eastern city border. This International Avenue is about 35 blocks in length with over 400 businesses. The avenue is an authentic mix of businesses of almost all cultural heritages. It's a mosaic of the world in the city of Calgary.

Last week the group launched a charrette. Charrette is a French word for small cart. The idea is to bring all stakeholders together and collect their ideas and have sessions on problem solving and vision design. The charrette process will bring greatness to our corner of the city.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Lee Ridge School

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I recognize the outstanding work being done by the principal and staff of Lee Ridge school in Edmonton-Mill Woods. This school will do almost anything to bring students and books together. Their recent readathon is a case in point.

Organizer Allison Winchester brokered a contract with the following terms: if the students read over 3,000 hours, Principal Caroline Missal would (a) dye her hair green, (b) eat something blecky, and (c) kiss a donkey. Well, Principal Missal needs a new business adviser, for last week the students met the contract. In total they read over 4,140 hours. True to the terms of the agreement, last Wednesday the principal sat on the gym stage and had her hair dyed green; then, as she tried to avoid her fate, something blecky, a haggis, was piped into the gym and she was force-fed three helpings; and finally, Andy the donkey was led onto the stage, and she planted three big smackers on his nose, all of this royally presided over by Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor of the province, Lois Hole.

Congratulations, Lee Ridge. Your students gain not only the reading but an appreciation of what dedicated, professional teachers are willing to do on their behalf.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising to table today five copies of a letter written to myself from the Minister of Learning signed by the Minister of Learning, the Minister of Alberta Seniors, the leader of the New Democrat opposition, and the MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods, being the Liberal critic with respect to Learning and, I gather, Seniors. The gist of the letter is that they have switched positions on the Committee of Supply. It was agreed to by the opposition and agreed that we should table it today just so that the House is aware of the agreement to switch the time so that Alberta Learning would appear on the afternoon of April 22 and Alberta Seniors would appear before the Legislature on the afternoon of May 6, rather than as was designated in the memo tabled previously.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands I'd like to table a document. It's a letter from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business dated September 5, 2003, warning the Finance minister of the increasing cost of and difficulty of access to commercial insurance for small- and medium-sized business.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Others?

Hon. members, I'm tabling today the appropriate number of copies of a letter from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods advising of his resignation as Interim Leader of the Official Opposition and also advising that the Alberta Liberal Party had selected the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview as its new leader.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 25, it's my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, and 45.

[Motion carried]

Property Theft in Agriculture, Food and Rural Development Department

Q28. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, I urge all members to accept this. It's a reasonable request. I hope the government is going to accept it. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to rise to move an amendment to the motion in the interest of dealing with a number of questions on the Order Paper dealing with the same matter but with respect to different departments. The amendment would read

that Written Question 28 be amended by adding "and the departments referred to in written questions 29, 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive, 72, 73, 80, and 81," after "Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development."

The amended question would then read as follows:

What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and the departments referred to in written questions 29, 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive, 72, 73, 80, and 81 for the 2002-2003 fiscal year?

I understand that the amendment has been appropriately circulated.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the amendment.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Thank you. I will note that the Official Opposition was in receipt of this amendment, faxed over at 10:49 a.m. today, and it is signed off by Parliamentary Counsel on the 25th of March, the last sitting day prior to the amendment being proposed in the House. So those two tests have been met, Mr. Speaker.

I also note and I will happily note that this is a good way to start off this afternoon. My commendation to the House leader for the government. What we have here is exactly the situation, I think, that the Speaker was guiding us toward last week, in that we have an identical question that has merely been enlarged to refer to other departments that are referred to in other written questions. So from the point of view of the opposition, who was seeking that information, assuming that the government is going to provide us with that information, at this point we are willing to accept the amendment.

Essentially, what it's doing is then: "What is the total dollar amount of public property lost due to theft in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and . . ." and then the departments referred to in the written questions that are listed as part of the amendment include Economic Development, Transportation, Municipal Affairs, Infrastructure, Solicitor General, Seniors, Justice and the Attorney General, Gaming, Community Development, Children's Services, Innovation and Science, Learning, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, and Health and Wellness. Those are the departments that actually correspond to the written question numbers that are contained in this amendment.

This is exactly the kind of leadership we were looking for the government to take. We are more than happy to support this amendment, and we look forward to receiving the information that would flow from the acceptance of this amendment and, indeed, of the question.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

2:50

The Speaker: Now, on the motion as amended, do you wish to close the debate, hon. member?

Ms Blakeman: No. I'm happy to support it with the amendment as it is.

[Written Question 28 as amended carried]

The Speaker: Now, what this means, hon. members, is that you should take your pencils out and cross out Written Question 28, having been dealt with, Written Question 29, having been dealt with, written questions 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive, and 72, 73 and 80, 81.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped and Supports for Independence

Q31. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How many of the 30,271 assured income for the severely handicapped and 28,278 supports for independence cases recorded in the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment 2002-2003 annual report included children?

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, this is vital information. There have been comments made earlier, as late as question period today but earlier on, in regard to the number of children who are unfortunately living in poverty or in poverty-related conditions in this province.

Certainly, one only had to go to the mac and cheese luncheon last week, that so many of the hon. members from the government side attended, found the time out of their busy schedules to attend. It was at that event where the Inner City Agencies Foundation gave to each and every person who was at the mac and cheese dinner a fact sheet. The fact sheet started with the simple headline Poverty Hurts and then went on to point out that 1 in 5 children in Edmonton live in poverty and that over 16,000 Edmonton families earn less than \$15,000 annually.

Now, this written question would go a long, long way to answering some of those questions. We can't fault the children. We've got to support and encourage the children. If we know just exactly who is most likely to be affected by low benefit rates for families who are living on AISH or for those who are living on supports for independence, or welfare – there's the perception that a lot of these individuals can work, but that is known not to be true. Many of the AISH recipients for one reason or another, through no fault of their own have a disability and cannot work. People who can work are usually working.

The same applies to supports for independence, or welfare. You look at the drop in caseloads over 10 years. It's gone down from over 90,000 to, in this case, for welfare rates, 28,278. To find out how many of these files or cases would include children is important in light of the hon. Premier's reaction to my question earlier in question period.

We have to improve. We have to improve the benefit packages for those cases if for no other reason than for the children. No child should be left without in this province. Other jurisdictions are talking about no child being left behind. There's certainly been a corporate campaign to increase public awareness of children and issues surrounding them and the circumstances of poverty. But I would remind all members of this House when we're discussing Written Question 31 that SFI is the income source of last resort for Albertans, and it is sort of the finest mesh in the social welfare net. We cannot forget the children, Mr. Speaker.

So, in conclusion, let's look at a couple receiving SFI, and if they get \$772 a month and they have one child, how much does that leave? If there was one adult and one child and they were to receive 820 bucks, let's say, plus medical benefits, there's not going to be much money left at the end of the month.

We need to know how many children are currently living, shall I say, within those individual files? We have to improve their circumstances. It is inconceivable that in a province as wealthy as this, where we have increased budgets in other manners with no regard it seems, we're willing to allow these people to grow up frustrated and marginalized.

I certainly hope that I will receive the information that I am seeking under Written Question 31. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of my colleague the Minister of Human Resources and Employment I'd like to say that the government is prepared to accept Written Question 31.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. To conclude debate, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. Minister of Seniors and thank the Department of Human Resources and Employment. I look forward to receiving the information.

[Written Question 31 carried]

Correctional Facilities

Q35. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

Which correctional facilities is the Solicitor General planning to close, and what is the timetable for the closures?

Ms Blakeman: The Solicitor General had mused at one time about closing certain correctional facilities in the province because they were underutilized. I am seeking information of a more detailed nature, then, of what plans the Solicitor General has around closing correctional facilities, which correctional facilities she is planning to close, and what would be the timetable that would be expected to be put in place for the closures if in fact there are any.

So that's the information I'm seeking through this written question. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that Written Question 35 be rejected. The answer to the question is the subject of the recommendations contained within the government MLA review of corrections report. As I previously indicated, the government has been taking the time to carefully review the report and will release it when these considerations are completed. I'm confident that this release will occur in the very near future.

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: How tantalizing. Well, you know, this underlines the difficulty that the opposition has in seeking information. We keep being dangled little tidbits of "stay tuned" and "soon" and "stay with us." It's really very difficult to . . . [interjection] I'm sorry; I'll correct myself: "stay with us" and other rather clichéd phrases.

The Solicitor General has raised it herself. We are still waiting for a corrections review that is now, I think, some two years out and no additional information. We don't know whether any information that we seek is contained in that particular report or not, Mr. Speaker, but for every question she gets from me around corrections, it's: wait for the review. Well, the review could come out and we still won't have the information on that particular question.

I guess I've been told that we'll have to wait for it; all Albertans will have to wait for it. Frankly, I think that is a shame, and it's problematic when we try to hold the government to account. There's

a lot of hiding behind these reports, and I hope that the Solicitor General will be able to table them as soon as possible.

Thank you very much. I regret that they won't support it.

[Written Question 35 lost]

Seniors Shelter Intake Survey

Q36. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry and Department of Seniors on the development and implementation of the Alberta Seniors shelter intake survey form between April 1, 2002, and February 17, 2004?

Ms Blakeman: Now, we're interested in how much money was spent developing this survey, that I think is not still in use. So what sort of resources were put toward it? I'm interested in receiving that information. I hope the Minister of Seniors is able to co-operate.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the government we will accept Written Question 36.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

[Written Question 36 carried]

Fraud Charges against Government Employees

Q37. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the total number of government employees who have been charged with fraud against the Alberta government between January 1, 1993, and February 17, 2004, inclusive?

Ms Blakeman: Oh, now, that's interesting, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure if I can say this person's name. It's in public documents, but this is . . . [interjection] All right. This is coming out of a case of an individual who I believe was a deputy minister.

Mr. MacDonald: A high-ranking official.

Ms Blakeman: A high-ranking official, a deputy minister in the government, who was charged with fraud, and the question that follows from that is: how many others have been charged with fraud during this government's tenure under this Premier?

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, I have to reject this particular question. The scope of the question, from January 1, 1993, to February 17, 2004, goes far beyond what might be appropriately found within records without doing a great amount of research.

The hon. member has referred to a deputy minister. I wish to make it clear in the House that I'm not aware of any deputy ministers that have been charged with fraud. With the appropriate audit processes that we have in place to hold accountability, there have been instances where senior officials have been accused of fraudulent activity in those circumstances. There's only been, I think, one or maybe two in my recent memory.

The question goes back to January 1, 1993, and in order to obtain this information, we'd have to go back and manually check every file that's been closed since 1993 from each of the Crown prosecutors' offices across Alberta because it talks, again, about any government employee. So in order to answer this question accurately, we would have to check every closed file in Crown prosecutors' offices since 1993. There is no formal or automated system in place to access specific Crown files, and given the timeline of the question, many of these files will already have been sent to the Provincial Archives for storage.

Mr. Speaker, the breadth of this question is such that even bringing in an amendment to bring down the scope, as we sometimes often do, to make the question answerable, in this case I couldn't find any way to actually bring the scope into the realm of answerability within any reasonable sense of time frame or numbers. It's with regret.

I think it's important for people to understand, however, that in every case where fraud is committed or where there's an alleged fraud committed, charges are laid and those individuals prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'm disappointed to hear the response and the rejection of the request for information. Truly I believe that the breadth of the question is what requires it to be put forward as a written question or if it were a document then as a motion for a return. This is exactly the venue that we should be able to use to get detailed answers from government on exactly this kind of issue.

I think I'm also more than a little alarmed that the government doesn't seem to keep track and learn the lessons from any employees that they have who in fact have been charged with fraud against themselves. I find it a little chilling that the government doesn't seem to be able to do that. So I'm disappointed that we cannot gather this information today.

Thank you.

[Written Question 37 lost]

Speaker's Ruling Written Questions

The Speaker: Hon. members, I make little notations to some of these questions. These written questions have to come through a process, but before they get on the Order Paper, they also require my signature. Quite frankly, I should not have signed on that one, and I'm going to make a comment after the House has already made a decision.

The question is: "What is the total number of government employees who have been charged with fraud?" It's a mere fact in our society, one of the principal rules of law, that we're not guilty until we're found guilty. People are charged. It doesn't mean that they are guilty of anything, and their good name comes into disrepute and into question when the charges are sometimes put out. We all know by reading the decisions of judges that charges are thrown out or people are found not guilty for dozens and dozens and dozens of reasons. Just simply because somebody has been charged should really mean nothing, if I understand the rule of law in our society, and it's only when you're found guilty that in fact there is a public record for that.

I'll take the responsibility for all the people who see these before I do, but I should not have signed off on that particular question.

Gas Bill Complaints

Q38. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How many complaints did the government call centre receive from Albertans regarding high natural gas bills between January 1, 2000, and February 17, 2004?

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, certainly, within that period of time many Albertans expressed concern and displeasure over the high cost of natural gas for domestic purposes and in regard to this government's natural gas policies for domestic and commercial purposes throughout the province. There's no doubt that there would have been a significant number of complaints to the government call centre.

We've had many reactions to the high price of natural gas for domestic consumption from this government and from the Minister of Energy. In fact, it's probably a little over a year ago that the hon. Minister of Energy glibly assured Albertans: well, you can turn down the thermostat and put on a sweater if you're that concerned.

3:10

Between January 1, 2000, and February 17, 2004, surely there must have been a very accurate record kept as to how many calls were coming in and what parts of the province they were coming from. I for one would like to have a look at this information for my own interest. When we consider how much money we've spent on natural gas rebates over the years and how much more we may spend in the future with the election rolling around, who is to say how much of a natural gas rebate will be offered? Certainly, the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East and others in this Assembly worked very hard last winter to convince the government to not renege on the promise of natural gas rebates whenever prices went up. Prices went up, and they're still up a lot higher than that budget estimate that was tabled here last week.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is information that I and other Albertans would find noteworthy and of a great deal of public interest, and I urge the government to provide the information. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is prepared to accept Written Question 38 with some amendments. Those amendments have been provided to our opposition colleague here by 11 o'clock as per the proper procedures. I know that the amendments have been circulated to the rest of the members, and I'll gladly read for the record what the amendments would be. We're suggesting to amend this motion by striking out the word "government" and substituting "Utilities Consumer Advocate" in that place and then by striking out "January 1, 2000," and substituting "November 23, 2003."

Mr. Speaker, the Utilities Consumer Advocate was put in place in the latter part of October, and the office became up and running in November of 2003. The Utilities Consumer Advocate is responsible for taking these calls, and we can provide the kind of feedback that the member opposite is looking for in a very accurate way through the calls that have come in to the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

So we would accept this by amending it to have the Utilities Consumer Advocate's calls from November 23 available in written form. The amended written question would now read as follows:

How many complaints did the Utilities Consumer Advocate call centre receive from Albertans regarding high natural gas bills between November 23, 2003, and February 17, 2004?

I now move that motion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the amendment.

Mr. MacDonald: On the amendment, yes, Mr. Speaker. Well, this certainly is interesting. This amendment certainly reduces considerably the impact and the scope of the question. The time frame has changed, but the information that the hon. minister with this amended motion is willing to provide, in my view, is already public knowledge.

There were two articles, as a matter of fact, one in a Calgary paper and one in an Edmonton paper. The Edmonton paper I believe stated – and it was an earlier article – that there were 700 complaints. There was an updated article that indicated that there were 800 complaints to the Utilities Consumer Advocate since the advocate opened for business.

Now, this doesn't tell us anything about the number of complaints that citizens lodged with their government previous to the Utilities Consumer Advocate. By denying us this information in providing this amendment, we will never know how many complaints it took to force the government to change its mind and do the right thing and share the natural resource wealth of this province with the citizens who own it by providing them with credits on their natural gas bills.

So, certainly, we know already the number of complaints the Utilities Consumer Advocate has received. To the minister's credit we don't have the breakdown as to how many of them are related to natural gas and how many of them are related to electricity. One would only assume that 80 per cent of these are based on electricity complaints and 20 per cent are based on natural gas complaints because that's the method that's been used to fund this office through industry: 80 per cent of the costs are coming from the electricity side and 20 per cent are coming from the natural gas side.

Now, I also see in the budget – and I realize that we're not discussing the budget here today, Mr. Speaker – that there's a considerable increase of almost \$2 million in the budget of this Utilities Consumer Advocate for the current fiscal year. Obviously, there is anticipation that there will be an increased number of calls.

This amendment doesn't do anything to respond and document the complaints that were received leading up to and during the election of 2001 and the subsequent years leading up to the creation of this Utilities Consumer Advocate. I am, Mr. Speaker, disappointed that not all the information would be provided, just the information that is almost up to date as a result of the due diligence of the press in regard to the activities surrounding the Utilities Consumer Advocate's office.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I'd like to speak to the amendment. The effect of the amendment if the House accepted it would be to radically cut down the period for which the minister is willing to report to the House. As a matter of fact, cut it down to a little over two and a half months. That, in my view, would be not very helpful.

Albertans have been complaining to the government and to opposition parties about the skyrocketing natural gas prices and how they've affected their pocketbooks over the last nearly three and a half, four years. So I think it's important for the minister to make a distinction between the complaints that have been received by the Utilities Consumer Advocate's office since that office came into being and became operational – that's quite legitimate, but then

there's a period before that, prior to November 23, 2003, from January 1, 2000. For those two and a half years or so, a little more than two and a half years, I think, almost three years, the government must have the information, information that Albertans would like to have, information that this House certainly would like to see disclosed and made transparent.

So I'm speaking, Mr. Speaker, against this amendment because, in my view, it will not oblige the government to disclose information for that very important period of nearly three years from January 1, 2000, to November 23, 2003. To accept this amendment really would be tantamount to defeating the real purpose of the original question, so I would certainly be opposed to this amendment, and I would hope that the House would reject this as well.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

3:20

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I would like to say at this time that the amended Written Question 38 will provide us a benchmark for the future on the activities of the Utilities Consumer Advocate. If we know how many complaints have been received there in regard to natural gas bills, we can check to make sure that the 20-80 split on the industry cost sharing of this office is accurate. For that reason there will be some advantage to having this information with Written Question 38 as amended.

Thank you.

[Written Question 38 as amended carried]

Deregulation and Electricity Bill Complaints

Q39. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How many complaints did the government call centre receive from Albertans regarding deregulation or high electricity bills between January 1, 2000, and February 17, 2004?

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, this is a government that keeps a keen eye to the polling numbers or, some would say these days, a keen ear to the rail line to see which locomotive is coming down the track and at what speed and pulling what. Certainly, there has not been such a public policy failure in the entire country, whether it be a provincial or a federal government, that would match this electricity deregulation boondoggle that this province has for whatever reason decided to implement.

I would love to have seen a cost-benefit analysis on electricity deregulation. I have certainly searched for one from this government. It has not been provided. So the barometer of success or failure of a public policy is the citizens' response, and in this case it would be the citizens' outrage over the high cost of electricity, not only the cost of electricity but the billing process surrounding the distribution and transmission of electricity.

Between this period, January 1, 2000, to February 17, 2004, we have gone in this province – for instance, everyone is always asking me to table my own power bill. Well, I'm going to talk about my own power bill this afternoon. Before deregulation it had two line items on it, one for energy costs and one for distribution. Now I have many, many, many more line items on my bill. I hear from rural Albertans, and they tell me that I'm lucky because they have in

some cases, Mr. Speaker, if you can imagine this, more than 10 line items on their bills.

So there would be no doubt that there would be significant consumer frustration expressed through the government call centre to the respective offices, whether it's the Premier's office or whether it's the office of the Minister of Energy or the office of the hon. Minister of Government Services. There's no doubt that there have been significant calls.

Now, there's also no doubt that those calls of frustration fell on deaf ears because this government does not seem to be in any hurry to unplug electricity deregulation. In fact, documents that I have received indicate that they seem to be anxious to go full steam ahead with this. It puzzles me why. There's been no benefit to this, and prices haven't gone down. I'm sure calls to the call centre haven't gone down either. I would say, depending on the local billing cycle, that there would be calls throughout the month.

Now, to analyze the failure of electricity deregulation, it would be very interesting to see how many calls have come from rural Alberta, how many calls have come from urban Alberta, how many calls come from, for instance, Stony Plain, how many calls come from Medicine Hat. No, we'd have to leave Medicine Hat out of this argument, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Taylor: None from Medicine Hat.

Mr. MacDonald: None from Medicine Hat because Medicine Hat citizens had the common sense to stay out of this. They had their own utilities there. They seemed quite wise, and I'm sure that if we were to compare the prices of utilities in Medicine Hat to those in Edmonton, Calgary, Grande Prairie, Stony Plain, well, we would be wishing that we had followed the lead of the citizens of Medicine Hat and had stayed clear of electricity deregulation.

You know, Rudyard Kipling would be very, very proud of the present-day citizens of Medicine Hat. It was one of his favourite places, as we all know, Mr. Speaker.

In regard to Written Question 39 I certainly hope that the government will provide all the information that I have asked for, and the citizens themselves can have a look and see where all the complaints about electricity deregulation were coming from prior to the 2001 election up until February 17, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We're prepared to accept Written Question 39, again with amendments. The amendments have been provided to the member opposite, the original mover, and also the amendments have been circulated.

For the record I would like to read what those amendments would be. The amendment would read such: striking out the word "government" and substituting "Utilities Consumer Advocate" and, secondly, by striking out "January 1, 2000," and substituting "November 23, 2003."

The reason for these amendments would be because the Utilities Consumer Advocate had set up shop and was prepared to take these calls, and we have a good, accurate record of these calls. We will provide them in writing to the member opposite.

So the amended written question would read as follows, Mr. Speaker.

How many complaints did the Utilities Consumer Advocate call centre receive from Albertans regarding deregulation or high electricity bills between November 23, 2003, and February 17, 2004?

I move that amendment.

The Speaker: On the amendment, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, this amendment is quite similar to the amendment for Written Question 38. We are really restricting and limiting the information that will be provided. What little information a person does get from this government is always considered a bonus, certainly. But, again, the fact that the Utilities Consumer Advocate has just set up shop, the fact that 80 per cent of the budget is coming from the electricity sector – there might be some interesting information in this amended question, but I'm disappointed that we can't get all the information going back to 2000. Certainly, there were significant price spikes in electricity costs. In fact, it got so high at one point that we had to cap it at 11 cents and wait until after the election and recover the rest of that money over a two-year period.

3:30

Now, surely we can be provided with more information than just from the Utilities Consumer Advocate. Albertans, I think, deserve to know. If we're going to be this open and transparent and accountable government, well, let's start. Let's not start by amending this written question and just providing any information from the Utilities Consumer Advocate's office starting the third week in November.

With that being said, I guess, Mr. Speaker, a little bit of information is better than none, but I must express my disappointment in light of the fact that this is an \$8 billion price tag and growing for this electricity deregulation scheme. This amendment is limiting. I guess under the circumstances I can understand why the government would be reluctant to release the volume of calls that it has received, where they're from in the province, and what specific discontent was expressed by the electricity consumer in regard to electricity deregulation. [interjection] Well, that's what I was hoping to get.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I cede the floor to another hon. colleague. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to the amendment proposed by the Minister of Government Services to Written Question 39. This amendment is identical to the amendment proposed by the same minister to Written Question 38, and for similar reasons I find it very unhelpful to getting the information that Albertans want to have with respect to, in this case, whether or not they have found deregulation of electricity to be extremely detrimental to their family budgets, to their businesses. One measure of that would of course be to look at the number of complaints, the frequency of complaints since the time that deregulation has been actively implemented with respect to electricity in this province.

Mr. Speaker, the New Democrat opposition has presented petitions from thousands upon thousands upon thousands of Albertans who have called on this government to scrap deregulation of electricity and return to regulated electricity provision in this province. They signed those petitions because they rely on their common sense and experience over the many decades in this province when electricity was produced and transmitted and sold and used under a regulated system. Whether they were families, whether they were small businesses or large businesses, everyone enormously benefited from the production and provision of electricity under a regulated system.

That system has alas been destroyed by deregulation, and Albertans have, I think, a legitimate right to know whether or not

their complaints are being recorded, are available to them as an historical record so that they can hear their own voices, sort of, reflected back to them.

Mr. Speaker, I think the city of Medicine Hat represents a shining example of how a smart community can use common ownership of a resource, in this case natural gas, to produce electricity and supply that electricity to the residents of Medicine Hat at a most reasonable rate – the same is true with natural gas – and sell the rest at market rates, from which then the residents of Medicine Hat benefit. So Medicine Hat presents, I think, an ideal model for the rest of Alberta to adopt to see what arrangements work best to both take advantage of market rates for a commonly owned resource and at the same time protect from market rates and market fluctuations the owners of that resource themselves.

The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, I think, since he holds an important portfolio in the cabinet – the ministry of environmental protection is under his charge – should be selling this Medicine Hat model to the rest of his cabinet colleagues and to this House so that we can return to a decent model that protects us from exorbitant market rates and from the unpredictability, instability, and fluctuations that markets are characterized by under normal circumstances. But he is not willing to use the experience of his own constituents, who have benefited greatly from this common ownership, to make sure that Albertans in general, who are the owners of natural gas and still are to some extent of electricity production, would benefit in the same way.

This amendment, therefore, Mr. Speaker, is really counterproductive because it would allow the government not to disclose very important information that Albertans would like to have, the very Albertans who are paying sky-high electricity bills and natural gas bills to keep their houses heated and to keep their businesses going. If this information is not disclosed, they will not know how many others like them have complained to this government and how this government has ignored their complaints and refused to listen to their concerns and to the advice to this government.

So for that reason, Mr. Speaker, I personally am opposed to this amendment, and I ask my colleagues in the House to express their opposition to it as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker. This time I will be quite brief. Certainly, the information that is provided as a result of this amended Written Question 39 will help this member determine exactly what is going on with the Utilities Consumer Advocate as far as the percentage of complaints which originate with electricity and which originate with natural gas and see if there will be any changes in this industry-funded consumer office. I don't know how it can be useful and serve a purpose representing consumers when it's being funded by industry, but we will get that information, and we will analyze it.

Thank you.

[Written Question 39 as amended carried]

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 3:40

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do appreciate this. I have a gentleman to introduce here today. His name is Doug McBain. He's the president of the Western Barley Growers. He's here in the House today and was hoping to have a chance to see some discussion on private members' bills as there is a bill that affects him and his constituents and all of rural Alberta in a major way. I'm hoping that sometime in the near future we'll get to the bill that he's looking for, but we won't necessarily have that chance today, which is unfortunate. However, I would ask him to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, an introduction?

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce a constituent of mine. Diane Oxenford is here today to watch the proceedings. She's in the public gallery. Diane is one of those golden volunteers who's out for everything, works very hard, is very committed. She's been active on the Rosedale power plant project, so the Minister of Community Development would be well acquainted with her. She's always full of very positive suggestions on how to move things forward. I would ask Diane to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly. Thank you.

head:

Written Questions (continued)

Private Surgical Facilities

Q40. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that the following question be accepted.
What calculations have been used by the Department of Health and Wellness as required under section 8(3)(d)(v) of the Health Care Protection Act to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of contracts for services with private surgical facilities for each contract approved under the Health Care Protection Act?

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, this question is being moved to in effect get some parameters that the government uses when it starts to evaluate contract-out options in the health care system. When we went through the whole debate on Bill 11, on the two-tiered health care system, there was a commitment by the government that this kind of evaluation would be made; it's part of the bill. We wanted to see what they were going through in terms of the cost comparisons and the cost-effectiveness of these contracts.

It's past now to where there are a number of these contracts in place, so we're asking the government to release for public scrutiny the parameters and the relative data so that the public can evaluate how well the government looked after their tax dollars and made sure that good value-for-dollar was being received. So we would ask the government to provide us with that information.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness I would respond and indicate that the government is rejecting Written Question 40.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close the debate.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's really a disappointment because during the whole debate on the bill the discussion was that this kind of evaluation would be done in the open, that the information that was used and the parameters that were set for the government to evaluate contract-out options would be dealt with in a public way. You know, if the government is going to make those kinds of commitments to Albertans during the debate on a piece of legislation, I think it's imperative that they do carry through with that after the fact, when they've actually utilized a component within the Health Care Protection Act, and that we do have the option to find and review the kind of decision-making that they go through on behalf of Albertans.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think it's imperative that everybody in this Legislature vote to accept this even though the minister wants it rejected. We need to vote and accept it so that Albertans can get this information for scrutiny of the effectiveness of the government in spending their dollars.

Thank you.

[Written Question 40 lost]

Intergovernmental Agreements

Q41. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What progress has the government made in implementing the Auditor General's recommendation that the Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations adhere to the laws of Alberta by enhancing its intergovernmental agreements systems to comply with section 11 and schedule 6 of the Government Organization Act?

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, this is another one of the issues that we wanted to in effect see where the government is at when they tell us that they're going to accept a recommendation. It's imperative that Albertans get information that allows them to evaluate and become aware of the position the government is in in implementing the recommendations being made by the Auditor General because, obviously, when the Auditor General makes these recommendations, it's an indication that there's a sense that the government's procedure can be improved. So on behalf of Albertans we're asking the government to tell us where they're at in implementing these recommendations of the Auditor General.

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I would like to indicate that the government will accept this particular question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close the debate.

Dr. Nicol: I'd just like to thank the minister. That's great that Albertans will find out how far along they're getting on this process.

[Written Question 41 carried]

Government Accounting Practices

Q42. Dr. Nicol moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that the following question be accepted.

What stage of the process is the government at in implementing the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report to change government accounting practices in order to improve accountability for the government's spending of taxpayers' dollars?

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, this is again another one of the arguments that we need to have public disclosure in terms of where they're at in the implementation process when they've already said that they will be accepting a recommendation. We need to make sure that Albertans are aware of the status of that implementation and what progress is being made to allow both Albertans and the Auditor General to feel confident that our dollars are being wisely spent. So I would encourage all members of the Legislature to accept Written Question 42.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on behalf of the government to indicate that we're prepared to accept Written Question 42. As the hon. member opposite indicated, the government had indicated acceptance in principle of the Auditor General's recommendation that the government's corporate accounting policies continue to be reviewed on an ongoing basis in consultation with the ministries and the office of the Auditor General. That was communicated to the chair of the Public Accounts Committee on December 15, 2003, I'm given to understand, by the hon. Minister of Finance, and progress has been made in this area. But we would be more than happy to respond by accepting the written question and respond more formally in due course.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close the debate.

Dr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie and all Albertans I thank the government for agreeing to provide us with that information. Thank you.

[Written Question 42 carried]

3:50 Health Care Premiums

Q43. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted. Of the monies the government receives annually from health care premiums, what amount was remitted by employers for the fiscal year 2002-03 and from April 1, 2003, to February 20, 2004, and of that amount how much was paid by employers on behalf of employees?

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, the health care premiums in this province certainly are seen as a heavy burden both by middle-class families that pay out of their own pocket and also by employers who choose to pay either all or part of the health care premiums on behalf of their employees. There has been a considerable debate in this province that has been going on for some time on whether or not the health care premiums should be scrapped altogether, thereby removing this tax burden on Albertans whether they're employers or families or individuals who pay that premium. That premium, Mr. Speaker, is quite high: \$1,056 for a family of two or more and half of that amount for Albertans who are single.

As far as businesses in this province and employers are concerned, this health care premium tax really is a payroll tax. It adds to the cost of doing business in this province and makes this province, in relative terms, uncompetitive with most other provincial jurisdictions or territorial jurisdictions in this country. So it is important to pay attention to the magnitude of the cost of health care premium payments by employers on behalf of their employees to see how much this burden is.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's worth noting that the difference between a corporate tax and a payroll tax is as follows: payroll tax is not a tax

that is imposed or implemented or required to be paid on net revenue or on profits. It is preprofit, adds to the costs of running a business in the province, whereas the corporate tax is always assessed on the net revenue or the net profits of a business or a corporation. So in the judgment of the New Democrat opposition this payroll tax that employers pay reduces their competitiveness. It adds to the costs of doing business in the province and needs, therefore, to be scrapped.

The request for information that's made by way of this question, therefore, is intended to disclose the magnitude of the burden that employers carry because this payroll tax, in the form of a health care premium tax, is a part of the continuing policy of the government that most Albertans would like to see, in fact, discontinued and scrapped.

So, Mr. Speaker, I hope that the government will accept this request, and I look forward to the response from the House leader and the ministry.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is prepared to accept Written Question 43 with amendments. These amendments have been circulated with our opposition colleague prior to 11 a.m. today.

I would like to move that Written Question 43 be amended by striking out "February 20, 2004," and substituting "February 29, 2004," and striking out "and of that amount how much was paid by employers on behalf of employees." So the amended written question will read as follows.

Of the monies the government receives annually from health care premiums, what amount was remitted by employers for the fiscal year 2002-2003 and from April 1, 2003, to February 29, 2004?

So I'd respectfully submit that and hope that the hon. member opposite would be prepared to accept that as an amended question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to report that we received the proposed amendment this morning in compliance with the requirements of the Standing Orders. I'm also pleased to note that I find the amendment quite acceptable. In fact, the amendment changes the date from February 20 to February 29, which I think is extremely helpful. As well, I think the second part of the amendment simply clarifies the language of the written question.

So I'm pleased to accept both parts of this amendment and thank the Minister of Children's Services, who had presented this amendment on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness. I'll sit down, Mr. Speaker, with declaring my acceptance of the amendment.

[Motion on amendment carried]

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to move the acceptance of the amended Written Question 43.

[Written Question 43 as amended carried]

Health Care Premium Arrears

Q44. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted. For the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03 and from April 1, 2003, to February 20, 2004, what was the total amount paid to collections agencies for collecting arrears on health care premiums broken down by agency?

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, again, the intent of the request that is contained in this question is to seek and make public information that's deemed important both by the New Democrat opposition and in the judgment of the New Democrat opposition by most Albertans when they are invited or asked to assess the value of the ongoing policy of this government with respect to the imposition of a health care premiums tax on Albertans, who either pay it out of their own pockets or have someone pay a portion of it or all of it on their behalf, be it this government, be it their employers, or whoever else.

Mr. Speaker, there are lots of Albertans who find it simply impossible to pay these very, very heavy health care premium taxes and in fact find themselves running into default because they fail to be able to pay these premiums on time because they really find it hard on their budgets and on their pocketbooks.

So it's important, I think, for us as a House to be able to assess the variety of costs for implementing this very unpopular and unhelpful taxation policy that the government of Alberta insists on continuing with. Hence the rationale for this question, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to respond on behalf of the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness that he has an amendment that he wishes me to bring forward at this time. I'd like to move the amendment which would read as follows: "For the fiscal years 2001-2002, 2002-2003, and from April 1, 2003, to February 29, 2004, what was the total amount paid to collections agencies for collecting arrears on health care premiums broken down by agency?" I would move that particular amendment at this time.

4:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, I rise to accept the proposed amendment to the language of Written Question 44. I want to thank the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Deputy Government House Leader for proposing that amendment on behalf of the Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Speaker, the amendment simply changes one date in Written Question 44; that is, it changes the date from February 20 to February 29, 2004. I think it's an eminently reasonable amendment, and I gladly accept it and thank the minister for his co-operation.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: Now on the motion as amended. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to close the debate.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Written Question 44 as amended be accepted and supported by my colleagues in this House. I'm pleased that the amended question is an improvement. I want to note that it's an improvement over the text of the question as noted in the Order Paper.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 44 as amended carried]

Health Care Premium Arrears

Q45. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted.
For the fiscal year 2002-03 and from April 1, 2003, to

February 20, 2004, how many health care premium accounts were in arrears by one day or more, by three months or more, and by one year or more, and what is the total amount of those arrears in each of these fiscal years?

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, again, the intent of the question is clear, transparent. It's simply an attempt to get information on record which will help us assess the costs of health care premiums policy implementation, the difficulties that arise for ordinary Albertans, middle-class Albertans, when they try to meet the requirements of paying these premiums, which are exorbitant: \$1,056 for a two-member family or more and half of that amount for individuals. Certainly, it is a burden on all kinds of businesses in this province, which makes running their businesses more expensive than would be the case if the health care premium tax were scrapped.

So, Mr. Speaker, this information with respect to arrears in these different periods in each fiscal year would help us evaluate the real costs and the burdensomeness of this unnecessary tax on Albertans, whether those Albertans are businesspersons, businesses, families, or individuals.

I move the acceptance of this question, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise with respect to Written Question 45 on behalf of the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness to table an amendment to that particular written question, and the amended written question would read as follows:

For the fiscal year 2002-2003 and from April 1, 2003, to February 29, 2004, how many health care premium accounts were in arrears by one day or more, by three months or more, and by one year or more, and what is the total amount of those arrears in each of these fiscal years?

Mr. Speaker, that having been said, I would move that particular amendment at this time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on the amendment.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Deputy Government House Leader for moving this amendment on behalf of the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. I'm pleased to note that the minister has accepted the spirit and letter of the question and simply makes the one and only change in the question as originally asked, and that is to change the date from February 20, 2004, to February 29, 2004.

I think that it certainly is most acceptable to me to see this date changed as proposed by this amendment. So I would ask everyone, of course, to support this and get on our way to the next question. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to close debate on the motion as amended.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move the acceptance of Written Question 45 as amended by the amendment on which the House has just voted unanimously.

Thank you.

[Written Question 45 as amended carried]

head:

Motions for Returns

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, March 25, I would move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 14 to 19 inclusive, 23 to 31 inclusive, 34 to 42 inclusive, 44 to 87 inclusive, 90, 93, 94, 96 to 103 inclusive, 106, 107, 122 to 146 inclusive, 159, 160, 162, and 164 to 180 inclusive.

[Motion carried]

Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations IT Costs

M14. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would be prepared to accept the motion for a return on behalf of government in the event that an amendment is approved by the House. I move that Motion for a Return 14 be amended by (a) striking out "Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations" and substituting "government of Alberta;" (b) striking out "broken down by company and total dollar amount for each" and substituting "and a listing of vendors providing these services;" and (c) adding at the end thereof "motions for returns currently appearing on the Order Paper as MR15, MR18, MR56, MR60, MR61, MR62, MR70, MR71, MR72, MR73, MR103, MR122, MR123, MR146, MR204, and MR205 be struck from the Order Paper as having been dealt with." A copy of this motion has been provided to the opposition.

Ms Blakeman: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hancock: A copy of this motion was provided to Parliamentary Counsel for approval on Thursday, as is required by Standing Order, but was not approved by Parliamentary Counsel pursuant to the Standing Order. I propose that the matter of it being in order be dealt with by the House. I'd be prepared to speak to it now or cede to the hon. member for the point of order.

4:10

The Speaker: Well, we're going to deal with the point of order first.

Point of Order

Amendment to Motion for a Return 14

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, I regret that this amendment to amend Motion for a Return 14 is out of order. I'll direct your attention to Standing Order 34(2.1), in which it notes that "amendments to written questions and motions for returns must (a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved." I have a copy of what was both circulated here in the House and was sent to the Official Opposition this morning, and it does not contain the approval stamp of Parliamentary Counsel.

I note in *Beauchesne* 579(2) that "an amendment may not raise a new question which can only be considered as a distinct motion after proper notice." In effect, what is being proposed by the Government House Leader here is a new question in that it is substantially changing the intent and the information requested by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

She had requested that the information be broken down. So we're looking for the total dollar amount spent on contracts for information technology services, and what we're going to get here is a listing of vendors. That is a very different response, a different set of information than what was being requested. It was requested in the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's motion that it be broken down by company and by the total dollar amount that each got and for the fiscal year.

So what we have before us, the amendment that's being proposed, is out of order on two points. One, it has not been signed off by Parliamentary Counsel and therefore cannot be considered here, and two, given its very content, it's asking us to consider a different question than what was asked for by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

I'll note that in *Marleau and Montpetit*, page 655, an amendment is out of order "if it is inconsistent with a decision that the committee has made regarding a former amendment." Looking at the Speaker's ruling on the amendment to Motion for a Return 10 – and that's now appearing on page 681 of *Hansard* for March 24, 2004 – the Speaker wisely says that "the amended Motion for a Return 10 that was approved differed from the wording of the other motions for returns that the Government House Leader indicated were similar." I would argue that that is the same case that is being brought forward here.

That Motion for a Return 10 also asked that a number of other motions for returns be struck from the order paper as having been dealt with, and I would argue, Mr. Speaker, that the original intent has not been carried forward into the amendment brought forward by the Government House Leader, and therefore those additional motions for returns that are added in should not be struck as they have not in fact been dealt with and, in providing this information, they wouldn't be dealt with.

I understand what the Government House Leader is trying to do, and I wish I could support him in doing that, but the Official Opposition is well within our rights to ask for the information. As a matter of fact, the government has directed us numerous times to ask for the information through motions for returns and written questions. We've followed their request and brought the request for information through, and we would expect to get the information that we requested.

Having the government amend the original intent to a point where it's no longer what the Official Opposition has asked for – I can't support what the Government House Leader is trying to do. I regret that. I would have been more than willing to work with the government in grouping together motions for returns or written questions if the government had been willing to bring forward the information that we were requesting. In fact, we've already done that today, and I have acknowledged it when it has happened. I'm more than willing to do that.

Rev. Abbott: All you're interested in doing is wasting the time of the House.

Ms Blakeman: There is some heckling happening here from Drayton Valley-Calmar. I'm sure he can join in on the point of order.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, based on Standing Order 34 with the lack of parliamentary approval, on *Beauchesne* 579(2) with the amendment raising a new question, on *Marleau and Montpetit* noticing that it is out of order if it's inconsistent with the decision that the committee has already made, setting a standard which in fact the Speaker gave us the ruling on, I would argue that the Government House Leader's amendment is out of order.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, first of all, there is no amendment on the floor. We have a point of order.

The Government House Leader on this point of order.

Mr. Hancock: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are a number of points that need to be addressed with respect to the question of whether the amendment can be ruled in order and put on the floor, and I'll start with the last part first, with respect to the argument put by the hon. member opposite that somehow by amending the motion we are changing the scope of the motion.

I would suggest to you that in her own argument she's negative to her argument, because she's indicated that in fact we passed a motion last Monday which made a very similar amendment in terms of the A and B sections of the amendment. The House passed that amendment and passed the motion as amended. Therefore, those portions of the amendment are not out of order.

The same amendment was done to Motion for a Return 10 last week and, in fact, is similar to many types of amendments that are brought before the House from time to time with respect to motions for returns in accordance with, I would suggest, *Beauchesne's 567*, that says that "the object of an amendment may be either to modify a question in such a way as to increase its acceptability," which is what we've been doing all afternoon by changing dates and things like that and which we did last Monday on Motion for a Return 10 by changing the motion so that it's all government departments and then broken down by company and dollar amounts and a listing of vendors providing those services. We dealt with that at some length last Monday and then passed the motion.

The question that came up as a result of it last Monday was whether by passing that motion as amended it was applicable to all the other motions. Now, that – I'd have to correct the hon. member opposite – was not included in the motion. In fact, it was a point of order that I raised after the motion was passed to ask that it be made applicable to the other motions and that the other motions be struck from the Order Paper.

Mr. Speaker, you quite rightly reserved on that and then came back and advised the House that the motion as passed was not the same as the motions that were still on the Order Paper, and therefore you weren't prepared to strike the other motions on the Order Paper as being redundant. Because the motion passed was amended and the motions that were still on the Order Paper had not been amended, you said: well, it isn't on all fours, and therefore you can't just take them off the Order Paper.

Now, I would direct your attention to what was discussed. In fact, in the March 22 *Hansard* at page 613 you indicated:

During the debate something else was added to this discussion, and it had to do with the number of other written questions or motions for returns that this was to apply to. That's not part of the motion. It's not part of the amendment. I have no idea how the chair is supposed to determine subjectively to which one of these other motions for returns this particular amendment is to apply. That would be a very unfair situation.

So, Mr. Speaker, the response to that is to make it a part of the motion, bring forward exactly to what other motions it is to apply, and make it a direction of the House in passing the motion that it is to apply to those other motions.

Now, is it appropriate to have one motion apply to other motions? Well, earlier today on one of the written questions there was an amendment put forward to have that written question apply to – and that was Written Question 28 – "the departments referred to in written questions 29, 30, 34, 46, 60 to 65 inclusive," et cetera. So, obviously, it's in order to have a written motion apply to other motions on the Order Paper. It's been done. In fact, it was done earlier today, and that was approved by Parliamentary Counsel.

So we have a situation where the first part of the amendment is clearly in order. We have a situation where the second part of the amendment is clearly in order. It's very difficult to understand how the two parts of the amendment put together are not in order.

4:20

Then we come to the question of Standing Order 34(2.1). Standing Order 34(2.1) clearly states, "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must (a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved." That's the Standing Order. That's the hurdle I have to get over here because clearly Parliamentary Counsel did not approve this amendment on that date.

Now, the question, Mr. Speaker, is: what is Parliamentary Counsel's role as provided for in the Standing Order? Clearly, the question for Parliamentary Counsel is not whether or not the motion itself is in order or out of order on a substantive basis but, rather, whether it's in an appropriate form to come to the House. Otherwise, Parliamentary Counsel would be usurping the authority of this House in determining what business it can discuss and what is substantive. Clearly, Parliamentary Counsel cannot be in a position where it makes substantive decisions with respect to business that can come before the House. Clearly, it can make decisions with respect to whether it's an appropriate form for the House, and in support of that proposition I would quote again your rulings and discussion before the House.

Mr. Speaker, on March 24 in *Hansard* at page 681: "When there are difficulties or problems encountered like this, the chair's view is that the primary responsibility for resolving them should rest with the House leaders." I skip a sentence, and then it goes on to say, "It is your Assembly, hon. members, and it is to you that the responsibility falls for dealing with the business of the Assembly." The business of the Assembly deals with how we deal with these written questions and motions for returns. They're an opportunity for private members to put questions on the floor and to request return of documents. Clearly, it's in order for those questions to be on the floor.

But now we have this unique situation where we have on the Order Paper 88 written questions and 210 motions for returns. Even though with the most recent changes of the rules we've expanded the time that's available to private members for private members' business by moving private members' motions to the evening on Mondays and having the hour for private members' motions there, freeing up the afternoon to deal with written questions, motions for returns, and private members' bills, clearly by putting this number of questions on the Order Paper, we will never get to private members' bills unless we find some method of aggregating the business.

Now, it would seem to me, Mr. Speaker, that it is entirely inappropriate to say that the only way that business can be aggregated, that questions can be aggregated is if they're to be accepted or rejected on the face of them, so that the only way you could deal with more than one question would be to accept or reject without amendment. That would seem to be an inappropriate way to deal with this matter because that leaves, then, the only way of dealing with questions, if you're not prepared to accept or reject on the face of them, as dealing with them individually, one by one, and making the amendments.

Then, Mr. Speaker, you're going on to make the same amendment to similar motions which differ only with respect to which department they apply to or which member they apply to. So you're making the same amendment that you would make to all of them, but you'd have to make them individually because the ruling would say that you couldn't aggregate those questions.

The simple answer here, a very straightforward answer, is that there's an amendment that's being proposed. It ought to have been approved by Parliamentary Counsel, not in terms of substance, because it's always for the Speaker on the floor of the House or members on the floor in raising a point of order to argue whether a motion or a bill or anything else is in order or out of order. It is always available on the floor of the House to do that. But I would suggest that it's not in order for Parliamentary Counsel to make that determination. Parliamentary Counsel's role is to determine form, whether it's an appropriate form to come before the House.

So I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that 34(2.1)(a) must be read in that context. If you read it in any other way, it gives Parliamentary Counsel a role which cannot be afforded Parliamentary Counsel but is the order of the Speaker in the House and the members of the House on the floor of the House. I would argue that Parliamentary Counsel should be determined to have approved this because it is in an appropriate form, that it is in order for the House to deal with the motion.

Then the question is: is the motion itself in order? That question has been answered. Written Question 10 last week made the first part of the amendment. Written Question 28 today made the second part of the amendment. If the first is in order and the second is in order, then the whole thing is in order. So substantively it must be in order, and therefore it's open to the House to deal with that question today.

I would submit, Mr. Speaker, then, that we should allow the amendment to proceed and deal with these written questions and motions for returns in a timely way so that the House can deal with the questions that have been put before it, deal with them in a straightforward manner, and then also allow time for private members to deal with private members' bills.

[Ms Blakeman rose]

The Speaker: Hon. member, it was your point of order. You've already participated.

Does anybody else want to participate on this point of order? Hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, I saw you move on the point of order.

Rev. Abbott: Yeah, Mr. Speaker. I was going to make some comments, but the hon. Government House Leader said it all. Thank you.

The Speaker: Others on this point of order?

Hon. members, I can understand. I used the word "angst" the other day with respect to the number of questions that might be on the Order Paper. But Monday is private members' day, and it is within the rights of the members to participate by way of written questions and motions for returns.

There were several points raised here this afternoon, and brief comments will be made with respect to these several points. First of all, there were statements made in the House the other day by myself with respect to this particular matter. Actually, considerable progress has been made today with respect to a certain number of these written questions and motions for returns.

The Standing Orders are the rules of this Assembly. The Standing Orders are written by the members of this particular Assembly. If we have a Standing Order, regardless of whether or not the chair likes the Standing Order, the Standing Order has been written by the members after consultation among the members after due diligence by the three House leaders with respect to it. Sometimes they don't even have to consult and sometimes they do not consult with the chair.

So let's take a look at Standing Order 34(2.1), written by the members of the House. It says, "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must" – not may be, could be, should be but must – "(a) be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved" and so on. Now, I look at that. The word "must" says to me that it has to be done. It means that you can't really be subjective about this.

Now, there's one way we could get around this: by asking for unanimous consent to give it the interpretation the Government House Leader has. I dare say and suspect that that probably wouldn't get unanimous consent, but I can do that. Any time we have unanimous consent, we can put away all of this so that we don't have to deal with it. But I suspect that we're not going to get that, so it's kind of hard to deal with an amendment from that perspective.

Secondly, I do believe that I heard the Government House Leader refer to *Beauchesne* 567, but I also heard the Opposition House Leader refer to *Beauchesne* 579(2): "An amendment may not raise a new question which can only be considered as a distinct motion after proper notice."

Now, the other day when I stood here, I suggested that, well, there's a way of grouping these things. Number one is that there could be harmony among the three House leaders. They can get together and they can work this out, and that's always the preferred route – always the preferred route – and there seemed to be some approach with respect to that today. The second way, basically, could be by following the procedures that were followed today with respect to the groupings where there are no substantial differences from the original motion to the new amendment, where they're not substantial; that's very important. If you take a group of them and you put them all together and there's no substantial change, what you're doing is just bunching them, and we all agreed that that would be a fine way to go.

4:30

This particular amendment, proposed amendment to Motion for a Return 14, which did not meet the test under Standing Order 34(2.1), in essence would not meet the substantive amendment test either. So there are actually several ways of dealing with this if one wants to. One could have a distinct motion. Notice could be given, say, tomorrow or Wednesday, and a motion could be dealt with on a Thursday afternoon to basically group 100 or 125 or 50 of them and say either yes or no to them. That's another way of dealing with it. Can't do it on the following Monday because that's private members' day, so it would have to be done in another way.

So I'm afraid that the point of order has to be upheld. In essence, we cannot proceed with this proposed amendment to Motion for a Return 14. Motion for a Return 14 retains its place on the Order Paper as it currently is. We can leave it there now and make good use of the remaining time this afternoon to deal with some of these other motions for returns which have met the test and could see some further progress this afternoon with respect to what we have. Hopefully, in the ensuing days and the ensuing weeks – perhaps the three House leaders would be able to meet during the Easter break, say four, five, six days. They could spend time on solving this problem and dealing with the House itself pending further review.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Point of Order

Explanation of Speaker's Rulings

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under the provisions of 13(2) asking for you to "explain the reasons for any decision," because I'd like to have you explain to the House in greater scope what you, then, believe the authority of Parliamentary Counsel is

with respect to taking substantive decisions away from the House rather than process oriented. You've indicated that 34(2.1) has to be read on the face of it, but is it your understanding that Parliamentary Counsel can make adjudicative decisions with respect to substantive measures and, therefore, take them away from the House? Or is it your understanding of Parliamentary Counsel's role to simply deal with respect to the form of matters coming before the House?

The second question I'd like to understand your rationale on is your ruling with respect to the substantive nature of the motion, because we have dealt in this House, as I mentioned in my argument, with Motion for a Return 10, which did exactly those substantive, if that's what they are, amendments to the motion. We have done that on a regular basis throughout.

We've also dealt earlier today with the question of bringing other motions into the motion, having the House say that by dealing with this motion, we've dealt with those motions. Now, your ruling would purport to say that you can only do that, presumably because we did it today, if you don't amend the motion. However, taking that subsection (c) by itself, I would suggest, belies what you've said. So I'd like to understand better your rationale for saying that that's more substantive than the motion which apparently was in order earlier today.

The Speaker: The chair is not going to get into debate in this Assembly with anyone. The chair will explain and will explain again, and the Government House Leader will listen attentively, please.

The Standing Orders are written by the members of the House. The tradition with respect to Standing Orders and the constitution of the House is essentially that, if at least it's a caring group of people, the three House leaders – that's why we have House leaders in here – will get together, will put ideas on the table, will work towards a resolution of what the constitution or the rules for governance of the House should be.

They are written by the members of the House. Sometimes the chair, the Speaker, may be aware of them. Sometimes the Speaker may not be aware of them. Sometimes the Speaker may be consulted as to whether or not a provision under Standing Orders is an intelligent one, an appropriate one, a functioning one, a desirable one. Sometimes the Speaker might even suggest to the drafters of these Standing Orders that that's really quite inappropriate, that it's not the best direction to go, but it still rests with the House if the House wants to proceed.

Generally – generally – when major changes are made to Standing Orders, governments can use their majority to basically bring about what it is that they want, and sometimes the minority can use its position to veto if in fact you're dealing with respect to questions that require unanimous consent.

But in the case of 34(2.1), "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must," it says "must," not may be, could be, should be. Now, if the hon. Government House Leader wants me to determine and define what the word "must" is, I will ask for one of the pages to get me a thesaurus. I think that "must" has the connotation that means it's mandatory, that it's not subjective. It doesn't apply in this situation when it works to one's advantage, but it applies in a different situation when it works to someone else's disadvantage.

I repeat again because I don't want any misunderstanding on this at all: "Amendments to written questions and motions for returns must be approved by Parliamentary Counsel on the sitting day preceding the day the amendment is moved." There's no suggestion in here that there has to be a subjective interpretation by anyone with respect to what that means. I dare say that I would suggest that on

the basis of the discussion that we just had here a few minutes ago, there seems to be a subjective view of what it means.

I did not write these Standing Orders. They're your Standing Orders. If there's a requirement in the Standing Orders to have a group of three or four members, then, be the interpreters of the constitution, of what these words mean – and perhaps a thesaurus or other dictionary might be found that provides what the word "must" would mean to somebody's satisfaction – then that is an option.

But the fact of the matter is that this is what it says. I can't define that any further than what I've already done on two or three occasions in the last little while. It's not the intent of this chair to basically define the word "must." It's very clear as to what the word "must" would be. As far as anything else, it's been repeated on at least two occasions with respect to that: there is the point of order. This amendment will not be proceeded with under the Standing Orders that we have in this Assembly at this time.

If the hon. members want to get together and change the Standing Orders, that's another subject, but these are our Standing Orders now. *Beauchesne* is very clear to me on what it says, and I repeat: 579(2). I've always provided another alternative as to how this might be dealt with. There's no further explanation that I can provide with respect to this.

If the hon. Government House Leader or any other member wants to have a private discussion with me in my office, I'd be very happy to have it, but we can't waste any more time in the House. This is private members' day. This is not a debate for lawyers to have a nice court appearance debate.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, with respect, again rising under section 13(2) asking for an explanation. You've read to us Standing Order 34(2.1), and you've emphasized the word "must," but you have not dealt with the word "approved." Nor have you dealt with the way that that Standing Order can be read, which says that "motions for returns must . . . be approved."

So you could read the Standing Order exactly as it's written to say that Parliamentary Counsel must approve an amendment when it's brought to him. Now, clearly that doesn't make sense. The reason for the Parliamentary Counsel to have a role in the process is to make sure that everything is in appropriate form. So what I was asking – and I don't believe this is a lawyer's debate, and I do believe this is important for this House to have discussion on – is the question of what the role of Parliamentary Counsel is in approving an amendment that is brought to him.

Now, I would submit to you that the role of Parliamentary Counsel is approval as to form. But if you wish to say that the Standing Orders prevail and have to be read as they're written, then I would suggest that you have to read it to say that motions for returns must be approved by Parliamentary Counsel; he has no discretion not to approve them. That hardly makes sense, Mr. Speaker.

So, clearly, the role of Parliamentary Counsel must be defined, and that was the interpretation I was asking you for: what's Parliamentary Counsel's role in approving an amendment before it comes before this House? We have many amendments that are brought before the House. They're always initialled by Parliamentary Counsel before introduction. We've argued on occasion as to whether or not they're in order after the Parliamentary Counsel has initialled them. Clearly, the Parliamentary Counsel's function is one as to approval as to form, and that's what we need interpretation on, because if his role is more substantive than that, then you're absolutely right: the Standing Orders need to be amended.

4:40

The Speaker: Well, we're having a debate, hon. Government House

Leader, and the hon. Government House Leader should refer to Standing Order 104.

Parliamentary Counsel

- (a) are responsible for the correctness of Bills and of amendments to Bills.

Emphasis on the word “correctness.”

- (b) shall be present, whenever required, at the Table, when any Bill is being considered in Committee of the Whole;
- (c) in the absence of the Clerk and the Clerk Assistant, shall substitute for the Clerk and exercise the authority and discharge the responsibilities normally vested in the Clerk;
- (d) shall act as counsel to the Assembly and members, to committees of the Assembly, to officers of the Assembly and to officers of the Legislature, as required;
- (e) shall assist members in drafting private members’ public Bills when requested;
- (f) shall act as examiner of private Bills in the fulfillment of counsel’s duties under Standing Orders 90 and 99;
- (g) shall transmit to the Clerk of the Assembly for delivery to all members, prior to the commencement of each session of the Legislature, a list of the reports or other periodic statements which it is the duty of any officer or department of the Government or any corporate body to make to the Assembly,
 - (i) referring to the resolution or Act wherein each is ordered,
 - (ii) placing under the name of each officer, department, or corporate body a list of reports or returns required, and
 - (iii) stating the time by which the report or periodic statement is to be tabled; and
- (h) shall prepare, for printing as statutes, the official copies of the Bills enacted by the Legislature; and
- (i) shall transmit to the Clerk for delivery to the Secretary of State, certified, sealed copies of the Bills enacted by the Legislature;

subject to such orders as counsel may receive from the Speaker or the Clerk

and to respond to the duties of the Parliamentary Counsel and always dealing with the traditions and the customs and the heritage of parliaments as we have in terms of how we deal with them in other matters.

Now, if the argument is with the table officers and the Standing Orders, then this Assembly should basically change the Standing Orders, if that’s the argument, and the Assembly always has the choice and the chance to change the Standing Orders. If the argument here is an interpretation asked for of the chair, the Speaker, because the Speaker upholds the Standing Orders, and if the debate now is a question of confidence in the chair, then the Assembly also has a major responsibility to deal with this by notice of a substantive motion in the chair.

The Standing Orders are very, very clear. They’re written by the Assembly. The chair has written and dealt with the Standing Orders on one or two occasions. The chair has pointed out on the basis of the other materials that we have in here that if there’s going to be a major change, a substantive change in the scope of the question – and if you look at the amendment to Motion for a Return 14, it strikes out “Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations” and substitutes “government of Alberta” – no problem with that – and in (c) adds the following. No problem with that. The substantive change comes in striking out “broken down by company and total dollar amount for each” and substituting “and a listing of vendors providing these services.” There’s a dramatic difference of intent.

This is private members’ day. If an hon. member wants to stand up and move a motion, that member has the right to stand up in this Assembly to move the motion. It is not the government’s afternoon; it’s a private members’ afternoon.

Now, if the motions are the same, if there would have been no change in what was requested in the motion and it would have simply applied to all departments, no problem. If it would have been outlined what they were, no problem. But if there’s going to be a substantive difference, what in essence is happening here is denigrating the role of a private member.

There’s an assumption here that one question having been dealt with would then be dealt with in the same way for all others. These are different questions sometimes from different members to different departments. What their intent is I do not know. I can’t get in anybody’s mind.

All I can ask for is the greatest degree of sense that goes along with this as private members’ day, recognizing that we look at the best utilization of time in this Assembly, recognizing that this is a democracy, recognizing that the majority will always win, understanding that there still is a role for private members.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Debate Continued

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On the basis of your ruling I’m pleased to reject Written Question 14 on behalf of the government.

Ms Blakeman: I’m sorry to hear that, and I regret that the government is refusing to provide the information that we’re looking for, which is fairly simply information just on the contracts for information technology broken down by company and total dollar amounts. I’m sorry that they’re rejecting the request for information.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 14 lost]

Department of Sustainable Resource Development IT Costs

M15. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the discussion that we’ve just had relative to Motion for a Return 14, I would note in looking at Motion for a Return 15 that it is almost exactly identical to Motion for a Return 14. The difference between Motion for a Return 15 and Motion for a Return 14 is that Motion for a Return 15 talks about the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development and Motion for a Return 14 talks about the Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations. In all other respects it would appear that those motions are identical.

Now, I would refer the House to Motion for a Return 10, which was dealt with last Monday. I don’t have it exactly in front of me, but I think it was dealt with by way of an amendment, which deleted the title – in this case it would be Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development and substituting “government of Alberta” – and deleted a section of it: do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the ministry on contracts for information broken down by company and total dollar amount. So it deleted “broken down by company and dollar amount” and substituted “and a listing of vendors providing these services.” That amendment was passed,

as I recall it, on MR 10, and then the amended motion was passed by the House.

It's unfortunate that we passed a motion which is presumably out of order as per your ruling this afternoon, but in any event that's what was done. So we have that amendment and we have MR 10 passed, which provides for the government of Alberta to provide for a return showing the contracts for the government of Alberta broken down by company and dollar amount. Hence, Motion for a Return 15 is redundant, and therefore I would say that it should be rejected on behalf of the government.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Well, I'm afraid I disagree with the Minister of Justice and the Government House Leader. I find that there is a substantial difference between the ministries of Sustainable Resource Development and International and Intergovernmental Relations. I would argue that that is the key to what makes these motions different.

There's going to be a campaign now, I think, from government to try and make it look like we are somehow remiss or at fault for trying to get information from the government, and I think that we're well within our rights to ask for this information. We would like to get it. I don't see that it's that difficult for the government to provide it for us. It's not being provided, and I can't speculate on why the government refuses to provide it, but it's obviously refusing to provide some fairly simple information here.

The minister keeps going back to Motion for a Return 10 and that somehow in the passing of that, all other motions should follow the same example. Again, I look at the division records, and it's quite clear that the government members have a majority and were able to use that majority to force the passage of Motion for a Return 10. That does not mean that that was the information that the Official Opposition was looking for. It does not mean that it then becomes an example to be used in all other instances where the Official Opposition is seeking information and the government does not give it to us and wants to amend and make it more vague. So I would refute the constant reference that the Government House Leader makes to Motion for a Return 10 that it is somehow an example of what should happen here.

4:50

As I've said before, Mr. Speaker, I'm more than happy to work with the Government House Leader and the third party House leader where we are able to successfully negotiate that we will get the information we are seeking. I did already use the example that happened earlier today where the motion was exactly the same except that it was allowing the inclusion of other named ministries. But to have a motion that now comes in two parts, one amending the intent or the information being sought and the second asking that additional motions be struck because they are included in it, is simply not acceptable, and the Speaker has already ruled on that.

You know, the government has all the power here. We're merely the opposition doing our best to seek information. The government repeatedly put us towards asking these questions in this venue and has refused to provide us the information in other venues. So what we've come down to is once again the government using its overwhelming majority to try and bash the Official Opposition on the head. I regret that such simple information as a dollar amount spent on technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for the 2002-2003 fiscal year is beyond the government's ability to provide, and I do once again plead for common

sense, some cool heads, and support for the motion as presented. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 15 lost]

Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development IT Contracts

M16. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for the Ministry and Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move an amendment to Motion 16 such that the amendment would strike out "the Ministry and Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development" and substitute "all ministries and departments in the government of Alberta referred to in motions for returns 17, 50, 51, 54, 63, 74, 76, 77, 106, 107, 124, 125, 126, 127, 144, 145, and 206." The motion as amended would then read:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for all ministries and departments in the government of Alberta referred to in motions for returns 17, 50, 51, 54, 63, 74, 76, 77, 106, 107, 124, 125, 126, 127, 144, 145, and 206.

Mr. Speaker, in speaking to the amendment, I would point out to the House that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the previous motion has complained about the lack of information that the government is prepared to provide. In fact, by substituting the amendment here, which deals with all ministries and departments of the government, we're expanding the information that's going to be provided because it will be done for all departments of government rather than being done on an individual basis as and when a particular critic might put their three or four motions on the table.

In fact, what's happened in this House under our Order Paper is that if you look at it, there are groupings of written questions and motions for returns, so it would appear – and I don't intend to make any allegation against any member, but I just surmised from looking at it that each opposition critic has decided to come forward with virtually the same question with respect to each of their departments, and one or two haven't done it. So we have written questions that are identical for all intents and purposes with respect to most but all not all departments of government.

Well, I think we can correct that oversight, Mr. Speaker, by having it deal with all departments of government. Rather than dealing with it on an individual one-by-one basis, we can approve an amendment which aggregates them all into the same motion and deals with them all at one time, thus saving some essential time in this House so that we can deal with other private members' business.

Now, I don't deny for a moment that private members have the right to put questions on the Order Paper, but when questions are put on the Order Paper where they deal with each individual department and deal with exactly the same return for each department, then it seems to me that it makes sense to aggregate them together and to deal with them all at once.

You've ruled earlier, Mr. Speaker, that one can't make a substantive amendment to a motion. On the previous motion the member was saying that we weren't providing all of the information. Well, in fact, the reality is that the amended Motion for a Return 10, just to use as an example when speaking to this amendment, actually does expand the information which is available to the opposition.

Now, it doesn't necessarily put it in a form that's easy for them to read. I grant that. What it does is provide the same information for all departments of government. What it does is show the dollar amount on contracts and a listing of vendors for the services. This is relevant because now they're asking for the policies relating to the contracts.

So what they will get under Motion for a Return 10 is a return on all departments of government with the dollar value of contracts and a listing of the vendors, and of course they can find out how much each vendor gets by looking at what we colloquially call the blue book or the listing that's published every year with respect to how much is paid to any individual or corporation in the province of Alberta. That's all a matter of public record.

Now, one of the problems with motions for returns is that it's not so simple as to say: why not give us this information? We have civil servants in this province who are doing yeoman's service on behalf of Albertans providing the services that they've been hired to provide, and we want to keep them doing that. We do not believe it's appropriate or useful to sideline those people who are out there making sure the courts are open every day, making sure the cheques are delivered on time, making sure that the program delivery happens. To take them off those tasks to squirrel through files or through information to prepare a report so that we can table it and give it to the opposition when that information is readily available to the opposition in documents that are already published does not make sense.

So to aggregate the questions as one, to say that we'll respond on behalf of all departments to save them the time of cluttering the Order Paper with the individual departments and to amend the motion in a way, not in this motion but in others, to aggregate the information, to put it in a more answerable form is an entirely appropriate way to go. It results, Mr. Speaker, in the opposition getting more information, not less, and points them in a manner in which they can use that information.

They can get the additional information they need from already published material without the downside of using up civil service time. These people are being paid to do useful jobs on behalf of the people of Alberta, to serve Albertans, and instead they want to sidetrack them to find answers to 210 motions for returns and then complain when we try and put them together so that you can get a comprehensive report that's got more information than was requested, not necessarily in the same form, because sometimes in order to get the information, it's necessary to change the question to get it into a more answerable form, and that's what we've purported to do.

I would ask the House to support this amendment so that we can take a number of those questions – in fact, 17 plus the one we're debating, so 18 – off the Order Paper and save us the problem of dealing with another four or five when they get around to putting those ones on the Order Paper, Mr. Speaker. So I'd ask the House to accept this amendment.

5:00

Ms Blakeman: I'm very happy to support this amendment. It cannot have gone by the notice of the Government House Leader, who is a learned man and particularly learned in exactly the sort of issues we're dealing with here, which is the specificity of language and administrative law, that the argument that he and I are having today, ably watched over by the Speaker, is about whether or not the changes substantially change the motion. Right here I'm more than willing to accept this because the information that the opposition is seeking is exactly the same and it is adding in the rest of those departments.

Now, why did we do this one by one and name every department? Because we wanted the information from every department. If the government is willing to give us the exact the information that we asked for for every department, we don't have a problem, and I've been very clear about that.

The wording is exactly the same between the two. We've got: "Current information technology services." Looking at the amended motion: "Current information technology services." "Contract tendering policy and process." "Contract tendering policy and process" for all ministries or for the ministry. We are very happy to accept this when you are going to give us the information we are seeking. Therefore, I am very happy to support this.

The opposition has no interest in being intransigent on this one. We have interest in getting information – and that is why we are here – when the information that is being offered and the information that is being sought are the same. But when the Government House Leader tries to extrapolate this further on and make some other motion in which Parliamentary Counsel will recognize that it is not the same, the Speaker recognizes that it's not the same, then we are not in agreement any longer.

I'm more than willing to support this motion. It gives us the information we're seeking. It gives it for all of the ministries that we're seeking it for, which includes the office of the Premier, Economic Development, Environment, Government Services, Energy, Seniors, Justice and Attorney General, Community Development, Innovation and Science, Learning, Solicitor General, Gaming, Public Affairs, Transportation, Infrastructure, Municipal Affairs, and Children's Services.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: Now we'll close the debate. The motion is amended then.

Mr. Hancock: Could we not continue debate on the motion itself?

The Speaker: Well, we can. I haven't recognized . . .

Mr. Hancock: I've already spoken.

The Speaker: You've already spoken on it. So who else wants to debate?

Mr. Hancock: I just assumed that others might wish to.

The Speaker: Anybody else?

Then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you for the information.

[Motion for a Return 16 as amended carried]

The Speaker: This motion having been done now takes off the Order Paper the following aggregated motions as well: 17, 50, 51, 54, 63, 74, 76, 77, 106, 107, 124, 125, 126, 127, 144, 145, and 206. They're not to return; they're gone. It can be done.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would request unanimous consent of the House to leave this order of business and move to private members' bills.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head:

**Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 203
Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes
Amendment Act, 2004**

[Adjourned debate March 1: Mr. Lord]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to join the debate on second reading of Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the Member for Calgary-West. This bill seems to propose reasonable amendments to the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act.

I do not think that the bill will be a cause for concern by the Alberta government. No one is going to get rich from the CPP credits. However, these credits will become very important for people living on fixed incomes in their retirement years. I agree with other speakers who believe that Bill 203 addresses an issue that should receive more attention. The notion of opting out of the CPP credit-splitting program was granted to the provinces by the federal government almost 18 years ago.

Rev. Abbott: Eighteen?

Mr. Cao: Yes, 18 years ago.

Alberta would not be the first province to take advantage of this option. This isn't groundbreaking legislation, but it is a sensible amendment.

For most people planning for retirement or living with financial independence in their later years is a distant concern. Retirement, pensions, and RRSPs are a minor consideration for most Canadians. In their initial form CPP credits may not be as valuable as other property; however, some people qualify for coverage from the CPP. The real value of CPP credits shows their monetary value in the form of a regular cheque sent by the federal government.

Bill 203 will hopefully motivate divorced couples to reconsider the importance of their public pension regardless of its size. This bill clears the way for divorced and separated couples to equally split or otherwise divide their Canada pension plan credits gained during their marriage.

As we heard through our debate last Monday, people place varying degrees of importance on CPP credits. Some believe that credits should be on the bargaining table as an asset when proceeding with a divorce or separation settlement. Others feel that CPP credits do not offer a great deal of wealth compared to other savings and are therefore easily discarded. I think that the attitude towards CPP credits will change over time. As a person comes closer to retirement age, they will look for opportunities to gain as much equity as possible in an effort to secure more financial independence.

CPP credits may not be as highly regarded by people in their late 30s or early 40s. Some people in their peak income-earning years do not believe that CPP credits are worth a great deal and can be easily traded for some other property gained during marriage. This attitude changes when people seriously consider their financial options as they approach retirement. The seemingly insignificant CPP credits can be a valuable and stable source of income to offset regular expenses such as utility bills.

Right now without Bill 203 a person can attempt to reclaim at any future date the CPP credits that were agreed to be the rightful

property of their former spouse in the spousal agreement. Legally there is little recourse for people who lose this portion of their credits even though the signed waiver is a standard legal agreement.

The federal legislation states that in order for the provinces to opt out of the program and agree not to split their CPP benefits, they must pass provincial legislation allowing for this agreement. Bill 203 will take this loophole away from people who attempt to reclaim a part of their portion that they willingly gave to their former spouse during a divorce.

5:10

This bill goes further. Assuming former spouses find out about this legal grey area, there is an important provision that makes the CPP credit-splitting agreement binding to June 4 of 1986. As we've heard from the Member for Calgary-West, this date was not chosen randomly. Amendments to the Canada Pension Plan Act to allow provinces to opt out of credit splitting were introduced on June 4, 1986. Section 55.2(3) states that a spousal agreement entered into on or after June 4, 1986, contains a provision that indicates the intention of the spouses or former spouses that there be no division of unadjusted pensionable earnings.

A few speakers here in second reading, some in Canada's legal community, have argued that CPP credits are part of the federal social program and should not be negotiable. I would agree that there is a significant social theme to the Canada pension plan. However, we must remember that a divorce is based mostly on division of property. The negotiating that goes along with the divorce fuels angry feelings and ill will exchanged between the two parties.

Private and provincial pension plans can be split or otherwise distributed in a divorce. From a financial perspective the only difference between the Canada pension plan and other pensions is the source of funds. During a divorce property is seen by some couples as much more than simple material items. It is seen as an entitlement. As a result, everything gained during a divorce is negotiable, and this includes CPP credits. At the time of a divorce CPP credits may seem useless to some Albertans, but over time and in the event of retirement or disability these credits become a stable source of income.

Mr. Speaker, imagine if a former spouse were able to claim other property attained during the marriage, such as a vehicle or house. I can assure you that the debate would be short and action from the government to remedy the situation would be swift. However, one of the differences between CPP credits and other property is that credits do not provide an immediate financial gain. The importance placed upon CPP credits will vary with every divorce. Bill 203 simply ensures that couples divorced since June 1986 adhere to their signed agreement and no future entitlement can be claimed. The bill also ensures that couples going through a divorce in the future will have the choice to choose how the CPP credits are divided.

Mr. Speaker, according to Statistics Canada there were 8,176 divorces in Alberta in the year 2000. This is a significant number of people who may not be aware of the provision surrounding the splitting of CPP benefits. Bill 203 could serve to bring a heightened understanding of this issue.

Some may argue that this bill overestimates the importance of CPP credits. The amount of time and money Canadians dedicate to retirement should be enough for this Assembly to move forward and pass Bill 203. According to the national survey only 1 in 3 Canadians have adequately planned for retirement. Another way of looking at this is that over 65 per cent of Canadians will not have financial independence when they reach their retirement age.

Passing Bill 203 will help people realize that the CPP credit-

splitting program is available to divorced couples. Albertans should be encouraged to take some responsibility to plan for their retirement. CPP credits will not be enough to provide full financial security after retirement.

Hopefully, Bill 203 will send a message to Albertans that pension credits do have value and that retirement options should be taken more seriously. Not proceeding with Bill 203 would mean that this government will continue to allow the opportunity by some to claim CPP credits that are not rightfully theirs. This bill fills a significant legislative gap that will become very important as Canada's aging population reaches retirement.

Mr. Speaker, the other part of Bill 203 that I would like to refer to is the protection clause. Bill 203 also protects former spouses from people who may see an opportunity to nullify the agreement to share CPP pensions. For this I want to support the bill.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Calgary-West, by recognizing you, this would end the debate. I've noticed that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford still wishes to participate. Sorry. Debate continues until all members have had a chance within the time frame.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be brief just so that the hon. member opposite has plenty of occasion to get her words on the record before time expires.

As all members know and understand, when a marriage does break down, it is the mandatory policy of the federal government for the partners to equally split the Canada pension plan credits accrued during the marriage. This policy was brought forward in 1987 to recognize that both spouses, regardless of whether they worked outside or inside the home, are guaranteed some form of pension on retirement.

The policy was designed to be automatic. The point is, Mr. Speaker, that it is not automatic, and at any time after the dissolution of the marriage either partner is able to apply for a share of the pension plan benefits. This bill seeks to put some certainty to that, and for that reason I endorse it wholeheartedly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak on Bill 203, Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. This bill, sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-West, has far-reaching implications for men and women who break a matrimonial relationship and then seek to carve out their own futures.

We have widely consulted with groups likely to be affected by this bill and the amendment that it seeks to make to Canada pension plan credits statutes as they exist now. We've been receiving some expressions of concern which are extremely serious if this bill were to become law.

Currently in the case of a relationship breakdown either spouse can apply for division of CPP credits accumulated during that relationship. If such a request is made by either partner, the credits are totalled and divided equally between the spouses. There are no mechanisms for appealing or disputing whether the credits should be split. If a request is made, the split is automatic. It is not affected by whether a divorce settlement has stipulated that the credits not be split. So the bill amends the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act to eliminate the automatic splitting and to encourage or force ex-spouses to make an intentional decision about whether CPP credits will be split as part of the settlement.

5:20

Mr. Speaker, we need to keep in mind the fact that marital relationships, particularly those that break down and lead to dissolution of the relationship, a split in the relationship, are often bitterly contested relationships. They are attended by bitter disputes, contestations, arguments before those relationships reach a breaking point.

Now, there are certain assumptions in the bill. The bill talks about providing choice to spouses who may have walked away from their relationship, and the choice is seen as a good thing, no doubt. Choice also appeals to the question of equality. It provides sort of equal opportunities for former spouses to choose between either splitting the CPP credits or not. On the face of it it sounds very nice, sounds very reasonable, Mr. Speaker.

When you look at it from the point of view of spouses who as a rule in a marital relationship are in a position of inequality, in a position of not being able to act as if they were equal partners – and this situation of unequal partnership is a result of not just one particular law but long-held traditions and histories of spousal relationships – then I think that one needs to acknowledge that merely seeking formal equality is not enough. Conditions, a substantive side of the equation, need to be taken into account.

I think I needn't remind the House that it's only in recent years, perhaps less than 20 years ago, closer to 15 years ago, in 1986, '87 I think, that the legislation was changed, issuing an entitlement to a fairer split in the course of marriage. That was, Mr. Speaker, the mid-80s, the late '80s. It was the era when 50-50 property split came about. Before '87 women would be missing out on access to public pension plans and a fair split in the matrimonial property that was created during the period of marriage. There used to be a three-year limit to apply, and the government removed that ultimately. So no matrimonial legislation could take that federally entrenched right away from the spouse who sought this split, in most cases the women in the relationships. This current legislation before us, Bill 203, would allow people to contract out of this requirement.

The problem is, Mr. Speaker, that those rights, when opened back to negotiation, are often given away for nothing in a relationship when it is a relationship of unequal power, unequal means, and unequal standing. There is very little consideration given in this bill to that kind of situation. In a marriage where one spouse is at a disadvantage by not being able to get that split, I think that's a situation that, in my view, is not appropriately addressed in this bill. It's especially, I think, important for older women.

It's very difficult to quantify the worth of these legislated rights to equal split in CPP credits, Mr. Speaker. People often in desperation are not able to assess what they may be giving up. The current law, as it presently exists, in a sense guarantees that there is no way that the CPP split can become a bargaining chip, but if this legislation is passed, this is precisely what would happen. Spouses in that kind of conflict relationship, particularly mothers and women, would sometimes find that they're desperate about getting some sort of a settlement, especially when children are involved, and under those conditions a woman could feel enormous pressure to give up a CPP split in return for a speedier settlement. Currently some women give joint custody just to get the divorce settled.

So, Mr. Speaker, it's those kinds of concerns that have been brought to our attention by people that we have been consulting on this bill, and we have consulted quite broadly with respect to this bill. The bill is sort of typical of minds that make assumptions that we are all treated equally and we are in fact all living under conditions of not only formal equality that the law might entitle us to but actual material conditions. That is not the case, unfortunately. I have in my hand a document which is . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, your time has now elapsed.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thought the bell had expired debate.

I appreciate an opportunity to also get on the record regarding Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act. Certainly, we are considering amending the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act so that spouses or common-law partners may enter into a written agreement that notwithstanding the Canada pension plan there will be no division between them of unadjusted pensionable earnings. Now, the amendments of Bill 203 certainly deal with the division of assets after a divorce or a separation, as was mentioned, but Bill 203 has the potential to negatively discriminate against the lower income earner in the relationship, which is more often than not the female.

Now, I would urge all hon. members to be careful when debating Bill 203. When we have a bill that seeks to govern the division of

unadjusted pensionable earnings and the entitlement to the subsequent pension and thus will have an impact on spouses and common-law partners after a divorce or a separation, the inevitable consequence of a written agreement made under Bill 203 is that the spouse or partner with the larger pension will benefit over the spouse or partner with the smaller pension. More often than not, Mr. Speaker, this will penalize the female in the relationship, especially, as I said earlier, older women who are homemakers and did not earn a pension.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Assembly stands adjourned till 8 o'clock.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, March 29, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/29

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

With the members' consent may we revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure and an honour this evening to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly members of the 1st St. Albert Scouts. They are seated in the public gallery here this evening. They are accompanied by their two leaders, Stephen Maunder and Larry Snidal. I'd like to indicate that Stephen works with Alberta Environment, for which we are very honoured and pleased. I'd ask the Scouts to rise as I call their names, and I'd ask both Scout leaders to stay standing while I make these introductions, please. The Scouts' names are John Delorme, Jordan Snidal, Justin Maunder, Zac Keith, Shaun Boddez, and Ryan Johnson. I had the honour this evening of speaking with these fine young gentlemen, and they are very intelligent and very well versed on what is before us in debate here on the floor. I'd ask everyone to give them a very warm welcome.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Health Care Premiums

505. Dr. Taft moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to eliminate health care premiums.

[Debate adjourned March 22: Mr. MacDonald speaking]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to respond to the motion put forward by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. This motion calls upon the government to remove health care premiums for all Albertans, thereby on the one hand eliminating premiums for Albertans but on the other hand seeking a new source of revenue to sustain Alberta's health care system.

I agree that the issue of eliminating premiums has come up from time to time, in fact many times. I know that many Albertans do believe that they ought not to pay health care premiums. It is important to note at this time that approximately 60 per cent of Alberta seniors pay either no health care premiums or only partial premiums. Health care is important to Albertans and, indeed, to all Canadians, but if health care premiums were to be removed, we would need to take steps to make up for the shortfall in health funding caused by the abolition of health care premiums.

My position, Mr. Speaker, is that we would have to take these steps within an overall framework of health reform, not make a decision in isolation. It isn't simply that we're living in a system that costs a lot of money. What we're doing in government is administering a system that Albertans care for that costs exponentially more money each and every year. So we're not just fighting to

keep an even amount of money. Every year we need to fight to get more money into the health care system, an 8 to 10 per cent increase per year. Common logic suggests that this continual increase in cost needs to stop.

We in Alberta are fortunate to have several sources of revenue from which to draw, thereby helping to ensure that health care funding only comprises roughly 35 per cent of our provincial budget. In other provinces we're looking at closer to 45 to 50 per cent of the budgets being spent on the costs associated with health services. Given the rise in cost, it is conceivable that Alberta's health care costs will continue to creep up to those percentages if we do not take steps to limit the growth.

So while health care is the priority, it also presents onerous costs, which means that for the sake of argument if we are going to take away a source of funding, then we need to ensure that we have a plan to either reduce health care services or a plan to make up those lost dollars. Then we'd have to get the money from somewhere, and where would we get it from? The federal government? Well, no one on this side is holding his or her breath for that to happen despite the promises being made by the Prime Minister.

When the Prime Minister was Finance minister of Canada, he was responsible for gutting health care funding to the provinces. It's pretty clear that when it comes to health care, he's a major part of the problem. What we've been left with is a system in which the federal government kicks in only 16 per cent of health care funding in all provinces. My hon. friends across the way will agree that this is far short of the 50 per cent the feds are supposed to provide under the Canada Health Act.

So what have we got? We've got provinces straining to meet their health care commitments alongside all of the other commitments they need to meet: schools, roads, children's programs, housing for low-income seniors and the working poor, and so on. We have the federal government not meeting their commitments, and then expecting us to get excited when they say that they'll kick in an extra \$2 billion to be divided amongst all the provinces. The offer falls well short, but of course we'll take it because it's owed. Let's be honest: the extra federal contribution amounts to enough money to pay for nine days of health care delivery in Alberta.

It doesn't make sense that the feds are only kicking in this much, especially considering that they've had record surpluses for the past five years. What have they done with that money? Not paid down their debt. The situation created is appalling, Mr. Speaker. The federal government is swimming in a pool of excess dollars while health care systems across the country are struggling to stay afloat. These excess dollars should be used to fill provincial health care pools, but you'd have to be out in the deep end to believe that this situation is going to be changed by the current Prime Minister. So with all due respect to the opposition across the way we're not holding our breath over here.

So if it's not coming from the federal government, then where is the money coming from? We hear that it would come perhaps from taxes or oil revenues, but this won't work either. Albertans have told us that they do not want their taxes raised. Albertans have told us that they support our broad-based, low single-rate tax plan, so for us to turn around and increase taxes would in short be against the wishes of Albertans. Oil revenues aren't the answer either. We've already embarked upon a plan to sustain our budgets by taking oil revenues and depositing them for the future, and eliminating health care premiums for the simple sake of replacing them with money from oil reserves is not the answer. These approaches don't break the fundamental problem, which is that many people think that health care is free or that it should be.

An Hon. Member: It's not?

Ms Kryczka: No. Further, it doesn't fit with the principles of running a sustainable government for today and for many years down the road. So these aren't real solutions, and those who want to replace health care premiums therefore have to look elsewhere.

Mr. Speaker, it might be instructive for the Liberals to look at the Mazankowski report if they're looking for substitutions to health care premiums. The Mazankowski report raises several options that we could look at that may have the ability to replace health care premiums. These include options such as user fees, making health care services taxable benefits, introducing a dedicated health tax, supplementary insurance, privately funded and privately delivered health services, medical savings accounts, and variable premiums. Many of these are rejected outright for a variety of reasons. Some contravene the Canada Health Act, some are discriminatory, and others go against the fundamental pillar of health care in our country, which is that people who are truly sick deserve first-rate care and should not be denied access to our system due to an inability to pay.

Others such as medical savings accounts are not rejected. Medical savings accounts, or MSAs, are built upon the premise that individuals are allocated a set amount of health care dollars per year. Depending upon the design of an MSA an individual could carry unspent money over from year to year, thereby giving them a fairly accurate picture of the price of their use of the health care system. As well, government would be there to pick up the cost of those health procedures that come with heavier price tags. However, given the discussion of MSAs it is important to note that the money has to go into the MSAs from somewhere and thus leaves us back at the same question I started with: where is the money going to come from?

One of the things that we need to understand about replacing health care premiums is that it ought to be discussed only within a responsible plan for comprehensive health reform. The Liberals have raised this as a one-off issue, and doing so plays irresponsibly with a lot of the emotions of Albertans who do not like to pay health care premiums. Health care premiums can be a lightning rod for some people, so it's easy to score political points by saying that they should be eliminated, but we have to remember that the premiums fit within a larger scheme of health care considerations.

When we discuss health care premiums or raise the subject of the elimination of premiums, we should consider the bigger picture. We should responsibly present the options and some of the concerns that are raised by the options. We should lay out the challenges that are posed by the growth of health care funding. We should lay out the challenges posed by the increasing costs of health care. This motion does not do any of this, and this is why I'd like my colleagues to vote against Motion 505.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, we have a request for reversion to Introduction of Guests. Are you agreed?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 8:10 **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to introduce two employees of the county of St. Paul who are here these next three days for their spring convention. I'd like to

first of all introduce the chief executive officer, Kim Heyman, if I could ask her to stand, please, and also the chief superintendent of public works, Mr. Leo DeMoissac. If I could ask the Assembly to please give them the traditional warm welcome.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Health Care Premiums

(continued)

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [some applause] The single clap is too kind. I would just like to say to all members that you only have to endure me for one more week and the Member for Lethbridge-East one more day.

Mr. Speaker, just before I start, I really have to congratulate the Member for Edmonton-Manning and his wife and three older children on the arrival of their brand spanking new baby boy. Congratulations. I know that that was a long-awaited date, and we hope everybody is doing well at home. Nine pounds, three ounces. That's a good size.

Mr. Speaker, on this motion. We have before us an excellent Motion 505, elimination of health care premiums. It's long been the situation for the Official Opposition to have supported the elimination of health care premiums in this province. We are one of only two Canadian provinces that still charge these premiums, and it truly is a regressive tax. Anyone who has ever studied economic modelling or the impact of regressive taxes on lower middle-income families or those on fixed incomes knows that it is one of the worst and most diabolical ways that a government can raise taxes.

Mr. Mason: Well, that lets these guys out.

Ms Carlson: No, that does not let these guys out, hon. member. Well, they haven't studied it, but diabolical in terms of regressive taxes they are.

We've seen, Mr. Speaker, that recently the burden has become even greater. Even though there were many musings from this government back in 2001, I believe it was, that they also were thinking of eliminating health care premiums, what did we see them actually contribute to doing? That was increasing those premiums by 30 per cent as soon as they had won an election, which is what often happens. In 2001, prior to that election, they talked about eliminating them, but within a month after the election up the premiums go by more than 30 per cent. This was an increase that attacked all families, those on fixed incomes, seniors particularly, who in previous administrations had been exempt from paying these premiums.

Once again we heard last fall that there was a possibility that at least premiums might be eliminated for either low-income seniors or those on fixed incomes. We all awaited the announcement in this year's budget, but it didn't happen, Mr. Speaker. That's really too bad because it means that this government isn't listening to those people who are hardest hit by regressive taxes, and they choose instead to take other options.

I disagree with the former speaker's comments about having some other way to pay for these taxes. First of all, there's a fair amount of administration involved in administering this premium, a fair number of dollars that are written off each year from people whom they can't collect from. When you net that out, the net impact on the tax base is negligible, particularly when you see what impact keeping those dollars in the hands of low-income people every month means in terms of the economic spinoff. They come immediately right back

into the economy. It isn't like they're hoarded away somewhere and taken out of the cash flow of the province. So there are other real economic spinoffs to keeping those dollars in circulation.

We really believe that it is time to eliminate health care premiums. We have just seen a very lowball budget come into this Assembly where oil and gas revenues are underestimated by a minimum of a billion dollars.

An Hon. Member: That's easy for you to say.

Ms Carlson: It is easy for me to say. I stand here and say right now that just before election time we're going to see all kinds of election goodies and giveaways again, and the government is going to say: oh, you know, we do have a huge surplus here.

What I'd like this government to do is to actually project their revenues based on reasonable economic models, which is not what happened. They completely lowballed this budget. They're coming in with a huge surplus already and at what cost? At a cost to those people in this province who can't afford to carry the weight for these guys while they stock away a lot of dollars to give away at election time. It's the wrong way for them to be running the government.

It's time for them to put some money in the pockets of people who need it. Those would be people on fixed incomes, low-income people, seniors. The dividends to all of you at election time are huge from that because who's going to be voting with their pocketbook this time? It's going to be seniors, and you're going to feel the impact of that. So there will come a day when you rue the day that you didn't do some simple, forward-looking steps like eliminating health care premiums.

I urge everybody to think about this this evening and perhaps change your minds and vote for the people of this province. Support this motion.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to add my comments to those of the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. However, they'll be quite different on Motion 505. That's a motion to eliminate health care premiums. I wish to quote from Premier Tommy Douglas' speech which ended the great medicare debate in the province of Saskatchewan in the Legislature in October of 1961. I can't do the accent.

We propose that the family tax, which we admit is a regressive tax, since there is a flat rate on every family, and therefore bears no relationship to ability to pay, should be kept as small as possible. We propose that the balance of the cost – probably two-thirds of the cost – ought to be raised by factors which have a measure of ability to pay.

So he's talking about that this family tax or premium that should be about 33 and a third per cent. Then he summed up his speech.

Every person in the province who is self-supporting and able to pay a relatively small per capita tax, will be eligible for care and those who are not self-supporting will be covered by other programs.

I want to say that I think there is a value in having every family and every individual make some individual contribution. I think it has psychological value. I think it keeps the public aware of the cost and gives the people a sense of personal responsibility. I would say to the members of this House that even if we could finance the plan without a per capita tax, I personally would strongly advise against it. I would like to see the per capita tax so low that it is merely a nominal tax, but I think there is a psychological value in people paying something for their [health] cards. It is something which they have bought; it entitles them to certain services. We should have the constant realization that if those services are abused

and costs get out of hand, then of course the cost of the medical care is bound to go up.

Alberta members do realize that Alberta's health care premium covers roughly only 13 per cent of our health care budget, which is well below Tommy Douglas' suggested per capita of 33 and a third. Progressive taxes that people are lauding cover 87 per cent of the health care budget. When hon. members consider what the average Albertan pays to own a motor vehicle, operate it, license it, and insure it, our health care premiums are really quite reasonable and certainly manifest the spirit enunciated by the father of medicare in Canada. I agree with Tommy Douglas. Let us keep the health care premium in Alberta.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to speak to the motion before us this evening dealing with the elimination of health care premiums. I would like to respond to the previous speaker.

At the time that Tommy Douglas made those statements, the costs of the health care system were substantially less than they are today. We've heard the Premier and the Minister of Health and Wellness go on and on and on about the rapidly escalating costs of the health care system. When Tommy Douglas spoke those words, the health care system was far simpler and less expensive than it is today. When he talked about a nominal cost to remind people that the health care system does actually have to be paid for and is not free, something I entirely agree with, he was not talking about the magnitude of health care premiums that are paid by the people of this province today in a much more expensive health care system with much larger budgets.

8:20

Certainly, I doubt very much that Tommy Douglas would consider the kind of health care premiums we pay today, over a thousand dollars in the case of most families, to be nominal. If the hon. member did quote Mr. Douglas correctly, he did use the words "nominal" and "as small as possible," and I would ask members of this House if they believe that these fees are as small as possible. They raise nearly a billion dollars for the provincial Treasury, which is my next point, Mr. Speaker. These monies are not put into the health care system. They are a tax that flows directly into the general revenues of the province.

Now, what could we do that would be less onerous to remind people that the health care system is expensive and does have a cost? One thing that I recall, Mr. Speaker, was a printout of the medical services used and the costs that were charged the health care system that was sent on an annual basis, so every family knew exactly what had been charged to the system on their behalf, what procedures, and how much they cost. That, in my view, would go far, far further in drawing to people's attention the actual cost.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

It has the added benefit of being a check against delivery. In other words, if the health care system has been charged for services or procedures that were not actually delivered – and that is a possibility – then there is an opportunity through that system for the prevention of fraud. So if we are sincere about trying to remind people of the cost of the health care system, that would go far further than the practice of this government to charge very high health care premiums.

Now, it's interesting that there was a 30 per cent increase because

if you read the Mazankowski report, it proposed that there be far greater increases in health care premiums than just a mere 30 per cent increase. I also recall the Minister of Health and Wellness talking about how the government was going to adopt and embrace all of the health care recommendations contained in the Mazankowski report. That suddenly stopped, Mr. Speaker, and, fortunately, other proposals such as delisting of services and further privatization seem to have been stalled. Now it would appear that the Premier has got a new fire in his belly for so-called health care reform.

But I note that the Graydon report, if I can call it that, Mr. Speaker, without breaking the rules, has not been released by the government. Here we have another one of these secret all-Tory backbench committees that consults with no one, talks to nobody that we're aware of, and makes a report that we never see. Apparently, it is so unpopular, according to the Minister of Health and Wellness, that the government doesn't want to release it. Now, under some pressure, the government has indicated that it will eventually release it but only when it's all been wrapped in a public relations campaign manufactured by the best spin doctors that the government has from its propaganda bureau, the Public Affairs Bureau.

So the question is: where is the government going with health care premiums? The Premier has also hinted from time to time that there may in fact be an elimination of health care premiums for seniors. In fact, he's promised that. We're expecting that as the government progresses and we get a little closer to the election, this will be announced by the government. It's not contained, as it ought to be, in this budget because all of the goodies in the budget aren't actually in the budget. They're going to be rolled out one after another so that the government can maximize the propaganda benefit thereof.

I would say this: if the government is at last going to keep one of its promises and eliminate health care premiums for seniors, then congratulations to the government. Certainly, the opposition, and the New Democrat opposition in particular along with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, who is an honourable member of the opposition, in my view, on this issue, has pushed the government very hard into a corner, where it's finally had to do what it promises. If that happens, then some congratulations are due to the government, and many more congratulations are due to groups like the Official Opposition and the New Democrat opposition, the Edmonton-Manning opposition, and the Raging Grannies and the Friends of Medicare.

I just want to indicate, Mr. Speaker, that that doesn't go far enough. You know, it's fine to dangle out an election goody like eliminating health premiums for seniors, but we need to go further. We need to recognize this as an expensive, regressive tax that the government could do without. If it were interested in real tax breaks for real families, then this would be the place to start.

So I know that the government will vote down this motion as they voted down my own, but they will not escape legitimate criticism notwithstanding repeated attempts to misrepresent Tommy Douglas that have taken place in this Assembly. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, it's the only quote of Tommy Douglas that I think the Premier knows. At some point in the history somebody has told him that he said that health care premiums were a good idea. It's taken completely out of context and not in any sort of historical relationship to the present time.

The government has a responsibility, in my view, Mr. Speaker, not just to eliminate health care premiums for seniors, which is a good thing in itself and is due primarily to the efforts of the opposition and those who support medicare in this province, but to go further and eliminate this tax, this weighty burden on the shoulders of working and middle-class families in this province, and put a billion dollars

or about \$900 million dollars back into the Alberta economy instead of giving tax breaks to big corporations who take the money back to Texas or to the United States. The savings that they realize on the corporate tax break that this government is so fond of don't necessarily even benefit this province economically.

I can guarantee you that if you cut the taxes, which is the flat regressive tax called health care premiums, that money will go directly into the Alberta economy, will be spent by families and will have a tremendously beneficial effect on our small businesses that sustain our communities, Mr. Speaker.

So I would urge the government to support this motion. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good evening. It's certainly my pleasure to rise this evening and speak on Motion 505, sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. When I look at Motion 505, I see an idea that has some merit. I believe that the elimination of health care premiums is something that this government needs to look at from time to time even if it's twice in one session.

Mr. Speaker, I recently had a look at the Official Opposition's web site. I wanted to see what alternatives they proposed for health care funding, because if we are going to look at reforming the way we fund health care and remove approximately \$1 billion in funding, we had better have a plan to ensure that the system doesn't collapse around us.

8:30

All Motion 505 tells me is that the Member for Edmonton-Riverview wants to eliminate health care premiums. The wording doesn't say anything about a reasonable alternative to take into consideration or why he wanted to do this. So I ventured onto their web site to see what their policy alternatives were. I encourage all members to do the same as it has an interesting solution.

Mr. Speaker, what the Official Opposition proposes through policy alternatives on their web site is that premiums would be eliminated because they feel that this would lead to a tax cut for everyone. I find it important that we talk about this and clarify the confusion that the hon. members opposite have on how funding a public program works.

Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition feels that there isn't anything healthy about health care premiums and that by combining them with a flat tax, they provide Alberta working poor with the highest tax rates. The Official Opposition closes by saying that health care premiums are "an unfair and an unnecessary tax." I think it is time that the Official Opposition asked themselves where they would find a magic money tree that would compensate for the almost \$1 billion loss in health care funding that would result by not including health care premiums in the health budget without further taxing Albertans.

As I said earlier, the elimination of health care premiums is an issue that the government needs to take a look at from time to time, but also I think a working plan that has been thought through is necessary. From what I've heard in the House and read on their web site, the Official Opposition has not thought this through, nor do they have a reasonable plan. They don't.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has been collecting health care premiums since 1969. As of 2001 there are over 3 million individuals registered with Alberta Health and Wellness. I can assure the members that the number has risen significantly in that time as Alberta's population continues to rise at a rapid rate. To ensure that all Albertans are able to participate in a provincial health care system, the government provides premium exemptions to those

Albertans that are unable to afford the cost of premiums for a number of reasons. In 2003 164,000, or 51 per cent, of Alberta's seniors did not pay health care insurance premiums.

Some Hon. Members: How many?

Mr. Broda: One hundred and sixty-four thousand, 51 per cent.

An Hon. Member: One hundred and sixty-four thousand?

Mr. Broda: That's right.

Twenty thousand, or 6 per cent, of Alberta's seniors paid partial premiums. The province of Alberta ensures that all of Alberta's seniors that cannot pay health care premiums are exempted or supported through current government programs. This is done to ensure that all of Alberta's seniors have the opportunity to participate in Alberta's health care system.

Dr. Taylor: Now, that's good government.

Mr. Broda: You bet it is.

On the Official Opposition web site they refer to the working poor as their reason to eliminate health care premiums, so I find it necessary to look at the programs the government has in place for those individuals. Mr. Speaker, as I said, low-income Albertans also qualify for health care premium subsidies. A single-earner family that has an annual income of less than \$15,970 qualifies for Alberta health care premium subsidies, and should that family have an annual income of less than \$12,000, they are fully subsidized. Similarly, a family with no children that makes less than \$28,240 a year qualifies for subsidies, and a family with no children who makes less than \$21,200 a year qualifies for full subsidy. Finally, a family with children who makes less than \$34,250 as an annual income qualifies for subsidies, and should that same family have an annual income of less than \$27,210, it would qualify for full subsidy for their health care premiums.

Mr. Speaker, these numbers and examples contradict the opposition's claim that health care premiums unfairly hinder Alberta's poor working families. Not only do they get subsidies for their health care, but they also don't pay any provincial taxes. On the contrary, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta government is working to ensure that Alberta's working poor are assured of participation in a health care premium system through their extensive subsidy program.

One other point I would like to make before I continue my argument is that health care premiums are put in place to ensure that the system user realizes that there is a cost to the system. More and more people are moving to this province, Mr. Speaker. It is up to the government to ensure that these resources are available to all residents, which brings me to my next point.

The Official Opposition on their web site also discussed stable funding as a part of their proposed health care policy. My question to them is: how would you go about providing stable funding for a health care system under financial stress that has just been relieved of a billion dollars of funding through what is proposed in Motion 505?

Mr. Speaker, I could go on and on and on, but I know that there are other speakers that want to participate in this. I also look forward to future debates on the elimination of the health care premiums when the time is more appropriate and when a proper plan is in place to address these issues in a broader context.

I encourage all members to vote against Motion 505. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I wonder if we might have consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

Mr. Nicol: Mr. Speaker, it's a real privilege for me this evening to stand and recognize a couple of members of our community that are in the gallery. I'd like to start by just recognizing Aaron Roth, one of our researchers. I notice his dad and stepmother are there with him, so I'd like to ask the three of them to stand and be recognized by the House.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**
Health Care Premiums
(*continued*)

The Deputy Speaker: I'll call on the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, following that the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, and then the hon. Minister of Environment.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to join debate on Motion 505 that was brought forward by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview. The sponsor has dedicated a great deal of time in this Assembly on various health issues.

Dr. Taylor: But he doesn't know what he's talking about.

Mr. Danyluk: Sometimes he doesn't, but I'm sure the member has the best intentions. I would say that most of the time he misses the big picture.

On the issue of eliminating health care premiums, he refuses to acknowledge the expansion of public health care and the pressure on all governments to find adequate funding. In the past the sponsor has referred to health care premiums as a regressive tax. I think he has considered a more responsible approach to funding health care. He should see that premiums are an acceptable alternative until reforms are implemented and the cost of health care is stabilized.

A straightforward action like Motion 505 seems like a reasonable request at first glance. One of the dangers with simple requests is that they overlook complex and important details. Eliminating premiums would save individual Albertans money, yet it would come with a substantial cost to the health care system. Health care funding in every province is currently unsustainable. According to a report released by the Conference Board of Canada, there isn't a single jurisdiction in Canada that is successfully managing the incredible funding pressure for health care delivery.

Dr. Taylor: Not even Alberta.

Mr. Danyluk: Not even Alberta.

There may be a day when the Alberta government eliminates health care premiums. However, this change in policy would only occur with other reforms. The motion simply calls for the elimination of premiums. It does not provide any realistic suggestion for recovering \$900 million lost from eliminating premiums.

8:40

The sponsor has talked about ways he would offset the funding lost by eliminating premiums. Let's look at a couple of these ideas. First of all, he has suggested to this Assembly that \$900 million

could be offset through Alberta's budget surpluses. I appreciate the optimism that the member has in the fiscal stewardship of the Alberta government. Years of fiscal discipline, careful planning, and thoughtful legislation have helped Alberta balance its books, pay off its deficit, and pay down its debt nine years – nine years – ahead of the debt-repayment schedule.

I would caution this member against relying on surpluses, especially that exceed \$900 million every fiscal year. Right now Alberta's oil and gas sector is doing very well. However, Albertans know all too well that what goes up comes down. The prices of oil and natural gas could come down with little notice, and the government surplus may shrink as a result.

Mr. Speaker, I would also remind the member that a large portion of the surpluses are directed to the capital account to pay for dozens of buildings and road construction projects. Albertans will continue to receive world-class public health care particularly funded by premiums. Under the government's current fiscal structure Albertans also enjoy new and improved roads and infrastructure, and we have members in the gallery that will attest to that. I would hope that the member across the way recognizes the importance of stable infrastructure and transportation funding to meet the needs of the growing population and the expanding economy. Taking \$900 million away from the capital account would postpone or may cancel many of these projects. Relying on annual surpluses exceeding \$900 million may be a little too optimistic.

Another one of the sponsor's ideas is to undo Alberta's single-rate tax system, which was phased in between 1999 and 2001. To me this particular idea raises a red flag, especially if the sponsor truly cares for the well-being of low-income Albertans as much as the Alberta government does. Eliminating a single rate would increase taxes for many Albertans. This shift in the tax policy would have a ripple effect on the Alberta economy and the well-being of the poor. A single-rate tax system balances fairness and competitiveness. According to the Alberta 2003 budget the top 15 per cent of income earners paid 66 per cent of the total income tax collected.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity.

The Deputy Speaker: I regret that the time allocated for this item of business has now elapsed.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 505 lost]

Tourism Levy

506. Mr. Strang moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to take measures to establish a tourism levy to be dedicated to the province's tourism marketing framework to promote the tourism industry in Alberta.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise today and open debate this evening on Motion 506, establishment of a provincial tourism levy. I think this motion is extremely important because of the implications to this province as a whole.

Tourism is a very important industry to Alberta. This province has different sceneries and opportunities for industry to grow. Whether it is our national or provincial parks or heritage sites or something as simple as the many campsites around Alberta, there are plenty of interesting areas for tourism to expand.

I represent a constituency whose economy depends greatly on tourism. In fact, I don't think there is an industry that affects the

likes of Edson, Hinton, or Jasper as much as tourism. Tourism is an industry that is saving communities in my constituency.

One only has to look at Grande Cache to see how important the tourism industry is. Years ago Grande Cache's economy was dependent on coal mines, which have kept this town alive and thriving. These mines are now closed. Grande Cache was in serious trouble as jobs began to disappear and the town began to fight for its survival. As the town looks for different economic opportunities and diversification, tourism becomes the most obvious choice because of Grande Cache's fantastic location just outside the national park. This allows Grande Cache to come up with a vital tourism business strategy that helps attract visitors to a place with wonderful history and scenery.

As strategies were developed and the industry began to grow in this area, it has become evident that this government does not invest a lot of money to market this province. I realize that we do have a lot of different priorities in this province – health, education, and infrastructure – but what is not fully comprehended is the amount of revenue that can be returned to this province from tourism outside of Alberta. Motion 506 urges this government to consider creating a dedicated revenue source that would be applied directly to the tourism industry. Funding could be used to market Alberta or enhance the product that we already have developed in this province.

Mr. Speaker, we do not spend a great deal of money marketing ourselves to the rest of the country or the world. If you look at the figures for total tourism spending since 2000-2001, we spent over \$18 million in 2000-2001, over \$19 million for 2001-2002, about \$23 million for 2002-2003, and about \$22 million for 2003-2004. Last week the new budget was brought down with a lot of optimism, and this included the tourism industry. Approximately \$24 million will be spent in total on tourism. However, only \$18 million will be spent on tourism marketing.

Now, I know that some members may hear these figures and think that this is a lot of money to be spending on marketing our province, but we have to put this in perspective. I believe that the Fairmont hotel chain, which has about five resorts in Alberta, spends more money marketing their five resorts than we do marketing our entire province. I think this is a shame and a missed opportunity for this government. This province has so much to offer visitors outside of our normal tourism destinations. It seems everybody knows about West Edmonton Mall or the Calgary Stampede or Banff, Jasper, or Waterton Lakes national parks, but there are other areas that are just as beautiful and interesting that we need to promote to travellers of Canada and the world.

With all the different opportunities in the province for tourism development I think it's time for this government to dedicate increased resources to promote this province. As I alluded to earlier, we put about \$20 million into tourism marketing and services in 2003-04, and the return on the investment is quite substantial. The tourism industry is estimated to bring in approximately \$15 billion and supports well over 120,000 jobs. It would only seem logical that if this province would invest a bit more money in this industry, we could see the revenues increase dramatically.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 506 asks for the government to establish a tourism levy that could be dedicated directly to the tourism industry. This is a venture that has been tested in other jurisdictions. In fact, B.C. has a similar levy and will argue that their tourism industry is very prosperous because of it. We in Alberta have a hotel tax, which is paid by every customer who stays a night in a hotel room. The tax is 5 per cent, and this money goes directly into the general revenue fund, which in turn goes to fund our priority areas. The problem I have with the hotel tax is that its main goal has been accomplished, and now it is time for us to reconstruct it.

8:50

The hotel tax was established in 1987 as part of a plan to have extra revenue brought in to help eliminate the deficit, a problem the province had back in the late '80s and early '90s. Of course, with the current Premier looking over the elimination of those deficits, the hotel tax has officially taken care of what it was supposed to. So now we have a tax that could be a great candidate for a revision so that we can dedicate it especially to the tourism industry. The hotel tax brings in about \$50 million, and even if a portion of that were dedicated to the industry, I think we could see returns far greater than what the tax can bring in.

I know that many here do not agree with dedicated revenue to certain programs because it opens the door to other levies and premiums that would be suspiciously designed for certain areas, but of course we already have such an item that is revenue dedicated to a program; that is, our health care premiums. The premium revenues generated are tied to health care and cover only a minute portion of our health care spending, but the presence of a dedicated revenue source is here. Revamping the hotel tax is supported by not only a lot of people in government but the industry as well.

I believe that in late 2002 when shareholders in the tourism industry came to the government through the Standing Policy Committee on Economic Development and Finance, they recommended that the hotel tax be replaced with a tourism marketing levy, which would be specifically dedicated to marketing this province. It is extremely important that we look at the benefits of a move like this. As I said earlier, if such a move were made, the general revenue fund would be out approximately \$58 million, but we would have to look at how much money it would bring back into Alberta through the tourism industry if we invest that money into this thriving industry.

Mr. Speaker, I think we should seriously consider revamping our hotel tax into a tourism levy so that we will have a dedicated and somewhat stable resource fund. I mean, one could argue that as tourism investment continues to increase, the money dedicated to tourism will also increase, providing more opportunities for investment, jobs, promotion of our beautiful province.

We have to look at making decisions on this idea sooner rather than later for the sole purpose that we have an extremely large event coming to this province that we need to capitalize on. Next year is our big 100th anniversary, and I ask: how are we marketing this event as to tourism around Canada and the world? Would we be better able to market this extremely important event if we had more dedicated revenue for this industry? How many advertising campaigns are we going to get to get visitors into this province for our centennial?

I think this is a remarkable opportunity that we should not let slip by. If we do not do more to ensure that this year is our most successful tourism year, I think we have done Albertans a great disservice. They are expecting a great event, a huge event. I am worried that we are not doing all that we can do to ensure that 2005 brings us a lot of prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 506 is one which limits what the government can do. Revamping the hotel tax . . . [Mr. Strang's speaking time expired]

Thank you. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Unanimous consent has been asked for for the hon. member to complete his speech.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [interjections] You guys wouldn't give me unanimous consent. I'm not prepared to give any of you unanimous consent. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, there is a problem: too much talking when there's only one member that's been officially recognized.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to have an opportunity to speak to Motion 506, to establish a tourism levy. I'm glad that the sponsor of the motion finally got around in his comments to describe where this money was going to come from, because when you first read the motion, the language is somewhat unclear in terms of whether the motion calls for a new tourism levy on top of the hotel room tax.

If that had been the case, we wouldn't have been able to support it, because irrespective of what this government says, we are not tax-and-spend Liberals. We are very fiscally responsible, and we would not support another new tax on an industry that would potentially price that industry out of the market in terms of competing provinces and other jurisdictions. It would definitely, we believe, go a long way in terms of removing our competitive advantage. But as the member described it, the hotel room tax would be a dedicated levy, and that's where the money for the tourism marketing would come from, and we're fully in support of that and have been for a long, long time.

In fact, we believe that the way to operate this would be to put a delegated authority in place so that you have it – well, I would like to say at arm's length from this government. It never has been so far. But at least that's a little further away in terms of controlling the money and being able to have the industry decide where that money is best spent. I think that that would be a very effective way.

Just take a look at other DAOs like the tire recycling board, where that dedicated tire tax went. Then they decide how to invest in supporting the industry and other options that they have available to them like helping to support environmental concerns and so on.

When we speak to people around the province who are involved in the tourism industry, whether it's in an organized fashion or whether it's individual proprietors or chains, they definitely believe that they could better administer that money than the government can, and I tend to agree with those folks. I think that they should have some control over the money that's coming directly out of their pockets, and to do that would be, I think, very supportable. Certainly, we've heard many concerns every single year since I've been in here about the amount of money that gets taken off in the room tax and how much actually goes back.

As the sponsor of the bill said, this was a levy that was started in 1987 by the Getty government. At that time, they said that it would help to eliminate the large deficits that were occurring in the government of the day. It's interesting how a Conservative government doesn't do any better job than anybody else in terms of, once the monies are no longer in a deficit situation, eliminating those taxes. We haven't seen an elimination of them over the past six years, and during that time period they collected nearly \$570 million in hotel room taxes. Now, not very much of that goes back to the industry. Fifty-six million dollars was collected last year; \$18 million went back to tourism. Not very equitable if you ask me.

So I would certainly support putting those dollars in the hands of that industry because the money does recirculate, and certainly we do need, I believe, to spend more focus and more time on promoting Alberta tourism. Time after time we see tourists going to Banff and Jasper and not coming out of that mountain corridor. The tourists go

back into B.C. or they go stateside or they go back to their country of origin, but we don't see them really spilling over into the main parts of Alberta and really enjoying the great beauty and the great treasures that we have to share with people from around the globe in our particular province.

I would certainly hope that we will see some changes here quickly. In fact, I thought we had a commitment from the Minister of Economic Development last year during Committee of Supply, when he stated that the government had an approved program for dedicating the hotel room tax to tourism marketing, but it was postponed by Treasury Board, and isn't that just too bad?

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business on this day has concluded.

head: 9:00 **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'll call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Offices of the Legislative Assembly

The Chair: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 58(8), which requires that the estimates of the offices of the Legislative Assembly be the first item called in the Committee of Supply's consideration of the main estimates, I must now put the question without debate or amendment.

Agreed to:

Support to the Legislative Assembly	
Operating Expense	\$38,664,000
Office of the Auditor General	
Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$17,646,000
Office of the Ombudsman	
Operating Expense	\$2,130,000
Office of the Chief Electoral Officer	
Operating Expense	\$13,735,000
Office of the Ethics Commissioner	
Operating Expense	\$447,000
Office of the Information and	
Privacy Commissioner	
Operating Expense	\$4,072,000

International and Intergovernmental Relations

The Chair: The hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Mr. Jonson: Good evening, Mr. Chairman. This evening I'm pleased to present the estimates for the Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations, the 2004-2005 business plan. First of all, I would like to introduce some people from IIR who are with us this evening. I think everyone is present, so I would like to introduce them and have them stand: Gerry Bourdeau, Deputy Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations; Garry Pocock, assistant deputy minister, Canadian intergovernmental relations; Wayne Clifford, assistant deputy minister, international relations section; James Doherty, international trade counsel, trade policy section; Lori Sajjad, director of corporate services; Kathryn Wiegiers, communications director; and Douglas Mills, my executive assistant.

Mr. Chairman, it is worth noting that I just introduced 10 per cent of the staff of the ministry. We may be small in numbers, but we do, I think, very significant work. Examples include our key role in the establishment of the Council of the Federation, strengthening Alberta's international relations, representing Alberta in the softwood lumber dispute and trade agreement negotiations, and working with agriculture on the BSE situation.

We take the lead in trade negotiations and national communications in discussions at the Council of the Federation and first ministers' meetings. The ministry also leads in the development of government-wide strategies and policies for Alberta's relations with international governments, organizations such as the World Trade Organization, and federal, provincial, and territorial governments.

In terms of business plan goals the ministry's business plan has three goals. The first focuses on our relations within Canada by "promoting the interests of, and securing benefits for, Alberta as an equal partner in a [strong], united Canada." The ministry's second goal focuses on "promoting the interests of, and securing benefits for, Alberta [through] strengthened international relations." Related to this, the ministry's third goal is to promote "the interests of, and securing benefits for, Alberta from greater trade and investment liberalization, domestically and internationally."

IIR's goals support two of the government of Alberta's business plan goals. These are: "Alberta will have a prosperous economy," and "Alberta will have a financially stable, open and accountable government and a strong intergovernmental position in Canada."

Mr. Chairman, the ministry is divided into three sections that reflect our goals: Canadian intergovernmental relations, international relations, and trade policy. I will now take a few minutes to discuss key initiatives in the year ahead for each of these sections.

The Canadian intergovernmental relations section works with other government ministries, with other provinces, and with the federal government to promote and protect Alberta's interests as an equal partner in Confederation. We will advance through the Council of the Federation and other government bodies Alberta's position on Senate reform, health care sustainability, and the need to address the fiscal imbalance.

In the coming year we will continue to pursue three initiatives identified by the Premier to improve federal/provincial relations. These are regularly scheduled first ministers' meetings, a guaranteed provincial role in international agreements in areas of provincial responsibility, and Senators appointed from a list of provincial nominees. Also in this particular area, Mr. Chairman, later this year we will be receiving a report from the MLA committee dealing with Alberta's future place in Confederation, chaired by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Canadian intergovernmental relations will also continue to support the Ministerial Task Force on Security and the cross-government climate change committee. As always, this section will provide strategic support to the Premier with the Council of the Federation, first ministers' meetings, and other federal/provincial meetings.

Mr. Chairman, the international relations section works with other Alberta government departments to strategically advance our province's international interests. A key area is building on and strengthening Alberta's relationship with our largest and most important trading partner, the United States. A major initiative is the opening of an Alberta office in Washington, D.C. I will discuss this initiative in a moment when detailing my ministry's budget for the upcoming year.

Our international relations section will also continue to emphasize Alberta's membership in organizations such as the U.S. Council of State Governments-West, the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, and the Western Governors' Association. We will work with our

state counterparts and bilateral councils Alberta has established with Montana, Idaho, and Alaska. We will increase Alberta's profile in key international markets by developing intergovernmental relations and enhance Alberta's nine twinning relationships, including celebrations marking the 30th anniversary of Alberta's twinning with Gangwon, Korea. We will also establish new twinning relationships in Ukraine. The section will support international governance office projects in developing countries including Ukraine, South Africa, and China.

Mr. Chairman, the trade policy section also works with a variety of Alberta ministries and other Canadian governments. As co-lead with New Brunswick on a special Council of the Federation ministers' committee Alberta will seek support for a proposal to ensure that provinces and territories have a guaranteed place at the table when the federal government negotiates international agreements affecting provincial constitutional responsibilities.

Our trade policy section along with our intergovernmental relations section have key roles in this initiative. The trade policy section will also advance trade opportunities for Albertans by working, again, through the Council of the Federation to remove internal trade barriers to ensure the free flow of goods, services, capital, and labour within Canada. Our trade experts will protect Alberta's priorities, interests while working with other provinces and the federal government to reach long-term, durable solutions to disputes with the United States on softwood lumber, wheat, hogs, and during the World Trade Organization negotiations, especially as those apply to agriculture, trade remedies, and services.

9:10

Mr. Chairman, I will now move on to the ministry's budget and staffing levels. We are a small ministry in terms of budget and staff. The 2004-2005 budget has grown by \$2 million to approximately \$8.5 million. There are a total of 58 staff in my ministry, an increase of five from last year. These new positions will be allocated between the new Alberta office in Washington, D.C., and our increased commitment to the Council of the Federation. The first significant budget increase in several years allows us to open the Alberta office in Washington, D.C., participate fully in the Council of the Federation initiatives, and meet the 3.5 per cent government-wide salary increase for staff.

Mr. Chairman, there are fiscal realities that come with establishing a presence in Washington, D.C., and providing leadership in federal/provincial relations. An additional \$1 million is allocated to establish the Washington office. The government of Alberta has recognized this as a priority. The United States is by far Alberta's most important economic partner, and Washington is a place where important decisions are made respecting our economic interests. The new office will advance Alberta's economic and policy interests in key areas such as energy, agriculture, and trade disputes and help expand Alberta's contacts with key U.S. decision-makers and policy-makers.

In the year ahead an additional \$900,000 is allocated for costs resulting from the significant increase in intergovernmental activities in Canada. Mr. Chairman, with the creation of the Council of the Federation, the provinces and territories are acquiring their own institution, and we're taking an important step to the future of Canada. Furthermore, each province is assessed a fee based on 10 cents per person, as I understand it, that is to be contributed to fund operations of the council. Yes, this is an overall new cost.

In past years the Premiers met once a year as a group. However, since January of 2003 they have met six times. Through the Council of the Federation and its secretariats the Premiers have developed an ambitious plan to work together on health care, literacy, the

environment, and disaster relief. All of this has placed considerable new demands on the time and resources of my ministry.

Another example of this increase in intergovernmental activities is the twice-yearly joint cabinet meetings between Alberta and British Columbia. The Alberta/B.C. co-operation arrangement will result in savings for taxpayers as we find efficiencies in transportation, education, children's services, and other areas. However, it has also placed more demands on the ministry as agreements have to be prepared and support provided for the Premier and our cabinet colleagues at these meetings. Over the next few weeks and months there will be meetings of health ministers, finance ministers, and others, all of which will require support from our ministry.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would like to present a very brief outline of how we measure the ministry's performance and track our progress in meeting our goals as effectively and efficiently as possible. Our outcomes are difficult to quantify because they often are long term and depend on external factors. To help us measure how well we are doing and identify areas for improvement on key initiatives such as major conferences, trade negotiations, or international missions, we seek input through client surveys and polling results. We use these measures to provide a detailed record of our achievements and activities in our annual report and other documents.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would like to indicate that our new business plan and budget sets out how we will meet the priorities of this province in the year ahead. I would be happy to answer any questions or hear comments from my legislative colleagues. In advance I will commit to answering in writing any questions I cannot respond to this evening.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the comments from the minister. As in past years I'll just ask a few questions and then ask the minister to respond to them. When he does, then I'll get up and ask some more questions in another area.

I'd just like to go back to, first of all, your last comments about the increase in funding for the Canadian intergovernmental relations. It's an increase of 60 per cent. I understand what you just said, that part of the explanation for that increased funding is the 10-cent levy, but we would like a further breakdown on where the costs are being allocated for the rest of the money now. I fully appreciate all of the additional meetings that are coming up in the next year and your expectation in terms of the travel and the staff to support that, but I would like a more detailed breakdown on the money. How much do you expect to spend on additional staff and travel with the B.C. meetings, how much with other provinces, and how much with the feds? Can you give me any idea of what that breakdown looks like now?

Mr. Jonson: I can give just a general comment. As the member, Mr. Chairman, has indicated, we will certainly provide a detailed response as well.

With respect to the two major components in the increase in funding for our ministry, first of all, we are anticipating that the Washington office will be an office with at least two personnel being present. Of course, we will have to lease space, and we hoped it would be in Washington. We, quite frankly, have made some I think well-received overtures to locating it in the Canadian embassy. Those things, however, do not come cheap. The Canadian government is not going to provide it to us free of charge, and that will be

a major component, along with of course our share of, I would expect, access to communication supports and so forth.

In the case of the Council of the Federation there will be an overall staff that will need to be hired to operate that on a national basis. We will have to pay our share there. I'm not up to date in terms of what the implications are as far as accommodation. They are in both cases very significant initiatives which, yes, are going to cost money, and in both cases it is money directed at developing an effective office which can carry the message, in the one case to the federal authorities and the federal politicians and in the other to our major trading partner.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks for those answers. Just a little follow-up on the Washington office. Do you know who's going to staff it yet and how soon you expect those two people to be in place? [interjection] Yes, we're hoping it's not an existing Conservative member who's going to be staffing it.

My next set of questions is on the international trips by the various MLAs. We've seen in this past year many members of the government and cabinet ministers taking trips abroad to promote Alberta or attend special events. Some of them, I believe, were organized and/or sponsored and co-ordinated through your department. So my first question is in terms of rating how successful those trips were in terms of what was achieved. Do you do that? Is that public information? If you don't do it, then what kind of performance measure do you use to see whether or not you got good value for your money, even if it's a long-term kind of measure that you're looking at?

Also, I'd like to know the kind of co-ordination that you have between the Public Affairs Bureau and other departments in setting the trips up. Who decides who goes where and which person it is that's actually going? Can you give us a list of MLAs and cabinet ministers who went abroad last year and then the costs of those trips abroad that would include symposiums or conferences? I think that's it on trips abroad.

9:20

Mr. Jonson: First of all, with respect to international trips I think we have been quite diligent in providing an initial announcement or release as to the trip occurring and then following up with a news release report on, at least in general terms, what the nature of the discussions was and what the results or, we hope in many cases, the accomplishments are of those particular missions.

With respect to MLA participation the basis of selection is usually a connection with a relevant standing policy committee. We do have you might say an assigned group or team—I wouldn't call it a formal committee—that takes part, for instance, in the annual meetings with Montana. As you know, we also have another group which was assigned to being responsible for relations with the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, or PNWER, and of course they do go to their annual conference, which alternates among the various members.

If you were looking for specific funding and so forth, I would have to get back to you in terms of a written reply.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just would like to comment that I see other members standing to ask questions. I believe it's the agreement between House leaders that opposition has the first hour of budget debate in every budget estimate, so you have

to wait till past 10 o'clock before it's your turn or until we're done.

Mr. Chairman, my next question to the minister is with regard to what his ministry may be doing to calm concerns in Alberta about separation. Are you doing anything to deal with that? We often hear talks about Alberta wanting to separate and discussions happening about that. The odd poll comes out. I believe it came up again in the firewall committee discussions. What does your department do to deal with that situation? Are you taking any steps to address the issue for or against support for this issue in Alberta?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Jonson: Yes, Mr. Chairman. First of all, we have certainly been supportive and will take credit for providing the support services, but I think we should recognize that our Premier along with the other Premiers in Canada has made a special effort through the creation of the Council of the Federation and through, I think in all cases, going to the table with federal politicians but particularly the Prime Minister himself with the viewpoint to establish more positive, more effective relations between the federal government and the provinces and territories. That has been going on. It's been well reported upon.

There has been some progress, Mr. Chairman. It would appear that at least two of the initiatives that Premier Klein had mentioned some time ago as doable goals have been responded to favourably: the idea of regular first ministers' meetings, and also the whole concept of the provinces having a place, a seat, so to speak, at the table when trade talks and trade negotiations are going on. So there's certainly been an initiative there.

As well, the committee that I referred to in my opening remarks, chaired by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, has travelled extensively across the province, held public hearings, has now sent out an invitation for additional written comment, or I guess that they have something called e-mails these days, too, that might be used. They will eventually analyze the information that has come to them. They've had quite a variety of recommendations and a great deal of input, and much of that deals with what you might refer to as western alienation and some of these particular issues.

So, Mr. Chairman, there has been a considerable amount of activity in that particular area.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like to ask: with respect to the increases in the Canadian intergovernmental relations budget, which is about a 60 per cent increase, to what degree are these costs associated with the newly-established Council of the Federation? And how will the council differ from the previous formations that have existed on a more informal basis to deal with relationships between the provinces and their relationship with the federal government?

I would also like to know whether or not there are expenditures in this budget for the senatorial elections that the government has alluded to and whether or not they'll be held this fall during the municipal elections. We'd like to know how much money taxpayers should look forward to spending on that.

We'd also like to know about costs related to the so-called firewall committee, otherwise known as strengthening Alberta's role in Confederation. We'd like to know when that's going to be completed, and what is the projected cost of all of its activities?

I would like the minister, if he would, to also please perhaps take this opportunity to explain the government's reasons for refusing to participate in the national health council.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Jonson: First of all – not necessarily in the order of the questions, but I'll get the answers to you – on the committee on Alberta's role in Confederation, the costs will likely be in the neighbourhood, Mr. Chairman, of \$280,000, and that is inclusive of travel and all the other expenses associated with that committee's actual activities.

With respect to the question on senatorial elections or selections, there has not been a decision on that at present. Certainly, it is something that is on the agenda for consideration, but there has been no hard-and-fast decision made about when or if such an event might occur and also what funding might be involved.

In terms of the Council of the Federation, it is a major budget item. I've already alluded to the manner in which the decision is made for the sharing of the cost among the provinces. I would like to elaborate a bit further on the Council of the Federation. The situation that we've had up to this point in time, or at least up until about three or four months ago, is a situation, Mr. Chairman, where certainly there are meetings between provincial and territorial representatives and the Premiers, but it is not as effective either from a federal point of view, I think, or from a provincial and territorial point of view as it could be.

9:30

The one thing that was missing is that there was not one support group in Ottawa that was available to the provinces and the territories to develop papers, to make arrangements, to make contacts, and to basically provide a base for the provinces and territories to work from. What is being done here is that these separate, somewhat fragmented presences that the provinces have had in Ottawa are being amalgamated into what's called the Council of the Federation. The Council of the Federation is the Premiers and the territorial leaders, but this secretariat is the working civil service arm that is being created. Yes, it is somewhat expanded over the numbers of people that were involved before and it will cost money, but it will also, I think, lead to much more productive, well-positioned agendas for the provinces and the territories.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There was quite a bit of noise in the Assembly, so I couldn't hear one of the answers that the minister gave.

Mr. Norris: You weren't listening anyway.

Ms Carlson: No, I was. You were talking, hon. minister, and that's why I couldn't hear.

I'm not sure if the minister for this department stated that he would give a breakdown of the \$250,000 in costs for the firewall committee, but if he didn't say that, I would ask him to do that.

Also, we're interested in knowing how many people attended each of the 12 meetings and any information he can give us on those and when we could expect to see . . . [interjection] No, I won't ask that question, I don't think, Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

My final two questions on this are: what does the minister plan to do with the report, and will the report be made public? Sometimes we see these reports just gather dust, and I'm hoping that won't be the case here.

Now I'd like to move on to talk a little bit about the Kyoto protocol. What steps does your ministry plan to take to address the Kyoto issue in the coming year? What is your department doing to help Alberta meet its targets? Are there any strategies that you're working on in terms of helping the industry? Have you done any

economic impact assessments relative to the Kyoto protocol, and if so, could you make those public to us? The last question on this one is: will you provide copies of the documents that you've got that support Alberta's position relative to the Kyoto protocol?

Thank you.

Mr. Jonson: With respect to, first of all, the report of the committee on Alberta's place in Confederation . . .

An Hon. Member: You can say firewall.

Mr. Jonson: The firewall is not our creation, but certainly people in that particular category were welcome to make their presentations and be heard, as were people from many other different political spectrums.

With respect to Kyoto, Mr. Chairman, the activity with respect to follow-up on environmental protection is with the Department of Environment. I think documents and reports and the overall strategy of the Department of Environment are well known, and the emphasis, of course, that Alberta is placing on a practical, scientifically based way to bring down emissions over a reasonable period of time with a reasonable target is going on.

It is interesting to note that to this point in time, although certainly Canada is a signatory to the Kyoto accord, the activity that we see at least recently with the federal government is much along the same lines as what we have been giving priority to here in Alberta, and that is advancing environmental protection, particularly as it applies to the atmosphere, through developing better technology and developing policies and standards and targets which are practical and doable without crippling industry that's involved in this province. That is what we are moving ahead with, and that is the overall stance of the government in that particular regard.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now I'd like to talk about the Premier's musings a couple of weeks ago about how great he thought the idea would be of supplying the U.S. with missile storage in Alberta. Did that come out of your department? Are you doing any work on it? Is there any possibility that you might go forward with what I think is a very lame-brained idea?

Mr. Jonson: Well, Mr. Chairman, I'm not responding to the Premier's remarks in particular, but the fact of the matter is that Canada has for a long period of time been a member of NORAD, and we as a government recognize that there is that long-term established connection for North American Air Defence. Beyond that, to my knowledge no particular additional policy or change of viewpoint is being taken by the provincial government. It is a matter for the federal government to deal with, and we recognize that we are part of NORAD and we are part of Canada.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That leads me to a couple of questions on counterterrorism. Certainly, if there were any possibility that Alberta would become a missile storage site, then we would, I would think, have to be increasingly concerned about what was happening regarding Alberta's counterterrorism crisis management plan. Can you give us an update on what individuals and groups you've been consulting with? Under what circumstances would Alberta's border with the U.S. be closed according to Alberta's counterterrorism crisis management plan?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Chairman, we do have an overall security/antiterrorism prevention or mitigation or defence plan in Alberta. A great deal of good work has gone into it, to the credit of Municipal Affairs and the Solicitor General's department, to name two of the key participants. We do have a communications centre up and running. We do meet fairly regularly to in a general sense get a feeling for the status of security in the province, and I think that the work that has been done in Alberta is in fact very highly regarded as being that which has underpinning it a very good plan.

However, Mr. Chairman, this is an issue of security, and I'm not going to endeavour to provide details, which I don't have in any case, in terms of how we do things, but there are protocols in place as to the assessment of threat or of danger if that happens. We have people monitoring the situation as it might apply to Alberta and exchanging information on a 24-hour basis, and I will stop at that with my description.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

9:40

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Minister for those answers. My next questions are around the export of water. The minister knows that I have always been against any potential for Alberta to ever export any of its water, but can you tell me if you are now in consultations with anybody on this, be that interprovincial, federal/provincial, or other countries? Have you got any update on the issue of water exports or any policy options that you're taking a look at considering or developing?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Chairman, the only activity that I'm aware of is one that has gone on for quite some time. The Minister of Environment may in his estimates comment on it when those come up. That involves the St. Mary River, which is really a unique situation. The river starts, as I recall, in Alberta, goes into Montana, comes back out, and there's some difficulty, some matters to be worked out there. Other than that, no, I do not know of any such plans.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Next I'd like to talk a little bit about a couple of issues in the business plans. When you talk about providing policy analysis for the other departments here, I'm interested in what you're doing on health care. Can you tell us whether you're providing any specific policy analysis or strategy with regard to where this government is going now and in the future on health care?

Mr. Jonson: With respect to health care this resides in large measure, of course, with the Department of Health and Wellness. However, in terms of the overall health issue we have provided advice. There are a number of different items connected with this. One is that we do have, working with native affairs, advice to give with respect to the legalities and so forth in providing health care to aboriginal populations.

Secondly, in terms of interpretation of the Canada Health Act, something that this department is well aware of and has been through on other occasions, this is another area where through our legal sources and our own staff we can provide advice in terms of the overall framework that you have to work within if you are going to work within the Canada Health Act. We've also provided comment and analysis on the various reports, of which I think there are about five at least out there. Not the least, of course, are the Mazankowski report and the Romanow report. So we are not the lead department

there. We've not tried to be. We're a support department, and there are areas in this whole very important area where I think we can provide some valuable support.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I wonder if the minister could enlighten the committee on the status of the softwood lumber negotiations between the government of Canada and the government of the United States and on what the status of the side negotiations may be or the participation of Alberta within the Canadian negotiations and on whether or not the government of Alberta is considering or has participated in the types of agreements that were reached by the government of British Columbia in its negotiations through the Canadian government with the United States and the type of agreement that was reached there, which may well see the loss of jobs in British Columbia and the closure of sawmills and other impacts. My understanding is that the British Columbia government agreed to that and that was concluded on their behalf. I would like the minister to please bring us up to date with respect to the status of Alberta's progress in these negotiations.

Mr. Jonson: First of all, Mr. Chairman, I believe that the hon. member was wanting comment on the overall softwood lumber situation or the status of the dispute. There have been discussions by conference call and so forth among the relevant ministers across Canada and at least on one occasion directly with the federal minister responsible. There is I think almost constant work being done between the negotiators of the two sides to try and come to some resolution of this issue.

However, at this particular point in time there was a proposal of sort of a framework that was presented. It was one which not just in Alberta we felt that the industry could not agree to, as did all the other provinces across Canada that are directly involved. So the industry's position at that point in time was that we should still be waiting, looking for some flexibility, a more positive approach by the Americans.

Also, we have been winning and making progress through the legal route, through NAFTA and through the North American free trade agreement repeal provisions. It is the hope of at least a certain sector of the softwood lumber industry that if we get further appeals that are in our favour from those two international organizations, this will help our cause in terms of convincing the Americans to open the border.

In the meantime there will I'm sure be additional discussions among the provinces in Canada, and we will be looking at having further discussions about what are called exit routes; that is, what specific requirements do you have to meet in order to get access to the American market and to have the deposits returned and the countervail duties dropped and so forth? There's the direct negotiation, which is kind of dormant right now, but there's still background work going on, and there's also the waiting that's going on for the decisions from the international tribunals.

I think that would be the comment there.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm hoping the minister can update us on the work that he's doing with the U.S. on the BSE issue to get the borders open. Can you give us an update on it?

Mr. Jonson: Well, Mr. Chairman, I'll respond to the question, certainly, but I would like to emphasize two points at the beginning,

and that is that the overall BSE issue is one where we have been fortunate to have a very strong and effective Premier that has I think credibility with the American government. Of course, the Hon. Shirley McClellan has taken on a huge load here in pushing for the resolution of this particular and very, very, very serious issue. Being an MLA, one of the . . .

Mr. Mason: Point of order.

The Chair: You have a citation, hon. member?

Point of Order Decorum

Mr. Mason: No. The minister is quite soft spoken and is giving us useful information, but we cannot hear because of the disturbance in the House.

The Chair: The chair would also observe, hon. minister, that when you read with paper there, you can't hear. So that might be part of the thing as well as the ambient noise that seems to be from some lively discussions which could be adjourned to the outer lounge.

Debate Continued

Mr. Jonson: I think there are three points, though, that can be mentioned with respect to the BSE situation. First of all, the American government has realized within the last number of months that the BSE situation is affecting their overall cattle market. I think there was the initial assumption that it would only be something that would involve Canada and the United States, and now the American government seems to be putting a considerable amount of attention on the fact that borders are being closed to them. So they're beginning to look at it as an overall North American issue. When I was down to Washington about two weeks before the minister and the Premier went, I found that there was a new viewpoint or, if I can go so far as to say, an attitude in terms of the American political establishment looking at this as an overall North American problem that had to be sorted out, and that's helpful from our particular point of view.

9:50

The second thing is that there is a committee established to review the overall situation as far as the BSE situation is concerned, and they are emphasizing the science. They are taking submissions, they are looking at the science, and they indicate that they will make their decision about the feasibility of opening the borders on the basis of good science and the protection of the public.

So those two themes are there that weren't there before. Also, of course, I think the visit of the Premier helped to raise reason for hope. The date of June or July has been mentioned as a possible point in time when there might be the opening of the border if the recommendations of this very important committee are favourable to doing that.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My last set of questions is around the province's plan for joining the Regional Transmission Organization. Can we hear what your participation is as a department on that and a timeline in terms of when you may be planning to join it and any information about the Regional Transmission Organization conferences that your department's had a hand in planning or paying for? Also, tied into that, are there any plans to export electricity in the Pacific economic northwest region? If so,

what kinds of meetings and discussions are you having about that? Is there a timeline?

That concludes my set of questions, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank the minister for the detail of his answers this evening and look forward to more specific detail on some of our more specific questions. Thank you.

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Chairman, we have not been as a department involved in the grid negotiations. This is being handled through the Department of Energy. If called upon, we will certainly be providing support, but we're not deeply involved in that, possibly because we've had quite a few other files on our desk lately.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to follow up on my question with respect to softwood lumber. I would like to request the minister if possible to respond in writing in more detail with respect to the position that Alberta has adopted and the present status of the negotiations or, alternatively, where Albertans might be able to locate information that would lay out in some detail the position of the government of Alberta and his department with respect to this issue.

Mr. Jonson: I would certainly undertake to do that.

I would like to respond to one other comment. If you know something that I don't, I would be really interested. I think the hon. member mentioned that there was an agreement between British Columbia and the United States. That would be news. I know that because of the great priority because of the nature of their industry being so important in British Columbia, they have been making tremendous efforts to try and come to an accommodation. Of course, their forestry situation is somewhat different from ours. But, as far as we know, there has been no agreement between British Columbia and the United States.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you. I have just a quick comment, more of a long-range view. In that the relationship within Canada is so important to Alberta and Alberta has such an important leadership role in the country, I'm wondering if the minister could put on the long-range horizon the notion of re-establishing an office in Ottawa particularly to encourage and to work with Alberta-friendly people in the public service and in nongovernmental organizations and especially in the media to advance Alberta's interests and to advance the Alberta perspective within that very important milieu.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Chairman, this is an item which, I think, should be dealt with appropriately in the context of what I think and government feels is a very promising beginning to the Council of the Federation as a structure for the provinces and territories to get together, to develop common cause as much as possible, so that they can have a stronger voice with the federal government. It's also designed, we hope, to be a vehicle which will lead to more civil contact and more constructive discussion than has been the case in the past few years. As we start down this road, I would have to say from a personal standpoint that it seems that there is a new atmosphere. We'll see how it goes.

So I think our emphasis will be on the Council of the Federation, working through that avenue. There will of course always be issues that are specific to Alberta or ones that we may have some great

concern with in terms of how they're evolving relative to the rest of Canada, but that's the way we're working right now.

The Chair: Hon. members, the only ones that are recognized for speaking purposes are those that are standing in their places. The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: One of the questions that I get often back in Whitecourt when I go home on the weekends is from the group that's out promoting the relationship between Hokkaido and Alberta. As you know, the province kick-started this some 10 or 12 years ago, and the municipalities seem to be taking a lead role in this. They keep after me: when is the government going to assist more directly with the municipalities in the twinning arrangement? I promised again that I would ask the minister this during this time and hear the response.

Mr. Jonson: First of all, Mr. Chairman, I would like to advise the hon. member, although I think he may have known this, that we did provide some additional funding this past fiscal year for their town's conference above what had been previously provided for. We do feel that this is a valuable activity, and we hope to keep the program going. What our future support plans will be I can't comment on specifically.

10:00

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: No major question, Mr. Chairman, but I did want to make a comment. I'll be very brief, for the hon. members. [interjections] Well, I know everyone wants to go home, but I think the hon. minister should know, as should all members, that the work that our two departments do in the international offices is greatly appreciated by our department. I see the minister's staff up there. They're involved in all aspects of international missions, and I think it behooves all of us to show our gratitude to the minister and his team for the great job they do for Alberta.

Thank you.

The Chair: After considering the business plan and the proposed estimates for the Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and

Equipment/Inventory Purchases

\$8,524,000

The Chair: Shall the vote for this department be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Shall the vote for the offices of the Legislative Assembly be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Legislative Assembly and the estimates of the Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following departments.

The main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for support to the Legislative Assembly, operating expense, \$38,664,000; office of the Auditor General, operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$17,646,000; office of the Ombudsman, operating expense, \$2,130,000; office of the Chief Electoral Officer, operating expense, \$13,735,000; office of the Ethics Commissioner, operating expense, \$447,000; office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, operating expense, \$4,072,000.

The main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for International and Intergovernmental Relations: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$8,524,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I think we should go home. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:05 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 30, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/30

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Deputy Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, guide our thoughts, words, and deeds to be worthy of the trust our constituents have placed in us to better serve Thee through service to our province of Alberta and its people. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that protocol sometimes is to have another member introduce a member of our direct families, but in this case I'm going to do it myself. In the members' gallery this afternoon is my beautiful wife, Gwen Green. I would like her to rise, and I'd like the Assembly to show her a nice warm welcome, a northern greeting.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce a guest in the members' gallery, a gentleman who has been working in this province for many, many years in the health industry, somebody I got to know through our association with the health authority west of Edmonton. I'd like Larry Smook to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great privilege today to rise and introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly two very fine ladies from the Vermilion-Lloydminster constituency. Ms Barb Gulka is here today with her friend Ms Linda Beck. They're not only here to observe the proceedings, but they're here to thank the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan for his excellent work on Bill 201. I would ask them to wave, and we'll give them the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. First question.

Rail Link to Fort McMurray

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A new company named the Athabasca Oil Sands Transportation Corp. could soon be overseeing a railroad project worth \$1.8 billion, but as far as we can tell, none of the leaders of this corporation have experience running railroads, so frankly the Liberal opposition is concerned that it's the Alberta taxpayer who could get railroaded here. My questions are to the Premier. What can the Premier tell us about this company, which was only registered last Tuesday and has already received 1 and a quarter million dollars in Alberta taxpayer funding?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, they haven't received one cent. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition should learn to tell the truth. That's the first thing he needs to do. He is not telling the truth when he says that we have given them \$1.25 million. That is not the truth. When someone does not tell the truth, he tells a lie, and I get frustrated.

The Deputy Speaker: I think that on the issue that you raise, if somebody is not telling the truth, that's one thing, but our rules definitely do move to the point where if you call it a lie, that is unparliamentary. The facts may be at variance with those stated.

Mr. Klein: My apologies, but I don't know any other word for an untruth.

Mr. Speaker, Athabasca Oil Sands Transportation Corp. is a newly formed Alberta company, as I understand it. The primary contacts are Jim Gray and Paul Giannelia, and Mr. Giannelia, of course, was the engineer responsible for Strait Crossing, the phenomenal bridge that links New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The contributors would be – would be, if all things work out – the Alberta government and the oil sands, and the feasibility study would be conducted by this group.

There needs to be a group to facilitate and co-ordinate all of the activities associated with not only the rail line but transportation systems generally into the north. Those transportation systems include the existing rail line, which is the old NAR; highway 881, which comes down from Anzac to Lac La Biche; and highway 63, which is the main highway now serving Fort McMurray from Edmonton via a network of other highways. It involves east/west links as well and how those links could be upgraded. It involves perhaps the extension of the road to the Saskatchewan/Alberta border to 881, more commonly known as the La Loche road.

Mr. Speaker, I can understand that the Liberals don't know about any of these things because they have never been in that area, presumably. The simple fact is that there are very serious transportation problems related to almost a hundred billion dollars of development now or potential development in the oil sands, which has a huge impact on the economy of this province.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental. The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the Premier promise Albertans today, here and now, that if we commit to any funding in this project, Alberta taxpayers will never be on the hook for bailing out a financial flop relating to this railroad? Will he make that promise now?

Mr. Klein: Absolutely. I'll make that promise today because, Mr. Speaker, that's what the feasibility is all about. I don't mind making that promise at all. As I said to the media yesterday, this is not a decision that will be made on somebody's back porch. This is a decision that will be made based on sound engineering, sound financial facts, sound safety and human factors, and sound economic facts. So all of these things will have to be taken into consideration.

Mr. Speaker, I heard from across the way that this is the Muskeg Line. The existing line, the old NAR, is the Muskeg Line. But I would remind the hon. member that this government and the people of this province have spent literally hundreds of millions of dollars already to build roads over muskeg. Highway 881 is a road that travels through a tremendous amount of muskeg. Highway 63, the main highway, is another example of a road being built on muskeg. You can't build anything – but this hon. member doesn't know because he very, very seldom goes to Fort McMurray. Certainly,

he's not invited up there. Maybe he will be now that they have a Liberal candidate up there.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental on this question. The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that this company is already on record as backing this railroad, isn't it a conflict of interest for us to be paying for them to study their own project? Shouldn't we be going to a third party instead?

Thank you.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, this was their initiative, and quite frankly it's an initiative that I thought was long overdue by the private sector. But in that there are so many considerations that affect the province – that is, road upgradings and so on and how we treat those road upgradings – I thought it would be worth while to participate in the feasibility study, because there are numerous factors that impact the province and the public good relative to this.

Mr. Speaker, there are also some benefits on the economic side, without getting into whether we're going to support or not support the project, and I'll have the hon. minister speak to that.

1:40

Mr. Norris: Well, thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, you know, I noticed yesterday that in an attempt to drag what I think is a marvellous project down, the Leader of the Opposition made references to *The Simpsons*, and while he may look like Monty Burns, he seems to be thinking like Moe Szyslak, the bartender, on this one.

However, the reality of the fact, Mr. Speaker, is that the government of Alberta has a responsibility to be involved in this. We have made no commitment whatsoever. No money has changed hands whatsoever, and there is no long-term commitment other than the study, and the study speaks to the economics, which are remarkable.

So if you want to allow them to go and drag the project down . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Second main question. The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Infrastructure Funding

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again this government has let down the people of Edmonton. Today we learned that the Edmonton area would only receive one-fifth of the acute care hospital beds it needs and would not be receiving any new schools. Not one. In comparison, an Alberta Liberal government would give this city the schools and hospitals it needs. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure. Why is the Edmonton area only receiving funds to add an average of 56 acute care beds a year for the next three years when there is an immediate need for 800 new beds?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, this morning we announced that there would be some 170 beds added to five facilities in the city of Edmonton. We have asked all the regional health authorities to give us a 10-year capital plan. In that plan the Capital health region asked for 800 beds for acute care. That's over 10 years, and this morning we announced 170 that are going to start this year.

As far as the school situation is concerned, all of the schools go through a very, very long process to get assessed. All of the schools in the province. We are currently announcing the top list. The school boards will be coming back with their new capital plans. We expect to have those in June. We will then assess all of those plans,

and we'll prioritize them. Then we'll look at how much money we've got, and we will come down with the list on that prioritization. Mr. Speaker, it's a very pure system, and we will be sticking with it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Is the minister then saying that Edmonton schools are a lower priority than Calgary schools?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, there's a long process that this goes through. It's all to do with the condition of the schools, the utilization of the schools, the location of the schools, and the list goes on and on. The fact is that the utilization in the city of Edmonton is slightly lower.

I know what he's trying to do. He's trying to make it look like Calgary has gotten much more than Edmonton. We have to look at the region of Edmonton. If you take and transplant the footprint of Calgary on the footprint of Edmonton, you're going to then include Leduc, Fort Saskatchewan, Sherwood Park, St. Albert, Stony Plain, and the list goes on. So what the member is doing is comparing apples to oranges, and we don't do that.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental, hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Finally, why is this government fundamentally refusing to provide the funds to address the infrastructure debt that has developed in the last 10 years? Why aren't we on top of that debt?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that this government, since we implemented this 10-year plan, has allocated and committed to some \$6.5 billion. That's a lot of money. If we want to move it over to the schools, for example, since the year 2000-2001 we have committed and/or spent \$1.8 billion. If you move it over to the health side, over that same time frame we've spent \$1.9 billion. That is a lot of money in anybody's books.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Corrections Review Report

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After two years the Solicitor General finally saw fit to release the corrections review. It is long on cost savings but, I would argue, short on enhancements for public safety. My questions are to the Solicitor General. Given that the jury is still out on whether electronic bracelets or GPS tracking systems work, why did the Solicitor General choose to make Alberta the guinea pig for this experiment?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, I first of all have to commend the committee that worked very, very hard on this particular issue, and that's the MLA for Red Deer-North, the MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs, and the MLA for Lac La Biche-St. Paul. I think one thing that's important is the fact that this government, the Alberta government under the leadership of our Premier, has looked at the correctional landscape in this province and how it's changing. I would encourage her, if she could, to please write her federal counterparts and maybe ask them to look at their correctional facilities and how they're dealing with it.

But, Mr. Speaker, on the electronic monitoring question one of the things that we have had to face recently is a 40 per cent increase in conditional sentences that are being served in this province from a decision in 2000 called the Proulx decision that the federal govern-

ment has made, a decision in retrospect to determine why we should keep people in a facility versus not in serving in the community. We believe that to protect the people in this province – and public safety is our number one priority – electronic monitoring is a good idea to monitor the offenders who are serving conditional sentencing in this province.

Ms Blakeman: Totally unproven.

My next question, also to the Solicitor General: how is public safety enhanced by having a category of offenders, which includes people convicted of assault, be allowed to report less to probation officers?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member is talking about one of the recommendations in the report about supervision standards. I have to say that the supervision standards pilot project that we launched two years ago has been highly, highly successful and is supported by the probation officers in this province, who believe that this should be expanded across this province.

Now, when you talk about supervision standards, it's very important to say that this does not include sexual offenders, it does not include young offenders, it does not include offenders who are serving conditional sentencing, and it does not include high-risk or high-profile offenders. What this does include is an offender who is charged with theft, for example. Under their supervision standards reporting could be done every two weeks instead of one, which allows the probation officers in this province to deal with the high-risk offenders.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental, Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Solicitor General: given that youth will now serve their time in centres far from home, thereby weakening the support systems that will keep them from reoffending, why has the Solicitor General made it more difficult for these youths?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, let's be very clear. We have a province that extends from north to south. We have young offenders who are sentenced to our correctional facilities, whether it's Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, or Red Deer. We have offenders that could be from Peace River. They could be from all over. They go to the facility that's closest to them. So, you know, by looking at closing Medicine Hat, where the utilization rate is very low, and the Lethbridge and Red Deer units of the young offender centres, we're letting our young offenders go to the facilities. The way she speaks, she'd want a young offender centre in every area in the province.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

1:50

Prescription Drugs

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Drugs have been the fastest-growing component of Canadian health care during the last 25 years . . . The public sector dominates most Canadian health care provision . . . In the area of pharmaceuticals, however, private sector funding has always dominated.

These are not my words but direct quotes from page 33 of the \$100,000 report that the Minister of Health and Wellness commissioned from the Conference Board of Canada and tabled in this Assembly two weeks ago. My question is to the Premier. Given that the area of health care with the most out-of-control costs is the one

dominated by the private sector, how can allowing more private involvement in our public health care system do anything other than drive up costs and make the health system less sustainable?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again you're comparing apples and oranges and grapes and pears and turnips and potatoes and everything else. You can't equate and compare the involvement of private pharmaceutical companies with the whole issue of privately delivered health care.

I'll give you an example. The example would be ophthalmology services. Certainly, an ophthalmologist operating out of a private clinic and doing cataract surgeries, for instance, can reduce his overhead and do things, according to an ophthalmologist I talked to, in a much more efficient manner. One of the ways is that he doesn't have to hire union staff – I know that would be offensive to the NDs – so that people working in his office can do all sorts of duties outside of medical duties if they're required to do those duties, administrative duties and so on.

Another example of the public system, the sole public system, is in the area of purchasing. In hospitals there is not the freedom to purchase. Everything is done through a purchasing agent, as I understand it.

I'll give you a case that is anecdotal, but it happens to be true, a true anecdote. I had the opportunity recently of visiting CUPS, the Calgary Urban Project Society. CUPS ministers to those on the street with drug problems – I'm talking about illicit drug problems – and they were wondering about the possibility of purchasing methadone, which is used as a treatment for heroine addiction, through the Calgary regional health authority. I contacted the Calgary regional health authority, and they told me that because of their purchasing policies and the way that they have to purchase, it would probably be cheaper for CUPS to go to Shoppers Drug Mart to get the methadone.

The other instance I was going to allude to goes back to the ophthalmology . . .

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: My first supplementary to the Premier: given that the Ministry of Health and Wellness's budget for pharmaceuticals has gone up a whopping 28 per cent from last year to this year, why has the government failed to implement innovations like reference-based pricing and increased use of generic drugs that provinces like B.C. have successfully used to constrain drug costs since 1996?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I understand it, we do have a generic drug policy. That policy is the least-expensive alternative.

One of the problems that we encounter – and I don't know how the hon. leader of the third party would address this, and it doesn't matter whether you're a Liberal or a Conservative or a member of the New Democrats – is that if you have cancer and there is a drug on the market that might be better or slightly better than the least-cost generic drug, the patients are going to demand this drug if it alleviates pain, in their minds or if it actually does, or if it prolongs life, even if that prolonging of life might be only for three or four months. They are going to ask for that demonstrably more expensive drug. It's one of those moral problems that health regions under ND administrations, under Liberal administrations, under Conservative administrations have to deal with, and it's one of the things that we'll have to deal with as we work through reforms.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental, Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a solution to this moral dilemma the Premier is talking about.

Let me ask him this: if this government is serious about making the health system sustainable, as opposed to lining the pockets of private health insurance companies, why has it failed to adopt the best practices of countries like Sweden, which funds 100 per cent of drug costs from public sources at a lower overall cost than is the case in this province?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I find it very interesting – well, strange, perhaps – that one day we would be talking about looking at best practices in countries like Sweden and be criticized by the NDs and the next day the NDs are suggesting that we look at the best practices in countries like Sweden. That's precisely what we are going to do.

I want this hon. member to stand up now and promise today that if we implement the best practices adopted by Sweden, he will never in this Legislative Assembly or anywhere else criticize the government for it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

SuperNet Delivery to Schools

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently I received notice from several of the school boards in my constituency about the pending connection to the SuperNet. These boards, indeed all the boards in my area, are very excited about the potential for the provision of some superb learning opportunities. Some of the boards, however, have been advised that in some cases there may be two types of connection: a wireless and a fibre optic. In fact, in one district out of the 15 schools all within a city 10 would be wireless and five would be fibre optic. My questions are all to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Could the minister assure this House and the education community that even with these two types of delivery services the level of service under SuperNet will not be compromised?

Mr. Doerksen: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta SuperNet is the infrastructure that is being put in place for high-speed broadband network services. That infrastructure will consist of both fibre optic and wireless components. Bell as the major contractor is obligated to provide service levels, in this case to schools. As part of our role Alberta Innovation and Science's job is to ensure that, whether they are a fibre optical network or a wireless solution, in fact those service levels are met and are reliable and deliver the kind of capacity that we have promised.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental, Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the demand for capacity will probably grow at each school site, who will pay for the upgrades and maintenance of these wireless and fibre optic deliveries?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, in the industry the term that's often referred to is scalability, and that means the ability to take services and actually scale them upward as the demand for broadband increases. We've seen over the last number of years the insatiable demand that users have had on broadband services. So as schools require additional bandwidth, these upgrades will be provided to them as part of Bell's obligation in the contract.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental, Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That definitely is good news.

Given that there appears to be some confusion out there on servicing and costs, is the Department of Innovation and Science working closely with Alberta Learning to make sure that there is clarification on these issues?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, let me be very clear that Alberta Innovation and Science is communicating on a regular basis with Learning, with Health, with Community Development as we start to deliver and build the Alberta SuperNet. In addition, we are also prepared to meet with representatives of school boards and hospitals or libraries to make sure that we understand their concerns, and we can also let them know how we are delivering on the service that we have promised.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:00

SuperNet Service Costs

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The \$193 million that the government gave Bell to build the SuperNet will be a drop in the bucket compared to the fees over the next 10 years that taxpayers are going to pay Axia, the SuperNet service provider. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Given that the yearly cost of each connection is \$3,000 and at least six ministries are paying for its services, what will the SuperNet cost taxpayers over the next 10 years?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, as I just referred to in my previous answer, the Alberta SuperNet is an infrastructure project that builds a network that provides high-speed broadband services. Over that service provision you can run applications such as the Internet, but the Internet is only one part of a service delivery. You could run an application like RACOL, which we demonstrated, from Rainbow Lake through La Crête to the University of Alberta to actually have teaching sessions using, again, Alberta's technology through the Smart board whereby you could instruct students in all of these centres at the same time. Schools and libraries and municipalities and everybody else have to pay a fee to access broadband capacity.

Let me use an illustration, if I could, Mr. Speaker. Currently you have a normal Internet high-speed service at your home, which I would compare to, say, a garden hose. The Alberta SuperNet, as it gets to schools and libraries, actually provides in a picture kind of way a fire hose so that you can send a lot more data and digital services and expanded applications over that kind of network that are not currently available.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental, Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Completely evasive.

Given the constant obsolescence in this technology, why did the government lock us into a 10-year service provision contract with Axia?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, going back to the first question that was received about the \$3,000, I must admit that I'm confused about where the \$3,000 comes from, because there are different levels of service depending on the connection that you choose. So there's an option to have a 256K service. You could have a two megabit service. You could have a five megabit service. You could have a

20 megabit service. You could potentially even at some point have a 100 megabit service. There are different costs that you pay to subscribe to that kind of broadband.

At some point soon we're going to be looking at the Minister of Learning's budget – and he may wish to supplement; I don't know – which talks about the connection speed that he is guaranteeing and providing so that every school, a thousand more schools, that currently do not have high-speed broadband in our province will be able to have access to it.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, this is getting to be a long question, and we're still only on the second part of a three-part question. Can you do it in 30 seconds? The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My department has budgeted \$10 million a year for SuperNet costs. We anticipate that this is what it will be. I will add that we're looking at the cities of Edmonton and Calgary probably decreasing their Internet costs by close to 50 per cent with SuperNet.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.
Final supplemental, Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: given that the government has already provided \$1.2 million to municipalities for hookup, how much more is the government going to have to give municipalities to help pay Axia's service fees?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the question, first of all, is about infrastructure, but more importantly, the cost is not a cost. You know what it is? It's an investment in rural Alberta and urban development, that you don't support. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hopefully, all of these extra people who are helping ask the question and, worse yet, are trying to answer the question will go to one minister and one member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Alberta Works Program

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2001 the Minister of Human Resources and Employment put in place a committee consisting of the members for Calgary-Bow, Calgary-East, Cardston-Taber-Warner, Edmonton-Norwood, and myself to investigate our provision of low-income benefits to needy Albertans. Following this review and subsequent report the minister has announced a new program known as Alberta Works. Can the minister explain to members of this Assembly and all Albertans what this new program means for low-income Albertans whom we are trying to help?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Well, thank you very much, and perhaps it's a great opportunity to once again thank the committee that looked into Alberta Works. Alberta Works, that we announced yesterday, has some main goals. We want to move people from assistance to independence through the workforce. For those people that are currently already working, we want to do whatever we can to have them maintain positions within the workforce, and of course for those who are unable to work, we want to be able to supply their basic needs for them. So this is what we've been doing.

The main focus now of the Human Resources and Employment budget will be on skills training. I want to assure all members here in the House that we will be very aggressive in moving people from a sense of reliance on the government to one of self-reliance.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister: will Alberta Works clients see an increase to their benefits as compared to the old program?

Mr. Dunford: Probably not if they're just looking for cash in their pockets or, of course, into their bank accounts. What we are doing is in terms of some benefits in kind. Basically, what we are able to do, then, is increase the financial support of our client base, and we've added some new features. Certainly, some of our folks find themselves in situations of abuse, and we need to get them out of those situations. So we're able to provide some additional funding in those particular areas.

I think that every member in this House is concerned about single moms and their situation with how it relates to them moving into the workforce and how it relates then to child care. So we're kind of opening up some new avenues in that area, rewarding families, particularly grandparents now, to be involved with those children to make it easier on the whole family.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: from a qualitative perspective will our clients receive a different or better type of service?

Mr. Dunford: Well, it's certainly going to be different. We've been working on this for the last three or four months at quite a pace with our front-line workers. Again, we want to increase their skills at assessment as people come forward seeking support.

Basically, what we're doing, Mr. Speaker, is moving from a system of labelling people and then providing entitlements to a more individualized case management approach. Then through the assessment, of course, we can look at a menu based on what their individual needs actually are. So I think that we'll see more attention given to the individual person, the individual Albertan, seeking assistance. Our main goal is to move them from assistance to being taxpaying Albertans.

2:10

Private/Public Partnerships

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, we continue to receive many letters and inquiries from Albertans on P3s. They are concerned that this government can't estimate the cost of a P3 project, even though they have committed hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to these projects. Albertans are outraged that this government would rather hide the infrastructure debt than be accountable for the public money they spend. To the Premier: why should Alberta taxpayers believe that P3s save them money when the Minister of Transportation and the Minister of Infrastructure refuse to give an estimate of how much a P3 project should cost?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is not true. There is one P3 project that has gone through the process, and the costs are public. P3s are not new at all. Maybe the name is new, the application of P3s. Is this hon. members suggesting that we should abandon the P3s that have existed for years and years and years in this province? Those

are nursing homes. You know, for years nursing homes have been contracted by government to government or now to regional health authorities. They're all run by private operators but are subsidized by the government. There are examples of P3 proposals or projects that have existed and worked in this province for years.

Now, relative to new P3 projects there is a process in place, and it involves a detailed adjudication as to the worthiness of the project. If it fails to meet the many tests involved, then it simply will not proceed, and we will proceed with the project on a conventional basis if indeed we have the money. If we don't have the money, then the project won't proceed. But if it meets all the tests and if it is a good project, then we will proceed with a P3.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental, Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: when will Alberta taxpayers see the proof that the southeast ring road extension or the Calgary court centre are more cost-effective?

Mr. Klein: I don't know about the south ring road, Mr. Speaker, but it will have to meet the test, and the process is a very transparent process, at least the outcome. If people, including members of the opposition, have a problem with the outcome and can provide demonstrable evidence that the project will not save taxpayers' dollars or the project will be inefficient or the project will not be properly managed, if they can present evidence relative to these issues or other issues, then we'll take that evidence into consideration.

Mr. Bonner: Again to the Premier, Mr. Speaker: given that many of the taxpayers that contact us believe that P3s are nothing more than private profiteering at public expense, what mechanisms are being put into place now so that P3s will not force taxpayers into costly agreements for generations to come?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to see copies, if the hon. member would be so kind as to submit copies since we don't have the privilege of FOIPing them like they do of us.

Mrs. McClellan: What? We can't do that?

Mr. Klein: Can we do that? If we can, fine. I'll FOIP them then. I mean, they FOIP us and then complain about the price they have to pay. So I would like to see this huge outpouring, this huge basketful, wheelbarrow full of letters that he talks about and this sense of outrage by Albertans. I would like to see that. I doubt it very much. So will the hon. member give me a commitment either after this question period or now that he will send me the letters?

Now, to answer his question, there are numerous steps that proponents have to go through to be approved for a P3 project, and I'll have the hon. Minister of Infrastructure explain.

The Deputy Speaker: Very briefly, hon. minister. We're already into this for six, seven minutes.

Mr. Lund: Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that this does take a bit of time, and we've done it many times in the House, so I'm not sure what is the best way to educate the hon. member.

The fact is, as the Premier has said, there are a number of steps including an outside panel that will look at these that are put forward, and they have to approve the project as being one that's good for Albertans, that it's efficient, that it's timely, and a number of other components. So in due course they will see.

The member continually brings this issue up. Just as an example, with one regional health authority that I'm aware of, we had allocated them so many dollars to get 150 long-term care beds. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that they came in in excess of 170 and had \$7 million left over that they could put into some other facility.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Court System

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know of a constituent that had to defend himself in a frivolous civil lawsuit and was literally bankrupted by the legal costs he had to incur. This isn't the first time I have heard such stories. I realize it would be inappropriate to discuss a specific case in this House, so I have a general question for the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Can the minister tell me what his department is doing to control the high cost of civil lawsuits so that the justice system is not one that financially punishes innocent people?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back in 1999, prior to my taking over the portfolio, there was a summit on justice, and that actually was one of the critical concerns that was identified by the summit on justice and therefore has been at the base of our business plan and operations since that time. It's a critical problem for Albertans. We have a great system in terms of a strong adversarial process with a strong tradition, but one of the problems is that it's becoming too expensive for the ordinary person to deal with.

So there have been a number of things that we've been trying to do to provide Albertans with alternatives both inside and outside the courtroom. We've expanded the use of mediation, other programs. The courts have also weighed in on this topic, knowing that they have to be responsive to Albertans' needs and to accessibility, so they've started judicial dispute resolution processes to try and encourage Albertans to solve disputes more actively and without the need for a trial. The long and short of it is that we have to find new and better ways to help Albertans solve their own problems: provide them with the tools, help them develop the tools to deal with their own problems without going to court, and to only use going to court as a last resort.

The court system is expensive. It is a difficult adversarial process. It needs to be there when points of law have to be resolved, but it should be a last resort. So we should be trying to ensure that Albertans have access to the tools to solve their disputes without going to court.

Now, having said that, Mr. Speaker, about 97 per cent of civil cases that are launched are resolved without going to court, so there's a lot of success in that area, but the big problem is where there's an economic imbalance between the parties. So we have to put in and we are working on putting in mechanisms which allow a party to a dispute to force an issue to go to mediation to see if that's a possible way of resolving it, and there are other methods that we're bringing forward to try and make the system more affordable.

2:20

Mr. Vandermeer: My second and only supplemental is to the same minister. Given that the status quo is simply not acceptable for people like my constituents, can the minister tell us if there are ways the system can be changed to take into account the needs of Albertans who feel unfairly punished by a complex and costly justice system?

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are a number of things that we've done already. For example, as the member will know, the small claims limit, or the Provincial Court civil claims limit, has been moved from \$7,500 to \$25,000, and discussion is happening as we speak with the Provincial Court about potentially moving that to \$50,000.

As members will know, people can appear in Provincial Court without representation by lawyers. They can put their cases, and as long as the cases are not complex cases requiring advocacy with respect to law, there's no good reason why parties should not be able to do that. So we're working on that process.

As the member may know already, as well, the civil mediation project in Provincial Court has been successful in helping people to resolve about 60 per cent of the cases that go before Provincial Court. On the family side, for example, there's a collaborative law process that's been engaged in by members of the bar themselves in which the lawyers contract with their clients not to go to court but to resolve matters through mediation, interest-based mediation. There are pilot projects in Edmonton and Calgary with dispute resolution officers who are members of the family bar who volunteer their time to assist mediating claims between parties so that they don't have to go to court. On the criminal side we have an early dispute resolution protocol that's come in so that we can have things resolved early if there's going to be a guilty plea in any event.

So there are a number of things we've done, and we're continuing to talk about reorganizing the courts on a single trial court basis so that we can be more effective in terms of using the expensive court resources in the most effective way. But again, Mr. Speaker, the key issue here is encouraging Albertans to solve their own disputes by arming them with the tools they need to do effective mediation.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. Has the superintendent of insurance alerted the minister of any auto insurance companies that provide auto insurance to the public that have withdrawn from the Alberta market?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I'd have to take that question under notice.

The Deputy Speaker: First supplemental, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: what extra costs would consumers have to pay if an auto insurance company that provides auto insurance withdrew from the Alberta market? How much would that cost consumers?

Mrs. Nelson: I don't believe, Mr. Speaker, that it would have an effect on consumers.

The Deputy Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: how many auto insurance companies have temporarily discontinued writing new business in Alberta since January 1, 2004, if any?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, under our new structure we've had tremendous co-operation from this industry to come on board to put this new structure in place. I believe they have carried on with their existing clientele very well, and they've honoured the freeze. They're looking forward to the new structure that the Member for Medicine Hat is going to be bringing forward this summer through the implementation team. They have worked very well with us on this structure. So I'm pleased to say that their response is good, and I am not aware of anything otherwise.

head:

Members' Statements

The Deputy Speaker: Hon members, in 30 seconds I'll be asking the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, the hon. Member for Calgary-West, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs for their statements.

Tartan Day

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tartan Day is a special day for Scots and all those who would like to be Scots to celebrate all things Scottish by wearing the tartan and honouring the numerous and significant contributions to society made by Scots. In particular, Tartan Day commemorates the anniversary of the declaration of Arbroath, or the Scottish declaration of independence, which is considered the Scottish equivalent of the Magna Carta and is one of the earliest expressions of the rights of people to a peaceful and productive life free of oppression.

It was on April 6, 1320, at Arbroath, Scotland, when Scottish nobles declared their defiance of the English king and their commitment to the independence of Scotland. I have circulated a copy of the declaration to each member along with a swatch of the clan Douglas tartan ribbon, a tartan similar to my own clan Graham tartan. Officially, Tartan Day is April 6, but we are recognizing it today because of the Legislature's spring break next week.

Mr. Speaker, that Scots have had a major impact on the development of society is captured in the recent *New York Times* bestseller entitled *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* by Arthur Herman. He describes how the Scots have made crucial contributions to science, philosophy, literature, education, medicine, commerce, and politics which have shaped the modern western world. This is no less so in our own country and province, where the Scots have played a major role in the founding and development of our society. Of note, those of Scottish descent represent the largest immigrant group in Alberta, numbering some 650,000 people, or 1 out of every 5 Albertans.

Back now to tartans, which are synonymous with Scotland and Scottish clans. They are very popular symbols throughout the world, and new tartans are being continually created by families, organizations, and regions to identify themselves. Today many members are wearing tartan, including my Calgary colleagues and I, who are wearing the new Calgary tartan, unveiled last year as an official symbol of the city of Calgary, provided to us courtesy of the St. Andrew-Caledonian Society of Calgary.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, may I say: let everyone wear their tartan with pride.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Wilbur Griffith

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wilbur Griffith, one of Calgary's shrewdest, most generous, and most humorous entrepreneurs, passed away March 20, 2004, at the age of 101. Wilbur is

best known for his donation in 2000 of 92 hectares of Elbow river parkland to the city of Calgary. Griffith Woods, as it is named, is about four times the area of P.E.I. To his friends Griff will always be remembered as the guy who played four holes of golf on his 100th birthday, and at age 97 Griff was tickled to be named the CFCN athlete of the week.

During my 1996 nomination campaign I came to know the graciousness of Wilbur and Betty in their beautiful home and was honoured by his support over the years. In 2003 he joined other Calgary-West constituents to receive a Queen's jubilee award. Even last month, during a brief visit in the Rockyview hospital, I was reminded of his great intelligence and dignified manner.

Wilbur Griffith, beloved father, grandfather, and friend, was born in 1902 in Enid, Oklahoma. After earning a business administration degree at Drake University, Wilbur joined the Gulf Oil company, where over 20 years he gained necessary experience to become a very successful independent oil lease broker. Wilbur moved to Calgary in 1955, where he and his late wife, Betty, built their home and raised their family in Springbank. He founded Canadian Export Gas & Oil Ltd. and was contracted to supply the gas for Trans-Canada PipeLines. After 1965 Wilbur continued his entrepreneurial endeavours, including wheat farming, cattle ranching, and land development.

2:30

In 1977 Wilbur constructed the Pinebrook Golf and Country Club, which ignited his passion for the game. Wilbur also enjoyed hunting, giving golf lessons, and travelling. His quick sense of humour, charm, and optimistic zest for life will be sadly missed and lovingly remembered.

Wilbur is survived by his children, Sally Rondio, Julie Warthe and her husband, Rick, and Bill Griffith, and by his grandchildren, Justin, Tessa, Kai, and Nico. Wilbur has surely been reunited with his Betty in that better place.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Health Care System

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier and members of the government caucus frequently misrepresent and distort the vision of medicare's founder, the late Tommy Douglas. The Premier has proclaimed that Tommy Douglas's vision of health care was a very minimalist one, a health care that would only protect people from losing their homes and livelihood because of grave illness. In other cases the Premier has invoked Douglas's name to justify the unjustifiable; i.e., the introduction of user fees, deductibles, and out-of-pocket expenditures for Albertans.

Let me say categorically that Tommy Douglas would never have supported this government's cold-hearted plans to burden hard-working and middle-class families and abandon the sick and the injured. Such distortions do a tremendous disservice to a truly great Canadian.

The Premier refuses to take seriously the counsel of men such as Tommy Douglas and Roy Romanow, both of whom served as Premiers of a province without the resources enjoyed by Alberta and who, therefore, know something about the difficulty of balancing provincial budgets. Romanow, like Douglas before him, understands that preserving health care in Canada demands that we strengthen the public system, not starve it, not dismantle it.

This government is so ideologically bent on padding the pockets of private health providers and insurers that they refuse to even consider the true vision of Tommy Douglas for a health care system,

which is "a comprehensive health insurance program which will cover all health services – not just hospital and medical care – but eventually dental care, optometric care, drugs and all the other health services which people require."

Mr. Speaker, Tommy Douglas never envisioned a health system characterized by health premiums and profiteering. His vision was one of compassion, equality, and comprehensiveness, and that is a vision shared by a vast majority of Albertans.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Private Members' Business

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One Monday ago, the 22nd of this month, the Speaker made several comments on procedure. As you know – and I'm quoting – "Monday afternoon in our Routine is private members' business, very, very important in terms of the history of this Assembly and everything else that we deal with."

The Speaker further commented that what the "opposition might do is to make sure that there's never ever any time on the agenda for those bills to come to the agenda," not suggesting for a moment that that may be the case. The Speaker further elaborated.

The way it's going right now is that I sit back and I look here, and my subjective view is that the only private . . . bills that will ever reach the floor this session would be government private members' bills, but with all the written questions and motions for returns, if we spend as much time as we did today on five of them, none of those [bills ever will].

Mr. Speaker, the Liberal opposition, however, contrary to what the Speaker has observed, notes on their web page that "government MLAs are holding up their own bills that would enhance workplace safety for firefighters and other emergency workers by dodging questions on government expenses," further saying, "The government doesn't seem as interested in debating these issues as we do."

Mr. Speaker, I would suggest to all members of this Assembly that many of the private members' bills before this Assembly at this time are of imperative importance. Some of the bills will preserve and enhance the safety of our front-line workers like firefighters, police officers, paramedics, prison guards, and others. Not passing these bills is detrimental not only to their health but to their lives. Hence, I would suggest that all members of this Assembly, particularly the members of the opposition, bring back the order of private members' bills on the agenda of this Assembly so that we can in a democratic manner debate these bills on their merits and either pass them or fail them on their merits alone.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The only comment I would make is that written questions and motions for returns are also private members' business.

head:

Presenting Reports by Standing and Special Committees

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The Standing Committee on Private Bills has had certain bills under consideration and wishes to report as follows. The committee recommends that the following private bill proceed: Bill Pr. 2, Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act.

The committee also recommends that the following private bills

proceed with amendments: Bill Pr. 1, St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill Pr. 3, Living Faith Bible College Act. As part of this report, Mr. Speaker, I will be tabling five copies of the amendments proposed for these bills.

Mr. Speaker, I do request the concurrence of the Assembly in this recommendation.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Norris: Stand up, Brian.

Mr. Mason: Save it for question period, hon. minister.

I'm presenting a petition signed by 47 individuals petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government to "implement a public, not-for-profit automobile insurance system."

Some Hon. Members: Forty-seven?

Mr. Mason: Forty-seven today, just today.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands has a notice of motion.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. I'd like to advise the Assembly that at the appropriate time the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona and leader of the New Democrat opposition will move:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly deplores the federal government's failure to deliver the new funding commitments necessary to adequately support health care in Alberta and the other provinces in its 2004-2005 budget and, further, that the Legislative Assembly urge the federal government to immediately correct this deficiency.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I rise to table a letter on behalf of the Premier. Much has been said in the last days about the horse racing industry, and of course much of that information was incorrect, incomplete, and some of it totally erroneous. The Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, in order to assist some of the members of this House to understand the importance of this industry, where 70,000 people work, to understand the split of the funds that they earn from slot machines, has written to the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition and invited him to tour Northlands Park – it's the one that's closest to us – and perhaps talk to some of the people who work in that industry and certainly better understand it. The type of information that's being given out here is a total disservice to the industry. On behalf of the Premier I would table this letter.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a tabling, as well, with a considerably shorter preamble. It is a pleasure for me to table a letter from a constituent of mine who feels

very strongly about certain recommendations contained in the final report of the Learning Commission.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: I clearly thank you, Mr. Speaker, for recognizing me. I'd like to table the required number of copies of the annual report of the Alberta Economic Development Authority. As you know, this is a requirement of our House. I would like to offer a very significant thank you to Mr. Art Smith, the cofounder of this with our Premier, and Mr. Ron Triffo for another fantastic year of work. I have the appropriate number of copies and I'm tabling them now.

head: **2:40 Motions under Standing Order 40**

Federal Health Care Funding

Dr. Pannu:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly deplores the federal government's failure to deliver the new funding commitments necessary to adequately support health care in Alberta and the other provinces in its 2004-2005 budget and, further, that the Legislative Assembly urge the federal government to immediately correct this deficiency.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, I'll speak to the matter of the urgency of this motion. The motion relates to health funding, which, of course, is an ongoing discussion that needs to be undertaken by all Albertans and Canadians, but this specific motion raises a matter of particular urgency and must be dealt with in a timely and pressing manner.

Mr. Speaker, the government introduced its budget for 2004-2005 last week, and this afternoon we will continue to give close examination to that budget. Last week the federal government also released its budget. In the days since, there have been hints about further federal funding for health care, yet no solid commitments have been made.

Mr. Speaker, our health care system remains in a precarious position. On the one hand, the Premier continues to threaten further privatization and delisting of services. On the other hand, the federal government presented its budget last week, and this budget was extremely disappointing because the federal government failed to indicate any commitment or timeline on the part of the federal government to meet the objective of providing funding for 25 per cent of the expenditures on insured services. Although it appears that the \$2 billion guaranteed by the Prime Minister will likely be paid to the provinces sometime this year, these dollars will only represent a one-time injection rather than an ongoing base payment.

Mr. Speaker, it's urgent that the federal government be brought under immediate pressure to provide the stable, predictable, and long-term funding recommended by the Romanow commission. This motion is intended to bring such pressure to bear on the federal government, and I hope that all members of this House will give their unanimous consent to debate this motion this afternoon.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Unanimous consent denied]

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head:

Main Estimates 2004-05

Sustainable Resource Development

The Deputy Chair: As per Standing Order 58(3) the first hour will be dedicated to the minister and the opposition members, and thereafter any other member is able to participate.

The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and good afternoon. I'm pleased to be here today to talk to you about Sustainable Resource Development's 2004-2005 budget.

But first of all I'd like to take the opportunity to introduce the staff from our ministry who are sitting in the members' gallery. They will be taking notes, and some of the questions that I don't answer here today will be answered in writing shortly after. I have Stew Churlish, the assistant deputy minister for strategic corporate services; Ray Duffy, director of the finance branch; Donna Babchishin, director of communications; and Daphne Cheel, executive director of policy and planning. Of course, also we have Dave England, who is my acting executive assistant at this time.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the dedication and professionalism that the ministry staff exhibits daily as they carry out their tasks. Our field staff are well known, respected, and appreciated in communities throughout Alberta. They do an outstanding job of managing our public lands and renewable resources and protecting our forests from wildfire and forest pests.

Our job in this department is to ensure that Alberta's natural resources are sustainable and available for future generations, to ensure that Albertans both now and in the future benefit from the development of their renewable resources and the public lands. To achieve that goal, the ministry has to maintain a balance between activity and conservation, and that's challenging. It has to consider economic, social, and environment values that all Albertans cherish. These three values are the very core of Sustainable Resource Development in this province.

The ministry has four core businesses: wildfire management, natural resource and public land management, Natural Resources Conservation Board, and surface rights and land compensation management. The ministry continues to be challenged by increased public awareness and expectations about the decisions that are made, competing demands on our landscape, and the need to reduce the footprint on this land base. The population and economic growth in Alberta are also significant factors affecting the services and the resources that the ministry oversees and manages. The ministry fully understands that the province's natural resources contribute to the high quality of life that Albertans enjoy.

A key business of the ministry is the sustainable management of our fish and wildlife resources. Grizzly bear conservation is a high priority area for the ministry, and a management plan is being developed for this species. Grizzly bear populations are very difficult to estimate. They spend the winter months hidden from view hibernating, and during the rest of the year they freely roam within a large area. It can be hundreds of square kilometres in size.

2:50

Alberta is internationally recognized for being a leader in grizzly bear research. SRD will continue the support of grizzly bear research so that we have the knowledge and planning tools to ensure long-term conservation of the grizzly bear in Alberta. This year we are conducting a DNA population census that will provide more accurate information on grizzly bear numbers. We will also continue with our support of grizzly bear research throughout the foothills model forest.

Alberta continues to make significant progress to support Alberta's endangered species legislation. This year SRD will support 14 recovery teams and over 16 stewardship research monitoring and sampling projects. A recovery plan is also being developed for caribou.

In order to improve our ability to manage all of our fishing resources, we continue towards reducing the number of commercial fishing licences in Alberta. Close to 275 fishing operators, accounting for more than 13,000 100-yard nets, have applied to participate in the buyback program which we call fisheries compensation. We will begin the process this year as dollars become available.

The interest in recreational fishing and hunting continues to grow. Last year over 221,000 sport-fishing licences were sold, an increase of about 4,000 over 2002. There were over 620,000 active wildlife identification number cardholders, an increase of over 50,000. Close to 97,000 hunters purchased more than 251,000 different hunting licences.

While the increased interest in recreational fishing and hunting is very positive, it does put increasing pressure on our natural resources. It is more important than ever to ensure that we have the proper system in place to deal with these increases. That means that our staff and ministry need to have the financial and manpower resources to carry out their responsibilities. We have set aside funds to develop partnership programs.

To generate revenue, the Alberta Professional Outfitters Society is collecting a levy that can go into the direct revenue fund for wildlife management. Alberta's 365 big-game outfitters are paying the fees for their wildlife allocation over five years. The \$1 million that will be collected will assist wildlife programs such as wildlife inventories and aerial surveys to manage species like moose, deer, elk, and antelope.

Our fish and wildlife officers continue to do an outstanding job. Over the past year they have worked with other staff on new priority areas, such as the West Nile virus monitoring program, walleye monitoring, and obtaining samples of elk and deer for chronic wasting disease surveys. The \$16.8 million budget for enforcement field services is a slight increase that will be used over 150 wildlife officers. About 130 of these are working in the field. Patrolling will continue to be required although they will be focused during angling and hunting seasons.

We have a challenge when our animals become urbanized also and become too familiar with human populations. We have deer, elk, moose, and coyotes coming into populated areas. This is not healthy for wild animals. Last year there were more than 16,000 accidents between vehicles and wildlife such as elk, moose, and deer and also resulting, unfortunately, in five fatalities. We are looking at a number of options, particularly continued education as well as additional changes to our fall hunt to address these issues.

There continues to be an increasing demand on our public lands and resources. We have seen an increase in the number of land dispositions provided through the public land and forest division. This department manages more than 187,000 land dispositions that are issued for agricultural, commercial, and industrial purposes. Last year dispositions increased about 6 per cent. This reflects the volume of work that the ministry staff are carrying out on a daily basis.

Over the next year SRD will continue to develop and implement policy guidelines and practices that will minimize the footprint on Crown land. We are working with the public stakeholders on a number of access management plans, such as the Ghost-Waiparous, which is over 1,500 square kilometres, and the Bighorn backcountry, which is over 5,000 square kilometres. These plans are being developed in consultation with stakeholder groups.

We are achieving a balance to protect the environment and provide recreation opportunities for the public. We are in the first full year of new rules for recreation and exploration access on agricultural leases on public land. The Agricultural Disposition Statutes Amendment Act has been very successful in resolving access issues between leaseholders and the recreation users. By December of last year nearly 90 per cent of the leaseholders had submitted contact information.

Supporting the agricultural community is also a big part of this department by ensuring that we have well-managed public range-lands.

Forestry continues to be an important part of our Alberta economy. It is an industry that generates an annual revenue of around \$8 billion, provides jobs for over 54,000 Albertans, and is a key industry in the overall economic diversification plan of our province. In fact, about 45 communities in Alberta depend on forestry as their major source of income and also job creation.

I am especially proud of the working relationship that we have developed with industry. Despite the challenges, industry continues to show their commitment to innovation and the future of our forests. They continue to introduce new technology and leading-edge practices while placing a high value on concerns for the environment and wildlife.

Just last week the Alberta Forest Products Association announced that the value of forest products produced by their member companies increased productivity by 16 per cent. Alberta industries have increased their exports to the U.S. by 30 per cent from approximately 1.1 billion board feet to about 1.5 billion board feet. This is because Alberta has some of the most modern and efficient mills in North America. Our forest practices are also amongst the best, and we have done a good job of creating the environment for industry to create jobs and create wealth in Alberta.

3:00

It is important to remember that a healthy forest industry is crucial to the well-being of our economy and our environment. It is no secret that the Alberta forest sector continues to face some very real challenges such as the impact of the softwood lumber trade dispute. A priority for SRD is to continue to work closely with the industry and, of course, the people that are involved in the softwood lumber trade negotiations. Together we are looking at options to resolve this dispute on a long-term basis.

As you know, last year we had another very busy fire season. Over 1,100 wildfires burned nearly 55,000 hectares of forested land. Many factors affect the cost associated with protecting Alberta forests, such as weather conditions, fire hazard levels, and moisture levels. To be as effective and prudent as possible, we start with a base budget to ensure that we have adequate resources throughout the year. Our priority goals are to protect human lives and communities.

Being prepared will save taxpayers money in the long run by reducing the number of costly escaped fires. When large wildfires occur and when numbers get high, the cost of additional staff and resources is covered through supplementary estimates. Last fall it was determined that disaster assistance was required, and additional funds were made available through a sustainability fund. In 2002-2003 the department was able to collect on a wildfire insurance policy that was in place. After carefully reviewing the increased premiums for this year, it was not in our best interest to renew the policy for this fire season. Despite the severe fire season in parts of the province I am proud to inform you that we did not lose one single building to wildfires, and we were able to reduce large fires from 4 per cent to 2 per cent.

This past summer was also significant with the devastating impact that wildfires had on families and communities in B.C. A recent independent report on the B.C. wildfires urged government to reduce the risk of large wildfires. Their recommendations are consistent with those contained in past reviews of Alberta's protection practices. We have been doing much of this work already. Alberta is continuing to strengthen the FireSmart community prevention program and will take more resources in that area this coming year.

I would also like to address the fine work that is being done by the Natural Resources Conservation Board. The Natural Resources Conservation Board has two roles: the traditional role, to review projects that could affect the province's natural resources, and their new role as a regulator of confined feeding operations in Alberta. Ever since the NRCB assumed responsibility for regulating confined feeding operations, their workload has increased dramatically. The additional \$1.1 million increase in their budget will ensure that they have the necessary resources to manage the confined feeding operations.

Last year the NRCB received 1,083 complaints, and so far they have resolved 876 of these. Inspectors from NRCB issued 19 enforcement orders. They received 148 applications for confined feeding operations or manure storage facilities. In the case of confined feeding operations the NRCB is involved in these stages and, of course, still takes directions from Environment on whether large projects require environmental impact assessment studies.

In its traditional role outside of confined feeding operations the NRCB kicks in once Alberta Environment determines the need for an environmental impact assessment study. The environmental impact assessment contains information on the anticipated social, economic, environmental effects of the project and what steps are being taken to reduce any adverse effects. As you can see, they continue to be extremely busy.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, the 20 minutes allocated to you have now lapsed.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Happy to have an opportunity to talk about the estimates of Sustainable Resource Development this afternoon, and I look forward to the minister having a chance to finish his comments in a few minutes. I'd also like to thank all of the staff that are here. You guys do a great job, and I know that you try and keep him on track. It doesn't always work, but I know that you try your best.

That's one of the first things that I want to talk about this afternoon, Mr. Chairman, an issue that his department tried to keep him on track for and he didn't follow suit, and that's about grizzly bears. In spite of evidence that there are dangerously low populations in Alberta and in spite of the recommendations from the government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee that grizzly bears be classified as threatened and in spite of thousands upon thousands of protests from concerned citizens, the government decided to go ahead with this spring's grizzly bear hunt, which meant that they also ignored the recommendation of their own grizzly bear recovery team that the hunt be suspended this year.

In response to that, I sent out a letter to a number of Albertans criticizing the government for that decision, and I got back some very interesting comments, Mr. Chairman, some for and some against. Cliff Wallis of the Alberta Wilderness Association and Sonja Mihelcic of the Sierra Club of Canada, prairie chapter, and Peter Duck certainly supported what I was saying, but some people certainly didn't.

Tom Foss, who is the regulations chairman of the Alberta

Bowhunters Association, had some interesting things to say, including that he spends some 20 days in K Country every year and sees between six and eight bears there a year. He says:

There is a huntable population of bears there. Whether a hunter harvests the bear, a car runs them over or they are removed by Fish and Wildlife, or killed by another bear, killed as they are held in a trap or snare, there will always be bear mortality. Unfortunately we are never going to have the numbers of bears that lived here over 100 years ago but we do enjoy a [healthy] population [now]. In our opinion there are many areas in the province that can support a hunt.

I guess that's the minister's opinion too.

T.J. Schwanky of Cochrane was also concerned with what I said. He said that while he's typically been a big supporter of mine and my position on environmental issues, he thinks that I'm "way off base on the grizzly hunt." He says that "hunters pose no threat to these great bears and, in fact, are quite likely their best ally. The real threat to grizzlies is habitat loss and human use in the backcountry."

Also, Ryk Visscher, who is the past president of APOS, stated that as one of my constituents and one of my biggest past supporters and as a biologist and an outdoorsman himself he's extremely disappointed in my position. He talks about in the past my being reasonable and objective and that he shares a passion for the great outdoors and wildlife populations, which I do, and he believes that I'm ignoring the science that already exist on the population.

In response to that, we have Jeff Gailus from Canmore talking about the need for "the persistence of a stable population of grizzly bears in Alberta" so that everyone – photographers, hunters, the general population – and other bears can enjoy the bears forever.

But the latest (and very substantial) research on grizzly bears, both inside and outside Alberta, indicates that the population in Alberta is too small, the reproductive rate too low, the habitat too degraded and, most importantly, the human-caused mortality rate way too high (2 or 3 times sustainable levels) to ensure a future for Alberta's grizzly bears.

He then goes on to support that argument.

So my questions for the minister are with regard to this issue and his position in terms of the budget estimates for next year and how they're going to spend the money. One, what does he have to substantiate or does he believe he's going to have to substantiate that the grizzly bear population in Alberta is in serious danger and he still refuses to elevate the status of the grizzly to a threatened status? Do you expect that you're going to be revisiting this issue and potentially suspending the grizzly bear hunt? There is an estimate, Mr. Chairman, that there are only 250 to 350 mature breeding individuals on provincial land, whereas the recommended minimum number to maintain stable, healthy populations is a thousand bears. So if you could answer that question, I'd appreciate it.

3:10

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Those are definitely good questions. It is definitely a priority of our government to ensure that we do our job in maintaining the balance between, you know, the development of our resources out there and environmental protection and, of course, the protection of our wildlife resources also.

As you can see, my budget did not increase, but it did not decrease in any area. We will continue with our budget and the programs that we have in place, and the member I know is quite familiar with some of the programs that are in place. We will continue monitoring very closely.

The challenge we have out there is in relation to when you're monitoring, being able to count the number of animals that are out there. Most grizzly bears will hibernate. The easiest time to see them because of their colour would be in the snow, and of course they hibernate in the winter, so they're not out there. The other time that you could try to find grizzly bears to count would be maybe in early fall or in the summer. Their hearing is really good. You know, if a helicopter were to fly in any area within 10 miles of the animals, they would probably move and hide under the trees and shrubs and stuff. So it's a tough area. We estimate that there are over 500 grizzly bears, and some have indicated that there are more than that. So it's a real challenge.

What we've done this year is actually reduce the hunt by about 30 per cent. We still allowed about 130 licences a couple of years back, and with the 130 licences the average take of animals was about 12. We've reduced that by 30 per cent. There are now 73 licences, and I would estimate, based on historic information, that the maximum that would be taken out would be somewhere around eight or nine. So it is a challenge.

I mentioned in my opening speech that we have a challenge in relation to animals becoming urbanized, and that includes grizzly bears but a lot more black bears. In order to keep animals wild and away from growth centres like Edmonton and towns and hamlets and communities throughout the province – I believe it is healthy not only for humans but also for the animals to remain wild, and I believe that the way you do that is to continue some form of a managed hunt. Now, at what level do you maintain it to try and keep animals away from growth centres and towns so that they don't endanger lives? If you do run into a grizzly bear, either the grizzly bear is dead or you are. It doesn't walk away. In fact, it'll hunt you down. So it is a challenge, and we'll continue monitoring that closely.

In B.C., next door to us, they allow 200 licences, although their grizzly bear population is around 1,400, 1,500, 1,600 – I'm not sure – in that area. They allow a bigger hunt. You know, animals will move between borders, so again it creates additional challenges.

So whatever I don't answer here, we'll do in writing on that specific item, you can be assured. I commend you for continuing to put pressure on our government and the people that are involved in the hunt of grizzly bear. That will need better monitoring, no doubt, and better management. That's our goal: to achieve that balance.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My next set of questions is around declining woodland caribou populations. In March we asked the question about them, and basically the minister responded that things are fine and that the government's doing a good job at maintaining healthy wildlife populations. Meanwhile, in the Edmonton *Boreal Market News*, volume 2, issue 4, there was an article that talked about harvesting being postponed for the sake of caribou, where Weyerhaeuser will postpone harvesting on 82,000 hectares in Alberta in order to aid protection efforts for the mountain woodland caribou. So my question is: why is it that a large forestry company like Weyerhaeuser can recognize that no further harvesting should take place until a caribou recovery plan is put in place, but we're not seeing any leadership from your department on that?

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much. That's another very important question. Actually, the press release came out today.

This is a normal process for the corporate sector. We have in the past always worked with the industry out there, not only forestry but also the oil and gas industry. Al-Pac, for example, in my constitu-

ency has, you know, a study that has been going on within their FMA for a long period of time now on woodland caribou, monitoring and tagging and following the paths where the animals move. In fact, they've also developed, similar to Weyerhaeuser, a recovery plan and plan all their forest harvesting activities based on the free movement of these particular animals.

Now, when it comes to woodland caribou, one of the challenges we have, of course, is again the management of the population growth. Woodland caribou in Alberta is not a food source for First Nations. It is a food source for wolves, mainly. Therefore, the wolf population is growing. They have more impact on the caribou population than the economic activity that takes place out there.

There's no one else hunting the animals. Maybe one a year is taken out, I understand, by the First Nations. In the extreme northwest of Alberta I believe a few more are taken out, but in the north-central, northeast, all the way to Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories border there are very, very few animals ever taken out for a food source.

Therefore, the main predator is the wolf population. Wolves are very, very tough animals to count to start with, to manage the population. They're very, very smart animals. In fact, my dad trapped all his life. He's turning 92 years old soon. He's trapped since he was 12 years old, and he only saw wolves twice in his lifetime. Now, he's a guy that spends all his time in the bush. So we are dealing with smart animals that are after these other animals. When you go to some of the oil and gas plants that operate in the areas where the caribou are, sometimes you will find that the caribou will hang around the developed areas for protection from the wolves because wolves don't come near the developed areas.

So it's a real challenge, then, to try and keep that balance going. You know, we'll keep monitoring. We'll encourage industries to keep doing what they're doing, like Weyerhaeuser – I commend them for that – Al-Pac, and no doubt other companies that are doing caribou management are to be commended.

3:20

In 2005, I believe, two forest management agreements out of 20 or 21 will be renewed. Some of the things we'll look at as we move forward are what this company is doing in relation to minimizing the footprint we leave out there as we harvest the resources, working in co-operation with the oil and gas industry in relation to use of the land base, the road network developed, and, of course, you know, the amount of dollars they spend on management of the caribou. So there are options. Eventually, all the FMAs will be renewed. As we move forward, we can incorporate some of the changes that are necessary to put in long-range plans for those companies that may not be planning our plans.

Thanks.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My next set of questions is on Dutch elm disease. We've seen this disease kill millions of elm trees throughout North America, Europe, and Asia in the last few years. Alberta is one of the few areas in the world where elm trees are widely grown and the disease has not yet been widespread.

In the past a province-wide monitor ensured that we would be able to identify and monitor early signs of Dutch elm disease in order to prevent its spread here. Last year, however, that position was cut, and I believe that it hasn't been reinstated this year. So my questions are: given that the elms in Alberta's rural areas alone are valued by this government at \$634 million, does the ministry not see a value in keeping that position to monitor the disease, and will you be

contributing any funding towards the monitoring of this disease in rural areas?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Chairman, on this particular issue I'll get my department to answer in writing to you.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I'd like to add to that question then: if you could give us some detail on what plan you have to stop the spread of the disease or to eliminate it once it is seen to be spreading in Alberta.

My next question, then, is going to be on forest management, including FSC certification. A study on the boreal forest entitled *State of Denial*, funded by an Alberta timber company, is demonstrating how the combined impacts of human activity are devastating Alberta boreal forests. FSC certification would help to protect these important areas while allowing our forestry companies to become more competitive. So the question is: when is the government going to establish more protected areas so that it can implement the forest certification standards? Can you tell us what you're planning on forest management for the 2004 plan? Do we see a review of the Forests Act any time soon?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'll start off with the certification process. That is another challenge. I'm sure the member is talking about the international certification.

It is a challenge, and it's something that we have to monitor very closely. Some of the larger companies already have those processes in place. It is an area where it makes it quite complicated for some of the smaller companies in particular because the international certification has nothing to do with the quality of wood that is manufactured or the amount of wood that is taken out of a tree. The certification is based on how you harvest your resources, and that's not bad. That's not bad. Some of the large companies, I believe, won't have too much of a problem in getting international certification. The companies that will be faced with a challenge are the smaller operators.

We have over 125 small sawmill operators and loggers in Alberta, companies that produce less than 5 million board feet per year. So far we've managed to exempt those in our softwood lumber negotiations. That is why there are about 50 communities that depend on forestry as their major source of income and also job creation. In those particular cases most of those companies will not be able to get international certification. We may have to look at it as a province in developing a certification plan to certify those smaller companies that can't afford to do the certification, because it would close the industry down.

In relation to the actual planning of how we harvest our resources in the forest management agreements, number one, when a company takes a forest management agreement, they buy it for 20 years, normally, 20-year agreements. Of course, when you do that, you have a 20-year plan to start with as to how you're going to harvest your resources and how you're going to expand your company and diversify and value-add and continue your plan to make, you know, the revenue that's required as a private company.

Then there is another plan, a five-year plan of how you're going to develop the resources. Then there's an annual operating plan. Again, most FMA holders and quota holders have to have a public meeting and invite the public to participate in how your harvest plan is going to be done for that year. Once that process is completed, it has to be approved by the minister, so the minister ends up seeing most of the plans in Alberta.

I believe there are one or two FMAs out there that don't have that condition in them and that may not be following the rules that closely. As we review these FMAs, we will make sure that the consultation part is included in them, so that will deal with that specific issue you mentioned.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to join the debate on examining the 2004-2005 estimates for the Sustainable Resource Development department.

Mr. Chairman, I want to make some general observations first about the widespread concern across this province that this department's ability to enforce its own laws and to enforce compliance with respect to its obligations to protect renewable resources has been on the decline since the get-go.

In 2001 this department was established, of course, to provide protection for and to enhance the sustainability of Alberta's renewable resources. On the watch of this minister Albertans are saying that the capacity of the department starting in 2001 has simply gone down. So I really want to get a clear message across the way to the minister that people in Alberta are very concerned about the growing incapacity of his department to do what it is there to do. The fact that it is there is that it has certain responsibilities. The message that I'm getting from the press, from the media, from various organizations, concerned Albertans is that the department is simply not doing its job, and I think the buck stops at the minister's desk on this, and he has to, I think, explain this.

3:30

I just want to read, Mr. Chairman, from a letter that the minister received from Steve Carlson, president of the Alberta Game Warden Association. This letter is dated October 22, 2003, and I just want to read here and there from this letter. I'm sure the minister has the letter available to him, and I hope that he'll pay attention to it. Mr. Carlson draws the minister's attention to the growing difficulties that his staff responsible for the sustainability of resources and for protection of wildlife and fish populations is having because of the budgetary cutbacks that they have had to live with.

Mr. Carlson says that

the Officers in the province have a very difficult job. As the primary front line contact for the department they are left with the challenge of being everything to every one. They are expected to provide detailed biological information on complex ecosystems, they facilitate volatile public meetings, they provide talks to school groups, respond to incidents involving dangerous wildlife, they apprehend serious resource violators, and they provide logistical support to other government departments such as those dealing with health crisis. The nature of their responsibilities dictates that they are a very mobile and responsive agency actually present on the landscape, with representation in communities throughout Alberta. This fact carries with it the reality that equipment needs and operating costs are greater than other functional positions within the Department. It appears this fact has not been recognized with the present allocation of operating funds within the Department.

The next paragraph is particularly disturbing in what it has to say.

It has been widely reported in the media that the Fish and Wildlife Division is suffering a severe shortfall on the money it requires to effectively deliver its programs.

Then the writer observes:

At this same time, operating budgets for the Fish and Wildlife enforcement districts across the province have been slashed anywhere from 20 - 50% compared with last years allotments.

So it compares with, I think, 2002's allotments.

What this equates to is that some districts were allocated a total

budget of \$8,300.00 to cover the costs of telephones (office and cellular), equipment purchase/repair/maintenance, fuel purchases, office supplies, travel and subsistence, [information technology] repairs or upgrades, office equipment rentals, etc. This then begs the question . . .

And I'm going to ask the minister to address this.

. . . where have the dollars (the \$700,000.00 budget increase, the \$800,000.00 reduction experienced by wildlife and fisheries management, and the money from the 20-50% district budget cuts) been allocated?

Where has it been transferred to? Why is it not available to the fish and wildlife branch of the department? What has the minister done in this year's budget to address this clear concern that his own staff has with respect to the inability of the department to provide those services?

Another quote.

It is reported that the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development was created in March 2001 to provide greater direction and focus on the sustainability of Alberta's renewable resources. The Deputy Minister for the department has indicated that nothing has changed in terms of the department's expectations that compliance with legislative requirements is a necessity.

I'm asking the minister: is he satisfied that this legal requirement on his department to have sort of compliance with legislative requirements as a necessity – does he have the resources to meet that obligation?

Published documents have acknowledged the importance of having a credible and effective enforcement program, which can be called into action when education and prevention are not sufficient.

I just heard the minister in his introductory remarks say that he focuses on education and prevention, but his own staff is saying that education and prevention are not sufficient to achieve compliance with the legislation.

In response to the limited budget dollars allocated, managers within Fish and Wildlife were forced to provide direction to Officers that preventative patrols would be discontinued, and officers were not to work evening and weekend shifts to avoid the additional expense of \$1.75/hr for shift differential and weekend premium. Of course it is during these evening and weekend periods when officers notice increased unlawful harvest of our resources. This also has meant that repairs and maintenance to equipment vital to their ability to monitor resource harvest and status (such as our highly sought after fishery resources) just do not happen.

Now, I don't think anyone can communicate to the minister in clearer language the sense of crisis that is experienced by the people on the front line in his own department.

A snapshot of the results this direction has had indicates that enforcement actions for the month of July has decreased by over 50% when compared to the same time period during the previous two years.

Grizzly management plans . . .

To which the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has spoken already.

. . . call for increased enforcement; meanwhile proactive deterrent patrols are at an all time low. Efforts of protecting the bull trout (one of the province's official symbols, sporting a zero catch limit), has all but been eliminated leaving these protected fish populations vulnerable to unregulated and uncontrolled harvest.

I hope the minister is listening. These are not my words. It's coming from his own staff.

Monitoring of commercial fisheries has in some cases been limited only to examining records blindly trusting that they have been completed truthfully and accurately, and that nets have not been set in locations closed as sanctuaries for the fish or where recreational fish such as walleye accumulate thereby being susceptible to over-harvest.

The question is asked by Mr. Carlson himself.

Do you view the delivery of compliance assurance activities with its present restrictions as being credible and effective?

Minister, I'm asking the same question: is your new budget addressing this question, and if so, in what way? Are the resources there for you to be able to live up to that compliance assurance that your department is supposed to certainly respect and implement?

Mr. Chairman, talking about fish in particular – and I have had on this matter some discussions both in public and in this House with this minister. You know, there are members in this House and the Premier who can go to these rather fancy lodges outside of this province to do their fishing. Most Albertans rely on the sustainability of the fish stocks in the province for them to be able to enjoy the natural wealth that's available to us by way of these renewable resources.

If the minister fails in his obligations to protect those resources simply because he can't win more dollars, more resources when he's sitting around the cabinet table, then people have the right to ask the question: why is this happening? So I hope the minister will answer that question.

I'm asking the minister to address this question concretely and nonrhetorically if possible. I'm trying to be as factual as one possibly can be on this. These are very serious questions, Mr. Minister, on your watch, and the capacity of the department to do these things has gone down, not up. Why? Why are you putting in danger the future of these resources for our present generation and for the coming generations? If you don't do the job that your department is supposed to be doing – and that's why the department was established in the first place – we won't have these resources either for our enjoyment or for increasing the attractiveness of the province to tourists.

3:40

The tourist industry is an important industry in this province. This government is committed to expanding that industry, but if we deplete our fish resources, if we allow our very unique species to be put in danger and disappear, then what happens? Your failure here is working at cross-purposes to the very goals that the department in terms of economic development, social development sets up for itself.

Here are some questions for you, Minister, to address.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the member for all the questions because they are good questions. I know that he's as sincere as any other Albertan in ensuring that we protect the limited, valuable resources that we have in Alberta.

The member used the words crisis in wildlife management in Alberta. There is no crisis. To start with – and the member may disagree with me – I feel that 99.9 per cent of Albertans are very honest. They would not purposely break any laws. Therefore, the plan we have in place is to deal with those few people that possibly break the law and to try to target our activities based on that. Why hit the 99.9 per cent of Albertans who never break the law, have a whole pile of staff out there checking everybody inside and out, when you know for a fact – and the officers themselves know – that Albertans are generally honest? They do not break the law on purpose.

You know, we have a \$40 million budget. We have over 1,900 staff total because staff do work together in a number of areas, even sometimes in different departments to support other departments. We have over a hundred fish and wildlife officers out there, and we need to make sure that we have efficiencies wherever possible when we operate the department.

I spent 19 years in government myself, right from a wage position

to a management position, in fact working as a consultant to an assistant deputy minister. I tend to think that I know how the departments operate inside and out. I know that from my involvement previously there are some deficiencies. Staff are generally good, but there are some efficiencies that we need to improve.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me reiterate here in Mr. Carlson's own words his very serious concern. The minister may not want to call it a crisis. Let me just read to the minister. I think he may have forgotten the contents of the letter and the tone of the letter. In the second last paragraph there, the important paragraph there, this is what Mr. Carlson says, Minister.

Although compliance enforcement is only a portion of what we do, it is no less important than the other facets of our job. We recognize that we always have to strive for ways to improve efficiency and focus our efforts on mission critical activities. However we do feel an obligation to do all that we can to ensure the sustainability of Alberta's natural resources, and the viability of those industries that are geared to capitalize on Alberta's natural wealth. It is for this reason that I respectfully submit that the Fish and Wildlife Division desperately requires . . .

Desperately requires. Is that a tone of crisis or not, Minister?

. . . additional funds to be allocated to their operating budgets. Without measured controls on development and compliance with management goals and objectives, these finite resources may be over exploited and doomed to long periods of recovery and inaccessibility to Albertans and industry alike.

I'd like the minister to respond to it and specifically address the question: by how much has he increased the budget for the fish and wildlife division, which is desperately short of resources to do the job that it is required and expected to do?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the one hour allocated between the minister and the members of the opposition has now elapsed. The chair will recognize any other member that may wish to participate in the debate.

Hon. minister, you may proceed with your remarks, but I'll recognize if there are any other government members.

Mr. Cardinal: Okay. Thank you very much. The other area that the member mentioned earlier, of course, is in relation to the commercial fisheries issue. Starting April 1, which is coming very shortly, we will commence the compensation program as part of our overall fishing management strategy in Alberta. We will commence the buyout program.

Right now we have over 800 commercial fishermen in Alberta. They fish approximately 34,000 100-yard nets. Our plan is to reduce that down to 200 and about 18,000 100-yard nets. We will have viable commercial fishing operations and the ability for us to be able to manage better and monitor better and ensure that the program works well.

The other thing we do, of course, is run some pilot projects. Calling Lake was one example. I think most people are familiar with that. It is working well, where part of the lake is closed completely from all activity. One part is open, where you can keep one walleye of any size. That's being monitored. The report is supposed to come out very shortly.

The other thing we're doing is that starting April 1, we will initiate the barbless hooks, where people will have to use a barbless hook now to fish in any lake or river or stream. I believe, again, that that will help in restoring some of the fisheries we have in Alberta because if you do catch, say, a larger walleye or pike with a barbed

hook, right now in a lot of cases when you take the hook off, you destroy the fish pretty well. If it's a catch-and-release program, you have no choice but to release the fish into the water to prevent you from getting a fine. So we are doing a lot of new, innovative ways of managing the fewer resources we have.

Our budget is consistent from previous years, so all we're doing is trying to operate efficiently within that budget, and we will. Like I say, I'm quite familiar with how departments operate and where there are maybe some weaknesses. We will continue to do that.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a question of the minister which the minister may or may not be able to respond to at the moment. It's really to satisfy a curiosity that I've had for some time. The curiosity has to do with confined feeding operations or livestock operations in general near a watershed, in particular confined feeding operations. As I understand it at the moment, if I were to build a house for a single family and it were to be outside of the normal sewage area and it was next to a watershed, I would have to have the effluent hauled away. In some areas it's not even permissible to have a septic field, depending upon where it is on the watershed. Why is it not permissible to have a single-family residence with human waste going into the watershed but it is permissible to have a large confined feeding operation that would have effluent going into a watershed?

3:50

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Chairman, again, because it's a pretty detailed question and it's very, very sensitive, I'll get the department to answer that particular one in writing.

In relation to the whole process of confined feeding operations, of course in the past, you know, as a former municipal councillor I was involved in some of this where applications would come into the municipality development officer for review and possible approval for any type of development, including residential, including larger commercial and industrial operations.

Of course, then in addition to that, there were the regional planning commissions, which in some cases, not in all cases, were involved in approving some of these developments. Because the municipal planning commissions were eliminated a number of years ago to reduce expenditures in Alberta, it was critical that some form of an organization be developed to deal with the intensive growth of the animal industry, and of course the NRCB two years ago was given that added role and works very closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

But specific to the question I will get the staff to write.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have two sets of questions left, and then I'm done for this afternoon.

The first is on staffing within the department. I've asked this question many times over the years in the House, and it's still, I believe, an issue, that fish and wildlife officers can't really be expected to protect our resources if they aren't adequately funded.

We see that other people are picking up on this issue. Back in the fall there was a letter printed in the *Alberta Game Warden* magazine from a retired fish and wildlife officer asking for more support for fish and wildlife resources. He talked specifically about:

There must be political will and some priority placed on Fish and Wildlife resource research and protection. A good start would be to take back the fish and wildlife licence money (\$7 million) that is

given to the Alberta Conservation Association, which in many cases duplicates the work and fragments management programs.

He really believes that the money has better use within the government department because the devoted staff there will bring forward good management plans and work within budget constraints.

That concern was picked up in the *Edmonton Journal* with regard to Fish and Wildlife losing to poachers. Officers feel demoralized and worthless because of budget cuts.

I for many years have advocated that there be more positions in this department rather than fewer. It's one of the few places where I think we just don't spend enough money. So I would like the minister's comments on that.

I'll just wrap up my last set of questions too, and that is in terms of the Alberta Conservation Association. We're getting increased concern from member groups in that association and groups that have decided that they will not or will no longer be member groups that the ACA, which has DAO status, is not spending the money wisely. The issues that they would particularly want addressed are five, and I will talk about them.

The first one is that the "priority or focused spending of hunter and angler monies . . . has not been achieved." They believe that necessary fish and wildlife surveys are not being conducted "that will better manage our resources and provide increased opportunities." They believe that they

are unable to direct the monies for on-ground fish and wildlife habitat protection, development and enhancement. Current spending includes a large manpower base, administration, spending on lower priority species, indirect benefits to hunters and anglers and generally lower priorities to hunters and anglers.

The second point. "The government is unable to deliver many of these necessary programs and although the Minister has tried to obtain increased budgets, it does not appear likely" that it's going to happen in the near future. "The concern for funding fish and wildlife management and enforcement has been expressed by government biologists and enforcement officers, and fish and game members, and the media."

Number three: "Without redirected funding and existing limited government budgets, the precautionary approach to fish management . . . will prevail." Then there may be "few changes to very restrictive catch and size limits. Such restrictions may in part be a cause for reduced angler interest in Alberta."

Point four.

The current organization of fish and wildlife management in Alberta appears to be confusing and attempting to determine who (the government or the ACA or the hunters/anglers) is responsible and accountable for information, for management priorities, and for spending priorities is a challenge.

Lastly,

efforts to change the direction of the Alberta Conservation Association [have] included considerable correspondence, the submission of resolutions to the ACA Annual General Meeting . . . , input into various government reviews of the ACA, and the 2002 Memorandum of Understanding between government and the ACA.

Yet little of the input has been accepted. In fact, former members have as a result withdrawn from participation in ACA.

So if the minister could address those concerns for me in terms of staffing, their relationship with the ACA, and why you don't just take back this organization, which doesn't seem to be meeting its mandate, and have those dollars available within your department.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much. Of course, in the past year we have restructured the Alberta Conservation Association some, and

we are monitoring it very closely and work with them very closely to see if there should be changes. At this time we are not anticipating any major changes immediately, but you know that if any program does not work in an organization like Sustainable Resource Development, of course the program won't be around. But we will monitor it.

Those are good questions. I'll have my staff answer most of them. But for the benefit of Albertans I think people need to know that the department does spend more than \$200 million already. We have around 1,900 staff. A lot of the questions today were related to the fish and wildlife issue or cuts in the budget, but there are no cuts in the budget. We still expend \$40 million. We have over a hundred fish and wildlife officers, and we do share movement of support staff and administrative staff in particular.

We can do some efficiencies yet within the department. You know, I think it's the right direction to go. I'll give you one example. At one time, as a member of the government working in the civil service, if a meeting was held in Edmonton and you're situated, say, at Lac La Biche, Slave Lake, or a place like that, which is about a 2 and a half hour drive, if the meeting started at 8:30 or 8:15 in the morning, you had to come in the night before, leave mid-afternoon, leave your work, come to Edmonton, stay overnight so you can attend a meeting at 8:15.

I often wondered why the meetings were not held, say, an hour and a half later. So you do not stay overnight. You can continue working on your job out there during that day, come the next morning, do your meeting, and go back the same day. It would save dollars for the taxpayer, and it saves time for the officers or government employees that travel, not only fish and wildlife officers but other government employees.

How we operate sometimes we need to review very closely. For an example, last Father's Day there was a checkpoint just south of Calling Lake. I got stopped in that. I don't mind. I'm like any other Albertans. I didn't break any laws, so I didn't get fined. But there were a number of vehicles. I thought it excessive the number of people involved in the checkpoint because you're in there, you set up your checkpoint, and because of the communication system we have these days with the cellphones, within an hour or so everybody in the country knows that you're sitting there. I said: well, why don't we have fewer people in there, less time in that one particular setting, and go move to another location to be more efficient? We have some efficiencies that we need to work on.

4:00

The other one is in relation to some of the charges we lay at times. What process do you do when those charges hit the courts? Do you go sit in there day after day after day till the case is heard? Well, I'm reviewing that right now to see if we can make some improvements in that particular area.

So we are monitoring very closely to try and do the job yet be cost-effective and save money wherever we can but, at the same time, do the job that needs to be done. Again I stress the fact that we don't have Albertans running around out there breaking the law; 99.9 per cent of Albertans that are out there using our wildlife resources are honest, hard-working Albertans. We need to design our enforcement programs based on that, and we need to ensure that we treat those hard-working Albertans with respect when we do a checkpoint, because they won't put up with anything other than that.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to ask just a couple

of questions that come up significantly in the rural part of southern Alberta, and this deals with the NRCB and its application to the intensive livestock operations. The public is looking for some direction as to: when are the officers who are out there doing the evaluations, doing the checkups going to be more open to the community in terms of their investigations: what they're doing, what they're looking at, how they're finding out things?

Then I guess the second question to the minister is in terms of enforcement and compliance. There have been a number, a small number, Mr. Minister, of cases brought where the public sees what appears to be a violation not being acted on. What do you have in the works to increase transparency so that the confidence can be brought to bear for individuals who see those violations that I was talking about and then will see some action in terms of compliance or cleanup action, whatever, resulting after a complaint is made? People don't see a real relationship between their complaint and some action.

The third question on that same area would be: at what time in the future do you see the NRCB looking at the issue of cumulative effect, you know, one big operation versus a whole bunch of small ones in the same community area? The issue of cumulative effect doesn't seem to be resonating in the community. They don't see any action. They see it as a heavy concentration of intensive livestock. If it's one big operation, the NRCB seems to act, but if it's a bunch of smaller ones with the same total number, the NRCB doesn't seem to act. There's a concern out there in the community.

So I just raise, basically, those three questions that the community would like to have some feedback on. Thank you.

Mr. Cardinal: The NRCB, of course, has done a good job. We had to get additional dollars throughout the year for staff, and then this year's budget has increased by \$1.4 million to try and deal with some of the complaints that we have. Like I said in my opening speech, last year we had over 1,083 complaints, and we resolved close to 900 of those. So I think the staff are doing quite well. No doubt, we can always do a better job, and of course we'll strive for the best.

It is a challenging area, but again it is a necessary process to have in place because we don't have the regional planning commissions any more. We have Environment with their environmental impact assessment studies, et cetera, to work with. Because we don't have the regional planning commissions, we have individual municipalities, of course, that approve some of the smaller projects. Therefore, I think that the NRCB will have to be monitored very closely to ensure that we are doing the job that people want out there. That is why we're out there. It's for the people that we're dealing with. Also, any individual that is in disagreement with the NRCB always has the opportunity to call the minister to ensure that we are dealing with the issues effectively.

Dr. Nicol: Just a friendly suggestion to the minister then. In your business plan where you talk about the mandate of the NRCB, change the order of your priorities. Where you talk about the "economic, social and environmental" interests of the community, turn them around so that people get the sense that the environment and social issues play more than the economics. Economic Development, Agriculture, or Energy can deal with that part of it. They want you acting on behalf of the community. So just a friendly suggestion.

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Chairman, that is a very good comment. I know that my staff is here taking notes, and we will definitely have a look at that. It's good.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a fairly simple question for the minister. Minister, I understand that the department had last year around a hundred fish and wildlife officers. What's the projected number of fish and wildlife officers for the year that we're discussing the budget for? What provisions are made in the budget to enhance their capacity for enforcement, which is what they've been asking for? Enforcement is a problem, they say, and they're unable to secure compliance with the laws of the province because of the lack of resources. So the number of officers and the resource enhancement for them so they can do their job.

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Chairman, like I mentioned earlier, we do have, you know, around a \$40 million budget. That budget has not decreased. In fact, there have been some minor increases in the budget. In relation to hiring new staff or more staff, if any vacancies occur, we will be filling those positions, but at this time I don't see us going out to hire a whole pile of officers. Again, I want to make sure that we do our job, that the staff have the capacity to do the job they need to do.

Keep in mind that 99.9 per cent of Albertans out there are honest. They're not lawbreakers. So you don't design a program like you're dealing with a bunch of people that are out there breaking the law. You design a program to work with the people to ensure that they respect the resources that are there. You can be assured that most Albertans do respect our wildlife resources and, again, would not break the law. Therefore, we need to ensure that when we're dealing with Albertans, we deal with them with respect. They expect that, and they deserve that. We can't be treating them like they all break the law. They don't. Very few do.

So we've got some work to do within our own department to make sure that, you know, the attitudes towards the people that we're dealing with are right. The best way to have abundant resources in the province is to work co-operatively with the public. That's the way to do it, not by enforcement. Only for the few that break the law, and there are very few that do.

Dr. Pannu: During the session last fall the minister brought before this House the Wildlife Amendment Act. The purpose of it was to greatly enhance the fines that lawbreakers would have to face, that would be imposed on those who break the law. Now, the very fact that the minister brought forward that piece of legislation to increase deterrents would suggest that there's a problem with compliance with the law. Otherwise, why would he have wasted the time of the House bringing a piece of legislation that for no good reason at all increases enormously the fines for violation of the laws that he's supposed to implement and seek compliance with?

4:10

Secondly, the Alberta Game Warden Association letter would suggest that the problem with enforcement – and I repeat this; I'm not somehow dreaming these things up. I'm basing my questions on what's been expressly stated by people at the front lines, people who are doing the enforcement for the minister and for us Albertans who want to be assured that compliance with those rules is happening. Whether it's 10 people or 50 people or 70 people, the damage is being done is what the Alberta Game Warden Association is saying. They want to prevent this damage from happening. The only way they can do it is not by hearing the minister repeat again and again that 99.9 per cent of Albertans are not lawbreakers. No one is accusing Albertans of lawbreaking.

The people who do in fact look after the question of whether the

law is broken are the people who are speaking through this letter, and they are saying that there's a problem. They cannot enforce the law, and compliance is not being achieved. So what is the minister to say about that? The minister does not address the question that has been asked by either of these letters that I've tried to put before the minister this afternoon.

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Chairman, no doubt, I get the same letters. If I don't, he should pass them on to me now. If they don't come to me but come to you, maybe you could pass them on, and I'll answer them in writing.

The overall issue of wildlife management and the amendment to the Wildlife Act in relation to fines for poachers again is another measure, another tool to discourage voluntarily Albertans or any other people from breaking the law. There are not too many of them, but if you discourage one by implementing a law like that, I think that's a lot. We're not saying that there are going to be a whole pile of people all of a sudden caught that are poachers because I don't think there are that many people out there purposely breaking the law by poaching.

In relation to the other questions I'll get my department to answer in writing.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to participate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: We do have time. I was looking, Minister, at page 401 of the business plan of your department. There are some interesting strategies outlined there, the bullets, that I want to draw your attention to. It's "the values Albertans receive from wild species are sustained and enhanced for future generations." What it means, your department says, is that

Alberta's wild species are managed and used in a manner that maximizes the environmental, social, and economic benefits that Albertans receive from these resources while ensuring they are sustained for future generations.

Now, there's a strategy there: "Mitigate and reduce negative interactions between wildlife and humans." The two examples are related to fishing and poaching.

You know, I was reading something this afternoon which says: open season with no patrols. The next headline reads: it's a poacher's paradise out there. It's not something that the New Democrat opposition has invented. I'm simply drawing your attention to the stories in the media, people speaking out, people with concerns. You have committed the department to mitigation and reduction of negative interaction between wildlife and humans. What specific measures in this year's budget are included to address that particular strategy? That's one.

I may as well, while I have the floor, draw your attention to a few of the other strategies that are indicated here.

Ensure high levels of compliance with fish and wildlife legislation by delivering appropriate education, prevention and enforcement programs; monitoring the use of fish and wildlife resources and ensuring timely and effective responses to non-compliance.

Now, again, this is your department's own strategy and committing the department to ensuring high levels of compliance, say, with enforcement programs, to use enforcement programs for that. Specifically, what new funds, as compared with last year, are allocated in this budget to enhance enforcement, Mr. Minister?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. In relation to the articles, poacher's paradise, et cetera, you know, I've seen those

articles also. I don't get a whole lot of phone calls from Albertans in relation to poachers on highways, but I do get a lot of phone calls from people running into deer and moose and other animals, road kill, on the highway. It's a challenge because animals are getting urbanized.

We have a major challenge out there. We have deer moving into towns and cities, moose moving into towns and cities, elk moving into towns and cities, black bear moving into towns and cities; also, coyotes and foxes and cougars, in some cases. It's a challenge because they're all of a sudden in town. Thirty years ago or 40 years ago you didn't see that. Thirty or 40 years ago you would have never seen a deer in northern Alberta. Today it's common to drive between Athabasca and Calling Lake, for an example, and see 30 or 40 deer along the highway.

So we've got that challenge that faces us. In fact, you know, I don't have too many people phoning saying that there are a lot of poachers out there. I still believe that most Albertans are very, very honest, and I'm sure you'll agree with that too. But we have to deal with the issue of the urbanization of animals.

We have to have some form of a balanced hunt to ensure that they remain wild. For the health of animals it is better for them to remain wild than move into towns because it creates a major problem for everybody. What we will be doing this coming fall is extending a lot of our hunting season: different forms to increase some of the hunting, the length of hunting, type of animal, et cetera, to try and reduce areas where there is a problem, to target the populations.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll sit down again, and I'll get my staff to do it in writing.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the minister for being patient and dealing with my questions with the seriousness I hope that they deserve.

The minister just made a reference to extending the hunting season to deal with what he called the urbanization of wild animals. I have a slightly different question. It's related to hunting. Grizzlies in this province, the Alberta wildlife association is saying, are an endangered species. There are far fewer now than there were some years ago and, certainly, far fewer than there were several hundred years ago. They're on the endangered species list. Will the minister in fact ban grizzly hunting in the province rather than extending the season for hunting grizzlies as well as some other species that he thinks are getting into urban areas?

4:20

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Chairman, at this time we have no plans to completely shut the hunting down, but we have plans to put in better monitoring programs, better management programs to ensure that the population remains reasonably healthy.

As I indicated earlier, it's a hard animal to manage; it's a hard animal to monitor. In fact, because grizzly bears hibernate – and the wintertime would be the time you'd be able to see them better. So they're not out. They come out in the summertime, the spring, when the leaves are out. They can hear so well that if you get a helicopter 10 miles away that wants to count the animals, you'd never find them. Therefore, it's a tough one. We estimate anywhere around 500 population now in Alberta and maybe more in some areas.

We've reduced the hunt by over 30 per cent. In fact, two years ago we issued 130 licences. This year we are only issuing 73. When we released 130 licences, the number taken out was around 12 a year. We not only reduced the numbers; we also moved the hunting from southern Alberta, where there's a lot more pressure along the

eastern slopes, to north of Grande Prairie and that region, where farmers are having some difficulties with grizzly bear and black bear. We are, you know, continuing to manage the hunt.

That's one animal you want to keep wild because, like I say, if you do run into a grizzly bear – it doesn't matter where, downtown or in the bush – either the grizzly bear is dead or you're dead. There are no ifs or buts. That's the nature of the animal, unfortunately. It is hard to manage.

So at this time I can't commit to closing down that season completely for those reasons also.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is to the minister again, from his strategies for the section on wildlife protection on page 401. What caught my eye is an interesting statement: "Promote healthy fish and wildlife populations by working with stakeholders to mitigate, detect and manage threats from disease and invasive alien species." What's that reference to, Mr. Minister? Invasive alien species. Which members of the wildlife are threatened by the invasive presence of what alien species?

Mr. Cardinal: I'm not sure exactly where that question fits in, Mr. Chairman, but, again, I will get my department to put it in writing.

There are – and I gave an example earlier – wildlife challenges. Just for an example, the one I used was the caribou population, which is threatened. Now, the threat is not from development. It's not from First Nations because it's not our food source, except in northwestern Alberta, I believe, Meander River, that area. There some of the First Nations may use caribou as a food source.

But the biggest threat for the caribou is the wolf population. Therefore, you know, that is the big threat. So how do you manage the caribou then? Do you reduce the population of the wolves? Those are some of the challenges we're faced with. Trappers do not normally hunt the wolf, so the wolf population has grown. They threaten the deer population. They threaten the moose population. So it's a tough balancing act. Some of those species like the wolves you hardly ever see in your lifetime. There are probably thousands out there. They're dangerous to other animals, even calves when they're born. They're dangerous to calves.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My next question to the minister is about the commercial fisheries buyout program that's mentioned as one of the strategies here. We're on page 401. Since we're dealing with the budget, what kind of budget commitments or allocations are included in your budget, Minister, with respect to these commercial fishing buyouts?

Mr. Cardinal: The commercial fisheries buyout is part of our strategy to manage the fisheries resources we have in Alberta both for sport fishing and for domestic and commercial and First Nations use. The plan that's in place and which will be implemented this April – and I'll get it out of the budgets later – was developed back in 1991. In fact, I chaired the committee when I was an MLA for Athabasca-Lac La Biche to work along with the Alberta Commercial Fishermen's Association and government to develop and design the fisheries buyout policy. The policy that's in place now only had minor amendments, so it's still a similar policy involving the commercial fisheries.

A number of years ago there were over 800 commercial fishermen in Alberta with access to 34,000 100-yard nets, and a lot of the

fishermen were not doing it as a full-time business. Some were. Because there are so many active commercial fishermen, even for some of the small ones in a lot of cases, it was not economically viable for the people that wanted to concentrate on it because there were so many people after the same resource. The plan is to reduce it to about 200 licences and about 18,000 100-yard nets. That is our target, and that plan would take place over probably three to four years. We've started this year with around \$2 million. There are over 230-some applications already, and I believe it's around 13,000 or 14,000 100-yard nets.

So that is the first phase of probably a three-year program, and it's going to be challenging. We need all your help to do that. We do have a hardship committee in place which will involve the commercial fishermen and some departmental people and some public to sit on this committee. If a person feels that they are not being fairly treated in the buyout process, then we will deal with that. We probably will spend close to \$2 million this fiscal year on that particular program.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The minister is committed to striking a balance, I guess, between environmental, social, economic values that Albertans derive from his department's activities. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East has asked him to perhaps rearrange the priorities there, focus on conservation, environmental sustainability and leave the other two to other ministries. I have this question: given that just recently legislation was passed in this House that loosens requirements for watershed management in forestry reserves – and here I'm referring to Bill 13, the Forest Reserves Amendment Act, related to which numerous environmentalists have expressed deep concern and alarm pointing out that this change would also impact water supplies fed by rivers passing through these reserves, and it's your legislation, I guess – does it make your job easier to seek to strike this balance that you're committing yourself to on a piece of paper, or does it make it harder, as a matter of fact? Which is what I think most Albertans who expressed their concerns on this particular bill would conclude.

4:30

Mr. Cardinal: I'll get the department to answer some of that in writing.

You know, you do have a good point. It continues to be a real challenge out there to maintain the balance between resource development, the environment, and protecting the wildlife resources at the same time.

Because of our economic growth there is a lot of pressure out there on wildlife resources. There is a lot of pressure. We manage over a hundred million acres of public land. There is a lot of pressure out there from all-terrain vehicle users. So we'll continue with these challenges, and I don't think they're about to change as long as our economy continues to grow as strong as it has. People have the dollars to spend, and we should encourage that, not discourage it, but in a planned way, so that is why the Ghost-Waiparous, the 1,500 square kilometres of area for which we are trying to develop an access management plan.

At one time people would drive up and down these streams and lake beds and stuff with all-terrain vehicles, and they still do in some cases. I've flown over, I've seen people drive up and down the streams. That should not be allowed, and the management plan will definitely deal with that.

The other one is the Bighorn backcountry, which is larger yet, 5,000 square kilometres, for which we've developed an access management plan in a similar way. But once you finish those plans, that's not the end of the process. The actual work starts after that.

There's going to be a monitoring committee that will continue overseeing these plans, ensuring that they're developed and a trail system put in properly and enforcement put in properly.

So it is a challenge overall to manage our resources that we have out there, but in relation specifically to the question you have, the department will answer you in writing.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Along the same lines as my previous question to the minister, another bill that I think would undermine the ability of the minister to strike this balance is Bill 2, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland Trails Act. You referred to, you know, proper trails and their monitoring and enforcement.

The Alberta Wilderness Association certainly expressed a great deal of concern about how, in fact, this bill will undermine rather than enhance their capacity to meet the mandate of your department. This is again a legislative initiative that came from your department. While you certainly are quite, I think, credible in terms of outlining the goals, the actual instruments that the department is developing concomitantly with the development of these goals would seem to contradict and suggest that the capacity to accomplish those goals is reduced rather than enhanced by the legislation.

I wonder if you have any comments on that.

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Chairman, I'll get the staff to answer that in writing.

The Deputy Chair: Any further questions?

Hon. members, after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Sustainable Resource Development for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$198,541,000
Capital Investment	\$3,200,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Chairman, I move that we rise and report the estimates of this ministry.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Sustainable Resource Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases \$198,541,000, capital investment \$3,200,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head:

**Private Bills
Second Reading**

Bill Pr. 1

St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move second reading of Bill Pr. 1, St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004.

The purpose of this bill is to make the necessary amendments to the incorporating act to enable St. Mary's College to grant three-year and four-year bachelor of arts degrees and to use the descriptive word "university" in the name as recommended by the Private Colleges Accreditation Board and as supported by the Minister of Learning.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else? The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw to close debate.

Mrs. Ady: Close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 1 read a second time]

Bill Pr. 2

**Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of
Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act**

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry I move second reading of Bill Pr. 2, the Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act.

Mr. Speaker, the Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Calgary and Medicine Hat wish to centralize their administrative units in the Calgary office and thus eliminate the need for a separate act to deal with their operations and their tax exemption in Medicine Hat.

4:40

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East to close debate.

Dr. Nicol: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 2 read a second time]

Bill Pr. 3

Living Faith Bible College Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move second reading of Bill Pr. 3, Living Faith Bible College Act.

This bill will incorporate a private Bible college that will be located near Caroline, Alberta. There's currently a Living Faith Bible College operating there, which has been operated since 1971

by the Living Faith Evangelistic Association. Bill Pr. 3 will create an entity that's distinct from the Living Faith Evangelistic Association, and it will provide for the possibility of moving towards accreditation as well as allowing students to be eligible for access to Canada student loans.

I urge everyone in the Assembly to support this bill. It has been recommended by the Standing Committee on Private Bills.

The Acting Speaker: Anybody wish to participate in the debate? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills to close debate.

Mr. Marz: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 3 read a second time]

head:

**Private Bills
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill Pr. 1

St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that Bill Pr. 1 be amended as follows. I believe the amendment has been circulated. Section 4(b) is amended in the proposed section 5 by striking out clause (h) and substituting the following:

- (h) to change the name of the College incorporated by this Act, without further amendment to this Act, provided that
 - (i) if required by the Post-Secondary Learning Act, the College obtains the approval of the Minister of Learning, and
 - (ii) no later than 15 days before the name change is to take effect, the College publishes a notice of the intended name change in The Alberta Gazette.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, just hold for a minute, please.

Mrs. Ady: Can I call the question?

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

[The clauses of Bill Pr. 1 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill Pr. 2

**Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of
Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act**

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Just to tell the House on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry that this bill has been approved by the Private Bills Committee and that there will be no amendments. We should pass it through.

[The clauses of Bill Pr. 2 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill Pr. 3 Living Faith Bible College Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that Bill Pr. 3 be amended as follows: section 3(a) is amended by striking out “in such fields as the Board may from time to time determine” and substituting “in the fields outlined in section 5(1)(a).” This accurately determines the types of degree programs that can be offered by this institution. I would encourage everyone to approve this amendment.
Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Perhaps, with the assistance of the Clerk, I’m just noticing that the amendment refers to 5(1)(a), and in fact in the bill, if I’m looking at it correctly, there is no 5(1), and so it would be just 5(a). Maybe the mover would accept that change to the amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. I guess that I would be willing to accept that as a clarification. The chair makes note of the correction that the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General is suggesting.

Hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, did you want to add anything to this particular point?

Mr. Marz: Just, Mr. Chairman, that the hon. member is correct in pointing that out, and I would accept that as a friendly amendment.

The Deputy Chair: The Assembly will disregard the reference to that (1). So it will read as 5(a).

Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

4:50

[The clauses of Bill Pr. 3 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I’d move that the committee rise and report bills Pr. 1, Pr. 2, and Pr. 3.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports Bill Pr. 2. The committee reports the following with some amendments: bills Pr. 1 and Pr. 3. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’d move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:53 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, March 30, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/30

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Community Development

The Chair: Are there any comments or other to be offered with respect to these estimates? The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, indeed, there are many comments to make, and I'll do my best to get them all done within the brief time allotted.

Before I begin, however, I'd sure like members here to help me welcome and thank some of the staff who are here in support of Community Development initiatives. Beginning with Deputy Minister Bill Byrne; our assistant deputy ministers, Rai Batra, John Kristensen, Mark Rasmussen, Hugh Tadman, and missing in action tonight due to illness, David Steeves; Terry Keyko, our executive director from the Alberta centennial office; Pam Arnston, who works in the budget area; and from the PDD sector, Jim Menzies and Garry Donald. Would you all please rise. Please welcome these hard-working staff members.

Mr. Chairman, it's a pleasure to be here to present the three-year business plan and the budget estimates for 2004-2005 for the Ministry of Community Development. Since I will be delivering some of it in French, I have provided translations to your table and would ask that these translations now be distributed to all members. For purposes of official tabling, here are five copies for the pages.

Mr. Chairman, the mandate of Community Development is very diverse, and it would take a great deal of time, indeed, to cover all the exciting work that we do in support of pillar 4 of Today's Advantage, Tomorrow's Promise: Alberta's Vision for the Future, which is making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. The full picture of my ministry's three-year business plan is found on pages 135 through 147 of Budget 2004. Here, then, are just some of the budget highlights.

To begin with, our operating budget for 2004-05 will be \$691 million. This reflects an increase of 7.8 per cent, or about \$50 million, from the '03-04 forecast. The '04-05 budget also includes an increase of \$25 million, or 5.7 per cent, for PDD, our persons with developmental disabilities program, which means our budget for PDD will rise from \$443 million to \$468 million. This \$25 million increase will help us to accommodate the growth in the number of PDD recipients and other cost-related increases.

Furthermore, an increase of \$5 million to our capital investment budget is seen, which brings the total to \$7.3 million for '04-05 in that area. This \$5 million increase for this year is part of the additional \$21 million over three years and is primarily for upgrading water and sewage treatment systems in Alberta's provincial parks.

We have a one-time allocation, an increase if you like, of \$800,000 for public libraries, which will be used primarily toward the purchase of computer hardware and software to connect libraries to the SuperNet.

There is a \$1 million increase for our Alberta film development program, which will bring the total funding up to \$11 million annually for Alberta's creative film and video community.

I would also like to add that our plan includes an additional \$30 million over two fiscal years, '04 through '06, for Alberta's 2005 centennial. These funds are over and above the \$12.5 million budgeted for '04-05 in Alberta Infrastructure for the centennial legacy grant program, which reflects funds previously committed to community projects. I will announce more details on centennial related funding very soon.

So here are some of the details of the budget. I'll begin with PDD. A breakdown of the funding for the PDD Provincial Board and for the six regional boards can be found on pages 90 to 96 of the 2004-05 government and lottery fund estimates book. Our PDD system helps develop and maintain and ensures the delivery of quality programs and services for about 8,700 adult Albertans who live with a developmental disability. We try to ensure that PDD recipients have the opportunity to participate in the social, economic, cultural, and community life of our province to the largest extent possible, and I believe and I am proud that we are succeeding in that objective.

With respect to disability issues in general members will recall that in this year's throne speech we announced that an office for disability issues has been created for government and other service providers to take a more inclusive and collaborative approach to disability issues, needs, and services. The office for disability issues will also assist government in responding to the recommendations contained in the Alberta disability strategy, which was authored by the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. We need better co-ordination of disability-related matters, and the office for disability issues will have that as one of its main objectives. We have the budget to establish this new office, so no additional financial implications are involved.

Turning to the area of parks, as announced by our Premier last month, an additional \$21 million will go towards ensuring that Albertans have access to safe, quality recreation opportunities and facilities in Alberta's parks and protected areas. Of this \$21 million in new funding \$16 million over three years will go toward necessary repairs and upgrades to drinking water and sewer systems at several provincial parks. A safe drinking water supply is particularly important to our parks, and this new funding will bring water systems and water wells up to current provincial standards. This, by the way, is also in a general way part of our government's Alberta water for life strategy.

The remaining \$5 million will be allocated over three years to address other safety hazards such as repairs to boat and marina docks and boardwalks. Our parks staff have developed an implementation plan, and we will begin repairs and upgrades at at least 26 sites in '04-05. We will also address the condition of our facilities, including items such as new picnic tables, repainting buildings, refurbishing, and improving whatever we can wherever we can to enhance the visitor experience in our Alberta parks.

Beginning in the 2004-05 year, some new fees will be implemented to partially offset the ever-increasing costs of providing educational programs, groomed cross-country ski trails, and bus and auto tours in provincial parks and protected areas. But I want to stress, Mr. Chair, that all the revenues collected through this new fee structure will go directly back into those same program areas and associated facilities.

Secondly, these fees are being implemented based on feedback from our stakeholders and visitors to our parks, who indicated a willingness to pay a cost recovery fee provided that those same fees got redirected back towards the cost of providing those particular

programs. These fees, then, are compatible and comparable with public-sector and nonprofit organizations who offer similar services.

With respect to our interpretive and environmental education programs, including bus and auto tours, these programs enhance visitor experiences and help everyone to better understand and appreciate our natural environment. Guided interpretive services are offered at 11 flagship parks across the province. Revenues from the user fees will help to ensure that these important programs remain available and will enable us to meet the requests for increased services such as community outreach or science camps particularly in rural communities. Many services provided in our parks such as amphitheatre and children's programs and so on will continue to be offered free of charge.

Regarding fees for specifically groomed cross-country ski trails in Kananaskis Country, such fees will only be applicable on groomed trails in the Evan-Thomas provincial recreation area and Peter Lougheed and Spray Valley provincial parks. Visitors will continue to ski for free in all other areas of Kananaskis country, including groomed trails in Sheep River provincial park and West Bragg Creek provincial recreation area. We will continue to have free day-use access to provincial parks and protected areas, including access to hiking trails, picnic areas, beaches, boat launches, and playgrounds.

I would now like to turn to libraries. The \$800,000 in new funding in '04-05 will be allocated to public libraries towards SuperNet access, as I indicated. Over the next three years Alberta's 309 public library service points will be connected to the SuperNet, giving Albertans throughout the province access to a wide range of information, programs, and services online, including improved access to learning opportunities, government information, health information, research materials, and so on.

The total cost of connecting all of Alberta's libraries to the SuperNet is \$1.3 million, of which we provided \$500,000 earlier for the research, readiness work, and equipment installation. Our next step, quite clearly, is going to be to assist libraries with ongoing monthly connection charges, and I'm working on that now.

Turning to our Alberta film development program, I'm proud to report some very impressive numbers for the '03-04 year. For example, our support for this growing sector, \$10.3 million, resulted in \$83.8 million worth of film productions by Albertans in Alberta. This program produced 3,648 employment opportunities for Albertans, and the film productions used 407 Albertans in key creative positions, such as directors, writers, composers, and so on.

8:10

I would now like to address the Alberta 2005 centennial. Our Alberta centennial 2005 program is guided by the following principles. The primary focus is on people and legacies. Provincially funded centennial activities address both community and government priorities and goals. Overall costs reflect the importance of our centennial while simultaneously recognizing the government's policy of fiscal responsibility. Program costs are shared among participants, beneficiaries, and other levels of government. We seek a balance of funding between local and provincial activities. Finally, municipalities, organizations, and communities are encouraged to plan and implement their own activities. Our centennial funding announcements are very consistent with those principles.

Mr. Chairman, from a provincial government perspective we opened a brand new, state-of-the-art Provincial Archives here in Edmonton, and we are now working on the renewal of our Provincial Museum and also on the complete rejuvenation of our two Jubilee auditoria, which will begin this year. Planning for our provincial park interpretive centres is also now underway.

Through phase 1 of our centennial legacy grant program we

distributed approximately \$56 million to 24 community-based projects across the province. Through phase 2 I also announced that 35 community-based projects were awarded \$25 million. Now, in the budget before us tonight we have an additional \$30 million allocated over two fiscal years for our centennial. This will include \$26 million for community organizations and municipalities to share and \$4 million for recognition, awareness, and celebratory activities regarding our centennial year including, for example, our Alberta official song, an anticipated royal visit, and numerous other plans. Please note that funding for provincial government capital projects for the centennial is found in the budget of Alberta Infrastructure.

Now I would like to review the funding we received, with thanks, from the Alberta lottery fund. Community Development's '04-05 budget includes a \$13.7 million increase in funding, which can be found on page 172 of the estimates. Total funding for the ministry from the Alberta lottery fund will be \$85.8 million this fiscal year. Lottery funding supports provincial, regional, and community-based organizations and individuals through five lottery funded agencies.

First, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts will receive an increase of \$1 million, for a total budget commitment of \$30 million from the Alberta lottery fund for '04-05, plus a further \$600,000 from other revenue sources. The \$1 million increase will of course go the Alberta film development program's budget, which I mentioned a bit earlier.

Secondly, \$17.7 million will go to the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation in '04-05, which is the same amount as last year. Additional revenues for this foundation are \$2.4 million, for a total budget in '04-05 of \$20.1 million. Additional revenues include an increase of \$500,000 related to anticipated funding from Sport Canada for the sport participation initiative under provincial programs.

Thirdly, the Wild Rose Foundation will receive \$7.8 million, which is the same amount as last year, from the Alberta lottery fund. That along with about \$700,000 of other revenue brings the WRF Foundation total budget to \$8.5 million. This foundation, as we all know, exists to promote and assist volunteerism and to strengthen the relationship among the voluntary sector leaders and government.

Fourthly, the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation will again receive \$6.9 million this coming year from the Alberta lottery fund. Together with \$200,000 of additional revenue the total budget for this foundation in '04-05 will be \$7.1 million. This foundation supports community-based heritage initiatives, including historical building restoration, research and publications, educational projects, historical markers, and area conservation through the main street program.

Fifthly, \$1.3 million of Alberta lottery funds will go to the human rights, citizenship, and multiculturalism education fund. This fund receives \$200,000 in other funding, for a total budget of \$1.5 million. Project funding is provided to organizations that foster equality and promote fairness and access to help Albertans participate in the social, cultural, and economic life of our province. One example of an educational initiative undertaken last year is the Help Make a Difference campaign, which was developed and broadcast as a series of ads on Global Television. It specifically encouraged Albertans to take action to help build a fair and respectful society.

By the way, while I'm on the topic of human rights, I should also point out, Mr. Chairman, that the total operating expense for the human rights and citizenship branch in '04-05 not including the multiculturalism education fund will be \$3.8 million. This is an increase of \$364,000 over the forecasted expenditures from '03-04. These additional dollars will fund three additional human rights officer positions as well as increases in salaries. That means that we will be able I hope to more swiftly address human rights issues and

complaints as well as see a reduction in the number of backlogged cases as a result of this increased funding.

The human rights and citizenship branch is also responsible for women's issues; however, it should be noted that specific programs, shelters, services, and legislation of particular benefit to women are found in a number of other provincial departments. Nonetheless, as the minister responsible I do attend the FPT meetings of ministers responsible for the status of women, and I was very pleased to host that group at its annual meeting last fall in Edmonton. One of the important results of that meeting was the release of *Workplaces That Work*, a report that discusses women's roles in meeting Canada's critical shortage of skilled workers and shows how both employees and employers can benefit from open and inclusive workplaces.

Before I conclude this section, I also want to mention that Community Development receives and distributes Alberta lottery funding for specific, one-time projects. For example, \$1.3 million in '04-05 will go toward hosting the 2005 World Masters Games in Edmonton. This is a spectacular centennial year event, drawing upwards of 20,000 athletes aged 25 to 100 from Canada and throughout the world. As well, \$500,000 will be provided to Strathcona county in 2004-05 for the operation of the 2007 Western Canada Summer Games in Strathcona county. One other example, quickly, Mr. Chair, is the city of Edmonton's centennial project for 2004, which is scheduled to receive \$1 million in 2004-05 as part of a three-year \$4.2 million commitment from our government.

Le Secrétariat Francophone recevra \$250,000 en projets spéciaux du ministère du Patrimoine Canadien du gouvernement fédéral pour appuyer deux projets de centre communautaire dans la communauté francophone. Un projet de \$125,000 est pour aider la Cité Francophone d'Edmonton dans la préparation des plans pour le développement de sa phase 2. L'autre projet, aussi de \$125,000, est pour l'établissement d'un centre communautaire à Falher pour servir les besoins de la communauté francophone de la région de la Rivière-la-Paix. Comme contrepartie à ces contributions fédérales les deux projets cherchent à obtenir des contributions équivalentes de notre CFEP.

[Translation] The Francophone Secretariat will receive \$250,000 for special projects from the federal government's Canadian Heritage ministry to support two community centre projects in the francophone community. A \$125,000 project is intended to assist La Cité Francophone d'Edmonton, Edmonton Francophone Community Centre, with the planning of its phase 2. A second project for \$125,000 is intended to assist with the establishment of a community centre in Falher to serve the needs of the francophone community of the Peace River region. To match these federal contributions, both projects are applying for contributions from CFEP, community facility enhancement program. [As submitted]

Mr. Chairman, I had some comments with respect to key changes to our business plan which time will not permit me to go into in any detail. Suffice it to say that our new vision statement is now this: "A superior quality of life reflecting fair, inclusive, and active communities engaged in valuing Alberta's cultural, historical, and natural heritage."

Finally, Mr. Chair, may I just quickly add that this revised format and content of the business plan came about as the result of a lot of hard work of the people in the gallery and individuals with whom they work. Regarding our performance measures, I should add now in conclusion that we have 15 performance measures, all of which are set to gauge our results.

Finally, in closing, I hope that everyone will agree that we have a very solid and concise business plan and budget estimates before us, and it's one of which I, frankly, feel very, very proud.

This concludes my formal remarks, and I'd be pleased to entertain

any questions. I'll answer as many of them as time will allow, and others I will respond to in writing as soon as possible. I would please ask members to provide a page number first if possible and then the line number or element number before asking their question.

On that, Mr. Chairman, I will just remind everyone that the most exciting musical event in our province's history and one which we feel so proud to be the first western Canadian prairie province to host are the Junos, and those are coming up on the weekend, April 2, 3, and 4, but they really all started yesterday. There's a great buzz in the arts community, and I think that as a result of that we will see just extremely clearly how much value our citizens in this province place on the arts and how that is matched by the enthusiasm of our government as well.

We have many areas to address, and I'll sit now and take questions from members who may have them for me. Please give us a page number to start.

Thank you.

8:20

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. That was a pretty good overview from the minister. He's actually answered some of the questions that I had written. Thank you very much. I will join him in noting the hard work of his staff who have joined us in the gallery.

I'm looking at page 21 of the fiscal plan, but it appears in several other places, which is the breakdown of the centennial legacy money. Now, I wrote as fast as I could. I'm trying to read this properly, so I'll have the minister explain the whole thing for the record. At the bottom of page 21 it's got:

providing \$225 million for centennial projects, primarily to construct and upgrade community, historic and cultural facilities. \$109 million has been provided over the last four years to start planning and construction. The remaining \$116 million will be allocated primarily in 2004-05 and 2005-06.

Then it talks about "a total of \$113 million to assist municipalities and not-for-profit groups." Am I correct then, Mr. Minister, that the Provincial Archives, the Provincial Museum, the Jubilee auditoria, and the park interpretive centres are all coming out of the \$225 million for centennial projects? Does that \$225 million also include the 24 community projects in phase 1 that you mentioned in your opening remarks and the 35 community projects in phase 2?

Then you've got \$30 million over two fiscal years, \$26 million to community organizations to share and \$4 million for recognitions. Does this \$30 million over two years fit into the \$113 million total that is listed as being "to assist municipalities and not-for-profit groups"?

It gets a little confusing, Minister, when you're giving us figures that are for this year, and then you're talking about \$30 million over two years, and then there's \$109 million that's already been spent, and \$225 million. The figures just flow, but I'm trying to allocate them to the proper years and the proper projects.

While I'm at it, I believe I have the original list of the 24 community projects. Could I please get the list of the 35 projects in phase 2 and the projects that are being paid for out of any additional funds that are coming there?

Part of my concern, Mr. Minister, is that I've heard a number of announcements that have been made, and it strikes me that what I would have considered projects that are regular infrastructure, regularly scheduled or planned upgrades, and regular maintenance are in fact being paid for as a centennial project and called a centennial project. That's what I was hearing because I was hearing the minister talk about these centennial projects and the legacy projects so often, and it seemed that every project that came up was being included under that.

So I just want to get a very clear idea of exactly what is being considered a centennial project and whether we're, you know, regravelling a road somewhere and calling that a centennial project. That's what it was starting to sound like. I'm sure that's not the case, but I'd like to have the list, please. I know you try to do it, but let me get you on the record on that one.

Okay. Now, going to the government and lottery fund estimates, I just have a series of questions that have come up as I've gone through. Starting on page 74, it appears that the library operating grants – that would be vote 2.2.2 – have gone down from \$19,542,000 to \$18,734,000. Could you tell me whether that's true, what I'm seeing, because that's sure what it looks like on the books. In the comparable 2003-2004 forecast it shows as \$19.5 million; under '04-05 it shows as \$18.7 million. If money has been moved around or things are being paid for from another area, could we please get an explanation of that.

The other one that's going to come up – I'm going to get asked this, so I might as well get it on the record with the minister – is an increase from \$5.8 million last year to \$7 million this year, vote 2.2.4, Alberta NHL teams initiative. Now, this is the flow-through money from that lottery ticket on the NHL teams, one for the Flames and one for the Oilers, \$5 tickets, and they were increased to \$10 tickets. Could I get an update on that program from the minister, please. What is the current price of the ticket?

An Hon. Member: What page is that?

Ms Blakeman: That's page 74. Just an update on what's happening with that NHL teams initiative for the Flames and the Oilers. It is looking to go up by \$1.2 million or so. I'm assuming that that's just expected better profit from the game, but could I get it on the record, please? Also, an update on the ticket prices and any other changes in that program.

I had my original question here under vote 2.2.5, assistance to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, going from \$29.034 million to \$30.034 million. That's a million dollars. I was asking if that was all going to the film fund, and the minister said that three times, so I don't have to get him on the record again on that one.

A small increase, about \$400,000, on human rights and citizenship on page 75. Could the minister expand, please. I'm looking for some statistics on the activity in the human rights and citizenship area with the board. What was the number of new cases that were accepted? Of course, not all cases that come to the Human Rights Commission are accepted. So what was the number of new cases that were opened last year? What's the expected number of cases that are going to be opened in this year of '04-05? How many of those were satisfactorily closed? How many of them are still pending? How many have gone forward to the Human Rights Commission, to the board, for a decision?

There has at different points been a backlog in this area. The minister referred to it. I'm just wondering if he can expand on that, please. What is the current backlog? How long are things backed up? If he can just give us some additional information on that.

Program 5 on page 77, the cultural facilities and historical resources. Could the minister just put on the record the explanation of the credit or recovery amounts that appear in that column under several areas. I'm pretty sure that this will be the friends-of groups. Page 77, vote 5.1.2, Provincial Museum of Alberta is showing a \$290,000 credit or recovery; last year it showed \$100,000 in the same column. The historic sites and cultural facilities is showing \$405,000; last year it showed \$1,378,000. Provincial Archives of Alberta: \$305,000 this year; last year \$25,000. Heritage resource

management: this year \$739,000; last year \$755,000. If I could just get an explanation for what that money is. Those are the specifics.

8:30

Now, under more general questions, on page 139 of the business plan: "connecting Alberta libraries to the SuperNet." Obviously, I've been talking about that recently. What is in this budget for the hookup charges to get hooked up to the Alberta SuperNet that the ministry is paying on behalf of the libraries to actually get hooked up to the Internet? Then what is the ministry expecting to do over the course of this three-year business plan? How much money is it going to cost to have them pay the ongoing service fee?

There are always two fees involved here. Well, three actually. There's the laying of the actual cable, which has happened and has been paid for under the \$200 million. Then there's the hookup to actually get them physically connected to the SuperNet, and then there's the ongoing service fee, the one that's being paid to Axia. So what is the ministry setting aside to pay on behalf of the libraries? Is there any other group or municipality or provincial building category, like museums, for example, or arenas, where the ministry is anticipating having to cover those costs, the hookup and the ongoing monthly service cost, and how much?

I'm going to go back to the centennial legacy project, which was originally talked about in the fiscal plan on page 21 and shows up a number of times, even under core business 3, the fourth goal, under strategy 4.2, around co-ordinating Alberta's 2005 centennial project. What is the ministry anticipating to happen with the \$26 million that he said is being set aside to encourage the communities to get involved? I think it's saying:

In partnership with other ministries, foundations, communities, non-profit organizations, municipalities and the federal government to provide opportunities for Albertans to participate in the celebrations and leave a legacy for future generations.

I know that in the 75th anniversary the government set aside \$75 million and that each community was assisted with a project to write a local history book. I'm wondering if there is some particular project that the government is going to launch and say: "Okay; everyone, please build a walking trail," which was once talked about using the Trans Canada Trail, and that might have become a centennial sort of birthday present that everyone participated in. Is the ministry following a particular theme or a particular idea that it's pitching to the communities, or is it just sort of a free-for-all, everybody do whatever the heck they want?

Is there some sort of pot of money that these communities can apply to? If there is going to be a grant program or matching money program, when will that be in place? I mean, we are – what? – at three full months, so we've got eight months until we're starting into that birthday year. That's not a lot of time for communities and voluntary-based organizations to start to organize themselves for that sort of thing. So I'm looking for what support services the ministry is going to offer.

A grant program. How is that going to be set up, or how could people plug into it? Will there be restrictions to the grant project? Will this \$26 million only be used for activities but not for bricks and mortar? Just a lot more detail around this. I'm quite concerned that we're only eight months out and there's virtually no information about what the government expects communities to do or is encouraging communities to do or how much they're on their own. I keep getting calls, and I send them on to the minister's office, but we're getting a little close here.

When I look at the \$1 million increase for the AFA – and that, of course, appears in a number of different places. I think it's under the votes under community services. Yes, that's right because that's where the million bucks was: assistance to the Alberta Foundation

for the Arts. That's where that increase was, particularly vote 2.2.5 on page 74.

I always do a stakeholder loop before we have this debate and send an e-mail out to everybody I've got on my list and say: "Okay. I'm doing this debate. Do you want me to raise any issues or raise any questions?" Certainly, the film people that I heard back from over and over again said: "I couldn't have made my film without the support that was available through this fund. We're really grateful for it. We just need more."

One of the issues that was raised that surprised me is that the film development fund is already spoken for, maxed out, allocated through 2006. So even though you've put a million more dollars into it for this budget year, people are still in a lineup. They're queued for money that would be coming free in I think '06-07 at this point. So is the minister anticipating any additional funds? Has he lobbied his colleagues or the Minister of Finance to be in line to get another amount of money?

I will come later to the specifics that were suggested as to what was really needed by the people in film. One woman went into a great deal of detail about exactly how much money was needed, and it was a lot, and I'll come to that later in my notes. I'm just wondering if the minister can comment, then, about having had the program maxed out at this point and already allocated for this year and, it sounds like, for next year.

Their concern was that unless there was some serious infusion such as \$10 million a year, producers would be leaving the province, taking experience and jobs with them. They're saying to add \$10 million per year and also requesting that the current Alberta film development fund be increased to \$15 million to \$20 million per year to accommodate purely Canadian/Alberta production and ensure that

this continues for at least a 10 year period, whereupon it can be reviewed to see its long term effects. This will allow the Alberta producer to know that, since it takes anywhere from two to five years minimum to develop a drama program/film, there will be a potential to actually finance it at the end of the development day.

Yes, a very good point.

You work so far out in film trying to put together all your amounts of money and your talent and your locations and everything else. To have a film fund that, you know, sort of rolls over on a three-year basis or, in the case of what's being said here, is already subscribed through this fiscal year and into the next fiscal year – I mean, how do they start planning? Will there still be money left for them by the time they get there?

Of course, they're leveraging money. Part of what this particular group was doing was trying to leverage foreign market money, and their point is that the foreign market will not ante up any financing or presales until they can prove that they've got the money in the bank, so to speak, in Alberta. Well, if we're already subscribed into 2006, they're not going to be able to leverage money from foreign investors. So it becomes a circular problem.

I'll leave those on the record for the minister to respond to and return with more issues.

8:40

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As always, the critic from the opposition party has provided a very large number of questions, and all of them are very good questions. I just don't think I'll be able to address them all in 20 minutes, but I would like to address some and then provide greater detail in writing. For example, to provide a complete and detailed breakdown of all the centennial legacies monies committed and/or already paid out to date

would in itself take close to 20 minutes because we have so many excellent projects, not only in Community Development, but we also have quite a few that are looked after by Infrastructure.

Nonetheless, I would just like to say that in a general sense we have in the current budget \$30 million, which I alluded to earlier. Now, \$26 million of that will go out in the form of grants, and I will be announcing that very shortly. We're just finishing off a new grant application form, and I will talk more about that soon. I can't give you an exact date, but it will be coming fairly soon. People are expecting it. We have about 1,200 or so groups, individuals, what have you on an interest list. They wouldn't all be eligible necessarily, but still this has been a growing momentum for us ever since Mrs. Klein and Mr. Donahue out of Calgary undertook the Klein/Donahue report in 1995. We had over 20,000 persons respond to that particular thing. We've done two phases, as the member knows, and we'll now look at another phase because that's what those monies are budgeted for.

The \$4 million in addition to that, which will be for centennial celebratory events, will include some staffing costs, the new office that we have set up, and a number of other related costs pertaining to some specific projects that we'll be undertaking. As you know, there are history books planned. There are other projects we're considering. There's an encyclopedia, an atlas, a commemorative stamp, commemorative coins, a royal visit, and the list just goes on and on and on. It's all very good stuff, and as we put more details onto the plans, we'll be rolling them out during the next couple of months. So there will be quite a bit more coming out in that regard.

Now, specifically you had wanted a list of all the phase 2 successful awards. Those were put out in a press release in April of last year, but I'd be happy to provide it again. And so was phase 1 put out by my predecessor in September of 2000, but we will put it out to you again, hon. member.

Then you asked the question: are these regular upgrades or maintenance-type projects which the government owns, or is everything now being done called centennial? Well, ongoing upgrades and maintenance and so on are a regular part of every different ministry's budget plan, as you will know. But there are some flagship items that we didn't necessarily have to do but we chose to do because there was a need for us to do them and because they are sort of connected to the history of the province or they're an icon of the province or they were given as a gift to the province, as in the case of the Jubilee auditoria at a 50th anniversary. We included those few projects as part of our centennial package.

There are others, of course, but when we talk about the Provincial Museum, that came about I think as a result of Canada's centennial in 1967. So we're looking at that as a major flagship for Alberta's centennial as well. Similarly with the Jubilee auditoria. The auditoria are in need of some refurbishing and fix-ups, but what we're doing is changing them from just regular maintenance upgrades to, again, state-of-the-art, first-class, best anywhere type of performance venues as afforded by the dollars available. I will give you more specific details on all the related questions that you had. That won't be a problem at all.

Now, with respect to the library estimates on page 74 or somewhere thereabouts, you asked the question: it appears that library funding has gone down. You're correct that there is an appearance of that, but that's not actually the case. The base funding remains the same as it was last year.

The difference is that last year, you may recall, we injected an additional – I don't recall the exact amount – \$1.3 million, \$1.6 million in one-time funding to assist with maintenance and related operational costs due to increases they were experiencing. That was

a one-time deal. Libraries all understood it. It's just that we can't repeat it this year. That was helpful at the time.

The other thing is the libraries and the connection to the SuperNet, which you mentioned. You wanted to know what is in this year's budget for actual hook-up costs. It's \$800,000. That's what is there. In my opening comments I had mentioned that we had made a commitment of \$1.3 million. About a year and a half ago we had committed the first \$500,000, and we did a lot of research and site placement work and so on for \$500,000, which helped the libraries know exactly what was needed and in what amounts and where and how the process would work and so on and so on. Now we're finishing off that project with the hook-up costs.

Please remember that we have over 200 library boards in the province, and they service about 310 or so individual library service points. With that in mind, we're going to do the best we can to ensure that they all have the hook-up costs through the \$800,000, which again will be a one-time injection.

Your other question was to do with: are we going to assist museums, arenas, and whatever else in the same way? I wish we had the money to do that. The unfortunate thing is that we don't, but we are hearing from those communities, so I will undertake to have a look at what may or may not be possible. I'll just ask my staff to make sure that they make a note of that for me so that we don't overlook it.

The other questions that you had were with respect to the NHL initiative. Let me just point out that under program 2 in the community services area, item 2.2.4, Alberta NHL teams initiative, this is basically for support to the Edmonton Oilers and the Calgary Flames hockey clubs. It's based on NHL players' tax revenues that will be collected each year, and we will simply be turning them back over to them, hon. member, to assist them to remain competitive.

We're small markets, as I think all members here would know, and until the league and the players actually sit down and finish their negotiations – I don't have it in my notes, but I think it'll be done during this next year – we won't be flowing any of those monies out because we're not collecting any in. So it's always a juggling, but we have to provide for it just in case it happens.

The collective bargaining agreements that they're experiencing right now should come to some conclusion in the '04-05 year. At least we're hoping that they do. Then we'll begin to receive that money, and then we'll flow it back out. It will come in through the Department of Revenue, and it will come over here, and we'll transfer it back out through our grant-making capability.

With respect to film development, that's been answered, so I'll just move along, except to come back to what you ended your comments with about the film program. It is indeed an incredibly active, vibrant, and contributing sector of our artistic and economic picture.

In many ways that Alberta film development program is, well, to be blunt, a victim of its own success. As I indicated, the \$10.3 million or so that we provided last year parleyed itself into well over \$80 million worth of film production. That doesn't include other films, offshore films, that have been attracted to our province, which we don't fund in any way, shape, or form, but they are attracted to our province because of the excellent crews that are now stabilized and living and remaining here. So there is another spinoff effect, if you will, over and above the \$80 million worth of production, all of which contributes a great deal.

We are happy to have increased the fund last year from \$5 million to \$10 million in base funding and this year to \$11 million. I think the indications are quite clear that if we truly want to grow this into the potential that it has to become a billion-dollar industry, then we will need to look at some point at increasing the funding beyond the

\$11 million. I just don't have the money right this minute to do that. But, yes, I am lobbying whoever I need to and trying to gain the support that we need to help bolster that particular industry further.

8:50

It is a very long-range planning industry, particularly the larger films, generally at least two to three years out, and it's always a challenge to try and keep up with it because, as the member may know, we don't actually pay out the monies from the film development program until all the other funding is in place and until they've actually got their licensing agreements and so on in place. That doesn't always happen perfectly on or before March 31, and that's just an anomaly of the industry, as you well know. So sometimes we see a lapsed funding situation occur, and that will cause some of the numbers to fluctuate. Nonetheless, I appreciate the feedback that you've received from stakeholders. So have I, and so have I met with them just recently.

Now, the other issue that you mentioned was with respect to human rights. I would just say quickly here on the issue of human rights – I think you wanted some statistics, if memory serves. I can tell you that the human rights stats are as follows. In terms of complaint files that were actually opened in 2002-2003, that number was 835. Up to and including a few days ago, in other words for '03-04, we were at 848. So we opened a few files more than the previous year.

In terms of complaint files that were opened and thereafter we were able to close off, in 2002-2003 that number was 772. As of a few days ago, for 2003-2004 we had already closed off 729. So it's not a huge increase, but still it's an increase in the number of complaints that the commission is opening.

The rising number of complaints can be caused by a combination of many and overlapping factors. There is, for example, a growing refusal by groups who are protected by human rights legislation, particularly people with mental disabilities and physical disabilities, to accept anything less than full participation in the workplace or in the school system or in postsecondary or in other areas of life, and that is fair and fine, and I agree and I support their desire for full inclusion. But as we create more awareness around the issues and as we ourselves get educated more about it and we in turn educate others, we do see more and more attention being paid.

For example, the ads that are on Global Television, which I referred to, the Help Make a Difference campaign, are a wonderful way for people to see themselves, and it's a great way to also increase our awareness of the cultural diversity and the issues related to disabilities which we're working on now. It'll be a separate piece at some point, I hope. But, still, what it does is it generates a lot more awareness, and that in turn generates a lot more complaints.

I think it's also fair to say that our cultural diversity is growing. It's much greater than it ever has been, particularly in the last five years. So in light of that and in light of our efforts around issues pertaining to racism, for example, and our desire to help cure society of racial discrimination and other forms of racial prejudice and what have you, we're doing a great deal more now than we ever have in terms of our awareness. For example, the Human Rights Commission is now working with the chambers of commerce across the province, increasing the focus on human rights in all parts of the province, and that's a very good thing.

The final thing on this point I think is simply to say that the vast majority of files that have been closed and dealt with through the complaint resolution process have yielded fairly good results, and we have a fairly high satisfaction rate in that respect. That isn't to say that everyone is happy, but when you talk about settling things through conciliation or settling them through investigation or some other form, we're batting quite high in that respect.

I think the other issue that the hon. member mentioned was to do with the centennial: is there a particular theme? I outlined what the major principles are in my opening comments, and perhaps if you just review those, you'll see what the theme is. To put it sort of more succinctly, though, our intention, our hope is to ensure that every community in the province – every city, every town, every village, every hamlet, everybody – is activated to do something that celebrates not only the province's 100th anniversary but also, perhaps, the role that that particular community played.

There are many communities who are also turning 100 in the centennial year, and some already have. For example, Edmonton is turning 100 this year. So we've accomplished some of those objectives already. There will be other opportunities for individuals to participate.

I think I should make it clear that the funds that we're talking about in the '04-05 budget, specifically the \$26 million that I referenced earlier, are anticipated to go to vertical infrastructure type projects. We have already funded a large number of community centres, community halls, recreation complexes, aquatic centres, hockey arenas, curling rinks, and the list goes on and on and on. We will hopefully be able to continue doing that in lead-up to the magic date of September 1, 2005.

With respect to the specifics about restrictions and so on, in the previous grant application phase, which was phase 2, announced with a deadline of March 1, 2001, we had very specific criteria. Those particular criteria can be viewed, I suppose, as restrictions. Let me say that in a general sense with any new monies that we're able to roll out into the community, in my view at least, at this point in time, priority should be given to those areas of the province who have not yet received, for whatever reason, centennial legacy grants, and there are a few areas like that. It might be because they didn't apply, or it might be because the projects that they had in mind were smaller projects and they could be handled through the community facility enhancement program or the community initiatives program. So there are a variety of reasons why a few parts of the province may not have received any centennial money so far, but quite certainly, wherever possible, they probably received some other form of provincial grant funding.

I think my time is just about up, so I'll take my spot and look forward to someone else who may have some additional comments to make.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. One question that the minister missed was around the SuperNet. I did understand the first time that he said that the department had put \$1.3 million in, that they'd already invested \$500,000, that there was \$800,000 there to hook up the libraries, which at 310 libraries is going to be around \$2,200 apiece to hook up.

The question that was not answered – and I'll leave it with the minister if he needs to do the research on it – is: what is the ministry also lining up to pay or budgeting to pay for the monthly service cost, the provision of service that goes to Axia? In this case that's the third party that's providing it.

I mean, if you're looking for an analogy – and this is not an exact analogy – if you get high-speed cable in your home or in your business, you pay the initial hook-up fee, which is what the \$800,000 is covering here, and then you pay a monthly fee to Shaw or Telus or Rogers or whoever else is doing it. So my question to the minister was: is he budgeting to pay that monthly service fee or the fee for the service provision that goes to Axia for the libraries or for any other group that would fall under his ministry? That

included looking at the three-year rollout that these budgets are now giving us. So if it's not in this year's budget, is it coming in the next year's budget? He specifically was addressing the libraries. I know that there are other ministries that are covering other parts of it; the Learning minister covering schools, the Minister of Municipal Affairs covering municipalities, et cetera. A couple of the stakeholders wrote and pointed out that the provincial funding is one-third or less than the funding received from either the municipalities or through the federal funding and that the province's share of the contribution continues to be significantly less than the other two.

9:00

Further on the Alberta centennial I'm wondering if there's a particular piece that's being offered to Alberta's arts groups and festivals participating. Would there be money set aside for them as well as being set aside for the various municipalities? Or are they expected to come up with something out of their funding that they're already getting to do something for the centennial? The minister says that he'll be making announcements in the future. Could I get an idea of whether that's two weeks or two months so that we'll all understand what it is that's being expected of people and who's going to pay for it?

Another issue that's out there, other comments particularly from the visual arts sector this year – again, very grateful for the funding that they do get but always pointing out that it is hardly enough to cover everything they're contributing and everything that they contribute overall: education of children and other programs that they offer. I understand that the institutional galleries have been cut off or that their grants have been eliminated, and I had a number of visual art galleries contact me and say, "Well, is that \$100,000 going to stay in the visual art gallery pot, or will it be reallocated into a different sector?" They're most concerned about this.

So this was the public gallery operations. Institutional galleries are no longer receiving funding, so that's all the ones that are attached to educational institutions like the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, or the FAB Gallery here in Edmonton, and a number of other ones. These five galleries were getting about a \$100,000, and there's a great deal of interest in whether that \$100,000 is going to stay in the public gallery operations pot and be redistributed amongst organizations like SNAP and Stride and the TRUCK Gallery in Calgary, Latitude 53 here in Edmonton. Is that \$100,000 going to stay in the pot for those galleries, or is it going somewhere else?

There's also a concern around the galleries this year – and I heard it from more than one – that the AFA policy is stating that galleries can apply for up to 30 per cent of their annual community support, yet none of them get that. They're all pro-rated back, and they're all getting something in the 8 to 12 per cent range. So why are they being told that they can apply for up to 30 per cent of their annual community support if nobody ever gets that? They're in the range of sort of 45 per cent of that. Yeah, that's right; 13.7 per cent of their annual community support. They're wondering why AFA seems unable to meet that 30 per cent of support for public galleries and artist-run centres.

There's also a concern that has been raised about the situation that has shaken down as a result of one grant per organization. I don't think that the government understood what was going to flow from that. I know that some members felt that there was double-dipping. At the time I argued that, no, there wasn't. They were receiving grants for different things that they were doing. They certainly weren't receiving more than one grant to do the same thing.

You know, those grants were originally invented so that they could augment and allow the groups to expand or take on additional projects. Now that all the rest of those grants have been pulled away

from them, they can't continue to exist with that. They're having to continue to cut back and cut back what they're doing. So would the minister be looking at augmenting that one grant per organization?

Further, is there any point where he envisions adding the CFEP and CIP grants as part of that one grant per organization? In other words, if you've got a CFEP grant, you're done. You don't get an operating grant; you don't get anything else. I want to know where the minister is on the record with that one grant policy and whether he can see it becoming more restrictive than it currently is.

Here's another one from another gallery. The last one talked about a range of – they were actually getting 13.7, but they were eligible for 30 per cent. This one's getting between 8 and 12 per cent, and again they're eligible for 30. This gallery is pointing out that in Britain there's just been a new program started to assist arts organizations to buy their own spaces. It was using the lottery program to help them do that. It's been very successful, and the groups were able to use the money from high rents and things and plow it back into their programming. Does the minister anticipate that kind of a program happening in Alberta?

Concern from an individual artist who, again, is very grateful for the money that they were able to receive. She points out that she was able to receive funding over two grant periods, so sort of an initial exploration or development grant and then a second for actual creation and production. She's hearing that that may be curtailed, that ability to line up the grants in sort of a part A and a part B. Could I get something on the record from the minister on that one? She points out that it would have been impossible for her to do the project if, in fact, that kind of a rule is going to come into play, and I would tend to agree. She notes that the province is one of the few resources that the individual independent artist has to turn to for funding. Canada Council does fund artists but not at the smaller level that the province does.

I just want to go back to libraries briefly. My understanding is that libraries are currently at a per capita grant of \$4.26. Libraries are advocating to see this doubled to \$8.52 to allow them sustainability in funding. Is that being worked into the minister's budget in this three-year business cycle? Or when could the minister see it attaining that level?

Finally, another concern raised about the loss of the community lottery boards, because it was able to allocate larger amounts of money to groups without the requirement for the matching funds. It was local decision-making. That's not under this minister's control, but there are certainly a number of agencies that receive operating funds that fall under him that are feeling the pinch because of that.

9:10

One more thing still on the arts and human rights side of Community Development, and that's around the creative class. Sexual orientation is still not written in although it is read into Alberta's human rights legislation. When can we expect to see the legislation amended to actually write in the inclusion of sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds of discrimination?

That ties into a larger discussion around a concept about the creative class written by Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. The point that he makes in there is that you need a large and vibrant gay community and also a large and vibrant arts community to start to build and fuel that creative class that charges that change and rejuvenation in our cities. There's a plea that Alberta Community Development recognize the economic benefit that the arts provide to the community, not only the direct economic impact and ensuing multipliers but the secondary economic benefits of attracting smart and talented people to our province, leading to long-term, ingrained support of our cultural institutions.

Questions around parks and protected areas, which appear as core business 5 on page 143, and specific numbers under program 6 on page 78. So either or both of those is what I'm referring to. Protection of the Chinchaga is an issue. The government recently announced that it would not allocate the forestry management unit P-8 to new forestry companies. This offers an opportunity for increased protection in the Chinchaga area, which would protect important habitat for species of concern but also contribute to economic diversification in northwest Alberta.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

My questions. Given the ecological and economic importance of the Chinchaga, when will this ministry engage in a land use conservation planning process with the conservation groups to enlarge the Chinchaga site to include significant old-growth forests and more caribou habitat? Second question: when will the government follow the recommendations from its own reports and put in place a meaningful and comprehensive strategy for the management of old-growth stands to ensure the long-term maintenance of forest biodiversity? Third question: will this ministry place a moratorium on further development in the Chinchaga until permanent legal protection for the area is established and transition funding is provided for affected communities?

Again on these same issues, vote 6 appearing on page 78 of the estimates book or under goal 5, the Castle wilderness protection. Albertans continue to ask for protection of the Castle wilderness. It's one of the most diverse ecosystems in Alberta, but it continues to be degraded by industrial and recreational use. Three questions: why does the ministry continue to put business interests before the natural habitats? It's part of a discussion that springs out of the bill that we had earlier this spring. Second question: will the ministry provide protection to this area before its value is destroyed further? And third, when will the ministry provide protection for the 1,000 square kilometres needed for the critical wildlife habitat in the Castle wilderness area?

A couple of questions about avalanche funding. This winter saw an unprecedented number of Albertans killed in avalanches while skiing both here in Alberta and in B.C. Both the B.C. and the federal governments are contributing \$125,000 a year, guaranteed for the next three years, for a national avalanche centre. Given that Albertans represent almost 60 per cent of the avalanche fatalities for the '02-03 season, why has the government not matched the \$125,000 contribution to the Canadian Avalanche Association? Given that it's been four years since this government has contributed anything to the Canadian Avalanche Association, when is the government going to resume contributing to a national avalanche centre?

Some questions on PDD. Overall, the survey that was done in 2003 on PDD services by the Vocational and Rehab Research Institute shows fairly high levels of satisfaction with the service provided but does have some areas of concern. One of them is the overall satisfaction of the families and guardians. That dropped from 90.2 per cent in 2001 to 88 per cent in 2003. So there are two things happening here. One is the drop in the satisfaction, and two, it's below the PDD Provincial Board's target of 90 per cent. Can the minister explain the drop in satisfaction amongst the families and guardians? Do you know if it's connected to budget? Is it a concern around management issues? Or is there some other reason for the decline in the satisfaction rate?

The survey does indicate that some people were concerned that there was not enough funding to participate in available programs. Is the minister planning on addressing this issue? He did indicate

that there were 25 million new dollars going into PDD this year. Does he think that's enough to change this satisfaction rating?

In this survey a number of the questions are asking about internal operations of service providers, but PDD doesn't have very much control over the internal workings of service providers, so I'm wondering why these questions are being asked about a service provider if PDD has little control over it.

Another concern raised in the survey is that fewer respondents know what to do if they're not satisfied with the service provided. What is the minister doing to address that?

The Acting Chair: The Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. I just couldn't write fast enough, but I'm sure the good folks in *Hansard* will have picked them up, and whatever I can't get to in the 20 minutes or whatever that's allowed here, we'll try and get to in writing.

The hon. member asked further about the SuperNet. I'm glad that we were clear and we both understand what I had referred to earlier. The issue about hookups I think has been sort of satisfied.

One of the things I should point out, however, is that in terms of the library boards that we have, which is over 200, and in terms of the library service points, I think we would all recognize that one library board such as Edmonton, for example, can have several library points. So we have to just work out some of the logistics of not so much what the one-time hookup fees would cost and how they would be applied and so on, but the monthly service charge issue that is being raised is one that we are looking into further. I did indicate in my opening remarks that our next step is in fact to try and see if we can assist the libraries with ongoing monthly connection charges, and I am working on that now. You may have missed it in my opening comments; nonetheless, I did refer to that.

9:20

Then there was another point that I'm sorry I didn't hear at all. I was looking for some other notes, so I'll have to read that. The next point I jotted down was something to do with the Alberta centennial. So I apologize for missing the second point that the hon. member raised, but I'll read it and respond to her.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The question was: will there be specific dollars allocated for arts groups? I should probably indicate that we have already announced \$500,000 in funding for arts groups, and it's in relation to one of our flagship centennial projects called Alberta Scene. We announced that about a week ago, two weeks ago – I can't recall – just sometime recently. We'll be providing that \$500,000 specifically to assist over 600 Alberta artists and arts organizations to travel from our province to Ottawa, where they will be showcased over 13 days at 19 venues in 94 events.

It's a huge, huge centennial showpiece for us that will really kick off the new budget year, for one thing, because it occurs in April and in May, and at the same time it'll also showcase our province through the arts to a national audience and also to an international audience. We do have information from Atlantic Scene that occurred a year or two back, which was very similar to what Alberta Scene will be all about, that indicated that the artists who went – and they represented every discipline of the arts – were talked to by international producers and promoters, international record labels and recording engineers, and so on and so on, and a number of deals were struck. We already have the same interest happening and

building around Alberta Scene, and it will include, you know, the performing arts, be it music or dance or drama or some other form. It will include the visual arts, it will include the culinary arts, and the list goes on and on. So that will be a very large centennial project dedicated specifically to the arts, and it's really very significant, and we're very pleased with that.

I should just briefly mention that there's sort of a bit of a reciprocal thing happening also. In the fall of 2005 for the first time, at least in my knowledge, perhaps the first time ever in the province's history, we will be hosting the National Arts symphony orchestra in Alberta, thanks to special arrangements and funding provided directly to that organization by EPCOR. So I think that's a pretty good focus on the arts as well because it will enliven our communities and there will be other artists involved peripherally or directly. We'll see. The arts have really come alive in the last few years, and we're very pleased about that.

The other point was specifically to municipalities, I think, in relation to the centennial. I think that if you check my previous answer, you'll see what I said there, so I won't repeat it for the saving of time.

Turning to arts funding in general, I know that there are concerns and there have been concerns about the level of arts funding, and I think the hon. member knows what my passion is. I made a living in the arts for many, many years, and I'm very proud of that. But the fact is that the arts always have required some form of additional government support and they always will require some support if we are to have them flourish and grow and develop at the rate that we would like them to.

So last year, as members here would know, was the first year we saw an increase to the arts budget in something like 14 years. But, in fairness, when the cuts happened to virtually every living and breathing program in '93 and '94 and perhaps a little bit into '95, the arts were not cut – it was kind of an anomaly – so we didn't have to regain perhaps what areas like health care and education had lost through the cuts of the day. Since that time, of course, everybody has increased and gone way beyond, almost into the stratosphere of funding in some of these areas, and I'm not bragging or complaining. I'm just saying that that's a fact, and I was happy that finally the arts did get an increase. But now I think we have the challenge of looking at the fact that every area in every part of the economy in every part of the society that we live in are all experiencing cost increases. So we have to do what we can with what we've got, but I do continue to raise the issue and will continue to raise it, as the hon. member has as well.

Now, specific to institutional galleries I don't have all of the answers here and I couldn't quite get all of the questions jotted down, but I think you were referring specifically to those that are attached to educational institutions. I'll have to check and see what our role in that is because I'm just not really sure right here, right now, beyond the funding. I know that we work with the Department of Learning when an educational institution is involved, and to my knowledge institutional galleries were likely rolled into postsecondary funding where that was possible to do so. I think they might continue to see funding being received if the institution where they are housed makes the application for them. That is certainly the case, for example, with Grant MacEwan College. I know they contacted me for some financial assistance for some touring projects, and because they're attached to an educational institution and because we provide monies through another ministry's budget for those institutions, I had to, you know, seek advice for that particular issue from the ministry who funds it. In general, I'll just say that this was all part of the one grant per institution policy, as I recall, and in most cases it's working well, I'm told.

Now, the AFA, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, was dealing with about six or seven different facilities or departments per institution, and it just got a little bit too large, perhaps. Maybe there was some confusion as well because there always is the possibility of some overlap, some duplication that might be going on. So it was felt that it's better to have sort of a one-window approach, but I'll have to look up more detail for the hon. member as I try to answer that question more fully.

The issue about the 30 per cent. I think you were referring to a different group – were you? – than public galleries. I just don't recall. I would say that if you were talking about galleries, I don't believe there are any reductions contemplated to the galleries at the institutions that you were asking about, but if you're talking about the 30 per cent of eligible expenses for other projects in AFA and the fact that we can't always provide 100 per cent of what they're eligible for, that would be correct. There has had to be some pro-rating, and that is tied directly to the lack of funds available for disbursing. I'm sorry that's the case, but I guess we could do the other thing. We could say: okay, those of you who are eligible for 100 per cent, we'll give you 100 per cent of the 30 per cent that you're eligible for. But that would mean some groups would get nothing, obviously. So the AFA's thought was to pro-rate and ensure that everybody who was eligible got as much as possibly could be given. So that's what they've done, and for the time being, at least, I've agreed with it.

The other point about one grant per organization. I have to confess that I, too, have some problems with that, but again it's tied to the shortage of funds. In a way we have sort of a very good bad problem to deal with because the arts have come so alive, more so than ever before, in the last few years in particular, and we now have arts organizations and artists undertaking far more projects than they ever have before. I can tell from the letters and the phone calls and the grant applications that come in, and that's been a trend that's been developing, hon. member, for quite some time now. So when the AFA brought in that particular policy, it was purely as a matter of survival and a matter of trying to ensure that the largest amount of dollars possible were spread out amongst as many recipients as possible and spread out across the province to the largest extent possible.

9:30

You made a comment about the initial reason why these foundations were set up in the first place. As I recall, the first one was the Alberta performing arts foundation or something close to that title, and it was about 1976, '77. My recollection of that era is that those foundations were set up for a few very specific reasons. First of all, the most obvious was to distribute funds that would be forthcoming from the new lotteries program that had just started up.

But, equally important, when the criteria were being designed for those programs, they were being designed so as to allow a foundation that was arm's length from government the ability to fund things that the government at the time could not fund and/or to fill voids in government program funding. Those were two of the main reasons those were set up, because I remember inputting into that particular issue. In other cases they were established to augment what the government may have already been funding, and all of that was accomplished.

Now, of course, there's a much closer working relationship because of all the partnering that occurs, and that's a good thing. We have far more money to work with, and in the end the government is accountable for it. In this case specifically, I am. So I do share the sensitivity of the history. We've moved far and beyond where we started. It's all good, and it's all working quite well. We

just don't have quite as much money as we'd like to be able to lift at this time that rule of one grant only per organization.

Now, the second question there was the issue of: does this restriction apply also to the CFEP program or the CIP program? I think the hon. member was asking in terms of those possibly becoming more restrictive. The answer is no, and I need to explain that a bit. CFEP and CIP, as we all know, are two completely separate programs. They're in Gaming, and they're not ours, but CFEP and CIP do fund a lot of arts programs.

The reason I want to flag that for all members is that so often we get accused of having the lowest per capita funding in the arts and all that kind of thing. If you take just the envelope that is labelled arts, that might be true, but if you take and roll in all the other monies that come from CFEP programming, from CIP programming, from the centennial programming and probably some others that I'm leaving out, we fare extremely well compared to all other provinces. I would challenge anyone to disagree with that and provide me information to the contrary. We never get credit for the tens of millions of dollars that flow out to arts organizations and arts society grants who host artistic endeavours in their particular communities. There are so many more monies that go out there.

But that's not the main reason why I flag this question. I just wanted to say that there are occasions when we look at what other government departments are providing by way of funding to a specific project as we are evaluating and reviewing whether or not that particular project should receive funding from a Community Development program. Where an applicant is using money from one government department to match government monies that would come from Community Development, we wouldn't allow that. But they are certainly welcome as an organization to apply to CFEP or to CIP over, above, and beyond what they would be eligible for in a Community Development project. They are completely separate programs.

Then there was another point the hon. member raised, and I'm sorry I couldn't write fast enough to jot it down. She did ask about exploration grants or creative grants or something in that vein. I think the question was: is the AFA planning to curtail it? The answer is: not to my knowledge. Now, I don't know if somebody has any information that they can shed on that. I don't know if there's a plan like that in mind. I would be surprised if there is, but I'll find out and respond in writing.

Because there's not much time left, I'll just cut quickly to a couple of the other areas that were mentioned. One that we haven't talked about yet is the parks area, and I think the hon. member referenced some issues with respect to the Chinchaga. This is of course one of the largest and most recently protected areas that we have in the province. Issues that surround that area that the member specifically referenced are outside the Chinchaga park area, so I'll have to talk with the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. I'm not sure if you mentioned the P-8 management plan or something like that. I'll undertake to get you the answer from Sustainable Resource Development if that's where in fact the question should have gone in the first place.

We have no plans, however, at this point to enlarge the Chinchaga area. It was one of the flagship dedications and designations under the special places program, and as all members here would know, the special places program concluded very successfully on July 24 of 2001. So it remains to be seen whether there would be additional initiatives or further opportunities to do some other designations. None of that is being contemplated at this time.

There are a lot of management plans that are underway, probably a couple of dozen that are at one stage or another. Some of them will be completed this year, I hope, and some of them will be

completed very shortly thereafter. There are very great complexities with all of these management plans, as you obviously are aware.

That leads me into the Castle wilderness. Now, I don't have any huge amount of notes with me tonight on the Castle wilderness, hon. member, but I am aware that some individuals want that area protected. It is indeed a very large area. It's sort of technically referred to as the Castle forest land-use zone, and it's actually administered by Sustainable Resource Development. Again, I will undertake to try and get you an answer to that. I know it's a sensitive area, but it's not one that we're responsible for. We did establish the Castle wetland ecological reserve under the special places program, so we're involved in that general area, but the specific point that the hon. member is asking is really better directed to Sustainable Resource Development.

Now, in the couple of minutes I have left, I'll just go quickly to PDD because we haven't touched on that, and if there's time, I'll come back to avalanche funding and the economic benefits of the arts. On the PDD survey that the hon. member mentioned and the satisfaction rate dropping, I can share this with the House, Mr. Chair. We do a lot in the PDD area, and obviously we need to do more.

I'm sorry. I hear that the bell has gone, so I'll have to answer that another time.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of clarifications. When I asked about whether there was centennial money specific to the arts, he quoted me the \$500,000 that's been set aside for the Alberta Scene and noted that there were 600 groups that were expected to travel to Ottawa for that. Quick math: with \$500,000 for 600 groups or artists there's less than \$1,000 each. That barely would pay the high-season airplane fare to get there. So is that \$500,000 the extent of the centennial projects allocation for the arts?

The \$100,000 for the institutional galleries was cut this year. The question that I'm asking and that the other artist-run galleries are asking is: what's happening to that money? Has it been allocated out of the visual arts sector? If it was a grant program that was going to those galleries, it's no longer going to those galleries. Where's the money? Is it staying in there to be reallocated to other visual arts entities, or is it being moved to a different sector under the government, or has it been cut entirely to somewhere else? It was there. Now it's not. Where's the money?

9:40

Finally, the issue of the one grant had fairly serious repercussions across the province, and I'll give you a simple example. In Fort Macleod in southern Alberta, in the Livingstone-Macleod constituency, they had a very active theatre. They had a season from September to May of touring artists that came in, and they were able to get community series grants to help offset the costs of paying for those artists to come in as part of a touring house. Over the summer they had an operating grant for their theatre. When they were told that they could only get one grant, the municipality, which was in charge of the theatre and owned it, had to make the choice: community series or summer operating. They had to make the choice. They couldn't get both grants, so they dropped their summer program.

Now, that summer program hired a lot of local people. It was developing a skill level with young artists because they ran a young company. They were starting to specialize in producing their own stories from that local area, and they had tremendous support from the local community. So that's what I mean when you talk about going down to the one grant. There was a huge ripple effect from that, simply beyond what the minister was referring to.

Since the minister has a much larger research budget than I do, perhaps he could back up his claim that if you add in the money that arts groups get from CFEP or CIP or the centennial grants, that would bring them to one of the best funded in Canada. I'll let him do the research on that and let me know.

Okay. Continuing on with questions on PDD, again this is continuing with the Alberta persons with developmental disabilities 2003 consumer and family/guardian satisfaction survey, which I gather is a government-initiated survey that was in fact done by the Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute. The survey found that on most indicators the Calgary region rated lowest: lowest in overall satisfaction among consumers, lowest in family/guardian satisfaction, lowest in satisfaction getting services, lowest in satisfaction with planning and reviewing services, lowest with service provider staff, with PDD staff, and with satisfaction with boards. Can the minister explain the poor rating for services in Calgary, and what has the minister done to rectify this situation? Has the minister identified problems with the board or board governance specifically in Calgary? Has the minister considered an independent review of the Calgary PDD board to explain these survey results?

I'm going to skip to community capacity initiatives: approximately \$3 million to \$4 million province-wide with Edmonton and Calgary both receiving approximately a million each in additional monies. The money is going out on a regional basis and to specific initiatives. Can the minister tell us how this money provided through the community capacity initiatives will be handled at the regional level? How will the minister ensure that there is accountability and that this money goes to support individuals who need it most? Will there be any review process or internal audits performed to ensure that money is being appropriately spent? What checks and balances exist in the system?

The Michener Centre. In 2002 the governance of Michener's services was transferred from the Michener facility board to the PDD Central Alberta Community Board, and the Michener board was wound down. Can the minister update us on what difference this transition has made on the residents of Michener Centre? Can the minister tell me whether there are any plans to close the facility?

The Protection for Persons in Care Act review. This review was begun in 2002 with the Legislative Review Committee. It submitted its report to the minister. Comments and recommendations were invited in the fall of 2003, and these are now being reviewed, analyzed, and summarized. Can the minister tell us whether there is any legislation or amendments coming forward during the current legislative session or expected in the fall session around changes to the Protection for Persons in Care Act?

Has the minister considered increasing the role that police and the justice system play in reviewing allegations of abuse? For example, as it stands now, cases are not reported to the police as a first line of defence where that would be commonplace in other jurisdictions like Massachusetts.

The question on DATS. I'm wondering if the minister can clarify for me. DATS clients are having to reapply for DATS. Now, is that funding flowing? I thought that was municipal funding, but it's turning up in my notes that there's some sort of government involvement here. Perhaps the minister could clarify that. So DATS clients are being asked to reapply. "It will take up to three years to re-certify all DATS clients. Once re-certified, changes to their eligibility will be made effective immediately": this is coming out of a newsletter specific to DATS clients.

An Hon. Member: Most of them are PDD.

Ms Blakeman: Most of the users of the DATS system are PDD. That's the connection. Okay.

So my question around DATS then is: what support is available to those individuals who would be PDD clients who are currently using DATS who are deemed not to need it any longer? Is the ministry considering any additional support for them? Or is that it; they're on their own?

How does this decision fit in with the results of the PDD consumer and family/guardian satisfaction survey that found that comments provided around transportation were almost entirely negative? There's certainly an issue there around transportation for PDD clients. It doesn't seem to be a good situation. What is the ministry doing in this budget year to address those issues?

I have just enough time to turn it back over to the minister one more time. Thank you very much for the opportunity to question the minister during the estimates on Community Development for the 2004-2005 budget year.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First, I would like to lend support to the minister and his department for the initiative of putting money into the infrastructure of parks, also supporting the water for life strategy.

I feel that the wellness part of the Ministry of Health and Wellness is absolutely essential because it is one opportunity we may have at being proactive and to help support activity and good health, therefore reducing health costs. Mr. Chairman, I would like to further see Community Development help promote activity and wellness. Could we support putting money into the budget to enhance activity?

9:50

Mr. Chairman, I want to stress the equity of access. I want to particularly talk about trail use. Trails should be encouraged to be used and not charged for. I realize that when the minister made statements about the charging for trails, groomed trails are the only ones that are going to be charged for. I would not like to see limitations of usage due to affordability. That's one of the points that I would like to bring forward. I would not like to see a trend start in charging for usage. I suppose that the question that I do have for the minister is: does he feel that the cost of administration to collect these fees is going to offset the revenues?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Given that there was one new speaker here, let me address his questions first. The issue of the water strategy that we have, which is primarily led by the Department of Environment and one which I commented on in my opening statements, is indeed one we are very pleased to be affiliated with, so to speak, through our parks and protected areas systems. We know how important it is to have good clean water in these parks for the obvious health reasons but also for the impact that it has on wildlife who come into contact with that water and, secondly, also as a tourism draw for our province.

We're very pleased to be allocating \$21 million over three years. It's the first significant increase to the parks and protected areas in several years. Ten? Twenty? Whatever it is, I know the staff are pretty happy about it, and so am I. When the Premier announced it on his televised address in February, we were all very excited by it.

The issue of promoting activities that lead to better health and

wellness habits and what have you is something that we are also very pleased to be a part of. We have a lot that we're doing in this area already. Other programs that we're doing cross-ministry with Health are also part of the equation. We have the Healthy U campaign, Ever Active, and two or three others that just escape me in terms of their real titles. Most of those are focused at youth in our province and trying to instill good habits that if properly ingrained at a younger age will hopefully stay with people for the rest of their lives and lead to exactly what the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul is alluding to.

We also have a lot of programs that occur specifically in the schools themselves to ensure that that focus is there. Typically, we like to involve some of our professional athletes when we launch those programs because it tends to encourage and enthuse and motivate young kids to become involved.

We know that there are severe problems of obesity and inactivity. I have to say that at the national level, at the federal/provincial/territorial level I'm very pleased that we are able to address that through our sport plans. One objective that we just met last year was increasing physical activity amongst Canadians by 10 per cent. We've set a similar objective for the current year, and I think we're on track to do that. In fact, Alberta is reasonably far out in front on most of those issues, and we're very proud of that.

The final point on that issue is with respect to our own Alberta sport plan. This was an initiative put together by the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation in conjunction with numerous partners. It's a very good document, and it provides a lot of strategies, some of which flow out of what the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul was alluding to and others of which address capacity building and infrastructure and funding needed in other areas where we're not providing funding at all right now. I know that the hon. Member for Little Bow has contributed a great deal to that particular foundation. We chat frequently about what needs to be done, and I'm grateful for that. I just want to say thank you to him for his advice and leadership in that regard.

The Alberta sport plan, to conclude, Mr. Chairman, is one that we are considering right now. There's sort of a good and a bad to it. It's got a lot of great ideas, so many, in fact, that the price tag associated with them is far beyond our capacity at this time, but I am looking at which parts of it we might be able to have an impact on. In any event, I will be responding formally on behalf of government as soon as we are able to.

The other quick point the hon. member raised was with regard to user fees, and I share his comment that we don't want to see a user-fee trend starting to develop in every sector because that would perhaps lead to some complications. I want to say that in terms of the user fees that we've introduced and/or augmented in the parks area, and specifically in Kananaskis with respect to groomed cross-country trails, the amount of money that we will receive in return from the revenues of those fees will indeed help us to provide ongoing first-class maintenance and upkeep of those trails. Every cent that comes in from those revenue fees will go back toward the improvements for those programs or at least maintaining them to the best of our abilities.

Now, the groomed trails that we have in the area of Kananaskis Country, as I recall, cost us approximately \$400,000 a year to maintain. Under a previous scenario we had the benefit of having the minimum security camp residents help us as volunteers in the basic maintenance and upkeep and grooming of the trails, but when that minimum security camp was closed a couple years back, it put a lot of pressure on us, and we suddenly had to come up with \$400,000. We came up with \$300,000, and the other hundred thousand we're hoping to raise through these, I think, relatively small user fees for some areas.

As I indicated in my opening comments, hon. member, a large number of other trails and other services in our parks will remain free of charge. But the specific groomed cross-country ski trails that we're referring to in Kananaskis Country, Mr. Chair, will attract probably 60,000 or more ski visits, and therefore we've brought in an idea called a seasonal pass, which will make it quite affordable for seniors, for example, who are frequent users and frequently write to us. Again, the response to the surveys that we received from Albertans and from visitors to our province was well past the 50 per cent mark, that individuals wouldn't mind sharing some of the burden of the cost through a user fee provided that those monies went right back into the programs, and that's precisely what we're going to do.

Now, very quickly – I see that the clock tells me I have one minute left – I just want to get back to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. She indicated that I was having trouble hearing her. It wasn't that I was having trouble hearing her, Mr. Chair, just that I couldn't write fast enough to keep up with her. She was throwing questions at me a mile a minute, and I did the best I could, but I'll have to review *Hansard* and get back to her with some of the specifics.

The first comment she made regarding Alberta Scene I've already covered. I just want to clarify for the record that we're talking about 600 artists, not 600 arts groups. For example, if the Edmonton Symphony or the Calgary Philharmonic were to go, that in itself would be anywhere from probably 56 to 70 players, not including technical people, and in fact we will have some of those larger groups going. Anyone who is interested in applying should look up www.albertascene.ca – I think I got it right – and there'll be a lot more information on the Internet.

The PDD survey. I guess the time has elapsed. I'll have to get back to you, hon. member, in writing on that as I will try and find out some information for you for the dance program. To my knowledge that may be part of an unconditional grant received from Municipal Affairs. But whoever it is that has the answers to your question, I'll do my best to try and get them for you as I will also on the PPIC Act review.

10:00

With that, I guess it's past the magic hour of 10 o'clock, so I will take my seat and just undertake to provide whatever I can in writing. I hear the bells going. So thank you, everyone, for your support and for participating in this discussion about one of the most important ministries in all of government, Alberta Community Development. Thank you.

The Chair: Pursuant to Standing Order 58(4), which provides for

not less than two hours of consideration for a department's proposed estimates, and after considering the business plan and the proposed estimates for the Department of Community Development for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, I must now put the question.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$676,942,000
Capital Investment	\$6,562,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Chairman, I'm happy to move that we rise and report the estimates of Community Development.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Community Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$676,942,000; capital investment, \$6,562,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 10:04 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 31, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/31

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Author of all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, we ask for Your guidance in order that truth and justice may prevail in all of our judgments. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce today the Hon. Shirley Gbujama, Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs for the Republic of Sierra Leone. The minister is in our province on her first visit to Alberta with her assistant, Alhaji Bangura. They are seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker.

Minister Gbujama is here attending an international conference on children and war being held at the University of Alberta. Sierra Leone has faced significant challenges in the past; however, the country has taken important steps to overcome these challenges and is building a brighter future for its citizens.

Albertans have supported these efforts. For example, funds for the project to enhance the quality of life for children in Sierra Leone were provided in 2000-2001 by the Canmore Rotary Club and the province of Alberta in conjunction with the Wild Rose Foundation. We are hopeful that Alberta can continue exploring areas where it may be possible to enhance the relationship between Alberta and Sierra Leone in the future.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask that our honoured guests please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with enormous pleasure that I rise today to formally introduce to you several outstanding individuals seated in your gallery who are responsible for and/or directly connected with the Junos in Edmonton. I would ask each of them to please rise and to remain standing as I present each of them to you. Ms Melanie Berry, president of the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Science, otherwise known as CARAS, from Toronto, with direct responsibility for the Junos; Ms Maureen McTague, director, events and promotions, Holmes Creative Communications, also from Toronto, directly responsible for the Junos; Dr. Bob Westbury, chair and volunteer number one in our province, looking after our local Juno organizing committee and over 1,000 volunteers; Ms Karen Topilko, executive assistant to Dr. Westbury, who helps him out a great deal; Dr. Jeffrey Anderson, executive director, recently appointed to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts and now recently our executive director in charge of the arts.

Mr. Speaker, the Junos in Edmonton are our single largest annual musical showcase of Canadian talent, and I'm extremely proud that CARAS chose Alberta as being the first Canadian prairie province ever to host the Junos. Please join me and our Premier to thank and welcome these outstanding individuals for making the Junos a reality in Edmonton.

Thank you.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly the mother and brother of one of our pages, Whitney Haynes. Whitney's mother, Brenda Haynes, is employed by Alberta Justice, and brother Landon is a grade 7 honours student at St. Nicholas school. Ms Haynes and Landon are seated in your gallery, and I would at this time like to invite them to please stand and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly four members of my finance branch. These members played a very important role in the development of the budget which I presented in the House yesterday. The members are Gerry Steckler, Karen Yan, Bill Waymen, and Jean Stricklin. They are seated in the members' gallery. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a visitor of mine who's in the Legislature for the first time, and he's keenly interested and excited to be here. I'd like to ask Mr. Kenny McElroy to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and to the members of this Assembly some very good friends of mine. They are members of the council of the Northern Sunrise county who are down in Edmonton for the AAMD and C spring conference and came to see how the Assembly operates, suggesting maybe that they would like some lessons on how to operate a raucous council meeting. My guests are Reeve Carolyn Kalebaba and her husband, Mike; Deputy Reeve Gary Lindstrom and his wife, Trudy; CAO Bob Miles; Evans Lavoie, councillor; Julie Gour, councillor; and Ed Dziengielewski, councillor, and his wife, Nancy. I see they're standing. I would ask the members to give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This being spring break I have the great pleasure and honour of having my whole family here with me today. I'd like to ask them to stand as I introduce them. First of all, my beautiful wife, Linnette, who, although she looks half my age, really is older than me; my oldest son, Taylor; my daughter, Jenna-Leigh; and my littlest son, Lucas. I'd ask the Assembly to welcome them, please.

The Speaker: The hon. member should know that the Assembly cannot protect a member from himself.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to

introduce to you and through you some constituents of mine that are visiting the Legislature while enjoying their spring break. I hope that they have all arrived, and I hope that I pronounce their names properly. The first one is Mr. Stephen Changarathil, along with his wife, Mrs. Sally Changarathil, and their son Mr. Thomas Changarathil; also Mr. Cel Robato, along with his son Joseph. I'd ask that they all rise and please receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce two special young ladies from Blessed Kateri school who are also on spring break but have come here to see the workings of our Legislature. I would ask Ashlynn Gentles to rise, as well as Adriana, please. Would you stand up? They are accompanied by their father, Leeroy Gentles, who's a social worker with Children's Services, and one of my secretaries, Lisa Gentles, who works in my office. Would you please welcome them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm thrilled to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House a dynamic duo of grandfather and granddaughter. Reg Basken is a retired president of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, former chair of the Edmonton United Way campaign, current board member of the Edmonton Community Foundation, and last but not least, president of the Alberta New Democrats. His granddaughter is Jessica Basken. She is graduating from Holy Trinity Catholic high school this May at age 17 and as soon as she turns 18 will be enrolling in postsecondary courses with the goal of becoming a social worker. Both granddaughter and grandfather are sitting in the public gallery. I will now ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: 1:40

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

School Construction in Edmonton

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The children and families of Edmonton desperately need new schools. The Edmonton public school district alone needs eight new schools by next year and has received funding for none. Even when a new school is announced, as was the case with Victoria school of the performing arts, the cockamamie process of the Department of Infrastructure leaves it in turmoil for years. To the Premier: given Edmonton's booming growth and the government's huge surpluses, how does he explain to the thousands of children in Edmonton who need schools that they don't deserve one?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to remind the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition that since the year 2000 we have spent \$1.1 billion on capital projects relative to schools. I'm going to talk about the capital region, as most people do when they talk about Edmonton.

We'll start with the A's: Ardrossan, Holy Redeemer Catholic school, two portables, \$255,000; Beaumont, l'école Coloniale Estates school, addition of a CTS instructional area, \$1.7 million; Beaumont, l'école secondaire Beaumont composite high school, addition of six classrooms, one ancillary room, library resource

centre, \$1.5 million; Beaumont, l'école secondaire Beaumont composite high school, moved portable from l'école Coloniale Estates to l'école Beaumont, transfer payment here from east elementary – I don't know what all that's about; it's \$21,000 anyway – Calmar, New Humble Centre school, \$26,000; Calmar elementary school, new K to 12 school, \$5.3 million; Devon, Robina Baker elementary school, lease support for Devon primary school, \$32,000; Devon core school, new Devon K to 9 Catholic school, \$4.3 million; Devon, John Maland high school, student health initiative . . .

The Speaker: I think, hon. Premier, that if we're only to the D's, this could be quite an answer.

The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier proves our point.

Given the delays and broken promises concerning the Victoria school, how can the public trust this government's announcements that schools will actually be built as announced?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll skip the D's and move right to the E's: Edmonton, Aurora charter school, lease support for Misericordia nurses school and residence to August, \$166,000; Edmonton, l'école Maurice-Lavallee, one freestanding portable, \$57,000; Edmonton, l'école Notre Dame, lease support for temporary accommodation of McQueen school, \$19,000; Edmonton, l'école Notre Dame modernization, \$3 million; Edmonton, l'école Notre Dame, addition of four entrance vestibules, library, mezzanine, mechanical fan room, et cetera, \$173,000; Edmonton, l'école Père-Lacombe, addition of entrance vestibule, library, mezzanine, new mechanical fan room, \$327,000; Edmonton, l'école Père-Lacombe, modernization facility, transferred funding advancement of \$396,000 from deleted l'école publique Gabrielle-Roy project; Edmonton l'école Père-Lacombe, one free-standing portable, purchase and set-up; Edmonton l'école St. Jean D'Arc, addition of new classrooms, new gym, gym support areas and student gathering area, \$3.5 million.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Infrastructure: has this government ever considered the possibility that forcing children to travel long distances to attend overcrowded schools in distant areas of the city is contributing to the astonishing 35 per cent high school dropout rate in Edmonton?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member only heard part of the great story of building schools in Edmonton. Since the year 2000 there have been 180 projects in schools in the area of Edmonton – 180 projects – and the fact is that there was \$52 million given to the public system last year, and the 180 projects don't even include the schools that will be dealt with in that \$52 million.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Security of Sour Gas Wells

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week the FBI issued a warning to Canada after receiving a terrorist threat against its oil and gas companies. Albertans are particularly vulnerable in this case because much of the gas production is of deadly sour gas. This is especially alarming given that many sour gas wells are protected by little more than a shed and a chain-link fence. To the Premier: given

that just two years ago a man broke into a sour gas well near Caroline and committed suicide by causing a high-pressure release using merely pliers and a socket wrench, what's preventing a terrorist from approaching a sour gas well and causing a catastrophic event?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I really can't answer that question because I don't know what would prevent a terrorist. But I can tell you that our Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations has been working with industry on a security plan. I'll have him supplement, and perhaps the Minister of Energy may have something to add.

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta has put a considerable emphasis on improving security measures in this province. We have established a crisis centre, a communications centre that's state of the art. We have developed through the Department of Municipal Affairs and the Department of the Solicitor General various networks in terms of being able to gather information and to be up to date on any terrorist threat that occurs across this province.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, the model that has been developed here in Alberta under the leadership of our overall security committee, which was established two years ago, has been commended and referred to as an example that might be copied by such governments as the federal government with respect to dealing with some of the issues that they're currently facing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Given that there's a proposal to drill six sour gas wells on the southeast city limits of Calgary, what reassurances can the Premier give Calgarians that they are not at risk from terrorist attacks on these wells?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. minister pointed out, steps are being taken to secure the oil and gas industry generally against terrorist attacks, and I would imagine that the gas wells or the proposal to which the hon. leader alludes falls under that protection.

But I'll have the hon. minister respond, maybe the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, you know, Alberta leads the way in a security infrastructure that defends against terrorism attacks against this very, very critical and important asset to Alberta. For the member to bring it up and expose that in a public domain only takes away from that security, so I'm a little shocked at that.

Then we watch his segue into something completely different, and that's the drilling of safe sour gas wells next to a large urban population. Mr. Speaker, that hearing has been deferred. The proponents in the hearing are consulting with the community. They are under a proposal to remove that gas faster, not slower but faster, using world-proven safe technology in this province.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Back to the Premier: has this government calculated the terrorist risks associated with allowing gas facilities in and around major cities?

Mr. Klein: You know, Mr. Speaker, that is a very interesting question. As the hon. minister pointed out, the matter of gas wells

in the vicinity of Calgary is now under review by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board. If the hon. member has concerns or specific comments or recommendations to make relative to how these fields can be made more secure, especially secure from terrorist attacks, then I would suggest that he present some evidence.

But the evidence that we would present, if we were to present any evidence, would be that we already have very significant steps in place to safeguard the industry generally – and this project would be included – from terrorist attacks.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Amber Alert Program

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's Amber Alert has failed. Yesterday when an abduction occurred on the Saddle Lake reserve, it took hours for the Amber Alert system to kick in. While the child was found, the abductor got away. My questions are to the Solicitor General. Given that timeliness is so crucial, where did the system break down?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, the system did not break down. This Amber Alert worked, and it has worked twice in this province. The unfortunate thing about this particular member is that she doesn't know the details of what occurred from the time the child was abducted until the time the Amber Alert was ignited. But I can tell you that the RCMP in this province did an unbelievable job, and it worked well.

Ms Blakeman: Can the minister tell us if all media outlets received the Amber Alert, and if not, why not?

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes, Mr. Speaker, all media outlets got the Amber Alert.

I will let the hon. minister elaborate.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, under my portfolio the emergency warning system is one that we work in concert with all media across Alberta. I might add that all media across Alberta have done a very good job in terms of the success last night. When the girl was first in fact abducted, at 9:01 the actual Amber Alert went off.

I also want to compliment the RCMP because not only were there members that were on duty, members came in that were off duty. The entire community came together to help in the recovery of this girl. The system worked, and it worked very well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Finally, back to the Solicitor General: given that the media is now very skeptical about this, what is the minister doing to restore credibility?

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, the media in this province in igniting the Amber Alert did an unbelievable, fabulous job. I happened to be watching *American Idol*, and it came across the TV station.

We are very proud of what the police in this province have done. We are very proud of how the media conducted themselves in this province. We are very proud of this province being the first province in Canada to look at the Amber Alert, and I may add that we have had nine other provinces that have followed us and our Amber Alert.

Mr. Speaker, I think the one thing we have to keep in mind is that

the system worked, the police did a good job – I'm very proud of the police in this province – and, more importantly, the child is safe.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

School Construction in Edmonton (continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again the Edmonton Tory caucus has failed to do their job, and the government has ignored the growing list of schools that need to be built in this city. Wellington school, Castle Downs high school, and High Park school: these are just some of the priorities set by the Edmonton public school board that have been ignored by this government. The needs of Edmonton children are going begging because of the ineffectiveness of the Edmonton government caucus and the disregard of this government. My questions are to the Premier. Given that Edmontonians were promised that if they voted for the Tories their concerns would be met, why has the government again neglected to meet the infrastructure needs of the Edmonton public school system?

The Speaker: Hon. Premier, I think you were at Edmonton and starting with P's.

Mr. Klein: Yes, I was. I'll finish off because the next one on the list, Mr. Speaker, is a brand new school. It's the George P. Nicholson school. That's a new elementary school in Twin Brooks. Capital health also provided \$465,000, and the YMCA provided \$464,000. The total cost of that school was \$6.5 million. Then I could go to the Suzuki charter school, two upgradings there valued at about \$60,000. Various locations throughout the city of Edmonton, various renovations of a minor nature, but they add up to about \$500,000.

Then we go to Archbishop Joseph MacNeil school – that's a new school, \$6.7 million – and the Archbishop Oscar Romero school, a new school at \$12.5 million. Mr. Speaker, then we go to Father Michael Troy, a new junior high school at \$6.7 million; Jackson Heights elementary, a new school at \$5.8 million. The list goes on and on and on.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, that's not good news for Albertans who hear that their Premier lives in the past.

Given that this government gave extra money last year to the Calgary school board, froze insurance rates that were unfair to Edmonton, and stood by as Edmonton lost a seat in this Assembly, can the Premier tell the House why he has again betrayed the capital city?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the list is so extensive, but I'll go from that list to what we've done for secondary and postsecondary school projects. In the year 2000 \$6 million, in the year 2001-2002 \$21 million for the University of Alberta. There's \$6 million for NAIT. Athabasca University facility expansion here in the city of Edmonton, \$3 million. University of Alberta health research innovation centre – this hon. member should pay attention because he worked at the university and that's where most of the money went and he represents that area – the University of Alberta natural resources engineering facility, \$25 million; the University of Alberta power plant expansion, \$27.5 million. The Minister of Infrastructure will be announcing more money for NAIT in the very near future. I don't know what this person is talking about, especially when he represents the constituency to which most of the money has gone.

2:00

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier: why is the Premier denying young Edmontonians, children six, seven, eight, nine, 10 years old, the right to have their own schools to which to go?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, I could continue with the list. The list is absolutely endless.

We predicate our capital funding on where the need is greatest and on a priority basis. I just pointed out where in this member's constituency millions and millions and millions of dollars have gone, and he is not appreciative. Would he rather we call that money back? It all went to educational institutions, namely the University of Alberta, where this hon. member taught, and here he is begrudging them that money.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Confined Feeding Operations

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the annual Association of Municipal Districts and Counties conference in Edmonton this week concerns have been expressed about whether municipalities will continue to have an influence over confined feeding operations under Bill 17. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Could the minister explain to the Assembly what role the municipalities will have under the proposed amendments to the Agricultural Operation Practices Act?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the House would recall that when we introduced the Agricultural Operation Practices Act, we stated at the time that after a year of operation we would have a review of the act, because it was a new way of dealing with confined feeding operations, to make sure that there were no gaps in the system. That review was very ably led by the Member for Leduc, and the amendments that were brought forward in this session and, in fact, passed in this session were done to bring clarity to the act. This gives a clear understanding of the responsibilities of the confined feeding operator, the municipality, the public, and the NRCB.

Mr. Speaker, one of the fundamentals of the Agricultural Operation Practices Act continues to be that neighbours are protected; their well-being is considered. It continues to encourage municipalities to identify where these operations could or could not be built, and municipalities continue to play a very important role in the siting and operation of these facilities.

Mr. Marz: To the same minister: can the minister explain why these amendments were made and what they hope to achieve?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, again, the NRCB I think has proven over the last few years that it very capably carries out what is held in that act. We did make some improvements to the act. Primarily, they were in technical areas to ensure that when the NRCB enforced the act and carried out their responsibilities under the act, those technical issues were not a difficulty for them. Responsibility and authority in a number of areas were clarified in that, respecting municipal development permits, for one, and health authority permits, for another.

Mr. Speaker, you can't have patchwork rules across the province. You have to have consistency to protect the municipality, the investment of the operator, and, of course, to protect our air, soil, and water, which was the primary focus of this act at the outset.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that concerns were expressed this morning and last night about not knowing what was coming in this bill, were municipalities and other stakeholders consulted regarding these amendments to Bill 17?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, very definitely they were. In fact, in May of 2003 there was a discussion paper and a questionnaire sent to every municipality, and 23 municipalities wrote back with recommendations. There were consultations with the board of the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, and we received many thoughtful comments about the process from people in municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to continue that, because it was expressed at the mayors and reeves meeting two days ago, this meeting in conjunction with the AAMD and C annual meeting – the Member for Leduc and two senior staff from my department went over to their convention and, I understand, met with 50 representatives from councils, had a very good discussion, and I think were able to clear up a number of misunderstandings.

Again, our commitment is to work with our partners to make this work. The municipalities want it to work, the operators want it to work, and this government wants it to work.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Rural Gas Co-ops and Electrification Associations

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to scheme to destroy rural electrification systems and natural gas co-ops. Instead of protecting rural electrification associations and natural gas co-ops, which have provided rural areas with quality utilities at affordable prices for decades, this government is doing its best to dismantle them. In a recently sent letter, which I will table at the appropriate time, Alberta's executive director for electricity states that by 2010 all consumers will be able to choose their electricity supplier. This would also include members of REAs. My first question is to the Premier. Why does this government pretend to respect the autonomy of rural Alberta when it plans to break up valued community services like REAs and natural gas co-ops?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that statement is untrue. For the truth I will call on the hon. minister.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Premier, and thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, one of the problems with this member is that his preamble is always so exaggerated that it extends the answer that you must give in order to deliver factual information.

In fact, the REAs do a good job, a great job, of delivering electricity in this province. Out of some record 9,260 megawatts that the maximum load drew this year, the REAs continued to deliver somewhere in the neighbourhood of 57 to 65 megawatts dependably to their members. There are certain REAs that have chosen ways to market their product, and others are looking at different and unique ways to market their product. Some have embraced the deregulation more wholeheartedly than others. What we do know is that there is ample electricity and there is ample natural gas for those associations to continue to deliver their product to their members at reasonable prices.

Now, Mr. Speaker, what we also know is that the competitive

generation model has brought more investment into rural Alberta, consistent with the rural development initiative put forward by the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and the Member for Wainwright, than ever before. In fact, wind power in this Conservative votin', gun totin', pickup drivin' province today delivers more green power into this grid than any other jurisdiction in Canada.

So, in fact, competitive market generation supports rural Alberta. It's not like you. It does not drag it down.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties has urged the government to unplug energy deregulation, is dismantling rural Alberta's electricity and natural gas co-ops this government's policy of revenge against rural Alberta?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there was no policy of revenge against rural Alberta. As a matter of fact, I ran into, oh, I think it must have been 12 or 13 of our ministers at the convention of the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties this morning. I spoke to them. I didn't hear any comments whatsoever about rural electrification or gas co-ops. I don't know how many were at that convention. I would guess a thousand or more people who represent municipal districts and counties throughout this province. I understand from the ministers that I spoke with that they were very, very pleased, indeed, with the actions of this government and the direction that this government is going in overall. The comments that I heard from delegates to the convention were very positive, indeed.

2:10

But I did talk about dome syndrome, dome disease, which they have. They have it very, very seriously, and they should go somewhere and get treated for it, because the real situation is out there at the AAMD and C conference where the leaders of the municipalities are, and I believe what they say. I listen to what they say, not what these people say, who are severely afflicted with dome disease.

Mr. MacDonald: That's shocking.

Again to the Premier: why is this government continuing with a \$3 million propaganda campaign aimed at convincing rural Albertans to abandon their REAs and their gas co-ops for a fictitious competitive market?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again that is a very misleading, to say the least, statement and preamble. Relative to rural electrification associations and gas co-ops I'll have the hon. Minister of Energy respond, because he's in charge of policy, relative to the way they operate just to enlighten the hon. member because I know that he doesn't get out to the rural areas unless he takes it upon himself to go out. He's never invited. I know that for sure.

I will have the hon. Minister of Energy respond, then the hon. Deputy Premier, who is responsible for the day-to-day operations of these agencies.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an important question, and again the answer has to be somewhat extended because of the falseness of the preamble. Let me start out by saying that I went to a college called Notre Dame College at Wilcox. At that time a very charismatic individual by the name of Monsignor Athol Murray said to me that there are two kinds of people: those people on the

building crew, those people on the wrecking crew. I think we know what side this government is on.

Mr. Speaker, this individual, this group every time talk about how bad things are in rural Alberta, how bad things are in Edmonton, how bad things are in Calgary, depending on the point of the moment. In reality, because of the great gift of the resources that we have, a gifted leader, and the fact that we have competitive market generation, this is the largest and fastest growing economic jurisdiction in North America, and in spite of their efforts it will remain so.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Education Property Tax Rate

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Based on the education tax rate that was announced in the budget last week, the municipality of Jasper says that residents are facing an education tax increase. Can the Minister of Municipal Affairs explain why even with a cut in the provincial education tax these constituents are seeing an increase?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Government did cut the school property tax rate, as was announced in the budget last week, by 2.3 per cent, and I think that was welcome news by all citizens. However, because there are new homes and the value of people's homes has gone up, more education property tax will be collected in terms of supporting the basic learning system. But because there are more citizens coming to Alberta, because there are new businesses coming to Alberta, it's living proof that the Alberta advantage is alive and well and also that the pie is growing in terms of the challenges we face. In fact, for Jasper, a beautiful place to live and work, I would like to say that we have implemented a capping system in order to assist the residents in the Jasper area.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. The municipality of Jasper sits within the national park. As such, it's facing a severe market restriction. What measures has the government taken to ensure that residents within national parks are not faced with a significant tax increase?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We will continue to apply the capping formula, which is so important, because we want to be assured that every Albertan doesn't face a jolt. We don't like surprises and we don't like jolts when it comes to property taxes in high-growth areas such as the beautiful area in Jasper.

Now, I would like to also say that based on a four-year average, the residential assessment, the increase is minimized to about 4.2 per cent, and this will further offset because there has been new development in the Jasper area. But because Jasper is a beautiful place to live, people are moving there. I do know that the Minister of Learning has in his purview a special education rate which, if he wishes, he could apply to the particular municipality that the hon. member is talking about.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question is to the same minister. The town of Banff receives the benefit of a special tax rate. Would the minister be prepared to support the same special tax rate for all mountain communities, even Jasper?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member has done a wonderful job in representing his constituents and came to me in the last couple of days and asked me this exact question. He won me over. Because of the federal restriction on development, because of the federal restrictions on residency, he did convince me. Under the School Act I do have the authority to make special tax rates, and we will be doing that in Jasper.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Correctional Services

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The report on corrections issued yesterday recommended that Alberta continue to monitor the privately run prison in Ontario set up by that province's former Tory government. The report stated that "the Government of Ontario is to be commended for embarking upon this innovative initiative." The report also recommended that five protective vests be issued to each adult corrections facility. My questions are to the Solicitor General. Given that a seven-year comparison between public and private corrections facilities in California has shown that escape rates are 21 times higher, why is the Solicitor General keeping this issue alive by continuing to monitor it?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's always nice to keep an eye on what's happening across this country, and, you know, I think that's what's nice about Alberta. We look at what's successful, what isn't successful. We continue to watch and learn from what other people are doing across this country.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Like electricity, I guess.

Given the inmate deaths and riots at Penetanguishene, why is the Solicitor General holding this up as a model for Alberta?

Mrs. Forsyth: Again, Mr. Speaker, it's important to watch what's happening across this country, and it's important to watch what's happening in the United States. No one has said that we're moving ahead to privatize our prisons. I think what the hon. members for Red Deer-North and Edmonton-Castle Downs and Lac La Biche-St. Paul said is: don't close the door on the issue; just continue to monitor it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Solicitor General: given that only five protective vests will be given to each adult correctional facility in Alberta, does the Solicitor General expect corrections officers under attack to stand in line and wait their turn for a vest?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, we got them their five protective vests. What the member is not seeing is that also

protective vests are available for the emergency response team. I wish she would get her facts straight.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

2:20

Police Services

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The budget announced last week contained significant funding increases for policing, but it also noted that only municipalities that pay for policing will receive provincial fine revenue. I know that some smaller municipalities have come to depend on this revenue to balance their books, so my questions today are for the Solicitor General. Can the minister clarify this issue of who will receive the fine revenue and who will not?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. member asks a very good question. In the recent budget we introduced \$58 million in new funding for policing, 16 and a half million dollars of which was transferred from the Minister of Municipal Affairs, which was greatly appreciated, from unconditional to a conditional grant. We also introduced a per capita grant formula of \$16. The other thing that I think is important is that we provided funding for 20 towns with a population of 5,000 and under.

One of the things that was discussed when we were looking at a police funding model with the AUMA and the AAMD and C, when we were talking about how to introduce some type of funding, was the fact that the fine revenue of communities that do not pay for their policing should come back to the province, and that will then go back into policing. It's one of the things that we're looking at; it's one of the things we're considering. Right now, though, Mr. Speaker, it's status quo.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister mentioned special constables. Given that just this morning the AAMD and C passed a resolution urging the government to enhance the powers of special constables to give them a larger role in policing, can the minister tell the House if that is being considered?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member that has asked the question is the same member that brought a motion forward that passed in this House in regard to special constables. We do employ special constables across this province, and the special constables that work in this province do a wonderful job. At this time we're not looking at enhancing their powers, but we sure are looking at making sure that all the municipalities will be receiving a standards manual that will let everyone know the responsibility of the special constables in this province. I think it's clear to understand – and I've said this in the Legislature before – that the special constables are a complement, but they are not police officers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

High School Completion Rate

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to Alberta Learning's own numbers, the three-year high school completion rate

has remained at 65 per cent from the 1999-2000 school year to the present. More incredibly, Alberta Learning considers this an appropriate target to be met. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. What has the minister done to ensure that the other 35 per cent of Alberta high school students stay in school and graduate within three years?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, one of the very important elements of the learning system, obviously, is graduating from high school. This has been one of the issues that we have looked at extensively, and we have numerous programs that are aimed at keeping kids in school.

One of the anomalies is the three-year versus five-year graduation rate. Yes, the three-year rate is around 65 per cent, which is low. The five-year rate is significantly higher at very close to 74, 75 per cent. We really feel that the five-year rate is more accurate because there are students who take four years in high school, some who take five years in high school. The other situation is that when you actually extend it out to 10 years, I believe – and I stand to be corrected on this – we're up around 90, 91 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, 100 per cent is the number of students that should be graduating from high school. I do not necessarily say three years. It would be nice to be three years. Five years is probably realistic, and that's what we're setting our sights towards. The Learning Commission themselves said 90 per cent.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister: what are those specific changes that have been made to try to encourage students to complete the program within three years?

Dr. Oberg: I can give you some, Mr. Speaker. One of the issues when it comes to high school graduation is in our aboriginal communities. We have launched our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education policy, which has had very good success. We have some jurisdictions now in Northland school division where you're actually seeing students graduate, which is a first in some of these particular areas.

We have also done other significant things such as the RAP program, which encourages students to take an apprenticeship program in school. We have the aboriginal apprenticeship program, which starts apprenticeship as low as grade 8. All of these things plus many, many more are aimed at getting the students, allowing the students to graduate. We have put a lot of effort and time into putting our education system on computers so that there are different ways for the students to learn.

So, Mr. Speaker, the quick answer to this question is that almost everything we do in Alberta Learning is aimed at getting students to graduate.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: why has the ministry set the bar so low with respect to graduation?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, each and every year I have a very heated discussion with my department about that exact issue. For once I will agree entirely with the hon. member that the bar should be set at a hundred per cent, recognizing that that's what we should always aim for.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Redwater.

Rail Link to Fort McMurray

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's hobby railroad to Fort McMurray isn't even mentioned in the government's 20-year plan or the three-year infrastructure plan released with last week's budget. It's a new record. This time the government took less than two weeks to break its 20-year plan and even less time to blow its three-year infrastructure plan, not to mention the budget, all so that the Premier can play engineer. Without so much as a news release the government is committed to spending \$1.25 million on a feasibility study on this railroad. My question is to the Minister of Economic Development. Would the minister stand up and tell the House why such a big project is not even mentioned in the government's 20-year plan or the three-year infrastructure plan?

Mr. Norris: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, if you stick around long enough, you'll hear intelligence from any source, so thank you for that.

The answer to the question that the hon. member has posed is a very simple one. The 20-year strategic plan as well as the value-added plan are very wide-reaching umbrella policies, Mr. Speaker, and they allow us as a forward-thinking government to always insert new ideas when they become available, because when you're planning a 20-year cycle, you don't always have all the opportunities in front of you. Clearly, this opportunity has come in front of us, and as a forward-thinking government it fits in not only under the 20-year strategic plan, not only under the economic development plan, not only under the hon. minister of agriculture's rural development plan but also the value-added strategy. So we would be remiss in our duty as a government if we didn't look at this opportunity. I would suggest to the hon. member that it fits into all those plans very, very well.

Mr. Mason: It's just not in them, Mr. Speaker.

This next question is to the Minister of Finance. Can she tell the House why the \$1.25 million for the feasibility study is not included in this budget, which she just presented recently?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, I believe that the hon. Minister of Economic Development's estimates are up for debate, and those are questions that should be asked at that time. This is contained within his budget.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much for that nonanswer.

Mr. Speaker, can the Deputy Premier shed any light on who is investing in the Athabasca Oil Sands Transportation company and what their connections to the Conservative Party might be?

The Speaker: There are two questions there.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, neither one of them very good to come to the government.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier has made it very clear in this House that this is an opportunity perhaps. It may be – it may be – the best way to move goods and services to the Fort McMurray area, home of the greatest investment opportunities in this province. It may be an opportunity to move goods and services from that very rich economic region. It may be. But it's actually the private investors' business as to whether they are going to invest, and I would ask the hon. member to draw on his wide net of acquaintances and friends

in that area and ask them that question. That is more appropriately directed at them.

2:30

At this point, Mr. Speaker, as has been very clearly laid out in this House, the government is involved to this extent: a portion of a feasibility study to see whether, in fact, this would be a good investment for the purposes of moving goods and services to and from the richest economic region in this province.

The Speaker: Hon. minister, with all respect I want to give another member an opportunity this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Redwater.

Avian Influenza

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you might know, I have quite a number of poultry producers in my area, and many of my constituents are getting somewhat nervous about the avian influenza affecting poultry flocks in British Columbia. They are worried about this virus spreading to Alberta. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Could the minister explain what policies are in place to protect our poultry industry?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, avian flu has been detected and identified by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency in a number of flocks in British Columbia in the Fraser Valley region, and the CFIA has moved very swiftly to isolate those flocks, remove the birds, and do the cleanup.

Mr. Speaker, probably the most important part of avoiding this is awareness, knowledge, and good biosecurity measures. The Alberta chicken producers, or feather industry, have very, very good biosecurity measures. Just to give an example of what that might be, a farmyard would quite likely be divided into zones, and there would be criteria as to where people can go when they come to that operation, where they cannot go, which is probably more important, the proper clothing that must be worn and removed when going in and out of a barn. Many things like that are a part of the biosecurity.

Mr. Speaker, our chief veterinarian in the province of Alberta, immediately upon hearing of the avian flu in Asia, met with our industry to ensure that our biosecurity measures in this province were as high as they could be and that they would be adhered to.

Mr. Broda: My first supplemental, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that some countries have now closed their borders to Canadian chickens, what is the potential economic impact on Alberta poultry producers?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, it's unfortunate that it appears that some nations may not be basing their decisions on science. However, I would inform the hon. member and all members of the House that Alberta actually exports only about 5 per cent of the chicken produced here, a little over \$2 million in trade. All trade is important, but I'm pleased that most of this wonderful product that's grown here is used domestically.

We don't want to lose any export markets. We want to continue to have all of these decisions based on sound science, and we'll continue to lobby for that.

Mr. Broda: My final question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Are Albertans at risk of contracting avian flu?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, at this time avian flu poses no health risk to

Albertans. The province does participate in a strong world-wide surveillance program for influenza including avian flu. There has been heightened surveillance in this province because of the recently confirmed case in a poultry farm worker from British Columbia.

I can explain, however, Mr. Speaker, that there's no evidence of human to human transmission of this disease. It appears that all confirmed human cases have developed after direct contact with infected poultry.

Again, Mr. Speaker, we are heightened in our surveillance of this, but at this time there appears to be no threat to human health in this province.

The Speaker: Hon. members, a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven members to participate in Recognitions today, but prior to that might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two guests that are seated in the members' gallery, Reeve Ray Prins and his lovely wife, Pauline. Ray, of course, is here for the AAMD and C convention. Reeve Prins provides exceptionally good governance to the ratepayers of Lacombe county. I would ask that Ray and Pauline stand and please receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, one of the groups I always enjoy visiting with in my constituency of Edmonton-Centre is the Lions Village Railtown, and this afternoon I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly six of the seniors from that residence along with their leader. Seated in the public gallery, we have Jean Leask and Mel Leask, Norah Warr, Louise Claire, Pat Bettcher, Mary Wolhand, and they're accompanied today by Michelle Kraeling. This group has a very lively current-issue debate during the morning coffee meetings that they hold every week, and it's a great honour for me to join them occasionally. They've all risen. Please welcome them.

head: **Recognitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Picture Butte Sugar Kings

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 20, 2004, the Picture Butte Sugar Kings won the provincial 2A basketball championship in Lethbridge, defeating Immanuel Christian Eagles. This is the fourth consecutive provincial high school final that the Picture Butte Sugar Kings have participated in, winning three silver medals and this year the gold.

I'm pleased, Mr. Speaker, to recognize head coach Kevin Reiter, assisted by his coaches Arnie Bergen Henengouwen and Mr. Ted Johnson, and of course the Sugar King team members: A.J. Bergen Henengouwen, Mike Caruso, Richard Doerksen, Eli Fowler, Marc

Leclair, Rory McLeod, David Murray, Tyler Russell, Cody Schooten, and Shawn Vander Heyden. Coach Reiter has been coaching junior and senior high school basketball for 21 years and is very dedicated to the sport and to all his athletes.

I wish to extend congratulations to the 2A provincial boys basketball champions.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Advanced Coronary Treatment Foundation High School CPR Program

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today in the Assembly to recognize an important program introduced in my constituency. The Advanced Coronary Treatment Foundation high school CPR program has made a positive impact in Alberta communities. In the St. Paul education regional division over 300 students from 10 high schools will be trained in CPR. This program has been implemented in the communities of Ashmont, Mallaig, Two Hills, St. Paul, Mymam, Heinsburg, and Elk Point.

Students are taught the early warning signs of heart attacks and strokes as well as how to react to these indicators. Practical skills such as basic CPR and the Heimlich manoeuvre are taught through the training.

The ACT Foundation is a national nonprofit association that helps high schools across Canada to implement a core curriculum CPR program for youth. The foundation operates in partnership with health professionals, service clubs, government, and the community to establish this critical program. I would like to commend the ACT Foundation and its partners.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Trinity Lodge Retirement Residence

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Saturday, March 27, I was invited to attend as chair of the Seniors Advisory Council the grand reopening of the Trinity Lodge retirement residence, home to 185 seniors and located in the Premier's constituency of Calgary-Elbow. Trinity has just completed a major renovation, and the residents and the community are very proud of the results.

What a wonderful event it was. The festivities included a kids' corner, live jazz and vocal bands in the dining room, a ribbon cutting, dancing, a ladies vocal group in the card lounge, guided tours, refreshments, and, very importantly, meeting the residents.

The Premier was of course the most honoured guest, with Alderman Barry Erskine, ward 11, and me. As the Premier noted, Trinity Lodge has provided quality, independent housing for seniors since 1975, and it just keeps reinventing itself to better meet the needs of today's seniors.

Congratulations, Trinity Lodge, on your beautiful new home, truly a warm, friendly place.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

2:40

Rotary Club of Edmonton

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me today to rise and recognize the Rotary Club of Edmonton on its dedication and commitment to the betterment of the city and our communities. Further, I would like to acknowledge the hard work

of two individuals, Harry Buddle and Daryl Wilson, of the downtown club.

Yesterday morning they organized a very successful breakfast fundraiser that generated more than \$30,000 to support two Rotary centennial projects: the Bissell Centre, which provides an invaluable range of services to low-income Edmontonians, and the Lurana Shelter, which is a temporary sanctuary for abused women and families. The breakfast fundraiser was attended by 500 distinguished business and community leaders from the Edmonton area. In the audience were four government ministers, including the hon. Justice minister, the Economic Development minister, Community Development, and Transportation, as well as 18 of my colleagues from the Legislature.

Over the years the Rotary Club of Edmonton has supported and funded a number of projects in our city and province and worldwide. Edmonton Rotarians are part of a global family of community and business leaders who are committed to making the world a better place for all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Emergency Responders

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to recognize the police officers, firefighters, paramedics, nurses, doctors, and correctional officers who are exposed to bodily fluids and blood in the course of their duties. The men and women working in these professions place their health and well-being on the line to protect and save our lives.

Unfortunately, a growing number of at-risk suspects demonstrate irresponsible behaviour by infecting others with little or no regard for the horrible emotional and physical harm inflicted on the victims and their families or their friends. Based on conversations and correspondence with police services, firefighters, and union locals across Alberta, an increasing number of professionals are being bitten, scratched, and spat upon by people who use that as a threat or a potentially fatal weapon aiming at disease.

Mr. Speaker, for thousands of Albertans who work in professions where it is their duty to stand in harm's way, forcing a blood sample from people who infect emergency workers is a necessary step to improve the well-being of people who work in increasingly dangerous conditions. It is for these reasons, Mr. Speaker, that it is imperative to continue the process of discussion on Bill 204.

Thank you.

Edmonton's Food Bank

Mr. MacDonald: I rise today to congratulate Edmonton's Food Bank on its new home, where I know staff and volunteers will continue to help even more people who have fallen on hard times.

The Food Bank's mission is to be stewards in the collection of surplus and donated food for effective and free distribution to people in need. Thanks to the generosity of Edmontonians the Food Bank has been successful in its mission and fed almost 154,000 hungry people last year.

But the Food Bank can never rest and always needs to collect and distribute more donations. Edmonton's Food Bank participates in 300 special events during the Christmas season alone, and its mascot, Fill-up, has become a familiar sight all over the city.

Donations to the Food Bank are accepted at local grocery stores and fire halls throughout the year and now at the Food Bank's new location at 11508 - 120th Street. We should all make a donation of

money or a nonperishable food item in honour of its grand opening.

I wish the Food Bank well.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Seniors United Now

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This morning I attended the annual general meeting of Seniors United Now, or SUN. SUN believes that it is only by banding together that the government will pay attention to the concerns of Alberta's seniors. The group believes that seniors can only persuade the government to restore benefits taken from them over the last 11 years by demonstrating that a large number of Alberta's seniors are prepared to vote for the party that will restore their benefits.

I invited the 400 or so seniors at this morning's AGM to join other seniors and sit in the Legislature gallery during the May 6 Seniors ministry budget debate, showing this government that seniors are not satisfied with what they received in the 2004-2005 budget. The government can't claim that it hasn't heard about seniors suffering as a result of its decisions, and still it hasn't restored benefits, but there wasn't any relief for seniors in the budget released this week.

The SUN group remains determined, and its fact sheet states and I quote: the general opinion is that the real surplus is even greater than was announced on March 24. Once again, the government, like any other bully, keeps hitting those who do not fight back. Keep on going, SUN.

Thanks very much.

The Speaker: Hon. members, one additional recognition today, but a little test to go with it. If you take the number 11 and you multiply it by an even number, you will determine the year in which on this day the hon. Member for Rocky Mountain House, the Minister of Infrastructure, was born. So happy birthday to him.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to present a petition signed by 866 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to "support Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act, which will provide more security and peace of mind for people working in occupations who have a higher risk of exchanging bodily fluids with a potential carrier of a blood borne disease."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present this petition on behalf of my hon. colleague for Edmonton-Highlands. The petition is signed by 121 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta

1. To immediately withdraw the draft management plan for the Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area and revise it so as to disallow any further commercial or residential development of the Kananaskis Valley;
2. To redesignate the Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area and adjacent unprotected public lands as a Provincial Park, with those parts currently undeveloped designated as Wildland Provincial Park;
3. To maintain Kananaskis Country in a natural state that provides high quality wildlife habitat and nature-based recreational opportunities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Bill 27
Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 27, the Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004.

As part of Alberta's business tax reduction strategy this bill amends the existing act to reduce both the general corporate rate and the small business rate by 1 per cent each: the general rate from 12 and a half per cent to 11 and a half per cent and the small business rate from 4 per cent to 3 per cent. With these changes the Alberta corporate income tax will be the second lowest among the provinces. The small business rate will be the lowest in Canada, tied with New Brunswick. The proposed amendments also reflect the federal resource taxation legislation administrative changes.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 27 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, March 23, under Introduction of Bills Bill 25 and Bill 26 were introduced in the Legislature for first reading. The bills as introduced were tabled as being sponsored by the Minister of Learning. In fact, Bill 25 was supposed to have been tabled as having been sponsored by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar and Bill 26, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

I understand that the Minister of Learning has contacted members of the opposition and achieved agreement that we could ask for unanimous consent to have the sponsorship of the bills corrected for the record of the House. So I'd ask that you ask the House for unanimous consent to do so.

The Speaker: I started attending this Assembly in 1974, and never have I ever heard of such a request coming forward. But under unanimous consent the Assembly can do just about anything.

I would take it, then, that there is also a requirement that the bills be reprinted with the new names, as well. Who would bear the cost for that, hon. Government House Leader?

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker, they're small bills, and the cost is not excessive.

The Speaker: So in addition to changing the names to these two hon. members, there's a request that the bills be reprinted and not be reintroduced?

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, there is, then, a request that two bills, namely Bill 25 and Bill 26, be reprinted, Bill 25 with the name of the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar placed on it and Bill 26 with the name of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark placed on it. Unanimous consent is being requested.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The bill in question, Bill 26, would also be moved onto the government Order Paper; is this correct? It being now

under the name of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, the request would be that Bill 26 be moved onto the government Order Paper?

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I was anticipating asking exactly that, that it then be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

head: **2:50 Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to table the requisite number of copies of a resolution passed this morning by the Association of Municipal Districts and Counties asking to enhance and increase the duties of special constables.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table my answer to Written Question 8, as asked by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to table a statement regarding Youth Science Month in Canada and with it my congratulations to approximately 500,000 students in Alberta and across Canada who are participating in local and regional science and technology fairs this month. I had the opportunity to participate in the central Alberta regional fair as a judge this past weekend, and I was impressed by their depth of knowledge and their commitment to their projects. I ask all members to join me in congratulating these bright young minds.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today. The first one is a letter that I received on March 23, 2004, from the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in regard to Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

The second tabling I have is a series of documents indicating that the price of steel in this country is going down, not up as previously reported on two occasions in this Assembly.

The third document I have is one from February 27, 2004. It's from Alberta Energy, electricity division. The original is signed by the executive director, Kellan Fluckiger, and it is in regard to a question I asked earlier in the Assembly about open competition by 2010 for electricity suppliers and customers.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to table two documents today. The first is a news release issued by the Edmonton public school board on March 30, 2004 – that is, yesterday – expressing the board's disappointment and frustration at receiving no new funding for infrastructure.

The second document is the capital plan highlights issued by the

Edmonton public school board for a three-year period beginning in 2003-2004. This document outlines the urgent need for the construction of new schools and the modernization of existing facilities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Mar, Minister of Health and Wellness: Alberta Cancer Board annual report 2002-2003; Alberta Cancer Board financial statements 2002-2003; and pursuant to the Health Facilities Review Committee Act, the Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee annual report 2002-2003.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

head:

Main Estimates 2004-05

Government Services

The Chair: Are there any comments or questions to be offered with respect to this?

Mr. Coutts: Well, before we ask for the question, I'd like to make a few comments, Mr. Chairman. I wish you all a great afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak to Government Services estimates for 2004-2005.

With me today and seated in the members' gallery – and I'm going to ask them to wave as I introduce them – are the people that I had the pleasure and the honour of working with to put these estimates together as well as our business plan. They work diligently on behalf of Albertans and the government of the province of Alberta and work very, very hard to provide the services that we do within the department.

They are Fay Orr, deputy minister of the department; Roger Jackson, former deputy minister and Alberta's first Utilities Consumer Advocate. We have with us also Dave Rehill, deputy minister and CEO of Alberta Corporate Service Centre, and with Mr. Rehill today we have Les Speakman, the executive director of the Alberta Corporate Service Centre. Laurie Beveridge is our assistant deputy minister of consumer services and land titles. As well, we have Wilma Haas, who's the managing director of Service Alberta and Alberta Registries. Sue Bohachuk is sitting right beside her, and Sue is our senior financial officer. Then we have a newcomer to our department, my communications director, Ryan Cromb, who has just joined us. We welcome them all here today.

Today, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to provide a brief overview of our business and our financial plan, which is based on our continued commitment to service excellence and support of our two major core businesses. First, we provide Albertans with a full range of licensing, registry, and consumer protection services. Our second mandate is to lead service improvement initiatives on behalf of the government of Alberta.

In support of these two core businesses we have prioritized our programs and services to focus our resources on six major goals. Our first goal and highest priority is "efficient licensing and

registration services." We measure our success by ensuring that clients are satisfied with the accessibility, accuracy, and security of our services. We also strive to keep our fees affordable and are confident that all our services remain competitively priced compared to other jurisdictions.

Ongoing growth in the Alberta economy means that our registry system now supports over 35 million transactions per year. For land title registrations, in particular, there has been a 25 per cent increase over the past three years in the number of transactions. In spite of the extra efforts of staff and significant overtime, the growing demand for services in this area resulted in fairly lengthy turnaround times this last summer. Extra funding has been included in our budget to hire 16 land titles examiners and fund the interim overtime costs until the new staff can be fully trained. It also addresses increases in our postage, printing, and imaging costs that result from these higher transaction volumes.

3:00

We anticipate that further improvements in our service delivery for land titles and our other registries will occur as we progress with our registries renewal initiative. Our registry system infrastructure will also play an important role in Alberta's automobile insurance reform. Enhanced security and identity protection remains a top priority, and we have several initiatives planned, such as rolling out within the next several months the use of facial recognition on our driver's licence to prevent and detect fraud. In total our registry and licensing services account for \$63.3 million worth of our resources but generate revenue in excess of \$325 million.

Our second goal is "informed consumers and businesses, and a high standard of marketplace conduct." A major initiative related to this goal is the Residential Tenancies Act. This legislation provided a framework for nearly 1 million Albertans who rent their accommodation. We have amended it to ensure that it remains relevant to today's environment and continue to consult with the Alberta residential tenancies advisory committee on related regulations. We are also looking at establishing a voluntary alternative dispute resolution process to resolve tenancy issues.

One of the cornerstones of our consumer legislation is the Fair Trading Act. We plan to introduce updates in the fall of 2004 to ensure that it keeps pace with changes in Alberta's marketplace. On other fronts we will continue with our award-winning national and international consumer protection initiatives and will focus on the most serious marketplace violations.

Another key protection initiative is preventing vehicle theft, and through our co-ordination of the Alberta vehicle theft working committee we've developed comprehensive recommendations for dealing with this issue. We allocate about \$9.3 million of our resources to protecting and educating consumers, and we measure our success based on client satisfaction.

Under goal 3 consumer protection is further enhanced through the establishment of Alberta's first Utilities Consumer Advocate. This new program will protect the interests of Alberta's 1 million residential, farm, and small commercial consumers in the province in our restructured retail utilities marketplace. The advocate will undertake a number of activities, such as, firstly, acting as a central point of contact to provide Albertans with information and assistance; secondly, ensuring utility companies address consumer questions and concerns in a timely and fair manner; thirdly and probably as important as anything is representing Albertans' interests at the Energy and Utilities Board hearings and other regulatory proceedings.

The advocate will also provide advice on industry and government

policies and practices as appropriate. This program is fully funded by electricity and natural gas consumers through the electricity Balancing Pool and natural gas distributors respectively at an estimated cost of \$4.4 million per year. If any of these funds are not required for this program, they will be returned.

Our fourth goal relates to the Service Alberta initiative, where we are striving to increase Albertans' awareness and satisfaction with access to all government of Alberta services through the Internet, through telephone, mail, fax, and over-the-counter service. Progress is continuing on an incremental basis and is dependent upon other ministries' contributions.

As of early February only 53 per cent of Albertans were aware of the toll-free number and the web site, so a key focus will be promoting awareness of Service Alberta and how it can help them. We will also continue to enhance the web site, promote integration of the Alberta government contact centres, and monitor satisfaction with over-the-counter services. The Service Alberta initiative amounts to approximately \$1 million worth of our resources.

Our fifth goal is to provide "effective management of, and access to information, and protection of privacy." A key initiative will be to support the implementation and harmonization of new privacy legislation for the private sector. While Alberta's act is already harmonized with B.C.'s legislation, we are now working towards greater alignment and co-operation with other provinces and territories.

Another key responsibility is to promote effective ways of managing the government's information and records. This program not only provides advice on standards and best practices but also offers training and encourages co-ordination between ministries and the Alberta Corporate Service Centre and the Provincial Archives. Nearly \$2.7 million of our resources are allocated to these services.

Another major program under goal 6 of our ministry is the Alberta Corporate Service Centre. It reflects this government's commitment to promoting efficiencies and continuous improvements. ACSC has spent the last three years consolidating operations, aligning activities and resources, and defining service delivery costs to prepare for major directional changes. Recently a new governance structure was implemented to strengthen ACSC's accountability and to support new directions in service delivery. Next steps include optimizing service delivery through pursuing best practices that position us to further streamline processes.

As well, we are developing a revised approach to costing and pricing services that reflects innovative practices used in other world-class shared-service organizations. Client satisfaction with this revised pricing and cost model will be a primary indicator for measuring ACSC's overall success this year. The centre operates mainly on a dedicated-revenue basis with \$142 million of the overall \$154 million budget recovered through service agreements with other ministries and agencies. The remaining expenditures are for central services such as supply management, telecommunications, and records management.

In closing, our ministry has a major impact on the lives of Albertans, and we take pride in delivering high-quality services in the most effective way possible.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you very much for this opportunity to present our priorities, and I look forward to addressing any questions that any of the members opposite may have. If we should happen to miss any, we will go through *Hansard* and make sure that answers are received to those inquiries in writing.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to participate in the debate on the estimates of Government Services this afternoon. Certainly, one looks at that budget, and you could sum it up like one of those old Clint Eastwood movies, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Certainly, there is work to be done in this department, but there are some good things being accomplished there. That's for certain.

One of those that I would like to note at this time is the work that the department has done in the recent past, going back to last summer, on some of these shady renovators that are going around the province. The department has put out some very informative information that consumers, householders can use to protect their money and, in some cases, their property from unsavoury and unqualified tradespeople acting as qualified home renovators. We know – one only has to look at the ads that are on television from various Canadian and multinational hardware chains – that this is a huge market.

3:10

I think and the constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar also think that the Ministry of Government Services has done some very good things. I would like to see more information made available to consumers by the department in regard to this matter. Consumers appreciate it, and they appreciate the hard work of the department on this issue. But that information should be available to all consumers, and it should be made available also to the home renovation industry. I don't know if they have a trade association or not, but maybe they should. I don't want to be accused by members from the opposite side of encouraging them to overregulate, but I don't think there's much of a chance of that happening.

Mr. Chairman, I wonder what the plans are to make the web site of the department more consumer friendly. I'm wondering if at some time the minister has the view that consumers would look to his department not only for leadership but for information, information that would be readily available at their fingertips. Consumers are sort of the Rodney Dangerfield of Albertans; they don't get any respect.

One only has to look at our government web site and look at the previous – and this was when the Conservatives were in power in Ontario. I don't think they were defeated because of lack of attention to consumer-related issues. Maybe they were. But, certainly, you look at the government web sites from various respective departments in Ontario, and you will see where there is an emphasis put on consumer information and consumer protection. I would like to see the same sort of right-wing zeal focused on increasing consumer information and protection in this province. Maybe this is the ministry and the Minister of Government Services that could do it.

It would be a one-stop shop for consumers looking for information on insurance. Unfortunately, it looks from today that by 2010 we're going to have choice in electricity and I can only assume in natural gas as well whether we like it or not; what's good for the government is going to be good for the consumers in this case.

This document that we talked about in question period – certainly it looks like there's an anticipation of trouble, Mr. Chairman, by the government. We've seen this consumer czar, this Utilities Consumer Advocate. Well, the budget is going from \$2.6 million when it started to – I believe we're up to \$4 million and a bit. Yes, \$4.3 million for this year. Then even after we get all the furniture and everything paid for in the office and the moving in and location expenses, it's going to go up in two years to \$4.8 million.

So I can only assume that the hon. Minister of Government

Services already knows something that the Minister of Energy does not or is unwilling to recognize, and that's the fact that there's going to be more trouble, lots more trouble with energy deregulation for natural gas and electricity. I can only assume that by looking at the increases in the budget.

From the time this office started till it's two years old, it's going to need an additional \$2 million. What's that \$2 million going to be used for? How many full-time employees are going to be in that department? How is the office being set up? Everything from furniture to electronic equipment: who's paying for that? Where's it coming from, and what's it going to cost?

Now, while we're on the subject of the utilities czar, it is amazing that this office would come into existence through a ministerial order that was one of the hardest pieces of detective work this hon. member ever attempted in his time in this Assembly, Mr. Chairman. I was asked even by reporters for this ministerial order, and I had to admit at first that I hadn't even heard of it. Then I heard that at a standing policy committee this issue was discussed, and I was lucky to get that information because I wasn't invited to that standing policy committee. I, unfortunately, wasn't invited, but hopefully in the future a guy may be invited. But I did get wind of this, and I did research through the EUB, and I was in my view lucky to have discovered the rules surrounding this Utilities Consumer Advocate.

No one is saying that the Utilities Consumer Advocate shouldn't exist. In fact, if you look at various government departments and you look at political parties in this province – the Progressive Conservative Party had a notion at one of their policy conventions that we have a Utilities Consumer Advocate. Certainly, we brought the issue up as Official Opposition. The Navigant report talked about this.

Various other studies done on electricity talked about having consumer education. Not propaganda but education. If you're going to force them to make this choice, well, make sure that consumers have the information.

Now, I don't know where the hon. minister in his opening remarks if I heard him correctly – there's a lot of buzz in here, and I may not have heard him correctly. According to public documents that are available from the EUB, and I'm quoting here, Mr. Chairman: the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate will promote understanding of the restructured electricity and gas markets and ensure that Albertans' concerns are heard and effectively addressed; the advocate's office will listen to and analyze consumers' concerns in order to provide advice and guidance to stakeholders, including government, the Energy and Utilities Board and other regulatory agencies, and utility companies of utility consumer protection policies and practices.

I don't see "enforce" in here. I don't know how consumers are going to be protected. How are they going to be protected if we're just going to promote understanding and we're going to listen to and analyze consumers' concerns? We're going to listen and analyze and promote. It feels good; it sounds good. But, I mean, where are the teeth? Certainly, hon. members on this side of the Assembly would like an answer to that.

I hope the Government Services minister and the department are not burdened or saddled with an outfit that is going to turn out to be quite ineffective. They're not ineffective at getting the budget and this whole idea of having money being paid. Now, where's this ministerial order? Right here. ATCO Gas north and ATCO Gas south and AltaGas Utilities have to come up with half a million dollars to pay the costs of the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate, and next year I suppose they're going to have to come up with a bit more to pay for the increase in the utilities office.

3:20

Mr. Chairman, that gets me to my next question in regard to this. What does the department anticipate the problems will be? Will they be all on the electricity side, or will they all be on the natural gas side? When we understand that 20 per cent of the budget is coming from the gas side and 80 per cent is coming from the Balancing Pool, the electricity side, it is unusual. I would assume, I think quite correctly, that the minister knows that 20 per cent of the problems are with natural gas; 80 per cent are with electricity. With the expansion of the budget is that going to continue, or will there be more electricity concerns and less natural gas concerns?

Now, in the performance measures here, item 3, we're talking about "effective advocacy of Albertans' interests in the restructured utilities market." This has got to be one of the toughest jobs that one could give an hon. minister. This hon. minister has been doing his very best in this department with the privatization of the registries and with our licensing issues. There's no doubt that he's been working hard. But, Mr. Chairman, I can't understand why they would saddle this department with this and why it wouldn't be tied directly to the Minister of Energy. You know, that department seems to be stubbornly resisting all attempts and all campaigns to unplug electricity deregulation and look at energy deregulation and how it has affected the consumers of this province.

We're looking here at goal 3, and this is a performance measure. It's new. "Percentage of customers 'satisfied overall' with services." Well, we're looking at a target of 60 per cent, and in two years if we spend additional money, it's going to go up to 80 per cent. So I hope that we're not being told that money is going to buy happiness here. I don't think that's going to happen.

Now, again, this is another performance measure, a new one: "Percentage of Albertans aware of the role/services provided by the Utilities Consumer Advocate." Fifty per cent, half of us, are going to be aware of this. I see a lot of information in my bill these days, and I wonder what could be provided in that bill to help the minister achieve his target of 90 per cent of citizens being aware of the role or service provided by the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

Is there another flyer going to go out? I don't know what we could put on that. I wouldn't want the department to come up with a marketing ad with sort of a watchdog there with a blindfold on or a big dog with his paws over his ears lying down pretending not to hear, not to pay attention. I wouldn't want that to be the logo of the department.

Now, the third performance measure here, Mr. Chairman: "Percentage of interveners expressing satisfaction with the cooperative protocol utilized by the Utilities Consumer Advocate." Co-operative protocol. This gets back to my earlier questions as to how all this will work. In the interests of the consumers we're going to have this co-operative protocol.

This is like voluntary compliance. Certainly, under the determined leadership of the Minister of Human Resources and Employment we've forgotten about voluntary compliance as far as workplace safety goes. We recognize that it doesn't work. The minister has taken a suggestion from this side of the House and has decided to vigorously enforce the law and take allegations through the court systems if necessary. I would commend him for that, and I would commend him for admitting that voluntary compliance doesn't work. That's the co-operative protocol. It's just another fancy way of saying "voluntary compliance."

I can't see how we're going to go with this from a satisfaction rate of 60 per cent this year to 80 per cent. I don't understand how this is going to work. I have a lot of confidence in the minister and a lot of confidence in the staff, but on this issue I have grave reservations.

I don't think this is what the Navigant report had in mind when they suggested a Utilities Consumer Advocate or the form of a Utilities Consumer Advocate. I know the Conservative Party didn't. The Progressive Conservative Party, I should say. There are a lot of Conservative parties around these days, so I'd better make that correction.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to ask the minister while we're talking about consumers – I think the Ministry of Government Services would be an ideal location for a whistle-blowers' office. Maybe we could connect it to the Ombudsman. Now, I may be stepping out of line here and assuming that this government is going to pass whistle-blower legislation and have good, strong whistle-blower legislation so that we can protect the taxpayers from any and all forms of abuse as may occur.

Now, on this web site that the ministry could develop for consumers, if consumers saw something that they didn't feel was right with their government, if they saw something at a registry office, for instance, well, the web site could inform them of how they could contact the Ombudsman and have an impartial office check out the indiscretions or the allegations and see what's going on. Perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself, but certainly we would on this side of the House like to see that implemented by this department.

When we look at this department, the issue of identity theft comes up time and time again. Over the weekend I was reading . . . [Mr. MacDonald's speaking time expired] Oh, I'll have to cede the floor to another colleague, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If the House would allow me to just respond to a few of the questions that have been brought forward by the hon. member opposite, just to kind of pick up where he left off in terms of what's in the future for consumer protection and how we get the information out to people. He kind of started off that way and ended up that way. We in the department have the same vision. We see a one-stop shop for information for Albertans to access, and it's called Service Alberta. We've expanded on that program over the last three years to the point now that Albertans are starting to use it. However, we could see some more use of that with a little bit more awareness out there.

Our Service Alberta goal is to make it easier and more accessible for Albertans to not only see government of Alberta programs but also to just get plain, good, solid information about what their rights are, information about where to go to get specifics on definite programs, et cetera.

3:30

Our Service Alberta web site is being expanded almost weekly to include whatever provisions Albertans would like to see on it and whatever we can accommodate. That web site is accessible at servicealberta@www.gov.ab.ca, and we encourage Albertans to go in there and provide us also with some feedback as to how we can improve it to make sure that their service needs are wanted and needed, and if it makes sense, we include it.

As a matter of fact, we have taken Service Alberta over the last six months – we had a number of access points in it, and we found out that we didn't need them all. We can consolidate, and we can bundle, and we can get information to people faster by doing that and provide them with just as much information, as a matter of fact more information. We see that as a work in progress, and we will continue to do that.

The hon. member is absolutely correct – and I appreciate his comments – in terms of some of the tradespeople that are out there doing some shoddy work and ripping people off. These are unscrupulous people. We recognize that in the department of consumer protection, and we work very, very closely – it is unfortunate, Mr. Chairman, that seniors seem to be the most vulnerable here, with the many tipsheets we put out or mail out. We look to the Department of Seniors to help us get some of that information out to seniors, and we're thankful for their participation. It's a cross-ministry initiative that we think is working pretty well, but there are always some that get through the cracks in trying to provide people with the information so that they're not taken advantage of.

The first thing that people need to know is that the first thing they should be asking for is a licence from these fellows that come to their door and make promises. The other thing that they should look for is a contract to make sure that those promises are kept for any building that they want to do or any fixing up of someone's home. Also, in those contracts people should be looking for things like cancellation provisions in case the contractor does not do the job that they say they were going to do so that a person can get out of a contract.

But, more importantly, I think the biggest thing today is that we don't like to see seniors cheated out of any of their money, and down payments are one of those things that an unscrupulous entrepreneur would demand without doing any work and before actually taking on and doing the job. Nobody should give out any cash before any work is done.

Those are some of the things that we put in the tipsheets.

The hon. member asked about the opportunity for using the Internet for those tipsheets. All of that information is on the Internet, and we encourage people to access that information to help them so that they can save their money and be secure in whatever endeavours they want to do to get people to fix up their homes and make it a little bit easier for them to have a nice lifestyle.

The next area that the hon. member brought forward was the consumer advocate, focusing again mostly on consumers and protecting people. The member through some of his questions asked why it was set up and why Government Services is taking on the role. Well, we see the Department of Energy responsible for the restructuring of electricity, and we see ourselves on the consumer protection side responsible for the advocate's role.

It was deemed appropriate that our ministry would be the place where the advocate would be housed given the fact that we have so many functions in terms of protecting Alberta consumers through our Fair Trading Act, which protects consumers on the marketing of electricity and that type of thing. It sets down those provisions and those best practices. It sets down cancellation rights. When marketers come to your door and want to sell you a product of electricity or natural gas, they have to present a contract and they have to identify themselves, some of those same principles that I talked about earlier in terms of house builders and that type of thing and renovators coming to sell their wares.

Those are just very, very basic things that people should be aware of, and we provide that kind of information to people through the Fair Trading Act regulations. That's a protection that we offer in the department, and now we continue to offer that same kind of protection with the advocate role, and it seems like it's a real good fit for our department.

How was it set up? Well, the consumer advocate's office was set up and was established as part of Government Services, as I said, in October of 2003 by order in council, and that order in council came through under the authority of section 4 of the Government Organi-

zation Act and section 18 of the Public Service Act. And, yes, it operates on dedicated revenue, and that dedicated revenue comes from consumers. It's put onto the rate base, and the funding is received through that rate base by electricity and natural gas providers through to us.

The hon. member mentioned something about the 80-20 split between electricity and natural gas. It was deemed at the beginning that most of the complaints seemed to be on the electricity side, and that would be about 80 per cent of the work. The other 20 per cent would be on the natural gas side, recognizing that there were some high natural gas prices. So we made the 80-20 split. Accordingly, the electricity Balancing Pool pays for 80 per cent of the office being set up, and the further 20 per cent comes from the three provincial natural gas distributors.

The hon. member asked about how many dollars in FTEs, et cetera, et cetera, made up the \$4.3 million that we're receiving for 12 months of operation. This year 31 per cent will go to manpower, and that will be 16 FTEs to look at all the programs and the communications and the strategies that are being put together by the advocate's office. The other 69 per cent will go to supplies and services, and we talked about offices and desks and computers and that type of thing. The advocate's office is now up and running with those kinds of dollars.

Now, the question came up as to why we need an extra 2 point some million dollars to operate this year. Well, the hon. member will recall that the office got set up in October of 2003, and it spills over until – well, actually today is the last day of that fiscal year, so it was about five and a half months. So the \$2.6 million that we got from the Balancing Pool to operate and get the operation set up was for that five and a half to six months. Now we are requesting in these estimates \$4.3 million for 12 months of operation. So that's very, very easy to explain.

I'd just like to go back and talk a little bit about what the advocate sees himself doing. The advocate is basically looking at providing information for the residents of Alberta, for small businesses and farms that were hit with high prices and providing that kind of information on the restructuring of electricity, letting the folks know what was deregulated and what is still regulated.

3:40

Also, the advocate takes a look at how they can best facilitate with the service providers discrepancies in bills or if their bills are in arrears and how they can get the customer service departments of those companies to work with the customer to solve some of those problems. They've been very successful in being a facilitator in that area. As a matter of fact, much of their time is taken in doing that.

As well, they work with Service Alberta in the call centre. We get calls in from both Service Alberta and the UCA office, and most of those concerns come through that office and through that Service Alberta in terms of concerns on the electricity side. Yeah, about 56 per cent of the concerns are electricity, and 36 per cent are gas related. Because he's called the consumer advocate, we get about 4 per cent of complaints coming into the advocate's office on issues not directly related to utilities, but they handle those and redirect those to the proper places.

Just to go back to the communications plan for consumer awareness and the advocate's office, we're putting together a number of strategies to be considered, rural and urban and residential and farm and commercial, and taking into account regional differences and dealing with all of those differences and making sure that people understand the restructuring and how it's presented. We've developed a web site, and it's been completed. That's ongoing

work. That's part of what the 16-member staff has been doing. As a matter of fact, the launch for that will be tomorrow, April 1, and we'll be sending out a news release, so everyone can look forward to that.

The advocate's office on an ongoing basis works with the media, and particularly they also go out and do some key messages with chambers of commerce, Rotary clubs, and that type of thing, letting the rest of Alberta know exactly what the utilities advocate is doing. So they have a number of speaking engagements as well.

Now, the third and final thing that the advocate is doing is taking part in regulatory proceedings and representing consumers mostly on two fronts, not only officially in front of the EUB on behalf of residents, farms, and small businesses but more importantly taking all the consumer groups that do make representation in front of the EUB and actually pulling them all together so that there's a unified voice to see if we can get sort of a better bang for the dollar that is charged back to the rate base for advocacy on behalf of consumers. That is a huge, huge responsibility, and it's a very expensive process. Lawyers are involved, the legal businesses, and technically it takes a lot of work and a lot of equipment.

I just got a note here from my advocate who's saying: we didn't use any of those dollars for furniture. So let me put that on the record. We didn't use any of those dollars for furniture. Thank you to my deputy for that. We've got to set the record straight here.

You know, when you take a look at a couple of million dollars for legal services to make those representations, we feel that it's dollars well spent on behalf of Albertans.

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

So that's a breakdown, basically, of some of the things that the hon. member had brought forward, particularly on the consumer advocate.

That's all I have to respond to his questions at this particular time. I look forward to more, Mr. Chairman.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I thank the minister very much for being so open and candid with his answers and, as well, his staff who are here to assist today and to listen to our questions.

Certainly, the Ministry of Government Services is one of those ministries that touches the lives of every Albertan in one way or another and on a very direct basis. It is one of those ministries that is constantly changing with the times and must change with the times as we continue to move forward with technology and as we continue to move forward as a more corporate society.

When I'm dealing in my critic area of Transportation in particular, I get questions from people involved in driver education and the examination of new drivers, and they certainly have many concerns when it comes to the information that is required. They also have many concerns when we look at the changes that have occurred in the issuing of drivers' licences.

Now, in the province we went to graduated drivers' licences, and one of the areas that they were most concerned with here is the fact that there was a deadline where people had an opportunity to obtain their driver's licence before they had to go in and get into the graduated licence program. The question they were asking me was at that time when there was a deadline. There were apparently some examination agencies out there that were taking a great number of these people trying to get their drivers' licences under the deadline,

and as a result some of these agencies or examination centres were charging an increased rate. So they took advantage of those people trying to get in under the wire.

Would the minister's department have first of all any documentation, any data which would show if there in fact was an increase in the number of people that got licences just prior to the graduated drivers' licences program coming in? Would the ministry also have any data as to what fees were charged for those licences; for example, in the last few weeks before the deadline?

As well, in the area of vehicles my constituency office is also getting requests wanting to know about altered vehicles. These are vehicles that are registered as normal vehicles, but they've been altered, whether they've been raised, whether they have large tires, even those vehicles that have been equipped with nitrous oxide in order to accelerate to great speeds very rapidly and for short durations of time. So their concern was that if people alter their vehicle and their insurance is no longer valid, then what sort of protection does the average motorist on the street have when they are involved in accidents with these types of vehicles? If the minister could please provide any information. Are there any additional or increased registration costs for these vehicles that have been altered, whether that is with the large tires, whether it is being equipped with nitrous oxide or whatever?

3:50

As well, I was listening quite intently to the questions that were posed by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on this whole issue of whistle-blower protection. I think that it is certainly an area where many people would get involved if in fact they were not subject to having to give their names and their personal information.

Speaking of personal information, as we continue to have databases established with a great deal of personal information, we know that the Federal Trade Commission says that 10 million people were stung by identity thieves in the last year at a cost of \$48 billion. Certainly, with the data banks that the ministry has, what type of systems are in place to maintain the confidentiality of information that they have in their systems? What sort of assistance do they give the victims of identity theft?

Particularly when we look at the amount of information that is available – and experts say that it has never been so simple to become someone else – databases have become too numerous and too vulnerable. It seems to me that this is a never-ending process whereby for every safeguard that the ministry can put in, somebody will be trying to leap ahead. It seems like we're into a situation where we're playing tag but we're always it, because for every step that the ministry would take . . . [interjection] Yes. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar says that it's a little bit like being in opposition.

I do have a few other questions, and these are in regard to the Auditor General's report. One of the concerns and recommendations of the Auditor General was that "the Department of Government Services make provision for appropriate recovery facilities and equipment to resume business operations if a service disruption occurs." I think it became extremely evident again to all of us after 9-11 just how our information systems can be disrupted, whether it be by that type of tragic event or for whatever other reasons that registry systems break down.

I think that one of the concerns, as well, that the Auditor General has is that the ministry had "contracted out the operation and maintenance of these systems to a private sector service provider." If the minister could please indicate how the department has addressed this recommendation by the Auditor General and what

steps they have taken particularly when the service has been contracted out to the private sector. What sort of controls does the ministry have in regard to dealing with those providers from the private sector?

Another recommendation, recommendation 19, that the Auditor General had was: "We recommend that the Department of Government Services complete and approve a project management plan for the Registry Renewal Initiative." The Auditor General goes on to say: "Registry renewal initiative to renew 20-year-old systems. Estimated cost: \$100 million." The findings were that the department "should improve the management controls" for the registry renewal initiative. They also found that the project management plan for the registry renewal initiative was "incomplete and not approved." Some of the areas that they were concerned with were certainly in the risk management plan that was not complete. So if the minister could please indicate as well how they are addressing recommendation 19 by the Auditor General.

As well, the Auditor General had recommendation 20. This particular performance measure gave them concern because it is a recommendation that was made earlier, in 2002, and this recommendation apparently was not addressed to the satisfaction of the Auditor General. So what the Auditor General recommended at this particular point was that "the Alberta Corporate Service Centre clearly define its performance measures and improve its processes to track and report results."

The criteria that they wanted the department to follow was, number one, that "performance measures and targets should be clearly defined and linked to the core businesses and goals of an organization." The second point under criteria was that "adequate control systems should exist to ensure that performance information is accurate and verifiable" and, thirdly, that "performance results should be reported in relation to the business plan."

Their findings were quite interesting in that the Auditor General goes on to say that "the Centre has not made satisfactory progress in improving its performance measurement systems." So if the minister could please indicate what they have done to address this recommendation that has not been followed on two separate occasions now.

As well, under this same recommendation they go on to say that the methodology for the cost savings measure was not clearly defined and used in the determination of results. The Centre prepared a discussion paper that set out the definition of cost savings, and how to measure them. However, this document was not finalized, approved or communicated to the staff responsible for collecting the information. Thus, performance results initially provided to us did not always meet the definition of "cost savings" as outlined in the discussion paper. In addition, supporting documentation was not available for all savings.

If the minister could please indicate how they have changed their reporting process in order to clearly define cost savings.

So with those questions, Mr. Chairman, I'll cede the floor to the minister and, hopefully, have another opportunity to get involved again. Thank you.

The Acting Chair: I would like to remind members that the first hour is for the opposition and the minister to have discussion or debate. So after the minister responds to the questions, any member will have the opportunity to ask questions.

Go ahead, hon. Minister of Government Services.

4:00

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The hon. member brought forward some concerns regarding the delivery and the education on the driver's licence and the graduated driver's

licence and driver examiners and things like that in his first questions.

One thing about Government Services is that we provide the service to the people of Alberta based on legislation that is in the Department of Transportation's purview. We provide that service under a memorandum of understanding between the two departments. In this particular case your questions would probably be better served by Transportation because they make the policies and they make the determination of all those types of dates, and they have the stats on the graduated licences and that type of thing. I only have the stats on the number of licences that have actually been given out. I will refer it to the Department of Transportation, and we'll work on that. We'll certainly try to provide that in writing to you.

That also goes for the altered vehicles that you were mentioning: different engines and different tires and different chassis and those kinds of things and the fuels that go into them, et cetera, et cetera. That is also under Transportation. So we'll refer that to Transportation, as well, and between us we'll certainly provide you with the information that you need.

In terms of identity theft and that type of thing and questions around our driver's licence, you know, we went to a centralized facility to make sure that we had the most secure system, the most tamper-proof card, et cetera, et cetera, so that identity theft could be controlled in Alberta. Our driver's licence program has been very successful in that regard.

However, we do have a number of people that have called our department with inquiries in terms of, you know: how come I have an interim driver's licence with no picture on it? They want to gain access to an airline or that type of thing and they don't have identification. We've had to field those kinds of concerns coming to Government Services and reassure people that once they do get their driver's licence, it will be the most secure document in North America. The inconvenience that they have for the five or six days that the card is being produced in a central location and being mailed back to them – we've reassured them that that's generally done in five business days, and most folks are pretty agreeable to that.

We had some problems with the central system with the power outage down in Toronto and Ottawa last fall, and there was a backlog. The contract that we have with the provider makes sure that we try to keep within that 14-day period that we originally discussed and wanted used as a target. Canadian Bank Note really did a good job in churning out the backlog and getting it done. We never were much beyond 14 days. We had one week there when we were 15, 16 days, and one or two people phoned us with an 18-day turnaround. But that's since all been fixed. It's very, very consistent. We have a five-day turnaround now. Albertans can be reassured that their driver's licence, which sometimes is used by other businesses as a source of identification, is a valid document.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

You talked about identity theft. Yes, identity theft is a real concern. We in the department don't get involved, again, on the service side. We're more with helping people go through a process of clearing, say, their debt or their credit information. If somebody else has assumed their identity and cleaned out their bank account, that type of thing, and ruined their credit rating, we help them with a national identity kit that takes them through a step-by-step program to let all banking institutions and retail shops and credit card companies know that their identity was assumed by someone else and someone else is responsible for those debts, et cetera. We take

them through that and provide them with the information.

Alberta has been a leader, as a matter of fact, in dealing with a national identity theft kit so that people can restore their credit rating but, more importantly, get their lives back together again. We've taken a lead in that, and it's difficult. I think that part of our awareness program is to let people know to safeguard their personal information, safeguard their credit cards, not leave bank statements around, that type of thing. It's one thing that all of us have to be aware of.

You talked about the database and the safeguards around the database. Part of our renewal for our registries makes sure that those safeguards are put in place so that people can't access and nobody can link into our database. Only those that are under contract or have authorization to do so can gain access to only certain things.

Our registry renewal initiative is progressing, and, yes, the Auditor General's concern about a plan has been addressed. Actually, we did have a plan in place for various components of this initiative. We put a business case forward, which we thought was the proper thing to do, and it related to plans that were set forward based on guidelines and sound principles and templates that were applicable at the time. However, after the Auditor General's recommendations came forward to us, we've taken that to heart, and we've complied with the Auditor General's wishes. We've expanded and integrated the components into one overall plan, which we think will have some benefits for Albertans.

The progress that we've made on that registry renewal initiative – basically, we've acquired the computer infrastructure including the data storage system that will provide that security that the hon. member was looking for. We have the system development tools and methodology. As well, we have the networks and associated support from the computer services that will provide the kind of certainty that the member is asking for. Of course, that's something that Albertans are asking for as well. They want to know that that security is there with our system. So that plan has been put into a comprehensive package, and we will continue to work on that with the Auditor General.

The next item that the hon. member brought forward was business interruptions and the controls that would be put into a disaster recovery plan. We've compiled and validated a total inventory of our systems through a recent business resumption planning exercise that we went through. We're currently comparing the cost of recovery services to the risk and the impact of those services that are not available in what we think is a reasonable time frame. We're working with Innovation and Science to improve on that as well as to determine the impact of that ICT initiative. So we're definitely continuing to work on that. It's a very, very important component of making sure that that disaster plan is appropriate and facilitates Albertans' information.

4:10

Pretty well your last question to me was about ACSC. This is an area that the Auditor General also had some comments on, that we have taken to heart. We worked very, very closely with the Auditor General's office as well as the deputy minister for ACSC.

Basically, in ACSC our whole function is to look at how we can re-engineer recruitment functions across government and make them more effective. We look at pricing models and tracking systems and transactions that we can consolidate and put together so that we can find some cost savings. We found that going back and trying to define what the benchmarks were in the various departments for administrative costs was an exercise that in itself was costly.

So we're still concentrating on savings in ACSC, but our targets

are focused more on changing our processes and making them more efficient and more cost-effective, and we think that in that we can generate the savings. As a matter of fact, as of this year we can pretty well track that we've made savings in the area of around \$25 million in ACSC. Yes, it's been slow to implement and it's been difficult, but we think that by focusing more on processes, we can come up with those savings that we need. So that's something that will continue to progress.

We've looked at ACSC in a number of ways trying to find how we can best make those savings. We've had some situations where we've outsourced some of the functions, and it's worked very, very well. Some components of the information technology services have done that, and they proved to be very, very beneficial in saving some of the dollars. We'll work on partnerships for the future in trying to make sure that we comply with those recommendations that have come to us through the Auditor General.

I think that pretty well covers all of the members. So I thank you very much for that.

The Chair: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and join debate on the estimates for the Department of Government Services. I want to start by commending the minister for his thoroughness. He seems to pay attention to detail as well as to the big picture. Also, I'm impressed by his detailed knowledge of programs, policies in his department. That's quite refreshing to hear. I think that not only should the minister be complimented on this but, clearly, his staff who help him stay up on this. I think this is something that we should acknowledge.

Having said that, I have a few questions. I want to start with one which is sort of a very simple question. At my constituency office I ran into a riddle that we couldn't solve even after calling your department, I suppose, and others. I have met with residents of some seniors' accommodations over the last several months, and they have had some complaints about the manner in which these places are being managed, the way some charges are being either introduced or increased without any consultation. So we tried to find out where to go. I've been under pressure to find some way in which they can take their complaints.

Mr. Coutts: Are these condominiums?

Dr. Pannu: These are not condominiums. These are publicly funded, I guess, at least partly publicly funded, lodges or accommodations for seniors. My constituency assistant was quite frustrated and sought my help. Unfortunately, I had to change my constituency assistant. There's a new person.

This program that the minister referred to as the tips program, would that be information that constituency offices should have, and would there be something in these pieces of information that would help? And do constituency offices on a regular basis receive this information? That's the other question that I have because I have a suspicion that my constituency assistant didn't have that information handy. So I just draw your attention to it, and I will certainly advise him to get in touch with, perhaps, your department to get some more direction on what to do with these complaints that we have been receiving on a regular basis for some time.

I want to turn, Mr. Chairman, to some questions to the minister on this new office that's just five months old now, the utilities advocate's office. The incumbent is present today, so I thought I should ask some of these questions.

Generally speaking, with respect to the terms of reference of this office, scope of responsibilities and powers is something that remains somewhat unpacked at this moment. I don't have a clear understanding exactly as to the responsibilities and the powers of the utilities advocate. For example, what kind of actions can the office recommend or take? Does it have some enforcement powers? If it decides to make some recommendations for action, where does that office refer, you know, those complaints or those recommendations for action? Good enough to listen and analyze complaints, but then some remedial action has to be taken. Does this office have powers to either enforce remedies or to recommend remedies, and if so, with respect to utilities where are those remedies to be sought and implemented?

The utilities advocate's office, Mr. Chairman, is an interesting office. It certainly is the result of deregulation of electricity, primarily, and the widespread dissatisfaction and unhappiness with it on the part of Albertans who consume electricity, although I do acknowledge that it's not just electricity. It's also natural gas, you know, as part of the utilities. But on those counts there have been complaints.

In a sense this response to the public dissatisfaction with deregulation has meant additional expense, of course, to consumers, because as I understand, this office will be funded through drawing money from the power Balancing Pool and from natural gas providers. Those costs are then transferred downwards to the consumers, I'm sure. They're not something that's not passed on. Not only are consumers paying more; they are paying some additional amount now to have the ability to go to an advocate and having to pay for it, albeit indirectly, through the passing down of the costs of this through the utilities which provide electricity or power.

4:20

The real problem, of course, that Albertans continue to insist that this government address is the question of high energy costs. It's just been brought to my attention today, as a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman – and the minister would be interested in making note of it – that as a response to these high power and heating bills, Albertans both in the cities and some smaller communities are continuing to express their displeasure and disapproval of the route that the government has taken by way of deregulation of these utilities.

There will be a town hall meeting, for example, in the village of Innisfree that will take place on April 13, next month, in two weeks' time. It's at 7:30 at the Innisfree Recreation Centre. I think this meeting is prompted, as a matter of fact, by a large number of petitions that the residents of Innisfree and the area have signed and have presented to their MLA. This meeting is in response, I guess, to that pressure from consumers in the Innisfree area who are not so much concerned about what the utilities advocate can do for them; they are concerned about whether or not the deregulation itself can be reversed. So they have demanded a meeting. This meeting will be on April 13.

Without intending or meaning any disrespect for the office or for the incumbent of this recently established office, I just want to suggest to you, Minister, that that office really is a band-aid to the real problem. The real problem is the one that people are organizing to express in places like Innisfree and other places by way of town hall meetings. They want some accounting for why it is that they have to deal with, they have to live with this so-called inevitable, irreversible decision that clearly is seen as wrong-headed and wrong and needing a reversal on the part of this government, but that's not happening.

Having said that, there's a new office. The money, I guess, for

this is about 4 point some million dollars, Minister, this year? For the five months, I guess, the allocation was \$2.3 million. I just wonder if this estimate is either too much or too little given the fact that the minister doesn't really have a clear road map yet based on past experience.

I also understand that the utilities advocate has established an advisory council with 10 members on it, and I hear that either the minister or the advocate had to hire a consultant to find these 10 members. I wonder what the costs are of these consulting services. Does the budget as presented here for that office provide for the remuneration that may have to be paid to these advisory council members, who may have a fair bit of work on their hands given the volume of complaints that this office has already received over the last three, four months since its opening in November? So would the minister be able to give us some estimate of the amount of money that's allocated for the work of this advisory council?

Is the advisory council a permanent feature of this office, or is it a transition kind of mechanism that will disappear next year once the office starts functioning? It's not clear from any of the information that I've been able to put my hands on on this matter, Mr. Minister and Mr. Chairman.

A couple of other questions. On the registry renewal services I'm just curious. Are these vehicle registries, or are there whole other classes of registries that are covered under this heading? I would like to know.

The expenditures certainly are up by close to a million-plus dollars. Would the minister have some explanation for that? We're talking about renewals. Is it because the registry rates have gone up? If so, by how much? By what percentage for each type of registry? Because I don't know whether we're talking about vehicle registries or some other kind of registries as well. So that's a question that springs to mind looking at program 5 in the budget documents.

Similarly for the minister, we have the land titles item also go up by close to a million dollars, which is about a 10 to 12 per cent increase over last year. Again, my questions are about: why this increase? How do we account for these cost increases? If the minister would provide some fairly focused information on that.

We also have registry services under program 3, and there is again some increase. Again, I'm not sure what these registry services entail. What kind of range of registries and services are we talking about here?

One other question and then I'll sit down so the minister has some time and other hon. members are able to ask questions. It has to do with the Residential Tenancies Act, that has been amended in this session earlier on, and the alternative dispute resolution mechanism that will kick in, I think, as soon as this new legislation comes into effect.

My questions are on: who is going to do this kind of mediation if mediation is required? Does the minister have in mind a number of mediators? I understand that these mediators might be travelling around the province, depending upon where the complaints are, where the disputes arise. Are these full-time positions, or are these going to be contracted out to mediators? Who is going to screen or hire them? That sort of thing. It's all new and raises questions about its implementation and the costs involved with respect to that. Which line item here in the budget will have the monies that may be needed for that purpose?

We have heard, I think, from the Edmonton Apartment Association. There is a reduction, I guess, in the budget for Alberta Registries. Is the budget being lowered? Does it have anything to do with the alternative dispute mechanism being introduced under the Residential Tenancies Act? We have heard from the Edmonton

Apartment Association that Service Alberta was getting many complaints of this nature when Calgary and Red Deer did their landlord and tenant boards. I'm not absolutely clear about it. You may have more information on it and may be able to shed some light on this.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I will take my seat and have the minister perhaps address some of the questions that I've raised. Thank you.

4:30

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to start right off the top, and I want to thank you very much for the compliment to our staff. The leadership that we have in executive council in our department has many, many years of service and serving Albertans. They know what their job is, and they go out and they do it very, very well. They also give great direction to the folks within our department that provide all of these services, and we're very, very fortunate to have the kinds of people in our department with the experience.

As a matter of fact, just within the last two weeks we had some staff meetings and recognitions, and it's amazing the numbers of people that we have in our department with 25, 30, and 35 years of service not only in various departments of government but, more importantly, in service to Albertans.

Mr. Magnus: You're no spring chicken yourself.

Mr. Coutts: I'm no spring chicken myself, but I don't have that much service.

Just to let you know what kind of experience we have, we have a person in land titles in Calgary that has had 42 years of service in land titles, and that kind of experience you just can't duplicate and you can't buy anywhere. That individual is just a very dedicated person and does the best that she possibly can for Albertans. Then we have another person in Edmonton who has 40 years of experience in land titles and duplicating the same kind of service here in Edmonton that the southern Albertans are getting with that kind of experience.

So thank you very, very much for the compliment. I know that those members will be reading *Hansard*, and they will appreciate your comments very, very much.

You talked about riddles. We're not good at riddles, but in Government Services we're great at solving problems and trying to solve problems. We're responsible for the Residential Tenancies Act. We do not have responsibility for seniors' housing. That goes under the Department of Seniors. What I would suggest: I'll certainly refer your questions about seniors' tenancy in seniors' affordable housing to the Department of Seniors, and we'll make sure that you get that information.

I think it's very important that you brought forward a concern about constituency offices and constituency administrators being able to access these tipsheets, being able to access the information so that they can pass it along to Albertans, to people that come into their offices. The folks that come into their offices looking for help should be able to receive those tipsheets just as effectively, and if you have your constituency administrative person phone us, we'll make sure that they can get all the kinds of tipsheets that they want and that they need. We think that that's a good service and an effective service for a constituency office to be providing for their constituents.

You had a number of comments about the utility advocate and

certainly the powers of the advocate. I'd like to mention just one thing. During your questions you talked about the deregulation of electricity. We don't deal with the actual deregulation of electricity. That is with the Department of Energy. But we do deal with how the consumers are affected by billing errors, et cetera, and with advocacy on behalf of consumers, small businesses, and farms. In that light, the consumer advocate office has assisted over 800 people in the last five and a half months in that job of dealing with the utility companies.

In terms of powers the Utilities Consumer Advocate meets with utility companies. It makes sure that utility companies understand, and the utility companies have come to the table in a spirit of co-operation to try and solve the problems that come forward to the utility advocate. We feel that it's a very valuable service on behalf of consumers out there to have that portal or that one-window approach to deal with the utility companies. I've got to thank the utility companies for also coming to the table in the spirit of co-operation to successfully get some of those irritants out of their way on their customer service side.

One of the things the advocate has also done is they've joined up with Credit Counselling Services of Alberta to encourage the utility companies – and this is part of his role, again, working with the utility companies – to make arrangement for arrears that have appeared on utility bills and where people have difficulty paying that. So for people that find themselves in financial difficulty, there's an orderly payment of debt program that is put out by Credit Counselling Services of Alberta. The utility advocate has successfully got the utility companies and that program together to help Albertans pay down their debt. It's a great opportunity for people that are having difficulty.

The advocate has also been involved in various hearings before the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, and that's done to ensure that the interests of consumers are best protected. That's an ongoing commitment, that's an ongoing responsibility of the advocate's job, and that takes a tremendous amount of dollars to do. It's an expensive process to go through with lawyers to make sure that you can have the proper case put forward on behalf of Albertans in terms of consumer protection.

The costs for this, again, come out of the rate base of the province, and it's through section 148 of the Electric Utilities Act that the \$4.3 million is made available through the Balancing Pool. Eighty per cent of that comes out of the Balancing Pool on electricity; 20 per cent comes from the three partners on the natural gas side. We picked the 80-20 split because that fairly represents what we think historically are the energy concerns from consumers. You know, if we find that that shifts, where consumers are having emphasis on gas problems rather than on electricity problems, then of course that ratio can be looked at. So that gives you the scope of what the utility advocate is supposed to be doing and is doing on behalf of consumers.

The advisory council that is being put in place for the Utilities Consumer Advocate. Yes, we soon identified that there needed to be a mechanism for ordinary, everyday Albertans – people that were on farms, people that had small businesses, and people that were just ordinary, main street Albertans, residents – to be part of the process, part of bringing consumer concerns forward to the advocate in addition to MLAs, in addition to utility companies as well.

So we embarked upon a process of how to set up the advisory council. It cost us an independent consultant, about \$60,000, to go out and get these folks. What I was looking for were ordinary, everyday Albertans: people with common sense, people that were looked upon in their community as the silent type, the quiet type but

who understood what their community needed and understood what people were experiencing in their communities, people that were not necessarily – and I'm going to say this – politically connected. These are ordinary folks. So the consultant went out there. We wanted a fair balance across the province right from the southeast to the northwest and from the southwest to the northeast.

4:40

We got 10 people that we interviewed through a process where he identified them and narrowed them down, and we interviewed them and put them on this advisory board. We see that council as being an important means of obtaining public input and promoting discussion on the various issues around consumers, what their views are and how they perceive utility companies, and to help the advocate get that common, ordinary input into his office.

It's interesting. We've got three farmers that are on the council: one from Grassy Lake, one from Boyle, and one from Brooks, Alberta. So there's good representation there from the farm community from across the province. From residents we've got somebody from Bluesky, Alberta. We've got one person from Calgary and one person from Claresholm. We've got big city and small towns involved in this, so we've got a nice balance here.

We talk about small businesses. We have an individual from Edmonton who has not only a small business but is also a full-time mom and runs her family home, so we get their kind of input. As well, the same thing from an individual in Fort McMurray who's a small businessperson. Then Grande Prairie and Red Deer are also represented.

So, you see, we have rural, we have small cities, and we have representation from big cities, and it covers from farms right up to residential and small businesses.

Their role is to meet every so often, about every other month, and provide the advocate with the information that he needs to help develop and get feedback from Main Street, Alberta. We think that that's a real good way, without any politics involved. They get paid their expenses only; they don't get paid an honorarium. So we think it's a very, very nice fit for the advocate's office.

You talked about registry renewal and what it involves. Well, the first part of that registry renewal was that our personal property registry and our land titles needed to be updated. That was the first year of a seven-year program. So personal property and land titles were the first ones that needed the most attention. We didn't see any increase in the fees this year, and we certainly don't see any increase next year in those two areas.

You asked: what do registries really encompass? Well, yes, it encompasses registration of your automobile as well as the driver's licence, and it also encompasses vital statistics and information that we have on marriages and births and deaths and all of that type of thing. Those systems have to be upgraded to stay in time with the trends of the day plus the additional pressures that we're having. The economy is growing so fast. People are buying more property. People are buying more cars. There are more people driving because they have to get to their place of work.

So what we're finding is that we need to have the system that will accommodate that growth but at the same time still protect people's personal information. That's going to happen over the seven years. Yes, it's difficult because there's new technology coming on stream all the time. To try and keep it within the original plan and not succumb to the new technology and the new things that are coming out, because they're a little bit more expensive each time you try to upgrade, and to stay with the original plan but still provide the kind of service that Albertans need and require is a real challenge for us.

You talked about land titles. This year because of the economy we did more transactions historically than we've ever done in the history of this province. We did over a million transactions in land titles. In other words, either mortgages had been renewed and needed identification of the validity of the property or actual exchanges of land. We did over a million transactions, and that's a 25 per cent increase over the last year.

Now, in order to get those transactions done in a timely manner, because Albertans have been used to about a three-day or a four-day turnaround, sometimes even a two-day turnaround – this summer we ended up with about an 18-day turnaround on one or two days, and the average was about a 14-day turnaround – we went to Treasury Board and worked very, very hard to get some extra money for overtime so that we could get those turnaround times down to an acceptable time period for the mortgage companies and for lawyers' offices, et cetera.

That overtime was put in by the excellent staff that we have in land titles. These folks worked their holiday time. They worked weekends. They worked evenings and afternoons when they were normally to be off. They took time away from their personal family time. They took time away from school programs and school concerts. They took time away from soccer practices when they could have been and should have been with their families. They traded time with other staff members to make sure that these transactions got done in a timely manner.

My hat goes off to those folks, the dedication that we have in our land titles to bring that time period down from 18 days to an acceptable seven or eight days. As a result of that overtime and a result of their dedication, we're now down to a three-day turnaround in Calgary and a two-day turnaround in Edmonton here. That's what the industry wants; that's what the industry expects.

So in order to keep that up, we're hiring another 16 people. They're being hired now, and they're being trained now. It takes about six months to train a person in land titles. They have to know the legislation. So the extra dollars that you were talking about, the extra million dollars, is going to go to those 16 FTEs so that we don't have that same kind of problem in the future.

Now, it's going to take me six months to train those folks, and that six-month period is going to extend into the summer. If we have a hot economy and things keep going the way they're going and land sales keep going the way they did last summer, we may creep up to another 10, 12 days this summer. I hope we don't, but our staff is committed to doing the overtime until the 16 members get on stream so that we can keep it down to a two-day or three-day turnaround.

In order to let the real estate industry know and the mortgage brokers know what the turnaround times are, on our web site we have the turnaround times for land titles. We hope that every day when these folks go to work, they take a look at that so that they can control their turnaround times. We're sure that with these 16 FTEs, in the future we can maintain that throughout the year.

The alternative dispute resolutions. We have created a director for residential tenancies and that role calls for the director to be someone that is from within the department, so we won't be hiring anyone new. The alternative dispute resolution that we have in mind is something that is voluntary. It's something that people can ask for, and the director would facilitate that. The whole idea is to make the process cheaper and faster for disputes that landlords and tenants might have and also something less intimidating than what the court would bring forward. So we see the alternative dispute mechanism as being a real benefit to Albertans.

Thank you.

4:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, I would appreciate a lot more time to debate or discuss the budget for Government Services. I'm not convinced, to start with, that our new driver's licence is going to be adequate. We can look at changing the printing and the photograph, the gradual diminishing type containing the driver's name and birth date, the 2-D bar code at the back, the laser marking, and the microprinting. You know, the state-of-the-art security features are certainly a good idea, but we've got to make sure that there's security in the registry offices. Whether there is or whether there isn't, we could debate that at length, but I certainly hope that I don't wake up some morning to read in a paper that there was yet another security breach at one of our privatized registry offices.

Earlier the minister informed the House in regard to a question about the Utilities Consumer Advocate and the furniture. Well, if the department is not paying for it, who is paying for the office furniture and the fixtures, and what are the terms of the lease for the Utilities Consumer Advocate? If the minister could answer that, I would be grateful.

Now, when we're looking at this budget and we're looking at this department, there is an awful increase in the number of service contracts and the total dollars. Going back to 2001, there was \$39 million in service contracts. In 2003 there was \$135 million. That's a \$96 million increase. What is it in this budget, and why are we going to all these service contracts? Who are they with? Are they tendered, or are they deals that a guy just gets? What's going on that we need to have all these service contracts? Certainly, the Auditor General has stated that there are some indiscretions to speak of in this department.

One of the recommendations is discussed on page 143 of the annual report of the Auditor General of Alberta for 2002-2003. There's "unsatisfactory progress," and this is in regard to the Alberta Corporate Service Centre. I believe that this was something that was started – and I could stand corrected – by Dr. West earlier. This was one of the experiments from Dr. West, this Alberta Corporate Service Centre.

The Auditor General states here that "the Centre has not made satisfactory progress in improving its performance measurement systems," that cost savings were not defined.

The methodology for the cost savings measure was not clearly defined and used in the determination of results. The Centre prepared a discussion paper that set out the definition of cost savings, and how to measure them. However, this document was not finalized, approved or communicated to the staff responsible for collecting the information. Thus, performance results initially provided to us did not always meet the definition of "cost savings" as outlined in the discussion paper. In addition, supporting documentation was not available for all savings.

Mr. Dunn goes on to say here that

the Centre did not have a central review process to ensure that performance information included in the draft 2002-2003 ministry annual report was consistent with the performance measure methodology and adequately supported.

So there are some reservations here. I'm sure that I'm going to be told that some of these service contracts are for the Alberta Corporate Service Centre, but what gives here? Why are we increasing the number of service contracts in this department? How are they being let and to whom? Now, I think we've got to be very, very careful with this. Money doesn't grow on trees.

Also, in regard to the SuperNet, the supersized SuperNet, how much has Government Services paid for its building to be hooked up to the SuperNet? Again, how much is Government Services going to pay to the SuperNet service provider, Axia, to maintain that

connection? That may not sound like a lot of money in a \$238 million budget, but it's significant.

Can the minister also tell us what the cost is of changing to the new, more secure driver's licensing system that we talked about and give a guarantee here this afternoon to all hon. members of the House that Albertans are safe from identity theft, particularly with the use of temporary licences?

Can we also get an answer in regard to implementing and sustaining the new Personal Information Protection Act? What is the expected cost of implementing and sustaining that act?

Mr. Chairman, what caused equipment and inventory purchases for registries renewal to be about \$750,000 more than the 2003-04 forecast? Again, the operating expense for registries renewal, looking at this, is going to rise by more than a million dollars. Is this increase on target for completing the registry renewal initiative over eight years? The Auditor General again had some comments on this matter on page 140. The Auditor General found that the registry renewal initiative project management plan was not complete and not approved, and to date, as we speak, I'm not aware that it has been rectified.

To the minister: what caused legal services expenses to increase from \$82,000 to \$133,000 last year, and why is \$88,000 more needed in the communications budget?

The Chair: I regret that we have to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. Your time is up.

Pursuant to Standing Order 58(4), which provides for not less than two hours of consideration for a department's proposed estimates, and after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Government Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, I must now put the question.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$238,685,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Government Services and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

5:00

Ms Graham: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Government Services: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$238,685,000.

That is the report.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head:

Private Bills Third Reading

Bill Pr. 1

St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw I'd like to move third reading of Bill Pr. 1, St. Mary's College Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 1 read a third time]

Bill Pr. 2

Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move third reading of Bill Pr. 2, Sisters of Charity of St. Louis of Medicine Hat Statutes Repeal Act.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 2 read a third time]

Bill Pr. 3

Living Faith Bible College Act

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move third reading of Bill Pr. 3, Living Faith Bible College Act.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 3 read a third time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we'll reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:05 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, March 31, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/03/31

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order. Would everyone please be seated. Let's get some order and decorum. Thank you.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Economic Development

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, as per our Standing Orders the first hour will be allocated between the minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member is able to participate in the debate.

The hon. Minister for Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and a very pleasant good evening to everybody. We are here to look over the business plan for 2004-2005.

Before I do that, I'd like to introduce some folks who have joined us in the gallery. Starting at stage left, I guess, is Mark Erdman, the communications director. [some applause] You can hold your applause; I know I would. Next to him is Anthony Lemphers, our financial executive; Rick Sloan, the ADM of the department; Derek Coke-Kerr, the managing director of Travel Alberta; and our newly minted ADM for tourism specific, Bob Scott. There he is. This is our team of Alberta Economic Development, so clearly we're doomed.

What I thought I'd do, Mr. Chairman, to open the discussion about this is talk about what our plans are and what our goals are, and hopefully it'll be of interest to somebody. If not, I'll just keep going.

Mr. Chairman, our role here as we see it as Economic Development is twofold, to grow and diversify. We do that in a number of different ways. By grow we mean our four existing industries, which of course are oil and gas, forestry, tourism, agriculture. [interjection] I was getting to that.

An Hon. Member: Entertainment.

Mr. Norris: Entertainment.

Those are our four big ones. We recognize that in Alberta we've been very blessed; they give us an incredible foundation from which to build. So one of our department's goals is strategic information and development. We don't take that very lightly. In fact, we take it very seriously because as we grow those four big industries, it allows us time to look at other ones.

The other part of our plan is to diversify the economy. We do that in a number of ways but primarily working with industry to look at new opportunities such as environmental services, aerospace, communications, telecommunications, bioproducts, et cetera. Like any other business, Mr. Chairman, we do this with a number of strategies. They're all outlined in our business plan, but I thought I'd touch on three of the more important strategies tonight.

Our first one is our international office program. Alberta is a very remarkable exporting province, Mr. Chairman, and to deal with those pressures, we have decided to have an international office program. Now, that program has been in place for some time, and

in the last year we opened a couple of new offices, specifically in Mexico City and London, England. The response to that from businesses has been great. They have told us that they do not need us to do their work for them but would like a business-to-business presence from one government to the other. So that's how we responded to it.

The final piece of our international offices, Mr. Chairman, will be an office in Washington, D.C. [some applause] Thank you for that. We're very happy about the international office in Washington for a number of reasons. Primarily, Alberta has been affected by some global occurrences which we have felt have not been dealt with on a level that we would have liked by our federal counterparts. As a result, in agriculture, specifically with the BSE crisis, where some 70 per cent of the cattle industry in Canada operates out of Alberta, we felt it important to have a voice there.

Also, Mr. Chairman, there are a number of major projects related to oil and gas that are coming through; two pipelines, to be specific. We felt it would be important for the Alberta government to have a presence in Washington with the decision-makers to talk about how remarkable the opportunity is not only for Alberta but for the people of Alberta and the companies who are capable of doing this job.

So that office, hopefully in conjunction with the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations, will be open within six months, and that should close out our international office program. That will bring our number to 10: four in China, one in Japan, one in Seoul, Korea, and again Mexico City, London, England, and Munich, Germany.

Another strategy we've been working on very hard, Mr. Chairman, is our rural development strategy, which is alluded to in this document but which has now been released by the Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development. Our department has worked very hard on that as we understand the importance of it, but I will leave that to the minister when she discusses it.

A third strategy we've been working on, Mr. Chairman, that will be released very closely – and it's referenced in this document – is our value-added strategy. The value-added strategy calls for Alberta companies and industries to work with the Alberta government to understand what the barriers are to bringing products up to their highest level and to developing to that level. It does not call for us to get into the business of business in any way, shape, or form, but it does call for us to identify that as a commodity-based economy as the price of commodities goes up and down, so does the economy. We want to get away from that and level it off with manufactured and value-added. So that's the strategy we're working on in that regard.

The final strategy I'd like to touch on, Mr. Chairman, is our tourism strategy. I don't think, quite honestly, we could have any more important strategy than that one. As you know, tourism is the fourth largest industry in Alberta, employing some 120,000 people, generating about \$5 billion in gross revenue, some \$700 million in taxes. What we've found is that we have an opportunity to grow this industry, that is not being dealt with appropriately.

So the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora along with the hon. Member for West Yellowhead, the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert, and some other hon. members who are not with us here tonight formed a committee to deal with that, and they've been working very hard to get tourism the recognition and the growth it needs. To the credit of our very highly astute Finance minister, she has concurred with our findings and has kindly given us more funding, for which we say a very, very big thank you. We believe that money will help grow this industry and will continue to diversify our economy.

Mr. Chairman, the underlying theory of our business plan rests

with allowing the Alberta government more ways to find revenue. We have all found ways to spend. We talk almost ad nauseam about the big spending that departments have done in response to the people of Alberta's requirements, but we don't believe in our department that we focus enough on the revenue generation side. So our business plan and our three core goals all deal with more revenue generation to help ease the burden on the future growth of the province.

So that's really what we do and why we do it, Mr. Chairman. The one kind of highlight that we have, as I mentioned before, is a new ADM in tourism – that gives us three ADMs – which is not to grow the department but to recognize that tourism has very specific needs and requirements, and we're very pleased that that happened.

I'll close now, Mr. Chairman, and open the floor to any discussion and any comments that hon. members opposite might have.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I'd like to thank all the staff that are here tonight. I think that you do a pretty give job given the minister that you have to work with. So it's nice to see you all here.

This is a ministry that has often been called the ministry of cookies and pork. We see a lot going out but not too many tangible results coming in. That's the focus that I'd like to talk about for the first little bit in these budget debates. That's the real benchmarking.

I heard a lot of comments from the minister about . . .

Mrs. McClellan: Go door-knocking, Debby.

Ms Carlson: I was door-knocking. If you'd like to come with me, I've got a great corner where you would fit right in. That would be good. I'd like to have the minister of agriculture out there.

What we really need to see in some of these areas is more than saying that we're going to work on value-added and that the response has been great. We need to see some tangible benchmarks in this department, particularly because I think it's an important department. I think that if you don't benchmark it properly, in the lean years in government it's one of the first ones to go. We've seen that a couple of times over the past 11 years that I've been here.

8:10

What I want the minister to be able to tell me – and we'll start with the value-added stuff first. We've been hearing a lot about what you're doing in a broad sense, but I want to know what that really means, and I want to know when we're going to see some tangible results that we can benchmark. Give us an example of a company that you're working with and what you expect the outcomes to be.

Mr. Chairman, as is my usual process here, I will ask a set of questions around an issue, get the minister to respond, and then ask more. And you weren't paying any attention.

Mr. Norris: I was. I was very enthralled by the criticism, and then I turned off when you said that you want us to do more, because I thought you were supporting what we were doing. I just thought we were going down the same road together.

Ms Carlson: No. It's the government that has the one-way railroad, Mr. Chairman. Those are not my . . .

The Deputy Chairman: Hon. member and hon. minister, if there are

responses that you may want to provide in writing that you could supply after reading the *Hansard*, that is also allowed. Okay?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I actually have questions that I was hoping to get some answers to, and I think the minister knows the answers to them.

So I'll just go back to the last little piece of this one, now that we have his undivided attention. It was on the value-added strategy. You talked a little bit about that in a kind of global sense, but I want some specifics. How are you going to benchmark the results? Can you give us an example of a business that you're working with and what the expected outcomes are and at what point you say that it's a success and at what point you withdraw whatever support you're providing so that they're on their own out there?

Mr. Norris: Let me start by apologizing, Mr. Chairman. I didn't know there was a question in the previous go-round. So you have all of my attention now, hon. member, for however long you're going to be here.

The value-added strategy that we referenced will look at working with industry, and I want to be very, very clear about this. It is not in any way, shape, or form about the Alberta government suggesting that we need to be in a particular business. It's identifying which commodities are being produced now. An example of that is in primary forest manufacturing, and the hon. minister of sustainable resources and I have talked at great length about this. We let out large blocks of forest and timber to be harvested, and there are certain expectations about that. After that, there is secondary manufacturing that takes place in places like Airdrie and Cochrane in the province of Alberta. Those are secondary manufacturers who are value adding to the existing product.

Mr. Cardinal: Petrochemical plants.

Mr. Norris: Thank you.

For the specific example that I'm using, what we are trying to do is say to the industry primary and secondary producers, "How can you talk better together; how can you do this all in Alberta?" recognizing that we have no desire to use a legislative hammer, nor would we. But we believe that there is enough primary production going on in the province in every industry that there has to be some coalition with government and industry to make this work.

The way we measure it, quite frankly, is when we see less commodities in a raw form going out and more manufactured goods. Petrochemicals are one of those, but I want to focus for a minute on agriculture because agriculture has been a remarkable success story in the question you're talking about. The hon. minister may want to correct me, but about five years ago the ratio of primary production to secondary in agriculture was about 70-30, 70 in primary, 30 in secondary manufacturing. It's now, if I'm not mistaken, about 60-40, whereby 60 per cent is primary and 40 is value added; things like wheat for strawboard – the hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks has a family member involved in that practice – looking at using grains for bioproducts, things of that nature. So our success will not be measured in how many people we tell what to do but in co-ordinating the efforts of the people who are already doing it.

The value-added strategy also has teeth to it. Again in the agriculture department, in the value-added centre in Leduc – I don't know if hon. members have had a chance to visit it, but I would encourage them to do so – remarkable things take place. The goal is to monitor and take products from the raw form into the converted form, and I might add that through that program we've had a number

of international award winners. One was a pea butter that understood the need for a nonallergenic peanut butter. They've now become a world-class pea butter. We have a samosa manufacturer who through the help of the agriculture department and the value-added centre has had a huge success. So there are success stories all throughout the province. We would like to measure more specifically to say: less commodity, more secondary manufacturing.

Ms Carlson: So just to get some more detail on that, do you facilitate meetings? Do you provide research and development support? If so, what percentage would the company put up in terms of what your centre puts up? How involved in the product development and marketing do you get?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm really thankful for the questions. I gather from the direction of them that the opposition party is very supportive of a value-added strategy.

I guess I have to back it up a bit. What we speak about in this particular document is that our strategy has only been through the government process and is now being released to the public. So to date the intervention or the involvement that you've been talking about would have been consultation with industry to see how to set the strategy up.

The strategy will be released publicly April 12, and at that point we'll have an opportunity to start liaising with our industry partners to understand if the document is fitting their needs. Again I would have to qualify that it is not an interventionist document but a way of looking to work together.

The perceived plan after that would be, yes, to facilitate roundtables with primary producers and secondary manufacturers. We don't have money to invest in businesses in any way, shape, or form. The value-added commodities would be done through the value-added centre in Leduc, which has a budget. I can't speak to it because it falls under the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, but we do work very closely with them in that regard.

Where major industries are concerned, generally where we show support and have done so is in the form of reports and feasibility studies that are generally partnered with industry 50-50. A classic example of that was one we just released about the opportunities in situ, talking about bitumen being converted into getting natural gas to help keep our petrochemical complex going. That is about the extent of the involvement we would have for dollars and cents.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce an individual from Two Hills. We were at a meeting with the weekly newspapers this evening and had the pleasure of talking with weekly newspaper owners. On behalf of our colleague and neighbour the Member for Vegreville-Viking I would be very pleased to introduce Sonny Rajoo, who is the owner and publisher of the Two Hills *Chronicle*. If I could ask Sonny to please stand and ask this Assembly to give him our traditional warm welcome.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Chairman, I also thank the House for the opportunity to introduce a constituent, an owner of the *Valley Times*, one of our weekly newspapers in our community. Rural members depend a great deal on those newspapers, and I am delighted that Isabell Fooks has joined us in the gallery tonight. She is also attending the Alberta Weekly Newspapers Association convention and had the opportunity tonight to meet with a number of our colleagues. Isabell, would you please rise and receive the very warm welcome of our House.

head:

Main Estimates 2004-05

Economic Development (continued)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to resume with my remarks. I definitely am very much a supporter of value added. It's in fact the reason I became a Liberal instead of a Conservative. I didn't think that Peter Lougheed was doing all that great a job. [interjections] He wasn't. He wasn't. We had primary industry in this province and not much else.

Mr. Mar: I know Peter Lougheed, and you're no Peter Lougheed.

Ms Carlson: Well, I never would aspire to be so, Mr. Minister of Health and Wellness. I'm just saying that I didn't like those strategies in the '70s.

Mr. Mar: Then you set your sights too low, I'm afraid.

Ms Carlson: Well, perhaps you would like to enter into this debate, Minister of Health and Wellness, in the fashion in which you're supposed to, which would be to rise to your feet.

Mr. Mason: I know Dan Quayle, and he's no Dan Quayle.

Ms Carlson: I think that's true too. I believe that he is no Dan Quayle.

8:20

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, according to our Standing Orders the first hour is allocated between the minister, which happens to be the Minister of Economic Development, and members of the opposition. Any other member who wishes to participate will be able to do so once that first hour elapses. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has the floor.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As I was saying, I very much support value-added industry and support in some fashion from government, not intervention, seldom funding in terms of a nest egg of money to attract businesses here, but certainly providing a framework for which they can grow both from a research and development perspective and a marketing perspective. So I would definitely support any and all initiatives that regard.

I want to talk now a little bit about attracting investment to Alberta, which the minister talked about and is on page 159 of the business plan. You talk about marketing Alberta as a "preferred location for new and expanded investment" and "increase the number of skilled workers" and "market Alberta as a destination for economic immigrants."

I like the idea of the new and expanded investment. I'm not even opposed to the kind of intervention we saw some 10 years ago with Al-Pac, where a lump sum of money was put up. At the time we did

criticize that move, but we have seen over the decade that those dollars have been returned tenfold or better into the province. So that turned out to be a very wise decision.

However, some of the other decisions that were made at that same time weren't as wise. [interjection] I have to say that it's so. It was if you take a look at MagCan or NovAtel or any of those. At any rate, I just hope that you have a transparent method of evaluating those that is also open to the public so that you aren't intervening or picking winners or losers but you're providing a framework to attract investment, and that I support.

I'm very interested to get more information about how you expect to attract an increased number of skilled workers. Certainly, in the discussions I've had with labour and the kinds of issues they have just within the Canadian market, it seems to me that one of the biggest stumbling blocks they have is the recognition of skills as being transferrable between provinces. So I would hope that that would be a part of this initiative that you're working on here. If it isn't, could you tell me why not and if you plan to work with other ministries to see that Alberta will recognize any skilled worker transferring in from any part of this country?

Mr. Norris: Well, I think that before I answer the hon. member's question, there's something that has to be clarified here, Mr. Chairman, for all members of the House. This value-added strategy speaks nothing about investing in businesses or picking winners and losers, and while I appreciate the support that the hon. member has for a value-added strategy, it's clearly not a panacea for economic growth. It's one of many tools that we use.

When the references to MagCan, NovAtel, Gainers, and others come, then I would also have to use that opportunity to say that 11 years ago this province was a remarkably different place. There were \$4 billion a year structural deficits, there was a \$25 billion accumulated debt, and only because of the courage of this government was that turned around. Now we find ourselves in a position of being accused by the opposition of not doing enough in the value-added sector.

I want to make it very clear that as the Minister of Economic Development and a member of this government never ever will money go into private businesses to grow them. I had my own business for some 11 years before I got into politics. I never asked the government for anything, nor do I expect did any of my colleagues. So if the member opposite or the other member for the NDs believes this is going to somehow get us to find money for businesses, I have to clarify that you're not there.

Where we want to deal with labour and labour issues is a very important point. Labour has become a big problem in Alberta for a specific reason. In the last 10 years we've led the country in growth at an average of 3 and a half to 4 per cent a year. Our unemployment rate sits – and I know the hon. minister of labour and human resources is here tonight – at about 4 and a half to 5 and a half per cent, which any economist knows is virtually zero unemployment, because of seasonably adjusted averages and those who choose not to work through retirement. You end up, then, with a position of these massive projects going ahead both in roadwork and oil sands and others and having a shortage of labour. So in order to address that, we have a program within our department that's shared by the Minister of Learning called the PNP program.

In specific, to answer your question about how we're addressing it, the PNP program allows Alberta businesses who cannot find adequate labour for what their job requirements are to go out to places in the world and find those. Now, that may be because of a skill set that doesn't exist in Alberta, or it may be because it's just an industry that's so white hot there are no employees there.

That program essentially speeds up immigration by allowing the businessperson to go over and identify somebody, give them a job, bring back the file to our department, which is sent to the federal government for a health check and a criminal check, which we fully support, and then the file is brought back to the department to be expedited. So it speeds up the process from two years to three months. The first year of that program was 400 test cases, oversubscribed. The second year was 400. We've renewed it again. So that's one way to address it.

The other way is that there has been a significant amount of money put into postsecondary education in the last four years for new spots, I think some 2,200 spots at NAIT and SAIT and some 4,200 – the Minister of Learning may correct me – at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary to deal with that.

The simple fact of the matter is that our economy is growing so much faster than our workforce that no matter what we do as a government – I know hon. members opposite would love us to do more – it's not going to catch up. So immigration is an answer to that puzzle. You're absolutely correct, hon. member.

Where we do run into problems is having people qualify with their particular trade or profession. That's a problem, and we are dealing with that. There's a multidisciplinary ministry including Learning, labour, ourselves, and one other that I can't recall to look at that specific question, but we have heard from Alberta businesses overwhelmingly that people who come here who claim to have skill sets had better be able to qualify to the very minimum Alberta levels. If they can't, that's not the fault of the government; it's the fault of the people who are training them in other countries. I know that you have cab drivers who say: I'm an engineer from a specific country; I can't get a job. Don't believe everything you hear, hon. member, because we make every effort to allow them to get their training certificates upgraded or pass to what level they need to be.

I don't know if there's a suggestion being made that we should just take things at face value, because I wouldn't do that, but I do agree with the hon. member that if there are hurdles that we are doing as a government, we have to eliminate them because immigration is the solution to our problem.

The other piece of the equation that I wanted to touch on is that federal immigration tells us that a good majority of new immigrants go to Vancouver, Toronto, or Montreal, and therein lies the heart of the problem. We have to figure out as a government how to get them and entice them here. I know that the rural development strategy of the hon. Member for Wainwright and the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake talks about that as well. It's a huge opportunity for rural Alberta as well as the province of Alberta.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for those answers, but I want to go back to this skilled worker issue within Canada. I'm hoping that your committee is taking a look at the transferability of skills. I'm talking about tradespeople, you know, electricians, mechanics, carpenters: those kinds of areas. Right now we're hearing that one of the biggest roadblocks to get skilled workers from other parts of Canada into Alberta is that there isn't a proper recognition of their trades here. So is that committee looking at that specifically, and if it is, how soon can we expect some of these barriers to come down so that we're essentially a borderless country?

Mr. Norris: Well, I appreciate the thrust of the question. No, the committee is not specifically looking at that, but I will get further information for you about that.

More important, though, is that while we recognize immigration,

we want to be able to have an economy that provides jobs for Albertans and allows them to get trained here and stay here as part of the solution to the problem. As a result, I know that the hon. Minister of Learning has worked very, very hard on increasing spaces to say: if you want to choose a trade in Alberta, that's a very noble thing to do, and you should do it here. I don't have the exact figures – we can get them to you – but I know from talking to him previously about this, because we share the labour file, that it's of utmost importance and that we have recognized that it's a twofold attack. Skilled labourers trained here need to stay here – it's a great economy that will keep them here – and immigration barriers have to be lowered.

I'm going to have to do some research, hon. member, as to how much is federal and how much is provincial.

8:30

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. I appreciate the level of detail in the answer.

Just one more on this particular issue. Do you recognize as a ministry that it is a problem in terms of recognition of transferability of trade skills interprovincially? Will you see that as something that you will at least look at in the next year?

Mr. Norris: The program that you're referring to falls within the Ministry of Learning, but I'm going to touch on it from a position of economic development. Yes, it is a problem. It is a problem when somebody in Saskatchewan has a harder time coming into Alberta and getting recognition than somebody coming from Uganda, for sake of example. That's something that we have to work on. After the next federal election, which I know the hon. member is very, very interested in, I'm hoping that we can get together with the federal government and look at removing interprovincial barriers as well as transborder barriers. You're exactly right about that.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That was the answer I was looking for.

Now I'd like to talk a little bit about the focus that the ministry has on film production and investment. As a result of the most recent trip to Los Angeles and the one previously to promote Alberta as a film destination, do you have any hard facts on how many new films would be slated for Alberta or the impact that those visits had? Also, how do you believe that the newly created Alberta Film Commission Advisory Council has boosted the film and television sector?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There were a number of questions there, so I'll attempt to answer them. If I don't get them all, I hope you'll indulge me.

At the outset, film production has been a real focus of this particular government, starting back with the now agriculture minister, who was then Community Development minister, following up now to myself and the hon. Community Development minister, who shares this file. We have identified the film industry as a real value-added winner in a number of different ways – knowledge-based, ties into tourism, showcases the province in a number of ways that other industries can't – and, as a result, have worked very hard on this.

I have taken three film-related missions, two to Los Angeles and

one to England. The ones to Los Angeles bore fruit in the form of three productions, two of them in the Calgary area and one in the Edmonton area. So the tangible of those I can get in a written form. There were three that came out of it.

One of them, as a matter of fact, which is a real personal highlight of the trip for me, said that they wanted to shoot the *Little House on the Prairie* remake, a six-hour made-for-television movie, thought Alberta might be appropriate, but didn't know if there were any big rolling valleys because they thought it was mountains and Drumheller. I asked if they had been in the Camrose area or if they'd been in the Oyen area or that eastern central part of Alberta. They hadn't scouted there. They did, and they found out that it was exactly what they were looking for, combined with the western towns that are already set up naturally. So we've had some really big successes there, and we will continue to work on that.

I don't recall what the next part of your question was.

Ms Carlson: It was about the Alberta Film Commission Advisory Council, what it's done for the local industry in television and film.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think you're referring to the advisory board that was set up about a month ago.

I have to preface this. Most, if not all, industries that we deal with, especially through our department, have an advisory board. There is an agriculture advisory board, an oil and gas advisory board, a forestry advisory board, et cetera. What those are set up for, quite frankly, is to liaise with industry and find out what their needs are and bring them back to government. The film industry did not have one of those, so we took it upon ourselves to get one. The film commission is housed in my department. The film fund development program is housed in Community Development.

The film commission commissioner, who was hired about a year and a half ago, came to us and said, "We have an awful lot of interest in this particular industry. The liaison to government doesn't seem to be getting through. Can we have a commission?" We said: yes, of course we can.

It was established some two months ago, I believe, give or take. It's made up of, I think, 21 industry players – I can get the exact number – and some department people. I know that the ADM who's sitting here tonight is a co-chair of that commission. They have only had two meetings that I know of to date.

So I think the answer to your question would be that they have outlined what their goals are, we have outlined what our goals are, and now we're going to move forward together. So tangibles I can't answer with any knowledge, but I do know that we're very hopeful that it brings the same skills and expertise as other committees that we have.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank the minister for his answers and comments so far.

I have some questions specifically with respect to the rail line to Fort McMurray that has been discussed in the last week or so. Today I asked the Minister of Finance during question period why the \$1.25 million contribution of the government to the feasibility study did not appear in the government's estimates, and she referred me to the hon. Minister of Economic Development. So I think that now is a good time to ask about that.

If it's not in the budget estimates of the department, Mr. Chairman, then my questions are where it will come from and why it was

not included in these estimates. That leads me to another question, and that is essentially: when did this project and the decision to contribute to the feasibility study enter into the government's calculations, being that it's not only not in the budget, apparently, but also not in any of the Economic Development plans or business plans of the ministry?

Mr. Norris: Well, we can do this one of two ways, Mr. Chairman. We can have a discussion about something that is not in the budget in trying to help the hon. member become educated about this problem, or I could honestly say that it's not referred to in this budget year, and as a result I don't feel the need to answer it.

If you want to have a discussion about what the plan is, I can talk about that, but it's not referenced in this . . .

Chair's Ruling Debate on Estimates

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister and hon. members, the estimates pertain to what is before us. However, the chair has normally given a fairly open latitude for you to stray a little bit outside that scope. So while you're not obligated to respond to it, should you wish to, it is okay. Should you wish to provide a response in writing, that's okay as well. Should you decide not to deal with matters that are not in the estimates, that is okay as well.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Debate Continued

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, you know, I would actually like to learn as much about this project as I can, so I would be happy to have the minister talk more broadly about the project, but I am particularly interested in the question that there is a government expenditure that's been announced by the Premier that doesn't appear to be in our budget. So I would submit that this is exactly the time that we should be asking about that question as well.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Well, all right. Fine. What we are involved in, to answer the hon. member's question, is a feasibility study. We do a number of them. I referenced them earlier to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. When industry comes to us with an idea or a concern or a problem and we believe it merits some government review because clearly we'll benefit from additional economic growth and new tax dollars, then we do it.

Where we're at now is a situation in northeastern Alberta with a vast amount of reserves that we want to access and a problem getting there because there's just so much activity. The road systems that were built some 20 years ago were not contemplating \$50 billion worth of activity, the town of Fort McMurray booming from 12,000 to 60,000, and on and on it goes with pressures. So the department is working with a private-sector group to examine the whole transportation piece in northeastern Alberta, including surface roads, bridges, rail, et cetera, to look at what a solution might be. The solution may very well be an upgraded rail line, it may be work done to highway 63 or 881, but this is all part and parcel of the scope of the project.

8:40

Where we're at right now, hon. member, is we have committed to absolutely nothing, no dollars whatsoever in the go-forward of this project. The only money that is on the table that I can knowledgeably speak about is the \$1.25 million that we've committed that's

going to be matched by the private sector. That money is going into the feasibility study. At that point, like all other studies, it will come back to the government of Alberta and the appropriate ministers for review. We have no obligation whatsoever financially or factually to do anything after that report is given back to us. Nor as the minister who is leading the committee will I commit to anything here in the House tonight or outside the House.

So the answer to your question is: we've put \$1.25 million into a study, which is nothing unusual. We've funded the Van Horne institute that operates out of the University of Calgary. We've worked with the petrochemical institute. We've worked with the forestry industry. We've worked with the tourism industry, the coal industry. And when they come to us and they say, "We've identified a problem; the government will be the beneficiary of this through additional economic activity and taxes," we sometimes lend our support financially and department-wise.

That's where we're at on this one right now, hon. member, and the government of Alberta categorically will never be in the train business or the rail business, I can guarantee you. That's not what this is looking at. This is looking at a comprehensive overall study of how to get northeastern Alberta where it needs to be with transportation links to access that vast resource that's up there.

Mr. Mason: I just want to indicate to the minister that, you know, I'm quite prepared to keep an open mind on this project. It seemed a little strange to me at first, but I'm certainly prepared to be convinced that it's economically viable.

My concern at this stage, Mr. Chairman, is more to do with the process that has been followed, because it does seem unusual. It seems like this has just come out of the blue. I noticed that the Premier had said in some of his comments that, you know, he's been thinking about this for 10 years. Nevertheless, it just seems to have very, very suddenly appeared on the government's agenda, and there's no trail of it if you look back into plans and budgets and so on.

So I guess I'm wondering if the government had not considered a preliminary feasibility study. Usually these are done before a full-scale feasibility study and are very much less expensive, probably a few tens of thousands of dollars. That stage seems to have been skipped, and we've gone right into a full-scale feasibility study. I'd like to know who's conducting the feasibility study and whether or not it's the private investors that are involved in the project and if the money is going to be given to them to conduct a feasibility study on their project. Then the next question is: once the feasibility study is done, I'd like to know when that might be expected and whether or not terms of reference for the feasibility study will be made public before the work is done.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Norris: Well, the fact of the matter is, hon. member, that this is not anything new. A brief bit of history. The hon. Member for Fort McMurray, the hon. Member from Vegreville-Viking, and myself met with a group of approximately 20 stakeholders. Department personnel were there to discuss the challenges that this group felt they faced as a consortium. It didn't represent a particular railway or trucking company or industry player. It was all members coming together to say: "Government of Alberta, we see a problem now, and we see a large one coming down the pike. With \$50 billion worth of projects and more being approved all the time, there's an issue that not only exists now, but we have to deal with it." This was a year ago that this started.

Our department lent support in the form of strategic information and co-ordination with other government departments, and our

assistant deputy minister who is with us tonight as well as the former deputy minister, who's now moved on to Innovation and Science, were involved with the project as well. The project has moved its way now, after a year, to the point where when the approach was made to us, we felt that there had been enough due diligence done and enough work done to get to the point where we could say: yes, this makes some sense to look further. So that's how we got to this point.

It's not unusual for our departments or mine specifically to get involved with industry on research and plans. There are budget allocations for that, some of them discretionary, some of them committed. But, for sake of example, an industry development branch, if we were to get a comment from the coal industry that they would like to look at the Grande Cache coal area and the feasibility therein – we don't have to do that now because, fortunately, Grande Cache coal is resurrected, and we're very, very grateful about that. But if it hadn't and we wanted to see what the opportunities were, then we would get involved in that as a study. This is no different.

You won't find a trail for any of these studies because throughout the budgeted year we have a general figure that we can draw on to say that if we have a budget that is required for a forestry survey, we'll find it. At the end of the year if that budget isn't used, the allocation is then returned. That's the way the process works. So you won't find a specific \$1.25 million allocation, but you will find a general and industry, and that's contained in the documents that we're discussing tonight.

Mr. Mason: Just another question on this item, Mr. Chairman, and then I'd like to go on to a second item. If the \$1.25 million for the feasibility study is not contained in this budget, will the minister then be making application to Treasury Board to fund that? If not, where will the money come from?

Mr. Norris: Well, again, I don't think the hon. member listened. We do have money in our budget existing for studies. If it goes outside the scope and the realm of what we have budgeted for, we may go to Treasury Board. That will come in due course, and then we'll all be able to discuss it at Public Accounts this time next year. The fact of the matter is – well, I presume you'll be here next year. I know we will. The answer is, again, that we do have money budgeted for this kind of research. If this falls in the scope of it, so be it. If not, we may go to Treasury Board.

Mr. Mason: I'd like to focus on the area of tourism. I did get an opportunity to ask the minister a question this morning in Public Accounts with respect to the tourism campaign that's currently underway. It's, I think, a Travel Alberta piece that has recently started to appear. The minister may want to respond to this in writing, but I would like to repeat some of the questions from Public Accounts.

I'd like to know the amount of this campaign and how much that relates to previous tourism advertising campaigns. I'd like to know if there's more than just the television component, whether it's a multimedia type of campaign, and what the objectives for the campaign are and whether or not they're going to be somehow measured. I'd like to know how the costs are shared. I understand from the minister's responses this morning that costs are shared with the private sector and that there may in fact as well be federal money as part of it. So I'd like a bit of a breakdown on that.

The other question, which I did raise this morning and that I'd like a little more detail on, is how the government makes decisions about engaging companies to provide this kind of advertising service. I understand from the minister that they do use – is it two companies?

– one for inside Alberta and one for outside, and they're separate. The minister is indicating yes, that I'm correct that there are two companies that they operate with. I recall that he said that it's a three-year rolling contract with a one-year sort of notice period, and again he's indicating that that's right.

I'd like to know a little bit more about that and whether or not other companies that are in the business have an opportunity to bid on this work and just what the process is with respect to that. Thank you.

8:50

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There are a number of questions there, so I'll try and address your overall concerns, and then if we don't get it, you can readdress the question to me. Does that sound reasonable? Okay.

The overall funding mechanism that we use for tourism is unique to Alberta, and it's called the STMC. The STMC was actually originally structured by the now Minister of Finance. The STMC is a model that the rest of Canada is now looking at with great envy.

What it does quite frankly is gets 14 members in the tourism business, whether they're operators of attractions or hotels or services, and puts them on a board, the same as the film advisory board we were referring to earlier. We then go back to them and say: as a government we have X number of dollars for you to spend; how would you spend it as industry experts? They come back with a plan that we have the final sign-off on.

The reason that we like the plan so much, hon. member, is because it engages the industry, it keeps us in touch with the people who are doing it day-to-day, and then we have the final say. So if there is a request for us to spend money on a \$10 million balloon campaign over McMahon Stadium, we can say that doesn't make a lot of sense to us.

The answer to your question about the two contracts is that Economic Development Edmonton and Calgary Economic Development have formed a corporation called Travel Alberta International, or TAI. TAI is responsible for the marketing of Alberta outside of Alberta. They get some \$6 million to do it. The contract was let – and I'm going to have to get exact numbers for you – some five years ago, I believe, and then renewed two years ago. The job that was being done was deemed to be excellent by industry players, i.e. the STMC, and our department. So that's fair because it involves the two major tourism players as well as the government.

The smaller contract you were referring to is called Travel Alberta In-Province. That's now held by a company called Parcom. I don't know how long they've had the contract for – and I'll get the exact details of it – but it is reviewed annually. It's a five-year contract, and I believe the review of that contract is coming up in one year.

So the answer to your question, hon. member, is that we will be reviewing that in one year. At that time, a decision will be made to (a) retain that company for the good work they've done or (b) go to tender.

When we go to tender, we'll have an RFP. The RFP will state: "The Alberta government has the desire to market Travel Alberta within Alberta, that we have about a \$3 million budget, that these are what our requirements are. Please put your company's best assets together, and we'll review that." Not unlike any other contracts that are tendered. As a result, we keep it open and transparent. The documents are not available, I don't believe, to the public, but as to the exact dates of them I can get you those without any problem. I will get you those if you desire to see them. I gather from the indication that I'm getting that one year is left on the existing Travel

Alberta In-Province, and Travel Alberta International is one year as well. They're concurrent contracts.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to do a follow-up question on tourism. The minister knows that I've long supported changing the way the hotel tax is collected and having the industry itself have more control over that tax. I've spoken before about perhaps having that revenue designated to a delegated authority organization that takes the politics out of some of the decision-making and puts it back in the hands of industry, if not the entire tax then some portion of it. Does the minister support that idea? Is he looking at it? Where do we think this is going to go?

Mr. Norris: That is a very, very good question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora chaired a committee with the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert and the hon. Member for West Yellowhead and others who are not here tonight, and they did come back to the conclusion that in order to get Alberta's marketing dollars to the level that would be competitive with our biggest competitors – British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec – we could look at using that as a method.

That proposal made its way through our caucus to Treasury Board. We were informed by Treasury Board, and rightly so, that it's a policy of the government not to dedicate taxes. So we were asked to come back with a different proposal, which we are doing now, that recognizes nondedication of taxes but some way to tie it to the amount raised by the hotel tax. So what you will have, I guess, is a benchmark generated by the hotel tax still going into general revenue and then money flowing to a department, perhaps mine or another, that is relative to that but not specifically dedicated.

The fear of dedicating taxes is that there are a number of different ways that could happen. The premiums on health care, for instance, now go to general revenue, et cetera. So we want the flexibility to be able to use that money in general revenue but recognize that the hotel tax has some role to play.

I thank the hon. member for her persistence on the question, because we will get to a solution. We do have a cross-ministry initiative working now. My deputy's dealing with the Deputy Minister of Finance, the Deputy Minister of Revenue, and the Deputy Minister of Community Development to look at that question. The answer will not come quickly because it's a very, very major policy shift, and as a result we need to examine all aspects of it.

So I think that I would ask the hon. member to stay tuned. The good news is that we did get another \$5 million this year and for the next three years out, bringing our total to close to \$25 million, that started at \$17 million three years ago. So we're getting there. But with regard to the hotel tax converting to a marketing levy, we're not there yet.

Ms Carlson: I'll comment on that. Twenty-five million is less than half of what B.C. is spending, so, you know, while it's an increase, it doesn't seem very substantive to me.

There are a couple of examples in this province of where taxes have been dedicated, and I point you toward the hunting and fishing licences, which go to the ACA and also the tire tax. So I don't see any difference between that and the hotel tax. It was a surcharge that was levied at that particular time, and I see no difference between the need for dedicated revenues there as there are from the other areas. I would encourage him to continue to work on that and all members of the Legislature to take a strong look at that.

I have another question. That's in terms of what Economic Development's plans are to support and enhance the north/south corridor. That includes, perhaps, a train.

Mr. Norris: Well, before I answer the hon. member's question, I'm going to revert to the tourism question for a minute. The hon. Member for West Yellowhead has brought forward a private member's motion. I believe it's Motion 506. Motion 506 talks about that, so we'll have a very healthy debate in the House about that because that's the way we do things in this particular government.

But the B.C. example is a bit spurless, and I'll tell you why. They do things differently in British Columbia. There is a general funding that comes to the tourism ministry, which I believe in British Columbia is called enterprise, competition, and development. It's not a tourism ministry. They also allow jurisdictions to have a separate tax, a hotel tax, which is regionalized into four areas: Whistler-Blackcomb, Vancouver, Vancouver Island, and the interior. So money is generated in those areas and flows back to the municipalities.

Talking to my counterpart there as to whether it's a good or a bad idea, he said that it's a way to raise money, but he wasn't in favour of it, having tried it, because the messaging that comes out of the province is very fragmented. The interior of British Columbia is tackling entirely different markets than the coast, as is Whistler, and you end up with three or four different messages, whereas if you've seen – and you alluded to our messaging earlier, hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. We have one message coming out about Travel Alberta. It's a remarkable opportunity and a great place to be, and we can control it the way we'd like to in partnership with industry, who take ads with us. So I think we're going to stick with our path and then, hopefully, get the funding equivalent up to where it needs to be.

Your question second to that was about the Edmonton/Calgary corridor, a remarkable story by any measure, the fastest growing economic region in North America, second only, I guess, to Luxembourg. So massive amounts of growth and success, massive amounts of challenges. What we continue to do through that KPMG study is try and identify with the cities of Edmonton and Calgary and Red Deer and our regional alliances what are the challenges. There are some fairly significant things coming out. Part of the way to tackle it is through regional economic alliances. In the capital area there's one called ACRA, which is the capital region. I know that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands and, I believe, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry are well aware of them because they both served on them, I think. Calgary has a similar economic development organization, and Red Deer belongs to CAEP, Central Alberta Economic Partnership. What these organizations do is tell the government on a regular basis what the growth challenges and the barriers are. So recognizing the massive amount of growth that's come out of that particular corridor, it does demand our attention, and we're giving it in that particular way.

9:00

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Is Economic Development hooked up to the SuperNet? If so, how much are you charged? How much do you pay your service provider, and who is it?

Mr. Norris: I'm not sure I heard the beginning part, but first may I inform the House, Mr. Chairman, of some remarkable developments tonight? The Edmonton Oilers have won 3-1. So now if they win

their next game and Nashville loses the next two, economic development in Edmonton is going to go through the roof because we'll have the playoffs, thank God.

Your question about the SuperNet. I didn't hear the first part, but I believe you must know that the SuperNet falls under the Ministry of Innovation and Science. I see the minister here; he's probably going to discuss it when he has his turn at bat. We don't have an economic involvement in it, if that's what you're referring to.

Ms Carlson: Are you hooked up to it? That was my question.

Mr. Norris: To the SuperNet? Well, every municipality in Alberta eventually will be.

I want to say one thing. The Member for Wainwright and the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, who brought forward the rural development strategy, understand the SuperNet's vast potential for rural development. We will be attached to the SuperNet just by default, being in a municipal building.

Ms Carlson: That gets to the heart of my question there. As a municipal building then, does it come within your budget to pay for the hookup or at least the service provider? If so, could you tell me where I'd find that in the budget book?

Mr. Norris: No, I can't answer the question, so I will attempt to get it. The IT for the government of Alberta flows in a number of different ways. A lot of it goes through the Minister of Government Services, and a lot of it goes through the Minister of Innovation and Science. So the answer to your question is yes, we have a budget for IT within our department to provide for things such as personal BlackBerry computers, phones, et cetera. I don't know who our service provider is. I can find out, but I suspect it probably runs through the Minister of Government Services. Anybody up there want to offer something? Is that roughly the right idea? They're all shaking their head, no. You're supposed to say yes. Okay.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, if you could just provide some detail, then, for us, divide out some of the IT spending, that would be helpful.

I think my last question for the evening is going to be a little bit on rural development. We've talked before about your plans to expand tourism into rural communities as a way of looking at helping economic development in those rural areas. We all know in this Assembly that they've suffered some impacts over the past decade, and while the minister and I differ on the impact of having taken regional offices out of rural areas, certainly I still say that there was some impact there. So in addition to the possible potential for value added on the tourism side, what else is your department doing to help revitalize rural Alberta?

The Deputy Chair: May I just advise everybody that the one hour has elapsed. If anybody else wishes to participate in the estimates, they are able to do so now.

The hon. minister.

Mr. Norris: Well, seeing that the hour has lapsed, Mr. Chairman, I'll keep my answer brief. Very simply, yes. The answer to your question is yes. We understand that the biggest problem with tourism in Alberta is the migration west. People come to Calgary to see the Stampede or other opportunities there – the Calgary Zoo, Heritage Park – then they go into the Rockies. They tend to go west.

The same thing with Edmonton. We want to make them go east to Bonnyville or Lac La Biche to see the mission or to see the Drumheller badlands or to see the remarkable Iron Horse Trail in the Bonnyville-St. Paul area.

The rural development strategy, that the members for Wainwright and Innisfail-Sylvan Lake co-chaired, does speak to that. Part of the new money that we have, hon. member, in answer to your question, is to look at rural development in a different way of combining tourism, and that will be in product development. That may be in some strategic help for them to get their product ready to be marketed. That may be as simple as Travel Alberta travelling out and saying: here's how you market your product; here's how you do a newspaper ad. All those things are part of our plan, and I think that to date Travel Alberta has done some – how many road shows would you suggest? Five? Five to date. They go as far north as High Level and Fort Chip and anywhere else in the province that requires it to help with that.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just thought of one more question, and it's with regard to tourism again. What has the impact of the Canadian dollar been on the tourism industry over the past year in terms of its relative relationship to the U.S. dollar?

Mr. Norris: Well, it would be very hard to quantify the American dollar. Suffice it to say that it has been a challenge; there's no doubt. That's why this industry to me is so particularly interesting. But we've also been faced with mad cow, SARS, a national airline that's in turmoil – a bankrupt national carrier doesn't help tourism; I can tell you that – and what you mentioned, hon. member. The American dollar is still advantageous to us, and we use it in our marketing to say, "Stay for three nights and pay for two," those kinds of things. It does go up and down, but it is still an advantage.

I don't know how to quantify that without taking out some of the other pieces, but I will give it some thought and get you a written answer.

Ms Carlson: Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the minister's answers to the questions on the issues that I've raised. I did want to take this opportunity, however, to make a brief statement with respect to the Fort McMurray rail project, which I continue to believe is a very curious development indeed.

First of all, I'd like to indicate that no mention is made in the three-year capital plan in Budget 2004 of a rail link to Fort McMurray or even a feasibility study. Further, there's no mention of the Fort McMurray rail link in the government's 20-year strategic plan, which was released two weeks ago. There hasn't even been a government news release put out with anything to do with a Fort McMurray rail link or a provincial contribution to a feasibility study. There's no mention of a Fort McMurray rail link in the three-year business plan for the Ministry of Economic Development or in the business plan of any other government ministry that I've been able to find. The contribution of \$1.25 million for the feasibility study is not included in the 2004-05 budget estimates for the Ministry of Economic Development.

I found the minister's answers to be a little bit contradictory on that point, that he may find some of the money within existing programs. So the question that remains in my mind is: was this

really anticipated in the development of the budget? If not, what's going to be cut in order to pay for it? There are no increases in the line items in the Economic Development budget estimates that would allow for a \$1.25 million contribution. By funding the feasibility study, something else will be cut, unless it is expensed as a supplementary requisition. Suddenly, Mr. Chairman, we're committed to a \$1.25 million feasibility study, and if statements by the government are to be believed, \$300 million may be committed towards this venture, which may include a rail link or perhaps a toll road to Fort McMurray; perhaps both, I guess. Meanwhile, out of nowhere there's this company with clear connections to the Tories, including Mr. Rod Love, the Premier's former chief of staff, as a consultant. It really raises a question of why we have this project suddenly on the front burner.

9:10

In addition, Mr. Chairman, it would seem that infrastructure investment, including feasibility studies, are generally not within the purview of the Economic Development ministry. Since we're talking about rail, this ought to be within the jurisdiction of the Minister of Transportation. So the question really arises: why is the Minister of Economic Development even handling the file? Even by the standards of this government all of this is rather strange and peculiar.

Another puzzling thing, Mr. Chairman. Normally when the government decides to undertake a major capital investment, a preliminary feasibility study is done prior to a full-blown feasibility study. A preliminary feasibility study is publicly tendered by the government and costs in the range of a hundred thousand dollars or so. The preliminary feasibility study for the proposed Meridian dam near Medicine Hat is a good example of this.

So why should it cost so much just to study rail and road links to Fort McMurray? We'd like to know what exactly is going to be produced for this considerable investment of public funds. Why wasn't this large expenditure of public funds tendered? Who is paying for Mr. Love's consulting services? Will any of the public funds directly or indirectly end up being paid in commission to Mr. Love or his consulting company?

These are all questions, Mr. Chairman, that over time will demand answers. Thank you.

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Chairman, I know that in the interest of time people wanted to wrap up, but there was so much of a drive-by smearing there that I am compelled to answer. I'm somewhat disappointed. I have to say that not 20 minutes ago the hon. member was suggesting that he enjoyed listening to the answers about the project and would keep an open mind, when clearly he came with nothing of the kind. So I could sit down and say nothing, but I'm not going to do that because there was so much damaging commentary in that that I'm going to address it. I'm going to address it for him to hear now, and I'm going to say that you've damaged the discussion and dialogue we had. From here on in probably I will just give written answers. So if that was the game plan, congratulations. You accomplished it.

Your comment is a number of different ones, so I'll start with: where does it fit in? I said earlier that our budget contains budgets for strategic initiatives throughout the year. We don't know throughout the year what's going to come up, so we have money budgeted for it. This particular project came to us in an interesting way, through private enterprise who wanted to look at us growing with it. It sped up faster than we thought because of the massive concerns about cost overruns, the fact that three new projects have signed up in the last three months, that some 14 billion dollars'

worth of new investment is now on the books. As a government we said that it is imprudent in every single way, shape, and form not to deal with the concerns of the industry: why are they worried about that?

So where does it fit in in the overall government plan? Well, I'll tell you. Here's our document. It's the value-added strategy *Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity*. I'll just highlight a few of the ways that it fits in with our plan that don't relate to the business plan that you are looking at, which is a very technical document.

Our strategic plan has now been approved and will be released I believe on the 21st of April. The first one of many things that it calls for is that the Alberta government look at ways to improve ability to educate.

So are you interested, or should I stop?

Mr. Mason: I am.

Mr. Norris: No. You know what? I'm not going to bother.

The Deputy Chair: Any further questions?

After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Economic Development for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense

\$57,509,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report the estimates of the Department of Economic Development and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Economic Development: operating expense, \$57,509,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:17 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, April 1, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/04/01

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We confidently ask for strength and encouragement in our service to others. We ask for wisdom to guide us in making good laws and good decisions for the present and the future of Alberta. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure today on behalf of my colleague from Lac La Biche-St. Paul to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly the Kikino Métis settlement council and Elders Committee. They are here today to observe the proceedings and to witness the introduction of Bill 30, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004, which will be introduced later by our Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake. I ask that they stand as their names are indicated. Seated in your gallery are Floyd Thompson, the chairman; Denise White, councillor; Randy Hardy, councillor; Henry White, elder; Reuben Pruden, elder; Elmer Erasmus, elder; Harry Hope, elder; Harrison Cardinal, elder; Tyrell Erasmus, youth; Leslie Erasmus, councillor. I'd ask that they all stand and receive the warm welcome of the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm really pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly this afternoon my favourite high-energy alderman for ward 6, Craig Burrows. Would the alderman please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you a former political opponent and now a solid political ally who is helping the area of south Calgary get much-needed infrastructure. He's also known on city council as Dr. No, a tight-fisted alderman on spending policies. He's the alderman for ward 12. Could I ask Ric McIver to stand and please receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to note a number of my friends and former colleagues here today, and I'm going to introduce one of them to you and through you to all members of this Assembly. He's the alderman for ward 11, which covers part of Calgary-Currie and immediately south of the ward that I used to represent. We worked on many issues together. He has one of Alberta's most popular radio talk shows, the Sunday morning gardening show on QR 77. He's our horticulture expert, resident green thumb guy on city council, and famous for his many environmental initiatives. May I ask Alderman Barry Erskine to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I have a second guest that I would also like to introduce here, also a friend and fellow elected official. He's no

stranger to this House, having served as an MLA here for a number of years. He's now on Edmonton's city council. He's also on the provincial secondary suite building regulations review committee with me. May I ask Ed Gibbons, councillor for ward 3, to stand and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly as well.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through you 40 members of the Girl Guides of Canada, Alberta council, and 4-H club who are participating in the Alberta Girls' Parliament. They are accompanied today by head adviser, Edie Jubenville, and leaders Sherry Gurjar, Claudette Vague, Bernadette O'Connor, and Vanessa Padoani. They are seated in the public gallery this afternoon, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly a pleasure and a privilege to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly students and parents and teachers from the Ardmore school from the Bonnyville-Cold Lake constituency. There are 33 students that are here today, and they are accompanied by their teachers, Mrs. Jackie Wakaruk, Mr. Alan Middleton, and parents Val Buckingham, Charlotte Brosseau, Carol Gillett, Tracey Hofer, Gloria Pura, Sonia MacDonald, Therese Scott, Darryl Waterfield, Cindy Wilson, Lise Langridge, and Sylvia Lavoie. I'd ask that my guests please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce today a graduate of Ardrossan high who is currently at the University of Alberta taking arts and thinking about moving into the political science area. She's also a vice-president of Students for a Stronger Alberta. I'd ask Julie Bohaychuk to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently it was my pleasure to visit and speak to a class of political science students at Augustana University College. Today those same students are with us to find out what really goes on in the Legislature and what really goes on in government. These 31 students are accompanied by Dr. Roger Epp, who is their instructor. Dr. Epp is also the academic dean at Augustana University College, soon to be the Augustana faculty of the University of Alberta. They're sitting in the public gallery, and I'd like to ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly the Hanley family, who reside in my constituency of Edmonton-Highlands. They are seated in the public gallery. Michael Hanley is here because he's concerned about the long waiting lists for surgery in our province, and he's brought with him his wife, Barbara Hanley,

and their three children, Miles, Marissa, and Aaron. I'm very pleased that it's spring break in Edmonton this week and the whole family is able to join him today. They're here to observe the proceedings. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a gentleman from the Grande Prairie-Smoky constituency who has served Albertans for a number of years, both in the Legislative Assembly and on numerous boards and in other municipal and regional authorities, and is currently the chair of the Peace regional health authority. I would ask Marvin Moore to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am really pleased today to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly members of the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta who are in Edmonton for two and a half days for their quarterly meeting. The council's mandate is to communicate with seniors and seniors service providers in Alberta and then advise government through recommendations to the Minister of Seniors on what they have heard. As chair I really appreciate their commitment to the seniors of Alberta.

Jim Acton, from Edmonton and area; Diane Caleffi, Calgary and area; Ellen Kemp, east-central region; Dennis King, southern region; Leonard Olson, northwest region; Evelyn Onofryszyn, west-central region; Janet Tomalty, northeast region; Dr. Sandra Hirst, Alberta's universities; Dr. David Belcher, Alberta Medical Association; and our very valuable staff we could not do so well without: Dianne Laird, our manager, and Jackie Katan, our administrative coordinator. Please receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: 1:40

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Coal Bed Methane

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Coal bed methane could be of huge value to Alberta, or it could be an environmental and social disaster. Farmers and ranchers are nervous about its impacts on land, air, and water. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. Given that over a thousand coal bed methane wells have already been drilled and that even as we speak many more are being drilled, how many wells is this government prepared to allow before proper coal bed methane regulations are in place?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, not only are appropriate regulations in place now, world-best regulations are in place now for the drilling of natural gas and the drilling of petroleum products and hydrocarbon products. The ability for us to work with a world leading regulator, a world's best regulator such as the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, has brought fabulous benefits to this province. With respect to discussions specifically of coal bed methane, or gas in coal, we're actually going to be in the process of consulting about this new type of product.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this new type of gas is found in the coal beds

throughout Alberta. Alberta is literally covered with coal, from Manyberries to Keg River and Paddle Prairie. Inside those coal beds our early experience indicates that we are not going to have the issues that we have seen in the United States.

For example, Mr. Speaker, in Powder River basin in Wyoming there was a tremendous discharge of water associated with the production of natural gas. That is not occurring in our production of mid-level coal bed methane. In fact, we have invited, as has the industry, many people who are going to see this unfold and grow so that there's total awareness, total information, and total transparency as Albertans share in the benefit of yet another great resource.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given the commitment to total transparency, will the minister then confirm here and now that committee members in this consulting process will have full access to all relevant records kept by the EUB on coal bed methane drilling and production in Alberta?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Finally, to the same minister: why is that same multistakeholder consultative committee prohibited from addressing the crucial issue of landowner compensation paid by the companies drilling these wells?

Mr. Smith: The member gets going so well on our last day here and then just kind of breaks down at the end. He knows full well that that's a commercial issue and is clearly covered in the rules that exist today. All he has to do is look at the process that's in place.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Emergency Preparedness

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Senate Committee on National Security and Defence released a report entitled National Emergencies: Canada's Fragile Front Lines. This report shed light on an emergency preparedness system in Alberta that, for all its strengths, is suffering from a lack of resources, a lack of support, and a lack of co-ordination. My questions are to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. What has the minister or his department done to address concerns from officials like Bob Black, director of the office of emergency preparedness for Edmonton, who claims that Emergency Management Alberta's policies are leading to, quote, poor co-ordination across the province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad the Leader of the Official Opposition brought up this issue, because the comments that were made by the particular individual are a year and a half late, premature in terms of what it was that was said, misinformed, and simply incorrect.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. How does the minister justify Emergency Management Alberta's policy of treating major cities

like Edmonton and Calgary the same as small hamlets for emergency and planning purposes?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it was my pleasure right here in the city of Edmonton in December, where the Deputy Prime Minister of Canada joined myself and the Minister of Infrastructure in opening a model for all of Canada. I want to in fact quote, if I could, the Deputy Prime Minister when she says – and I will table this – that this Alberta model is the first of its kind in Canada, and it's a model for every other province in Canada to follow, and it's right here in the city of Edmonton. I'm very proud of it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: why does this government provide funding for emergency services and preparation to small communities but none to cities, even though most Albertans live in cities?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the preamble was simply not true once again. In fact, in this past year \$1.8 million has gone to municipalities in terms of dealing with things to be able to plan for, respond to, and recover from. Just before the new year the American ambassador visited again the emergency operation centre that we host right here in the city of Edmonton, and his comment was: it is comforting to know that the province of Alberta is so far in advance in its good effort in emergency preparedness.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Appeals Commission

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In a memo dated January 6, 2003, from Mr. George Pheasey, chief appeals commissioner, to all hearing chairs and appeals commissioners regarding MLAs appearing before the Appeals Commission, there is this quote: "At two previous Hearing Chair meetings, concerns were raised regarding MLA's and/or Minister's appearing at hearings." My first question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. What are those concerns regarding MLAs or ministers appearing before the Appeals Commission?

Mr. Dunford: I think it was a letter from the chief appeals commissioner, if I heard the preamble right. If he's on a fishing trip, I guess that we'll see what the supplementaries bring.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. In this memo it states – and this is from George Pheasey, the chief appeals commissioner . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, we have no preambles. Get to the question.

Mr. MacDonald: "I will then advise our Minister with a request that he/she discuss the matter with the individual MLA." How can the minister be at arm's length from the Appeals Commission when this information is in this memo?

Mr. Dunford: I'm not at arm's length from the Appeals Commis-

sion. The Appeals Commission is part of our ministry. That was part of the reform that we went through, you know, in the last couple of years in terms of how workers' compensation would be administered in this province. The imperative was to move the Appeals Commission from WCB, so it found a home within Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: why was this issue of MLAs appearing or not appearing before the Appeals Commission not discussed publicly in the last two reviews of the WCB act that were conducted in this province?

Mr. Dunford: I've just heard a little aside from one of the chairs of the committees: it simply never came up.

If he is trying to infer something, I wish he would be direct and just come out and say. What is on your mind, hon. member? We'll try to deal with it. But, again, this is the same hon. member that we've all gotten to know and some of us even love, I suppose, but with innuendo, inferences always around the little issue instead of dealing with it directly. You know, I don't know how many times I've heard from the opposition about coming clean. Well, maybe it's time that he came clean.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Rail Link to Fort McMurray

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A \$1.25 million contribution by the ministry of economic development and trade to a company fronted by the Premier's former chief of staff isn't in the ministry budget. It's not in the government three-year business plan or in the 20-year strategic plan. Earlier today I wrote to the Auditor General about the apparent failure of the government to follow its own tendering rules. My question is to the Minister of Finance. As the minister responsible for the province's finances does she support the request for an investigation by the Auditor General prior to releasing the government's \$1.25 million contribution to this new company?

1:50

Mrs. Nelson: First of all, Mr. Speaker, let's get the record straight. In the estimates that were up before the House last night for the Department of Economic Development, the minister clearly said that there's a category that allows them to go into feasibility studies under business development investment, under, I think, vote 4 in the estimates of that department. Was this a line item identified in there? No. They never are because these opportunities come up throughout the year and they're funded through that category.

Insofar as the Auditor General's review he will be beginning the audit process probably in the next few days of all departments, of all ministries of this government, and he will validate the appropriateness of the expenditures that have taken place within those departments.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister said last night that he may have to come to Treasury Board to find all of the money, will the minister tell the House whether or not rules that require public tendering of government contracts were followed in the \$1.25 million being provided to the Athabasca Oil Sands Transportation Corp. and its front man, Mr. Love?

Thank you.

Mr. Norris: With all due respect to the hon. member opposite, if he has a question for the Ministry of Economic Development, he could probably look at me and ask me, and I'll tell him, and I'll give you the exact answer, Mr. Speaker.

In our department there are two methods of operating these kinds of opportunities that we're experiencing right now. One of them is if the department itself chooses to examine an opportunity for Albertans and Alberta companies. Then we would look for a company to work with us, and we would do a request for proposal.

The other opportunity, Mr. Speaker, is when a company comes to us and says: we believe that this is in the best interests of Albertans to create jobs, new revenue, new taxes. In that case, we have what's called a granting mechanism, which falls under our industry development department.

The hon. member asked last night, and he's asking again today

...

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Practices

The Speaker: We're going to go on to the third question. As I understand in reading the *Hansard* from last night, there are two hours available for each of the estimates. Two hours were not even spent on this department last night. We're not going to use the time of question period to go back to another department. I also understand that these estimates were passed.

The hon. member.

Rail Link to Fort McMurray (continued)

Mr. Mason: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. Will the Finance minister put a stop-payment on her colleague's \$1.25 million cheque until proper tendering procedures are followed? If not, why not?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, for the third time the Minister of Economic Development has gone through the process of evaluation that they use within their department to determine whether they get involved in an assessment process that is not unusual. If the hon. member would like him to repeat that, I would ask the Minister of Economic Development to please rise and go through the process slowly so the hon. member opposite can get it.

The Speaker: No. You'll need the permission of the chair.

The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Cold Lake Fish Fry

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The infamous Cold Lake fish fries are known throughout Alberta and across Canada as a northeastern Alberta delicacy and a signature trademark of the city of Cold Lake. So it is with great concern that I question the future of the annual Cold Lake Chamber of Commerce fish fry. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Why are the organizers of this annual fundraising event being told that they cannot hold a fish fry this year?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, I know that this good MLA is not on a fishing trip. In fact, we are not preventing the fish fry from happening this summer. We're only trying to find how we're going to approve it, and you can be sure, hon. member, that you will get the approval.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly appreciate the

response that I got from the minister, but I do have one last question for him. Given that the fish consumed is purchased from local commercial fishermen, can the minister assure me that as he reviews these regulations common sense will prevail so that not only this fish fry but other fish fries will not be jeopardized in the province?

Mr. Cardinal: Well, Mr. Speaker, you know, in this House, in this government we do operate with a lot of common sense.

Now, in this particular case it also involves federal legislation, so it is complicated, but we are within the process.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, are you finished?

Mr. Ducharme: Yes, sir.

Highway 3

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, in consultation with the municipality of Coleman Alberta Transportation endorsed a south route for highway 3 from the B.C. border to the Frank slide all the way back in 1977. Sometime in 2003, however, this government decided to conduct another functional planning study on highway 3 to determine whether a northern or a central route would be more suitable. As it turns out, the study has suddenly recommended the consideration of a very controversial northern route. To the Minister of Transportation: given that the south route has been gazetted since 1977, why has this ministry suddenly decided to revisit this decision?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, no decisions have been made on any changes in any corridor. There were various presentations from elected officials in that area in terms of safety, efficiencies, and as a result of their approaches to their MLA and to our department we are studying some of their proposals at least.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister: why were area residents not informed of this study until an open house in January of 2004, which was so poorly advertised that few residents even knew that alternate routes were being considered?

Mr. Stelmach: I'm kind of perplexed here, Mr. Speaker, because there was not only an open house, but through the good help of the local MLA there was a large gathering at a chamber of commerce meeting, which was a headline for that week in the local paper, also discussions ongoing amongst elected officials and residents, and certainly a number of presentations made to the local MLA.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister: given that this government has purchased much of the land for the south route and area residents have purchased land and developed homes where the north route has been proposed, why has this government suddenly changed its mind?

Mr. Stelmach: Again, Mr. Speaker, no decisions have been made. Perhaps the hon. member does realize that the province at times buys land in some situations as much as 30 years ahead of its time. One of the examples of that is all of the land we purchased for the two ring roads around Edmonton and Calgary, and that was the very visionary government of the day under Premier Lougheed.

Reforestation

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's forests and forest companies are important to the provincial economy. In Whitecourt-St. Anne Alberta Newsprint, West Fraser, Millar Western,

Weyerhaeuser, and hundreds of contractors are means of employment and investment. These same forests and the forest companies are being significantly impacted by a number of natural factors, such as wildfires. When wildfires burn through an area, they can have a devastating effect on existing forests as well as areas that were recently reforested by companies. Can the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development advise the House what funds from the department's budget are allocated to reforesting these areas?

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, that is a very important question. Reforestation is and will . . .

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Practices

The Speaker: Hon. minister, it seems to me that we've already approved the minister's budget earlier this week. Is this not correct?

Mr. Cardinal: Yes, we have.

The Speaker: Time was spent on determining what was in the minister's budget, and the Assembly has approved it?

Mr. Cardinal: It's approved, yes.

The Speaker: And all members can participate? And this is question period?

So let's go on to the second one.

Mr. VanderBurg: Forget it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

2:00 Inspection of Long-term Care Facilities

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the ways government can ensure high-quality, safe care for our seniors is to regularly inspect long-term care facilities. The state of Massachusetts takes this seriously, with unannounced inspections of all facilities done by a professional team of nurses, social workers, and dietitians. Inspections can take up to a week. All aspects are inspected, measured, and evaluated, and compliance must be met to have the operating licence renewed. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. When can Alberta seniors expect to have an independent body of professionals conducting thorough, surprise inspections of long-term care facilities?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, it surprises me that the hon. member would bring an example from the state of Massachusetts and suggest that we bring it here. Maybe we're finally getting through to her with respect to trying to bring in ideas from other jurisdictions.

Mr. Speaker, we do have a facility review committee that does review facilities on a rotational basis. They enter facilities unannounced, and reports are provided. The work is capably done by individuals within the department, and the people that are appointed to this particular committee, I can assure you, do very good work.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. It's government requirement, Mr. Minister.

When will Albertans be able to access published inspection reports on these long-term care facilities, as the Americans already can?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, again I'm surprised that the hon. member would bring forward an American example to benchmark Alberta to.

When complaints are made, the review committee goes in. The review committee also goes in on an unannounced basis. Corrections are made with the facility operators. It's done with the co-operation of regional health authorities as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. There's nothing in place here that's the same.

Given that Massachusetts reviews every three months the prescription drugs that each long-term care resident is taking with the intent to reduce the use of unnecessary medication, when can Alberta seniors expect regular review of their drugs?

Mr. Mar: Actually, Mr. Speaker, I think this is quite a good suggestion. If the hon. member wants to bring forward the regulations or the procedure by which such drugs are reviewed for seniors, I'd be more than interested in seeing it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ground Ambulance Services

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some of my constituents in rural Alberta are expressing concerns about the announced program of transferring ground ambulance governance and funding from municipalities to regional health authorities. My first question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. How will this transaction affect the delivery of ambulance services to people who live on outlying farms and in rural communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Of course, in Budget 2004 \$13 million was announced for the ministry of health for ambulance service delivery; next year, \$55 million.

Let me say this, Mr. Speaker. In many municipalities across Alberta the system is working excellently just the way it is right now. We want to build on that excellence in this way: provide money to municipalities through regional health authorities so that, in fact, it will give municipalities greater breathing room and, at the same time, the excellent ambulance service that they have been enjoying. I see this as an enhancement to an already very good ambulance service.

Mr. Jacobs: To the same minister: given that many rural services are fire/ambulance emergency oriented, how will this program change affect municipal delivery and administration?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, obviously, we're looking for a seamless approach. Once again, if the system is working well and it's not broken, I see this additional money going into helping RHAs. I see a contract from an RHA going to a municipality if the system is working well and it's efficient today. If there's a way to build on that efficiency, certainly we want to do that.

I do know that within Alberta, rural and urban, there are very good systems in place. This money, I know, is welcomed by municipal leaders in terms of helping them with some of the pressures they're facing within this province.

Mr. Jacobs: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: will there be rural

grassroots involvement and representation on the implementation committee?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That type of consultation is so critically important. I'm going to ask the Minister of Health to supplement specifically on this point.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is yes. We, of course, understand the need to deal with regional health authorities and their representatives as well as the municipalities involved as we begin this transfer. Exactly how the transfer and implementation will take place has not yet been fully determined, but I can advise the hon. member in this House that beginning on April 6 there will be representatives of regional health authorities and municipalities working together to identify some of the opportunities and some of the challenges involved in this transfer.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Kingsway General Insurance Inc.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Finance: given that Kingsway General Insurance has temporarily discontinued writing new business in the portion of the province north of latitude 55 effective January 1, 2004, has Kingsway General alerted the minister that they will now resume writing insurance policies in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member opposite knows, we've been in a legal situation with this particular company, so I'm reluctant to make comment on their operations.

Mr. MacDonald: Given that this has nothing to do with any legal situation, to the same minister: what effect does Kingsway General's action of failing to write new policies for consumers affect the auto consumers in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray who are trying to insure a vehicle, whether it's for business or for pleasure?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, I'm reluctant to make comment on the relationship with this as it has been before the courts.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that on Tuesday in this House the minister stated that the insurance industry is "looking forward to the new structure," why isn't Kingsway General Insurance on board with your reforms? Why are they walking away from part of this market?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, clearly, 90 per cent or 97 per cent of the industry, in fact, are looking forward to the new structure. They're anxious to see a new go-forward plan come out of all of the deliberations and the consultations that have taken place over the last year. This has been a very difficult file for everyone concerned, and they'd like to see an end to it and a new beginning start. With the leadership of the Member for Medicine Hat at the helm of the implementation team that's exactly what is coming forward. We're very close to having the new system in place, and we'll be operational this summer. I have explained that to the hon. member opposite a number of times. The industry is looking forward to a new structure and an end to the controversy that we've had this last year.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Oil Sands Royalties

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hundreds of millions and potentially billions of dollars in provincial revenues hang in the balance because of a dispute between Suncor and the government over whether their proposed Fire Bag oil sands project or venture is a separate project or an extension of their existing operation. Oil sands projects already receive excessively generous royalty holidays on their capital costs, allowing them to pay few if any royalties for many years after the project construction. My question is to the Minister of Finance. Why would the government design a royalty holiday regime with so many loopholes in it that Suncor can take the position that their Fire Bag project is simply an extension of their existing operation?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, it would only come from that side when someone would criticize \$50 billion of capital investment in this province, attracting the largest migration of people to a province in the history of this entire country.

Particular to the details of this situation I'll ask the Minister of Energy to respond.

2:10

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, the member's improper, inaccurate preamble that it's an excessively generous royalty structure – it is not. It is a fair and equitable royalty structure that, as the Minister of Finance has appropriately stated, has not only attracted the investment, but two things happen with a growing economy: one, investment pours in and, secondly, people go to work. In fact, there are over 470,000 new jobs since the Member for Calgary-Elbow became Premier Ralph Klein, or however I'm supposed to say that. Investment, has doubled. Retail sales have doubled.

With respect to the specific issue of the oil sands royalty and our discussions with the company those discussions are ongoing. They are an interpretation of the transition agreement and the interpretation of the oil sands royalty regulation. But I must emphasize that this government, this leader, and certainly this minister will take a very, very hard stand to protect and further the royalty interests of Albertans, as they own this great resource.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Finance again: how many billions of dollars could be lost to the public purse in forgone royalties should Suncor and other companies succeed in taking advantage of an obvious loophole in the government's royalty regime? The Premier yesterday acknowledged that there's a loophole there.

The Speaker: Well, there are about four speculations in that question. If the minister can find an answer to it, proceed. If not, we're going on to the third one.

Mrs. Nelson: Go on to the next one.

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what steps is the government taking to ensure that Albertans don't lose

\$875 million in royalties, a figure quoted by the Premier yesterday, as a result of these loopholes which seemingly lie at the base of this dispute in the first place?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, a number of years back the government entered into a new royalty regime with the oil sands players, and that was to bring investment to this province. It clearly has worked. Over \$50 billion of investment has come into this province to enhance and develop the oil sands, something we call the jewel of the north. It is the only place that we have such a situation. Quite frankly, only the members in the NDP caucus could be against this kind of development. The one thing I want to say – let's be very clear – is that this has been the jewel of this province. It is a good part of our future success.

I'm going to ask the Minister of Energy again to supplement the answer, please.

Mr. Smith: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I will be brief. The question of \$875 million is but one number. The exact amount of this is tied into a number of different factors: one, the continuing change in the value of the U.S. dollar; two, the disruption of heavy oil from Venezuela, that creates a marginal spread between light oil and heavy oil; three, the appropriate interpretation of the transition agreement. These numbers can change.

We are in material discussions with this company, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue to hold the line of protecting Alberta's interests in royalty calculations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Acupuncture Regulations

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In Quebec a person was discovered who practised illegally as an acupuncturist for 20 years and failed to use sterilized needles, resulting in 1,100 people now having to be called in for tests for HIV and hepatitis. So my question today is to the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that acupuncture has become a very popular alternative treatment in Alberta, what assurances can he give Albertans that the same unsafe practices are not happening here?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In our acupuncture regulations there is a requirement that acupuncturists only use presterilized, disposable needles that must be discarded immediately. If a person has a concern that an acupuncturist is not following this practice, they should contact the registrar for acupuncturists. I've been advised by the office of the registrar for acupuncturists that a letter will be sent or perhaps has been sent to all registered acupuncturists reminding members about the requirement to use only presterilized, disposable needles.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you. My last supplemental question is to the same minister. How are acupuncturists currently regulated in Alberta?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, acupuncturists have been registered in this province since 1988. In 1999 the Health Professions Act included acupuncturists as a regulated health profession, and in November 2003 we approved the regulation of traditional Chinese medicine

under the same act. Accordingly, in the future acupuncturists and doctors of traditional Chinese medicine will both be regulated under the Health Professions Act.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Group Homes

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There have been complaints with respect to the work being done by at least one agency that contracts with the Department of Children's Services to operate group homes. My question is to the Minister of Children's Services. Are contracting agencies required to perform criminal checks before placing new employees in group homes?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, we are having a residential review of all of our group homes, all of our group home practices, and all of the circumstances surrounding those facilities. We also have had reviews through the Social Care Facilities Review Committee.

In response directly to the member opposite's question it is my understanding that those record checks are done.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: are group home employees allowed to vacation with the children in their charge?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of any circumstance in which that permission has been given. However, I would be very pleased to be enlightened by the member, and we would check into the circumstances that were involved.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister: given that one group home was described as, and I quote, a pigsty, who is responsible for ensuring that group homes meet sanitation standards?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are certainly licensing requirements, and there are inspections that are done either at the request of the minister or from any directive through the director of child welfare in the region. The Social Care Facilities Review Committee will conduct an inspection. We will also provide staff from the department to inspect homes. I am disturbed indeed to hear the allegation that a group home was found to be a pigsty, and I look forward to getting the information so that we can follow up.

Mr. Speaker, for the most part, from the homes that I have visited and the staff contacts I have made, I am very satisfied that the standards are kept, but I am appreciative and will be appreciative of the hon. member's providing me the particulars so we can follow up on this one.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, to be followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Agriculture Financial Services Corporation

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Interest rates are currently at an all-time low. However, many young farmers are concerned that the rates that they're paying to the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation for farm loans are significantly higher than current market rates. To the Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development: could the minister tell me exactly how current AFSC rates do compare to today's market rates?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the interest rates depend on the particular program that is offered. Ag Financial Services offers a number of different loan programs to both producers and processors.

I will give an example on the beginning farmer program. The interest rate is based on Ag Financial Services cost of borrowing plus 1 and a half per cent. For example, Mr. Speaker, if the loan is for a five-year term, the interest rate is 5 per cent. However, an applicant may qualify for an incentive on the first \$300,000, and then the cost of borrowing is 3 and a half per cent. Now, if it is on a long-term loan, the interest rate is 6.59 per cent.

2:20

There is a reason the producers, particularly beginning farmers, choose Ag Financial Services rather than more traditional forms of lending. One is the stability of the interest rates; two, the financial consulting and support that they get from Ag Financial Services. They can make lump-sum payments without any penalty, Mr. Speaker. They have business management advice for their clients, and it is well documented that the success rate in the beginning farmer program in particular is very, very high and the loss rate is very low.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: how often does AFSC and the beginning farmer loan program review and adjust their rates?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, at one time Ag Financial Services reviewed their rates twice a year. Now they review them on a weekly basis to ensure that they're current and timely.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Future Energy Demands

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question today is for the Minister of Energy. According to the Canadian National Energy Board demand for energy will grow at more than twice the rate of population growth in Canada over the next 20 years. Population will rise 13 and a half per cent; energy demand will rise 34 per cent. My question: is Alberta capable of meeting future energy demands?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I am always reluctant to believe any statistic or number that comes out of Ottawa, and I am always a little concerned about an organization called the National Energy Board. But knowing that that organization now has its head office in Calgary and is very well staffed, I've changed my opinion about the National Energy Board and welcome their forecast.

They talk of an energy component, and I think one of the most difficult times that we have right now is predicting the future of this great industry. What we've seen today, Mr. Speaker, was an announcement by Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, British Columbia that electricity prices are going up. These four are all hydro-power producing jurisdictions. So, in fact, what we've seen over the last three years – because we're the fastest growing economic jurisdiction in North America, we are the predictor of the future. If people want to know what's going to happen, they look to Alberta because that's the speed ahead of the curve that this province is.

With respect to other forms of energy and energy consumption,

Mr. Speaker, one has only to look at natural gas and the doubling of imports to the United States, the continual growth across Canada. We continue to grow in population, and as economic growth occurs, so will the demand for energy. Natural gas will continue to grow. Simply because of the question asked earlier on coal bed methane, it's estimated that there might be as much as 500 trillion cubic feet. That, basically, is 12-fold our present reserves that could be present in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, we've talked about oil sands at length at this table, and I think it would be a good thought for everybody to leave here on a two-week break thinking how blessed we are in this province for that wonderful resource.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Which leads into the next question: what percentage of this anticipated energy demand will be met by oil sands production?

Mr. Smith: That's an extremely important question, Mr. Speaker, and I don't know if I'll be able to supply all the answers in this short time.

The Speaker: Well, you will because what you're doing is speculating here right now. It has nothing to do with government policy, so go on to the third one, please.

Mr. McClelland: All right then. The third question is: will the royalties and the economic rent that Alberta gets from the oil sands be on par with the economic rent that Venezuela gets from its oil sands?

Mr. Smith: We only send into the rest of Canada about 200,000 barrels a day of oil. So this thought that's been around since the bleak days of the Liberal national energy program, that said, "Turn the taps off" – well, Mr. Speaker, it doesn't matter. You can't turn the taps off because, in fact, much of what's being purchased in eastern Canada is purchased offshore, from Venezuela, from Mexico, from the North Sea. So, in fact, Alberta is an offset to energy self-sufficiency.

That's why we have the Institute of Sustainable Energy, Environment and the Economy at the University of Calgary. That's why we have offered the federal government all the resources at our disposal to help make that notoriously inept body called NRCan a much better policy-making body.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, followed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Forest Sustainability

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Sustainable Resources: given that wildfires have devastated millions of acres of precious forested lands, can the minister advise the House how we can ensure the forest's sustainability in these burnt areas?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Of course, that is a very important area, and the member, I think, was going to address that in his question earlier. It is very important because, you know, in the last five years or so we've spent over \$200 million on forest fires. A lot of those fires, of course, took place in areas where private companies

had reforested already. We are developing some policies right now – they've gone through the process actually – and we'll be seeking additional dollars from this government in the future to ensure that we do continue the reforestation program.

Mr. VanderBurg: Given that the planting season is just around the corner, when will the minister and his department meet with my companies to advise them of the plan for this season?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Yeah, Mr. Speaker. We are available to tour all these facilities in Alberta. There are a lot of facilities. It's a very, very important industry. It's part of our economic diversification plan in Alberta. Thousands of people are employed in the industry.

Dr. Taylor: How many?

Mr. Cardinal: Thousands of people. Actually, over 54,000 people are employed in that industry, and about 50 communities depend on forestry as their major source of revenue and also job creation.

We are always available to meet with industry officials, Mr. Speaker, because they are very, very important to Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Graduated Drivers' Licences

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions this afternoon are for the Minister of Transportation. Last weekend when I was in my constituency, I met with a number of students in a social studies 10 class. One of the issues that we discussed was graduated licensing. Issues that were brought forward by those students I think should be addressed by the minister in the Assembly this afternoon. I would like to ask the minister why someone who has reached the age of 16 but does not yet have a learner's licence should have to wait until the age of 17 before he or she can obtain a standard driver's licence.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the graduated driver's licence program in Alberta follows a bit of a different format than some of the other provinces. One of them is that there is no discrimination based on age, meaning that it doesn't matter if you're 65 with no driving experience and apply for a driver's licence or someone at 14 who would have a learner's permit for two years and then get their probationary licence at 16.

It varies from Nova Scotia, British Columbia, and there is also variance in that in this province there aren't any restrictions on the number of passengers in the vehicle and no time restrictions in terms of when probationary drivers can drive in the evening. Some provinces have restrictions on the number of passengers between 1 o'clock and 5 o'clock in the morning.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On the same line of reasoning, why is it that we concern ourselves so dramatically with determining whether or not someone is capable of driving when they first get a licence, but then we never bother to find out if they are

still capable of driving after they've had a licence for a number of years?

Mr. Stelmach: Actually, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member brings up a very important point. As one of the discussions that is coming forward from a number of different organizations – the Alberta Motor Association, the centre for injury prevention – they're looking at: is it necessary or would it improve Alberta's statistics in terms of the number of injuries and collisions and of course the number of fatalities on Alberta highways if we go to a measured, timely re-examination of every driver in the province of Alberta?

That is something that we are looking at, investigating, looking at other jurisdictions. We are doing a review of driver safety in the province at the moment, and if it's something that's proposed, we certainly will be looking at bringing it forward to standing policy for further consideration.

2:30

The Speaker: Well, congratulations, hon. members. That was 17 sets of questions and answers, the highest, I think, in years.

In 30 seconds we'll call upon the first of four to participate, but in the meantime can we revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms. Calahasen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm very pleased to introduce to you and to all the Members of the Legislative Assembly some staff from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. They're in the members' gallery, and I'd ask that they stand as I introduce them: Cameron Henry, director of aboriginal relations; Thomas Droege, governance consultant; Linda Lewis, governance consultant; and Lona MacKay, researcher from the governance branch. So please give them a warm welcome.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Amber Alert Program

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As everyone in the Assembly is aware, a community's worst nightmare was realized when two little girls were abducted in Saddle Lake. In the aftermath I was very discouraged by the statements made by the members opposite critical of the effectiveness of Amber Alert during this alarming situation. On behalf of the Lac La Biche-St. Paul constituency I would like to take this opportunity today to applaud the collaborative efforts of the local RCMP detachments, local radio and television stations, and our local rural Crime Watch for their invaluable assistance in the kidnapping earlier in the week.

For the people in my constituency the Amber Alert system proved successful. The entire community is extremely pleased that these young children were returned safely to their family. Mr. Speaker, all local radio and television stations received the bulletin and broadcast the message. The local rural Crime Watch assisted in activating a telephone fan-out regarding the abduction. It is very likely that the reason why the children were released was because the kidnapper heard the Amber Alert and realized that he would be caught.

In Canada approximately 65,000 children are reported missing every year. Out of this number most children are runaways, others are lost, while some are taken by their parents in custody disputes. I would like to stress that it is an extremely small percentage of children that are actually kidnapped by strangers. For those who have raised concerns and criticized Amber Alert, it should be recognized that if the alert were issued after every child went missing, Amber Alert would become useless.

There are important steps that need to be taken before an Amber Alert can be released. People must first find out about runaways, lost children, and parent abductions. Mr. Speaker, it takes time for this process to be employed in a correct manner and work to the advantage of the case. I find it discouraging that critics are quick to find fault with the system without understanding how it works.

I firmly believe that the Amber Alert system was the key to the successful outcome of the situation in Saddle Lake, and I would like to congratulate all those involved.

Earned Income Tax Credit

Mr. Lord: Well, Mr. Speaker, today I rise to talk about an idea whose time, I think, has come. It has to do with helping people get out of poverty, and it takes a very different approach from what we do in Canada right now. It's called the earned income tax credit, also referred to as the incentive to work program or just the EITC program. Unlike raising the minimum wage, the EITC is targeted only to the poor.

Raising the minimum wage is really just a shotgun approach to spreading small business owners' money around, and I've even heard it estimated that it may only result in 10 cents on the dollar actually getting to people who live in dire poverty. Instead, it ends up in the hands of teenage kids living at home with their parents or hospitality industry employees who may also be earning significant tips, for example.

Worse, it may even increase poverty since minimum wage increases are mostly paid out by small business owners, who themselves are the poorest working group of Canadians, many not even earning minimum wages themselves, in fact not earning anything at all, with 4 out of 5 going broke in their first five years. Raising their expenses won't bring any more business in the door and, in fact, may only help them go broke faster, maybe throwing all their employees out of work instead.

The EITC alternative, on the other hand, is credited with literally lifting millions of people out of poverty in other jurisdictions. How it works is that instead of paying destitute people to sit at home on welfare and clawing back anything that they earn if they try to work and better themselves, you do just the opposite. If they work even a little but still don't earn enough money to get to the poverty line, we top up their paycheques each week for every hour they work with a few extra dollars per hour. We literally pay them a little to go to work instead of paying them a lot to stay at home.

Combining the money that they can earn from work with the money we're paying them, that we would be paying them to sit at home anyway, voila: a significant increase in their total annual incomes, enough to at least get them to the poverty line. It's simple. We target only the poor, and we encourage them to work instead of discouraging them. It's an idea that I hope we can study and, better yet, implement.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Rail Link to Fort McMurray

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to make a few

comments on the proposed rail link to Fort McMurray. Over the past week I've had the opportunity to speak with industry experts regarding transportation links to Fort McMurray. All the experts agreed that both rail and road modes of transportation are vital for the future development and completion of approved projects in the north.

They're also quick to point out that the existing rail line already carries many heavy loads. It is my understanding that the current line has 120-pound steel rails that have a load capacity of 263,000 pounds. However, heavier loads can be hauled using multi-axle cars. The maximum width that can be hauled by rail is approximately 16 feet, and any loads wider than 13 feet, 6 inches require a special train service at a cost of \$100 per mile.

A rail link with the coast is essential when transporting heavy components that are manufactured offshore and have to be transported to the Fort McMurray site. Choosing a new route for the line to Fort McMurray would be very expensive. Under normal conditions construction costs and a new roadbed are \$1 million to \$1.2 million per mile. With the additional cost of land purchases, the cost of bridges, trestles, and building the line over difficult terrain, the cost per mile will soar.

We look forward to seeing a cost-benefit analysis regarding any new proposed rail link to Fort McMurray. We feel that it makes more economic sense to use the present railway right-of-way. It would be much cheaper to upgrade the existing line, extend it from Fort McMurray to a point near the tar sands where spur lines could be built to the various sites.

While we support the improvement and expansion of the rail link to Fort McMurray, we call on this government to consult with all Albertans should it wish to use taxpayer money to fund any projects that put this government back in the business of being in business. After all, why should your average, hard-working Albertan subsidize a multibillion dollar industry?

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, I don't know if I'm being presumptuous, but I'm just guessing in my head that this will probably be the last opportunity for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to participate in this particular Legislative Assembly.

The hon. member has been a member for a number of terms now and advised all of us some time ago that she would be departing upon another venture, a venture with a certain degree of turbulence and rough waters and who knows what. But, hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, we bid you adieu and wish you good luck, and the same message will go to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East as well. [applause]

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate your comments, and I'd like to say that it's been an honour and a privilege to work with all of you, a little more fun when we could keep your feet to the fire but always an honour and a privilege.

2:40 Student and Youth Day of Action for Clean Energy Solutions

Ms Carlson: Today, Mr. Speaker, April 1, 2004, is Student and Youth Day of Action for Clean Energy Solutions. Today thousands of students and youth from across Canada and the United States will join forces to demand clean energy solutions from our schools, universities, and governments. Students and youth have proclaimed this, April 1, a day to make a fool of fossil fuels as countries around the world are beginning to embrace viable renewable sources of energy such as wind and solar power.

Now these youth are challenging the overuse of fossil fuels and nuclear energy and calling instead for significant investment in pollution-free, sustainable, healthy energy sources. These students and youth will join with a diverse coalition of organizations to call for a future free from dependence on fossil fuels and short-sighted energy policy. They will be voicing their ideas and concerns at more than 120 campuses and communities.

Globally, wind energy has become the fastest growing energy source, and businesses, schools, and communities are making significant investments in both solar and wind power. However, the international push for cleaner, more sustainable energy has not been met with significant investment from any of our leaders.

In Alberta high growth rates have been both a challenge and a blessing in terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and pushing for the use of green energy sources. It is this very growth that must push us to adopt greener technologies in order to reduce the impact that we have on the environment. To reduce carbon emissions and to continue to see strong economic growth requires a great deal of innovation in terms of government policy, market innovation, and technological innovations. In addition to using 90 per cent green power at its facilities, this government must also increase its overall renewable and alternative energy capacity on both provincial and municipal levels.

In light of this awakening to green energy, North American youth and students are taking the lead in creating a brighter future. Let Albertans participate in this important event today and every day so that we can take the lead on this important initiative.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition signed by 688 police constables and their loved ones from the capital region petitioning this Assembly to

support Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act, which will provide more security and peace of mind for people working in occupations who have a higher risk of exchanging bodily fluids with a potential carrier of a blood borne disease.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Mason: I'm presenting a petition today signed by 140 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta

1. To immediately withdraw the draft management plan for the Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area and revise it so as to disallow any further commercial or residential development of the Kananaskis Valley;
2. To redesignate the Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area and adjacent unprotected public lands as a Provincial Park, with those parts currently undeveloped designated as Wildland Provincial Park;
3. To maintain Kananaskis Country in a natural state that provides high quality wildlife habitat and nature-based recreational opportunities.

Thank you.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) and also pursuant to Government Motion 6, agreed to on February 18, 2004, to give notice that on Monday, April 19, I will move that written questions appearing on the Order

Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 47, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, and 59.

I am also giving notice that on Monday, April 19, I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 146, 159, 160, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 197, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, and 205.

Thank you.

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Bill 28

Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to introduce Bill 28, the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004, for first reading.

Mr. Speaker, this bill expands the mandate of the act by allowing feeder pigs to be included under the act, providing Alberta's hog producers all of the advantages of feeder associations.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 28 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I would move that Bill 28, the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004, be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

Bill 29

Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 29, the Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, this is a very small change in the act. It will amend section 29 in the act, and it will clarify the ability for participants in projects as to the amount that they may borrow and also clarify the number of borrowers that can participate in it.

Mr. Speaker, I look forward to comments from members on this bill as it proceeds through the Assembly. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Bill 30

Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to

introduce Bill 30, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004.

These amendments will provide for more efficient and effective governance on Alberta's eight Métis settlements.

[Motion carried; Bill 30 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I would move that Bill 30, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004, be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Bill Pr. 4

Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill Pr. 4, Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 4 read a first time]

2:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Bill Pr. 5

Brooklynn Hannah George Rewega Right of Civil Action Act

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill Pr. 5, the Brooklynn Hannah George Rewega Right of Civil Action Act.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 5 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table a news release issued by the Athabasca Oil Sands Transportation Corp. dated March 29 of this year. The release announces "funding for a \$2.5 million Oil Sands Transportation Initiative."

That's it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings this afternoon. The first one is an information sheet put out by Edmonton's Food Bank. At this time, on behalf of the directors of the Food Bank I would like to say to anyone in this Assembly or anyone else who wants to visit the Food Bank at their new location at 120 Street and 115 Avenue that the directors would be delighted to see them and provide them with a tour.

The second tabling I have is a memo dated October 25, 2002, and it is from the hon. Justice minister to the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View. It concerns a question I asked earlier in question period.

I also have another memo dated December 16, 2002, and this is from the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment to the chief appeals commissioner of Alberta Workers' Compensation.

An Hon. Member: Isn't that old?

Mr. MacDonald: I can't help it if this was only leaked to me lately.

The fourth memo that I have is also from my question today, and it is dated January 6, 2003. I referred to that in question period as well, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the requisite number of copies of a report compiling the latest statistics regarding qui tam whistle-blower reward legislative actions in the U.S., in which now over \$12 billion has been successfully recovered through nearly 4,000 cases where state and federal governments had been defrauded by suppliers, which frauds only came to light as a result of whistle-blower reward legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a number of tablings today. The first is from Stephen Legault, the executive director of Wildcanada.net. It's an open letter to the Premier. He's very concerned with the Premier's attitude towards callers with regard to the grizzly hunt that opens today.

The second is a letter from a constituent of mine, Janice Radloff. She's very concerned about how people other than the custodial parents who are involved in a child's life are treated.

The third set of tablings is copies of correspondence from constituent Anthony Hughes. He's involved in a WCB fiasco, if I could call that accurately, where he feels that he has not been getting proper recognition or treatment from anybody involved with WCB in this province.

Lastly, I have a tabling from the Canadian Federation of University Women in Edmonton, who are very concerned that "the federal, provincial and territorial governments of Canada . . . work collaboratively to implement the recommendations of the Romanow Commission."

Thank you.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on behalf of the Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. I would ask at this time that the Government House Leader share with us the projected government business.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd be happy to do that.

Just before I do, I'd like to take a couple of seconds to thank the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie for her outstanding service over the 11 or 12 years and also to wish her well in her bid for a new career, and the same goes for the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Speaker, under Projected Government Business I'm pleased to report the following. On Monday, April 19, 2004, pursuant to Government Motion 6 agreed to on February 18, 2004, we will deal in the afternoon with private members' business, written questions, motions for returns, followed by public bills and orders other than government bills and orders, and that should include some private members' public bills if time permits. In the evening we will deal with motions other than government motions, and at 9 p.m. we will be in Committee of Supply for the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

On Tuesday, April 20, in the afternoon as part of Government

Bills and Orders we'll deal in Committee of Supply with Children's Services, as designated, and if times permits, second reading of bills 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29, depending, of course, on progress made in that regard today. In the evening in Committee of Supply we will deal with the Ministry of Transportation, and again depending on progress we may deal in Committee of the Whole with bills 22, 25, and 26, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, April 21, we expect to be in Committee of Supply for the ministry of agriculture, as designated, and depending on progress earlier possibly second reading on bills 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29, and otherwise as per the Order Paper. On Wednesday evening we will be in Committee of Supply dealing with the ministries of Finance and Revenue, and that's as per the unanimous agreement by the House leaders and consent having been granted by the Assembly to do so. We will then deal with Committee of the Whole for bills 22, 25, 26, again depending on earlier progress, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday afternoon, Mr. Speaker, we expect to be in Committee of Supply for the Ministry of Learning, as designated, and that'll be followed by second reading of bills 27, 28, and 29, again depending on earlier progress, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, over the next couple of weeks please have a rest, and will you please, as well, have a spiritual and happy family-oriented Easter.

head: **Orders of the Day**
head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**
Environment

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Orders the first hour will be allocated between the minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member who wishes to participate will be recognized.

The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll keep my comments relatively short. [some applause] I love support from my own members.

First, I will just introduce some people I have in the gallery. We have Peter Watson, I think, up there. I can't see very well up there because of the light. He's my assistant deputy minister. Peter, stand up. We have Monica Norminton up there, who's our new financial officer. She's a lawyer as well, so not only does she keep the taxman at bay, but she keeps me out of jail. We have Robert Moyles, our communications assistant director. Then we have everybody's most beloved EA in the building, Ken Faulkner, most recently of the Krispy Kreme doughnut fame. So we're pleased to have all of these people here to watch the goings-on in this House.

I'm going to, as I say, keep my remarks relatively brief, Mr. Chair, because I know that the opposition has some good questions. I will say that if I don't have a chance to answer all the questions, they are recorded in *Hansard*, and we certainly will respond with appropriate answers to appropriate questions.

3:00

As you are all aware in the House, the province has experienced

tremendous economic growth, and it's largely fuelled by our natural resources, as the Minister of Energy quite appropriately pointed out during QP today. Of course, with that growth in the province we have population pressures, we have growing expectations for public input into the process, and we have growing pressures on our environment, Mr. Chairman.

To meet these challenges, at Alberta Environment we have changed our approach. Rather than trying to put an environmental policeman on every corner, which is simply impossible in this day and age when we have this rapid growth, we've focused on identifying environmental outcomes we need to achieve. So what we're looking at is: where do we need to be? What does our environment need to look like? What is our future economy going to look like? What do we want for our children in the future in terms of a healthy environment?

So what we're doing is putting in place systems to achieve that future sustainability. Not only are we putting in place those systems, but we are committed to working with partners and empowering our partners and working with our partners to make sure that the outcomes are reached.

This upcoming year my department is going to focus on two core businesses, Mr. Chair. The first one we're going to focus on is assuring environmental quality, and secondly is sharing environmental management and stewardship. If you look at our business plan, if you look at our budget, they are focused on those two areas. Particularly, we are going to focus those two areas on areas of water – all of you are familiar with and I'll say just a bit more about the water strategy – climate change, sustainable resource and environmental management, information technology, and staff capability.

The big issue, I believe, Mr. Chairman, as we move forward is going to centre around water. Water will be the issue of the 21st century. You can see how it's impacting Alberta. There was in the press just recently the Capstone Energy hearings in the Red Deer area. I've met with the MLAs involved speaking on behalf of their constituents there. So we need this water strategy. As we move forward, we need to fund the water strategy. As we move forward, you'll see us spending a lot of time talking about water, developing our budget around water, and simply doing the right thing.

I encourage all members, if they're not familiar with our water strategy, to take a hard look at it. I spoke at the AMD and C yesterday or the day before about it and received warm regard from the AMD and C around our water strategy, what it is about. So we have people in Alberta that are very strongly supportive of this, and we need to move forward on it.

With that, I'll conclude my comments, Mr. Chairman, and look forward to hearing from members of the opposition.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank all of the staff who are here this afternoon. It's been great working with you for all these years. You haven't always given me all the answers I wanted, and the minister particularly hasn't given me all the answers I wanted, but most of the time they tried.

An Hon. Member: Ask nicely.

Ms Carlson: I always asked nicely for that particular minister, and sometimes he gave me answers.

Dr. Massey: All he does is monitor.

Ms Carlson: No, it's the other minister that always monitors. This

one often will give an answer. Once in a while he's taken a good idea that we've put forward and incorporated it, so for that I have to thank him.

I want to start where the minister left off, and that's the water for life strategy. We're really pleased to see that this is still ongoing. It isn't ongoing nearly as fast as we would like to see it, but the initial investment of dollars that we've seen at least is a start when we talk about it being used for improving Alberta's drinking water supply and enhancing water management and watershed planning and all the other activities that the minister plans to do with this particular strategy. I'll ask a few questions, ask him to answer them, and then I'll go on to another issue.

The question really is: why is so little money dedicated to do so much? It seems like this could be the most important question we have before us for the next decade in this province, how to manage our water. We really feel that it's a priority issue, that we are in many regions facing a water shortage. It looks like it's going to get worse, not better. In the midst of all the planning that's happening around things like enhanced oil recovery, coal bed methane, the technology developments for CO₂ injection, all the studies and incentives and things like that that have to happen, why do you have so few dollars dedicated to what I see to be the top priority issue in environment in this province?

Dr. Taylor: I'll attempt this question, Mr. Chair.

I want, like other members, to wish the member the best in her future. It has been a pleasure sometimes getting to know you. So I do wish you the best, but I would think that on your last day you might have had a little sweeter disposition towards me.

But we'll go on and answer the question. I would point out that this water for life strategy is a cross-ministry initiative. There are nine ministries involved. If you go through the budget, I think it's about \$46 million cross ministry that is involved in the water for life strategy.

As we move forward, if you'll look in my budget, Mr. Chair, my budget has a 100 per cent increase in the water for life strategy. That's what we needed this year because what we're going to do this year is start implementing. As I said, next year we'll need more money. We won't be able to operate it on the \$5 million that we are granted this year. Next year we will need more money, and we will go forward to Treasury Board in the appropriate business planning process and tell Treasury Board how much money we need for the next year. As we go forward, I believe that we will meet success with our Treasury Board colleagues. As I pointed out, it is, I believe, \$46 million this year across all ministries.

I would also say that a fundamental issue in the water for life strategy is conservation. We need to conserve, Mr. Chair, on both the supply side and the demand side. When I'm talking about conserving on the supply side, I am talking about more water storage. Because of the way we get the spring runoffs here, most of the water passes through, particularly the southern basins, early in the spring. Even in one of the most dry years in history, 2001, we passed on 57 per cent of the natural flow to Saskatchewan. We only need to pass on, by regulation and agreement, 50 per cent. This past year I would guess that we will probably have passed on someplace between 80 and 85 per cent of that natural flow.

So as we move forward, we have to do a lot more on conservation on the demand side. Mr. Chair, that means both on-stream and off-stream storage, and we will be looking at these issues as we move forward. On-stream storage will be, I believe, very important in the future. Of course, the water strategy also looks at technology development, a lot of technology. It looks at knowledge, and it looks at conservation on the demand side as well.

I won't comment any more because no doubt some of those questions will come up on the demand side.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would have thought that the minister would have thought it was pretty sweet that I was asking for more money for his department. But if he doesn't like those kinds of questions, I can ask tough ones on water management.

We've been waiting for the advisory committee to release its recommendations on the water being removed from the hydrological cycle, so we'd like to know: where are those recommendations? In the absence of them, then why are you still approving new licences for water diversion from watersheds that are already highly damaged? In particular, I'm concerned about the Red Deer River. Why do you continue to allow the use of fresh water for injection before the recommendations are out? Will we see any changes to your commitment to water conservation in terms of applications for use from businesses to divert water?

Dr. Taylor: A number of questions there again, Mr. Chair. Let me first talk about the committee she's talking about. That's the committee we established to look at water removal from the hydrological cycle, and 98 per cent of that, as she's correctly identified, is in the oil and gas industry.

We did establish a committee that was made up of various stakeholders. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers was there. That was one of the co-chairs. The Pembina Institute for Sustainable Development was another co-chair. We had members of the general public. We had irrigators there. We had other industrial water users there.

3:10

It's my understanding that they have prepared a preliminary report, and I will get that preliminary report either later today or tomorrow. We'll then have to take a look at that preliminary report. But it's only a preliminary report; it doesn't have final recommendations.

This was a consensus-based process, and in that process all members have signed off. So that means the green NGOs have signed off. That means CAPP, the association of oil producers, has signed off. That means the irrigators. Everybody has agreed, apparently, as we move forward, to these preliminary-only recommendations.

The next phase for that will be for them to go out and consult with their stakeholders. Certainly, CAPP will have to go out and talk to the various companies that it represents. Certainly, the environmental NGOs will have to go out and talk to the various people they represent. The irrigators will have to talk to the various irrigation districts that they represent. So that's the process. As I say, hopefully, we'll see those either later today or perhaps transferred to my office tomorrow.

In terms of allowing water licences, Mr. Chairman, we have a process that's governed by legislation. The legislation is in effect, and until that legislation is changed under the law, there is nothing really that we can do as a government to change the process. If we're going to change the process, we must change the legislation.

The member did mention the issue of Red Deer. In the Red Deer area – perhaps she knows – a decision of a director of mine was appealed to the Environmental Appeal Board. We have a very good system. We're one of the only jurisdictions in North America that has a system like this where if one of my directors makes a decision, it can be appealed to a quasi-judicial body that has nothing to do

with the ministry, has nothing to do with the minister. It's quasi-judicial, and it holds hearings. The EAB did hold hearings on the Capstone Energy issue that the member referred to in the Red Deer area. They have a month from the date that the official hearings end to get a report with a recommendation to me. I believe the official date for the end of the hearings is March 31, and I expect that I will be receiving a report from the EAB, that quasi-judicial body, and I expect to receive that report legislatively by the end of April.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. One more water question. There's an appeal of an irrigation district licence amendment that I'd like to talk about. On October 31, 2003, there was an amendment to a water licence which allowed an irrigation district in southern Alberta to use water for purposes other than irrigation. The St. Mary river district can now allocate 12,000 acre feet annually for other uses such as

municipal, agricultural, irrigation, commercial, industrial, management of fish, management of wildlife, habitat enhancement and recreational use. The Licence Amendment also states that the Licensee shall not deliver water under the Licence for the purpose of injecting water into the ground to enhance oil or gas production.

So the Southern Alberta Environmental Group, based in Lethbridge, with support from Trout Unlimited Canada, is appealing AB Enviro's decision to amend the licence. There are two key challenges as we see it in the appeal. One, it challenges the precedent which denies opportunities to restore health to the Bow and Oldman river basins, which have already been assessed as moderately to heavily impacted from massive diversion. Large irrigation districts should not be allowed to right off the rivers.

The second one is that it challenges the precedent of allowing a private irrigation board to make decisions about how water, a scarce public resource, will be allocated. These boards are comprised of farmers, who are not accountable to the public interest in reallocating water to benefit a growing urban population and a changing economy in southern Alberta let alone to the public interest in restoring rivers to health, which was clearly expressed in the water for life strategy.

So the questions around this are: in the face of a growing water scarcity in Alberta why would the minister approve a licence that allows an irrigation district to determine our water priorities? And what responsibility does the district have to protect the health of a river and to allocate water in a way that best serves the growing population?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Chairman, I did not approve the licence. One of my directors approved the licence, and that is presently in front of the Environmental Appeal Board, so I have to be very careful of what I say about that. But I can speak in general, Mr. Chairman.

Well, one correction I would make, too, is that the St. Mary River irrigation district does not affect the Bow River basin. It's way south of the Bow, and the Bow runs into the South Saskatchewan. St. Mary River irrigation district is largely Oldman – you were correct in that – and Belly River and Waterton River and a couple of other small rivers, and it affects the South Saskatchewan as well.

Once again, I'm proud of this province. It's one of the only jurisdictions, as I've said, in North America that has an appeal process like this. It's outside the political process. This group, as she has correctly identified, has appealed the decision of the director to the Environmental Appeal Board.

I would comment, Mr. Chairman, that basically all those river reaches in southern Alberta and the reaches of the South Saskatche-

wan have been frozen; that is, we will not grant new licences on those rivers simply because they're either overallocated or allocated at a high enough level. So if we get an industry coming or we get an agricultural value-added industry like a potato chip plant – we have two of them already in southern Alberta, but just take something like a potato plant. They need water, and we can't grant them any more licences because, essentially, other than for potable water, or drinking water, the system is frozen.

So where do they get their water from? What St. Mary's has done is said: okay; we realize that there are these issues and there are needs and demands for water, and because of those needs and demands for water we're going to change the nature of our licence somewhat. It was very clear that it does not include oil field injection, but it does allow for St. Mary's to take on, you know, being able to provide water to a potato plant, for instance. So that decision is being appealed.

I'll give you another very practical example, Mr. Chairman. There's the South East Alberta Water Co-op, and that's a pipeline that's going to run out of Chin Coulee all the way across southeastern Alberta. This was really ably financed by the Minister of Transportation, and I'd like to congratulate him for his fine vision – yes, Minister, fine vision – on financing this pipeline in southern Alberta, and I hope that he finances more of them.

But that water co-op could not get a water licence for the pipeline because everything has been frozen. So they went to the United irrigation district and said: can we have some of your water licence? So United irrigation district transferred some of their water licence to the South East Alberta Water Co-op. Without that ability to be able to move licences around in irrigation districts, South East Alberta Water Co-op would not have been able to get water, Mr. Chairman.

So as I say, it's a very practical example. It's a little different than what she's talking about, but in the broader sense it's an example of, if the appeal is unsuccessful, what will happen. [Dr. Taylor coughed]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, if you need a little break, that's okay. I'm sure that the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie may have more questions that you can respond to.

Dr. Taylor: Okay.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This just points out how important water is for all of us. I hope you're okay over there.

Thank you for those answers on water. Certainly, they're helpful to us, and we'll be continuing to monitor your progress in this regard and hope that we can see some sort of a framework come out from the water for life strategy sooner rather than later. I'm really supportive of that strategy. In fact, I think it was one of our great ideas that you based your decisions on for setting that up. I wish it would go a little faster, but there are really good people involved in that strategy from all sides: from the department, from industry, from the environmental community. So I have every expectation that it will be progressive and meet its mandate, hopefully in a very timely fashion.

3:20

I would hope and encourage all members of the Assembly to support the recommendations that fall out of those meetings because I really do believe that they will bring forward ideas and initiatives that will work in the best interests of Alberta. I hope that they have

got as a part of their mandate looking at the long-term sustainability of the whole ecosystem in Alberta because it's been something that's been missing from a part of the decision-making process.

Are you okay now? Can I ask you some more questions? Okay.

Now I'd like to change topics and talk about climate change for a few moments. I've a series of questions I'd like answered. We see in the budget that a total of \$6 million is in the 2004-05 budget for initiatives related to implementing Alberta's action plan on climate change and ongoing support for Climate Change Central. Funding for Alberta's climate change action plan will increase to \$13 million in 2005-06, including funding from Innovation and Science.

So my first question is: could the minister break down the budget for initiatives related to implementing Alberta's action plan on climate change and ongoing support for Climate Change Central? If you could just give us a little bit of an overview and then provide some of that detail in writing, that would be helpful. I'm still not convinced that we're getting a good bang for our buck from Climate Change Central. I'm hoping that you'll have some information to share with us about how they're doing more than just meeting, where we're going to see some outcomes soon.

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Chairman, certainly I can do that. You've got to remember that Climate Change is a relatively new organization. I think they've been only operating for two years. They have been ramping up. They have done, really, in the last year a lot of positive things. Some members, perhaps in my caucus, disagree with some of the things they're doing, like the furnace rebate program. I see some people disagree. I happen to think that is a very worthwhile program.

People are replacing their furnaces with very energy-efficient furnaces, and they are about \$5,000 for a furnace. Through a partnership between Climate Change and the federal government they're getting a \$400 grant from Climate Change on their furnace. So people are actually spending \$5,000 to get a \$400 grant.

I sit on the board of Climate Change, and I would also point out that Climate Change Central is governed. It's arm's length, again, from government and has its own board of directors. The chair of that board is a gentleman, the president of Nexen Energy, Mr. Charlie Fisher, and it has high-level people on that board, company people. Once again, it's got environmental groups on it, and the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake sits with that group as well.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

The board decided that they wanted to try this program. They had enough for 3,000 replacements, and there was some doubt with a \$400 grant and a \$5,000 furnace how much uptake there would be on that program. What happened, Mr. Chairman, is that they have already passed the 3,000 applications or requests; they've got over 3,100 requests. So they're going to go back to the federal government and once again ask if the federal government is interested in continuing the partnership with Climate Change Central on that furnace replacement program.

They've done a number of other programs, Mr. Chairman. They are the first ones in the province to model emission trading. They've a partnership with a group out of New York. Unfortunately, the group that they were working with was in the office towers that were hit. Some of the people that I worked with and were up here were killed in that terrible terrorist attack of 9-11. They have done workshops on emissions trading.

What I will do to provide more information to the member is I will see that she gets a copy of actions undertaken by Climate Change Central so that she knows exactly what Climate Change Central is

doing. I'm sure that once she gets those actions, she'll be very aware of what Climate Change Central is doing and will probably feel much more positive in regard to Climate Change Central.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very much in support of the furnace rebate program. In fact, it's that kind of a program or other programs that encourage energy efficiency amongst homeowners that we've been promoting for a couple of years here. I was very encouraged when I saw that program come out. So as a follow-up question to that: what else do you expect to happen in the near future this next year either in Climate Change Central or within your own ministry to support both homeowners and industry to become more energy efficient?

Dr. Taylor: Well, certainly, Mr. Chairman, this government has taken the lead. We've actually spent more dollars in this area than any other government in Canada, including the federal government. So one of the things we'll do in the future is going to happen starting in 2005. Ninety per cent of the power utilized by this government will be either wind power or biomass power. Ninety per cent. It's the largest purchase of green power in the history of North America, and that was done by this government.

Another thing that's just starting to unfold is the municipal energy efficiency program. That's a hundred million dollars that this government has committed for municipalities to upgrade and make their buildings more efficient or build energy-efficient buildings as they're building new buildings, Mr. Chairman.

We actually have just a nice little booklet. It's very simple, and it's available, certainly, from my office. I think most MLA offices have these – I hope they do, anyway – to pass out to constituents. That gives you some more information, Mr. Chairman, on where we're going and what's happening in regard to the climate change action plan.

I would point out, Mr. Chair, that the government of Alberta is providing \$27 million in funding for research into sustainable energy technologies. That's over the next three-year period. So we are certainly doing that as well.

We're part of the Canadian Clean Power Coalition, Mr. Chair. The Minister of Innovation and Science can probably do this better at this than I can, but we think that by 2007 or 2008 there'll be a demonstration plant up that burns coal with virtually zero emissions.

Once again, climate change is a cross-government initiative. The Minister of Energy has allowed for a royalty rebate program of up to 30 per cent for costs of projects that capture and inject carbon dioxide into oil and gas pools.

So I can go on quite a bit, but there are a lot of really good things happening and that will happen as we move forward on this climate change action plan.

The Acting Chair: The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. When will mandatory reporting of greenhouse gas emissions by large emitters be implemented?

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Dr. Taylor: That's in the process, Mr. Chairman. We're actually working with the federal government now to come up. We've agreed and industry in Alberta has agreed to mandatory reporting. Because we want to do it so that each jurisdiction doesn't have its

own little reporting scheme, we're working with the other provinces.

I just got a letter two weeks ago signed by the Deputy Minister of NRCan and the Deputy Minister of Environment saying that they wanted to work with Alberta to develop a governance structure for national reporting. We took this as good news because the new Prime Minister has said that he wants to work with provinces on these issues.

The member quite correctly points out that there's an election coming, so the test will be: after the election does he behave in the same fashion? I hope he does, but we do have to remember, Mr. Chair, that he is a Quebec Liberal. We know how other Quebec Liberals have treated western Canada. But I'm hopeful that this Prime Minister will treat us differently and treat us with respect. You know, we're the only jurisdiction in the country that's going to be a net income contributor to the federal processes here. All the other provinces are basically living off Alberta. Last year we put in \$9 billion more than we got back in services.

3:30

So we will stand up for our rights, but if the new government is prepared to treat Albertans with the respect that we deserve because we're the most knowledgeable province in this whole area of greenhouse gas reporting – we've already got a scheme – and if they are prepared to work with us, then I think the mandatory reporting will come in quite quickly because we've agreed and industry has agreed.

I think that if you're looking at a time frame, I would say that you're not going to get a lot of action till September. Our sense from talking to the federal government – they've certainly got an election coming some time. I'm sure the member knows quite well about that, and one might speculate on when that election will occur because of her recent actions here. Then you're into a summer break. Our indications are that we'll be talking about governance and how we manage that with the federal government as early as September. It could happen relatively quickly after that.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It would be very nice to work with this minister in Ottawa on some of those issues, with any luck.

Mr. Chairman, my next question is on investment and research on sustainable energy technologies. I believe it's low, and I believe it's hard to access in this province.

When we talk about coal bed methane or fuel cell technology or enhanced oil and gas recovery or a new project that I was just recently introduced to, which is the ability of Alberta to actually build the windmills that would help support the wind energy industry in this province – right now that technology is not available in Alberta. They have to import those large windmills from Germany. The cost is about \$1.5 million per windmill. The cost to transport it over here is about half a million dollars. They can be made cheaper here with advanced generation technology right here in Edmonton, and of course the transportation costs to get them on site would be significantly lower.

The company I was talking to doesn't have enough access to capital to develop a prototype. They have all of the various stages of the development ready but can't get that extra mile, which is a really important step for Alberta to take, I think. There is no reason why we can't be a leader in those kinds of technologies in this country.

So if the minister could talk a little bit about what he thinks we can be and should be doing and he is expecting to do to support

research on the sustainable energy side in this year's budget and perhaps in the future.

Dr. Taylor: Well, once again, Mr. Chairman, that's outside my budget. As a department we don't support research. That would be more appropriately asked to the Minister of Innovation and Science. I will just make a couple comments if I might because I do have this excellent little document in front of me.

On sustainable energy, Mr. Chairman, we are investing \$3.25 million into a project at NAIT. Apparently, the NAIT swimming pool is heated by fuel cell technology. So we are doing that.

In Medicine Hat, my home constituency – actually, the greenhouse is located in the Member for Medicine Hat's constituency. Microgenerators provided by Mariah Energy, if I can just read it, reduce carbon dioxide by 97 per cent, nitrous oxide by 97 per cent, reduce power costs, and create surplus energy. I happened to see Mariah Energy this past week, and they told me that they're working with the city of Medicine Hat now because this has been a very successful project at the greenhouse in the member's constituency. They're working with the whole city now to provide microgenerators and moving forward on it.

There's also the vapex field project. It's a \$30 million field project, and it's funded by the Alberta Energy Research Institute. Quite clearly, once again the Minister of Innovation and Science – I don't want to steal his thunder – has done a yeoman's job. He's done an excellent job of stimulating the growth of the Alberta Energy Research Institute, and that's where the dollars will be. I know that the Alberta Energy Research Institute is looking at a major project at the University of Calgary. That will be a world leader in sustainable energy research.

It just goes on and on, but as I say, it's outside my ministry. We do not directly fund research, but I would encourage – well, she won't be here. I would encourage her caucus, perhaps, to get the Minister of Innovation and Science to respond when his budget estimates are up, and he'll provide much more detail than I can.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods will follow up with the appropriate minister.

Can this minister tell me if he is still working towards developing a carbon trading system, and if so, can you give us any details on what stage the development is at?

Dr. Taylor: We won't develop the system ourselves, Mr. Chair. What we want to do is create the environment for it to happen, create the regulations needed for the carbon trading system to happen as well as other trading systems. We need to trade in nitrous oxides, sulphur oxides, particulate matter, and mercury perhaps as well. So there's going to be a broad trading system developed.

But the government will not develop it. What we'll create is the right environment, set up the regulations, and we're in the process right now of working with other jurisdictions, working with the federal government on what a system like that would look like and then what regulations we need to develop to allow that to happen, and then the private sector will do that.

We actually have just located in Calgary a carbon management company from England. They do a lot of work in Europe, and they just located within the last two months in Calgary, and they're carbon traders. We just have to get our regulations right to allow the private sector to do it.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Those are great answers. Happy to have them.

The government has said that its 2003 royalty credit program offsets up to 30 per cent of the cost for projects that inject carbon dioxide into oil or gas pools to improve resource recovery and store the carbon dioxide. In addition to this \$15 million program, the province has revised royalty deductions under the enhanced oil recovery program for carbon dioxide enhanced projects. Additional royalty reductions will be available to cover the higher costs involved in this type of enhanced oil recovery.

My questions are these. Since additional royalty reductions were made available for projects that use enhanced oil recovery, to what degree has this use increased? If there has been no increase, is the minister currently looking at other incentives for industry to adopt this technology?

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Chair, as I pointed out, climate change, like the water strategy, is a multidepartment agenda, a multidepartment project. These two programs she's mentioned are run out of the Department of Energy, so I can't give her the details of those two programs any more than the general details that I've already provided. When the Minister of Energy's budget is up in Committee of Supply, that needs to be discussed with the Minister of Energy.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Okay. Thank you. Perhaps you can't answer this one either, but if you could give me any feedback on it because it's related. It's around the Alberta Energy Research Institute's energy strategy to reduce the cost of carbon dioxide capture and compression. I'm wanting to know how much closer it is to the goal of a 75 per cent reduction for new facilities and 50 per cent for retrofit operations. Do you have any information on that at all?

Dr. Taylor: That is out of the Ministry of Innovation and Science. The only information I would have is to say that it's ongoing. We believe it will be a successful program because we think that ultimately technology will solve the issues around emissions, not just carbon dioxide emissions but emissions of nitrous/sulphur oxides, emissions of particulate matter, and emissions of mercury as well. They will be solved through the developments of new technology, and that's what this program is about.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

3:40

Ms Carlson: Thank you. My next question, then, is about the Car Heaven Alberta program, which gets vehicles 13 years old and over off the streets. Do you have any information on how many have come off the streets, and do you have any plans to increase that kind of program to get old vehicles off because of the emission problems that they present?

Dr. Taylor: This is a program that's run out of Climate Change Central and has been quite successful. We did a pilot, and it got about 300 vehicles off the streets in Calgary. I was involved with the renewal of two Car Heaven projects, one in Calgary and one in Edmonton.

We're still, as I say, counting the cars that come in, but they have started again. As I say, the initial one got 300 of these older vehicles off the streets in Calgary. We expect that this will be an ongoing program of Climate Change Central.

I must say, though, that it does generate some controversy because

many of these cars, especially the GM brands, have this 351 cubic inch engine, and that's an ideal engine, apparently, for people that build street rods. So they've actually been out at both the new openings of the programs, one in Edmonton and one in Calgary, with a bit of a protest. What happens to these 351 engines is that they come in, they get taken out, then they fill the cylinders with foam so that they can't be used any longer, and then they get shipped away.

Once again, this is a public/private partnership. We're working in particular with Pick-A-Part, one of the major partners of this in both Calgary and Edmonton. I know that Climate Change Central is looking at how it can expand more to rural Alberta, but the issue is getting the right people to be partners with. The issue is: will enough people bring them in?

But the program is operating again. It started this winter in both Calgary and Edmonton.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to ask a few questions with respect to the estimates. Can the minister tell us what the budget is for the government's project in partnership with BIOCAP Canada, which is examining the legal mechanisms for use with agricultural sinks? What are the most recent developments on these projects, and when are the projects expected to be completed?

Dr. Taylor: I'm not that familiar with that project. Again, I think it's being run out of Innovation and Science. But I'll make a commitment. This is in *Hansard*. Even if it is run out of Innovation and Science, I'll make a commitment to get you some information on that. I know BIOCAP. I met with some people from BIOCAP just last week, and I gather that they're just pretty much in a start-up stage.

One of the big issues is how you measure sinks. Now, it's easier to measure agricultural sinks than forestry sinks. I mean, how much does a tree this tall absorb in carbon dioxide compared to one this tall, and what is absorbed in the growth? So the difficulty with forestry sinks is measurement. I know that that's what our researchers are working on, how you get accurate measurements around sinks for forestry.

We'll get you some more information on that.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Yes. Thank you. And thanks for the answer. I can raise it with the minister when we do Innovation and Science.

A second question is: when will the government release its research analysis in key areas like the glacier response and the southern Alberta water supply and response of Alberta ecosystems to climate change? What was the budget for that research and analysis?

Dr. Taylor: Well, most of the research that we do, once it's completed, is put on our web site. Whether those two specific projects are on our web site or not, I don't know, but if they're not – we put absolutely everything on the web site. We actually are putting, you know, the air quality indexes on the web site.

Where we're moving to, where we want to move to and are working with industry on it, is actually having real-time monitoring, going right to the web site so that people can sit and look at the air monitoring around Inland Cement in real time, you know, 24 hours a day. That's where we're moving with our monitoring. Are we there yet? No. Will we get there? Yes. It's a combination of

getting some money for technology and working with industry to have that happen. Certainly, we are moving forward, and as those projects are completed, the results will be put on our web site.

The one area of concern that we do have in particular is the glaciers that feed the Bow River. We have a good history on those glaciers, I think a 70-year history. The way the Bow works is that in the spring, essentially, the Bow is fed by the spring and summer runoff till typically, depending on the dryness of the year, about either August or September, and then it's those glaciers that feed the Bow River. We're in a situation, because of the history of those glaciers that we have – that is available publicly, and if it's not on our web site, if you want, I can get it for you – where the glaciers are shrinking.

We're in a situation where, depending on how dry the year is, those glaciers can provide up to 40 or 50 per cent of the water that Calgary needs. Depending on how dry it is, depending on how the climate warms or cools, we're estimating that in anywhere from 30 to 50 years those glaciers will not be able to provide that level of volume of water.

If you look at what's happening in urban growth, we expect that all major urban areas will double in population size. Growth, unfortunately, is going to be in urban Alberta and in the urban world all over the world. Urban growth is going to double all over the world in the next 30 to 50 years. So you're going to have a situation in Calgary where you've probably got 2 million or 2 and a half million people and not enough water if we don't do anything. Because water issues are long-term issues and they're long-term solutions, that's why it's so important that we move on our water strategy on the conservation side, both supply side and demand side conservation, and actually do something, don't just talk about it but do something. Well, you and I probably won't be here in 30 to 50 years, but our grandkids might well be, and if we don't do something and they're living in Calgary, it will be a horrendous problem. So we need to move forward on it.

We do have the data on those glaciers available. It is publicly available, and if it's not on our web site, certainly we can get it for you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again, what adaptation initiatives is the Prairie Adaptation Research Collaborative currently working on?

Dr. Taylor: Adaptation is part of our climate change program, and it is probably the least worked on because everybody has been working on the mitigation side. It goes the same thing as for water. Everybody has been working on the conservation, on the demand side as opposed to the supply side. Certainly, the adaptation, which is part of our climate change project, I will say, from my own personal perspective, has been lagging a bit. The ingenuity fund – and that's what we used to call the science and engineering trust fund – has committed about \$7.5 million to the prairie adaptation centre over a three-year period.

In terms of specific projects I can't tell the member what specific projects they're working on, but once again I would be pleased to provide information from the prairie adaptation centre as to the specific projects they're working on.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to change the subject, then, if I could, to coal bed methane. Given the great emphasis, it seems that's this is going to be the province's answer to

declining conventional natural gas supplies. However, we've heard from people around the province. I heard the Minister of Energy on the radio this morning talking to a group who are really concerned with respect to the environmental issues, land disturbance, their surface rights. They were concerned about surface and groundwater impacts, venting and prolonged flaring of noneconomic gas, and noise pollution. Each of these will have an impact on the environment. My first question to the minister is: will large-scale CBM projects be subject to mandatory environmental impact assessments?

3:50

Dr. Taylor: Well, once again that is a decision that will be made by experts in my department. It's not the minister that determines if an environmental impact assessment is required. Applications come in. They go to the scientists, the engineers in my department, and they will make the determination if an environmental impact assessment needs to be done.

This is a significant issue that the member has raised. I mean, if we're not careful, you could have a well site every 10 acres. So the issue is: should companies be allowed to drill a well site every 10 acres, or should they be required to slant drill?

Now, we don't have a policy on this, but certainly my personal opinion is that maybe you drill 10 well sites from one site. Because this is so new here in Alberta and, as the Minister of Energy pointed out today, we're just starting some hearings on this, whether or not there would be an EIA will be decided as major projects come forward, and that will be decided by the Department of Environment.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again, then, on the same topic: how will the cumulative and social impacts of CBM development be determined? Who's going to look after it?

Dr. Taylor: These are big issues that the member is talking about. Actually, these are the kinds of big policy issues that fascinate me. I've just been in discussions with a professor at UBC by the name of John Robinson. What John talks about is a sustainable future. When he's talking about a sustainable future, he's not just talking about what the environment looks like. He's talking about what our economy will look like, what our cities will look like. I just quoted the figure in my last answer to you about cities around the world doubling in the next 30 to 40 to 50 years. That's John's statistic. I just got it from him. I was meeting with John Robinson yesterday.

I'm actually going to bring John into Alberta and have him sit down with some of our leading thinkers and some of our leading industrial people in the oil industry and talk about: what do we want looking forward into the future? John's group at UBC just got a huge CFI grant. It's too bad it didn't happen here first in Alberta, but it's just a really exciting project that they're doing. It talks about what the future looks like, not just economically but socially.

So to answer your question, I don't know, but those are the things that we have to figure out. We do have one model that is working I think quite well. It's called CEMA. It's in Fort McMurray, and it consists of native groups, of industry. They're looking at how they manage the huge development that's going to go on there. There are NGOs, environmental groups in that group as well. It's not a government organization. It's a local organization and is working very well with all the sectors. Now, is that a model for the rest of the province? We don't know yet. It's too early to tell. But they're trying to do some very creative and exciting things there as we get thinking more about these issues, about the sustainable future.

I don't think it's enough any more just to talk about a balance

between the economy and the environment. When you say balance, it means that, well, if you get something on the economy, you lose something on the environment or that if you get something on the environment, you lose something on the economy. I think we need to start thinking past that to what sustainability actually means and look at sustainability in a broad sense.

So we actually are just starting to think about some of those issues. I'm just starting to think about them, and the department is just starting to think about them.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That is interesting, and it's encouraging that sustainability is being questioned as a concept and that the interpretation we have on that particular concept right now is being questioned. I think it's overdue.

May I ask what requirements are imposed on companies now to minimize the impact of CBM development?

Dr. Taylor: Well, I assume that you're talking about coal bed methane. Once again, that's largely driven out of the EUB, but we are very concerned in Alberta Environment about water and potable water being destroyed as we move forward.

I'm not a scientist or an engineer, but my understanding is that you cannot use the U.S. experience and generalize it up here. Apparently, there was a lot of potable water in U.S. coal beds, and quite frankly they've got an environmental wreck down there in some places. But in Alberta the amount of potable water in the coal beds, the ones that we know about – and we're just doing the initial research and initial test drilling – appears to be very little, next to nil.

As we move forward, we have to determine how we are going to handle potable water that is in those coal beds, and that's part of what the hearings going around the province are about. It's one of the issues that is going to be discussed. You yourself have watched the issue around Capstone Energy, so you know how sensitive the issue of potable water is. That's one area where I really believe that the local community is going to drive government on that issue.

If you look at our water strategy, what we're proposing in our water strategy is two local levels. We're looking at a local level that would manage the larger watersheds, for instance the Bow River. The best example I can think of is the Bow River Basin Council. Very effective. The Bow River is now apparently the third best river in the world for trout fishing, one of the cleanest rivers in the world, and that comes as a result of a consensus-based multistakeholder group called the Bow River Basin Council. But for that to be effective, government has to step up to the plate first, and we stepped up with 225 grand every year to them. Once we step to the plate first, you know, they can find private-sector money, they can find federal money, and they can find NGO money.

That's the model we're looking at at that basin level. Then when we get down to the even smaller level, we're looking at watershed user groups. The best example I'll give you on that is in my own constituency. It's called the Bullshead Creek water co-op. They might say in my constituency the Bullshead Creek water co-op. It's just a very little, short creek with maybe 12 ranchers on it. One of the licences on it is very ancient, from 1905. The person that had that licence – it doesn't run all season; it just runs in the spring – was capturing the water and not storing it, apparently, in a very effective way, so there was a lot of waste water. It was causing a lot of friction in that community amongst the ranchers.

What we did was we helped that group. We helped them establish the Bullshead water co-op. What it is is consensus based, and even the guy with the oldest licence got on board. Now, do they have

issues? Yes, they do, but they're telling us as government how to manage that creek, and that's the way it should be. Our job is to provide them the science, to provide them the knowledge and say: here's the science and knowledge we have on the Bullshead. How do you want to manage it? It's working very well.

So that's another model on a really small level where the local guys are actually managing it and doing a very good job. I always think that the guys at the local level make the best decisions because they're there. This one rancher has a 1905 licence. His granddad started the ranch, and he's still there. Other ranchers have been there, you know, 40, 50, 60 years. They're going to be there, their families will be there, and they need sustainability in that watershed. So we provide knowledge, we provide science, and we provide a few dollars to help them to organize and so on. That's the way we're going to solve major water issues in this province, not by my department or the minister, whoever the Minister of Environment is in the future, mandating but actually asking the people.

We're modelling a lot of this on CASA. I'm sure you're familiar with CASA and what I did two years ago in asking them to come up with emission standards. It works. It takes time, and it takes somebody with some skill and some money to get in there and help them organize and manage. That's our role as the Department of Environment: to provide some money and some skill to help these people organize, then get everybody involved, make it consensus based, and it'll work.

4:00

The Deputy Chair: Any further questions? After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Environment for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and

Equipment/Inventory Purchases

\$123,352,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Chairman . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, we've already voted. You just want to add some . . .

Dr. Taylor: I just wanted to thank the members in the House and, in particular, the members opposite for intelligent questions. Thank you.

Mr. Zwozdesky: That was just an excellent testimony there from the Minister of Environment. Thank you.

In that spirit, Mr. Chairman, I would move that the committee now rise and report the main estimates for the Ministry of Environment.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, before I recognize the hon.

Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan to report, I also wanted to add my appreciation and best wishes for the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie in her new career.

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Environment: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$123,352,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 25
School Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise and move second reading of Bill 25, the School Amendment Act, 2004.

First of all, I'd like to thank the hon. Minister of Learning, the MLA for Strathmore-Brooks, for giving me the opportunity to carry this important bill. Bill 25 balances the interests of our teachers with the interests of our children by improving the functioning of the board of reference to make sure that there is a process to deal with situations where an educator might not fulfill the high standards of their peers.

Mr. Speaker, in any profession there must be a process in place to ensure the highest quality of service by professionals, and this process has to be effective and fair. We're talking about someone's livelihood, and the board must make decisions regarding whether or not that teacher will continue in that livelihood. This is not a decision to be taken lightly. However, we must also safeguard the rights of children whom Albertans entrust to those in the teaching profession. The fact is that we're talking about the future of these children and the very future of this province, which will some day be built by those who are in our schools today.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has great teachers, exceptional teachers, and we have to make sure that all educators hold to the same high-quality standards and abilities that Alberta's teachers are known for. The changes in Bill 25 will set a framework in place that will facilitate the best decision-making process possible for the board of reference. The amendments also safeguard our children, ensuring that potential labour disputes do not negatively impact education, through the expansion of the professional responsibilities of teachers as recommended by Alberta's Commission on Learning.

Mr. Speaker, we previously announced that we want to establish a new practice review process for teachers that will enable the ATA to assess the professional competency of its members. The details of this will be discussed elsewhere, but it's an important reference because one of the things contained in Bill 25 is that this new amendment will diminish the need for the board of reference to be involved in reviewing teacher competence. However, more importantly, the legislative changes we are tabling in this act are

designed to improve the way the board of reference functions.

Even though the board of reference will not have the kind of role it has now in terms of assessing the professional competency of teachers, it will continue to play a vital role in hearing matters on employment issues that are beyond the scope of the practice review such as cases of misconduct. This process is still going to be very largely driven at the local level by superintendents and school boards.

Amendments to section 61 mean that the boards would no longer be prohibited from delegating the power to terminate or suspend the services of a teacher. This is something the boards must be able to do. They should be able to decide whether or not the board will make the final decision regarding teacher termination or suspension or whether that responsibility will be delegated to a superintendent.

Under the proposed practice review process, superintendents will have the responsibility of determining whether a teacher should be referred to a hearing committee for a review of that teacher's practice. We're recommending that superintendents also have the authority, if given to them by their board, to determine whether a teacher should be suspended or terminated. The safeguard for the teacher is that the board of reference will still review the superintendent's decision.

I would also like to make a note of the changes to section 138 because I think these are important safeguards for students. Currently section 138 sets out the types of orders the board of reference may make, including confirming a teacher's termination or suspension, removing a suspension, directing that a teacher be reinstated, and directing the school board to pay an amount of money equivalent to the teacher's salary for a specified period.

What we're doing is adding a subsection that would prohibit the board of reference from reinstating a teacher when it finds that that teacher should not be teaching. The subsection also prohibits the board of reference from reinstating a teacher when it determines that just cause exists for the termination, despite any procedural irregularities or procedural noncompliance that may have taken place at the school board level. So, basically, what this does is restricts the board of reference's power to reinstate in these cases of, we could say, technicality. Now, this is vital. First and foremost, we need to protect students from the reinstatement of teachers who may be guilty of gross misconduct, neglect of duty, or other inability to perform his or her duties.

In addition to this amendment, we've worked with the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association to add wording in section 138 that sets out certain factors that the board of reference must ensure it considers in determining whether to reinstate a teacher. These factors include:

- (a) whether the teacher is guilty of gross misconduct;
- (b) whether the teacher refused to obey a lawful order of the board without justification;
- (c) the risk to the safety of students, co-workers and the teacher;
- (d) the ability of the teacher to perform teaching duties effectively;
- (e) the effect of reinstatement on the future relationship between the board and the teacher;
- (f) the possibility of recidivism;
- (g) whether the reinstatement would have the effect of undermining the confidence of Albertans in general in the public education system;
- (h) fairness to the teacher;

and any other factor that the board of reference may consider relevant.

Mr. Speaker, the changes to these sections ensure that the board of reference has the ability to safeguard the best interests of the students once the school board and superintendent find that there is enough reason to bring it to the level of the board. This is not

something that the board will take lightly, as can be seen from all the factors that the board must consider, factors so vital that they will now be set in legislation.

There are also changes being proposed to more effectively provide for an avenue of appeal. Changes to section 133 will require that the notice of appeal be filed within 21 days of the suspension or termination and set out the grounds for the appeal. An amendment to section 136 will facilitate the process by ensuring that both parties in an appeal have a full understanding of the case to be reviewed before a hearing commences. As well, it will require that a case be considered abandoned where no action is taken for a one-year period, similar to rules that exist with respect to civil cases filed with the Court of Queen's Bench.

4:10

Mr. Speaker, I'd now like to delve into the area of professional responsibilities. The School Act is specific in setting out what is termed the statutory responsibilities of teachers. There are a lot of vital responsibilities included in this list. Teachers are required to provide competent instruction to students. They're required to teach prescribed courses; to promote educational goals and standards; to encourage and foster learning in their students; to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results to students, parents, and the board; to maintain order and discipline; and subject to the collective agreement to carry out duties assigned by the principal or board.

In recommendation 81 the Learning Commission suggested that there is a need to allow all key partners in education to sort out appropriate roles and responsibilities in a way that ensures that the best outcomes for students are recognized and achieved. Included in recommendation 81 are two subpoints: one, to maintain teachers' right to strike and, another, to expand the professional responsibilities of teachers. The government supported these two subpoints, Mr. Speaker.

The School Amendment Act will expand teachers' professional responsibilities to include not only teaching in the classroom but also participating in development and field testing of curriculum; developing, field testing, and marking provincial achievement tests and diploma exams; and supervising student teachers. The expansion of these professional duties will ensure that teachers continue to provide these critical education services during potential labour uncertainties. This is important for students. It's a change that brings essential duties into the scope of the statutory responsibility of teachers, where they should be.

As the Learning Commission found, in cases of labour unrest we have to be able to protect students from effects that could be devastating to their futures. If teachers withdrew from any of these services, it could have permanent effects on the future goals and aspirations of the students; for example, students who are patiently waiting for their results to get into a postsecondary institution or student teachers that are finishing their education degrees. With this amendment students, their parents, and the public can be certain that in the case of any future labour uncertainties, the basic needs and, in fact, the basic rights of students continue to be upheld.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, with the amendments being proposed in Bill 25, we're not simply changing pieces of legislation. We are defending the rights of Alberta students to go to school with the knowledge that their teachers are fair, just, and safe, and that it is their best interests that are kept in mind. This legislation also cements this government's commitment to yet another recommendation from the Learning Commission as well as our commitment to working with stakeholders to build an education system that is truly responsive to the needs of Alberta's children and youth.

I urge all members of this Assembly to support these important amendments outlined in Bill 25. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments at second reading of Bill 25, where the obligation is to look at the principles that the bill has been built on. I think that one of the important things that this bill and its companion piece, Bill 26, represent is a new era in terms of the teachers' association and the school boards and trustees and the ministry working together to try to come up with solutions that are in the best interests of, ultimately, the children and students in this province. So I think that the background for these two bills is extremely important.

One of the principles seems to be that the requirements of teachers have to be expanded, and I heard the mover just now talk about the new requirements that teachers have to participate in curriculum and field testing, have to develop and test and mark achievement tests, and supervise student teachers. His take on it was that that would stop students from being put in jeopardy by the withdrawal of those services.

There is another piece to that, Mr. Speaker. Being able to take that limited action has, I suspect, prevented total teachers' strikes in the province at times. As much as these are strike-proofing recommendations, I think it may be a gain in one area, but it may be a loss with respect to flexibility of teachers to be able to react to a dispute without taking full strike action. So there's something lost when we pass this, but it's something that's been agreed upon by the teachers and trustees. I respect that, but I don't think that it should go unmarked that that's possibly what could happen.

The designation of people who do and who do not belong to the organization has long been contentious. I think that there are some provisions in here that still raise issues with respect to designating teachers, and it's going to probably take some time once the bill is passed and in practice for us to see exactly how well that is working out. There's been that constant concern of the hiving off of people into administrative positions, breaking them away from the teachers' association and taking them out of the association.

I think the changes to the board of reference are changes that all agree are good changes. The board of reference has long been a bone of contention for trustees, and I think the teachers' association was wise in recognizing that and in agreeing to some changes and in being able to put forward a positive proposal that will go a long way to lessening the number of disagreements that arise from the operation of the board of reference.

So I think it's a move in the right direction. I'm sure that there are going to have to be adjustments in the future, but if one of the underlying principles of this bill is to try to help resolve disputes and to have a mechanism in place that is agreeable to both sides, then I think that is what it accomplished.

I look forward to looking at the particular sections of the bill when we visit the bill in committee.

Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar to close debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a second time]

Bill 26

Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to rise and move second reading of Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004, which deals with important changes to reflect the Learning Commission's recommendations regarding the teaching profession.

The success of our learning system is based in part on the world-class educators that are available to students to help them best meet their education needs and guide them toward a lifetime of learning. Through the guidance of our teachers students can belong to a vibrant learning community that supports their intellectual and spiritual growth, helping them excel in a number of areas ranging from academics to athletics. Mr. Speaker, that's the kind of support that will help our children become the leaders of tomorrow.

As the House well knows, this government recently conducted a broad, comprehensive review of Alberta's K to 12 education system, involving all the key stakeholders and interested Albertans. Mr. Speaker, prior to this review the last time Alberta conducted a comprehensive review of the learning system was in 1972.

4:20

To put that into context, the last time a review was done on our education system, Peter Lougheed was the Premier of Alberta, Pierre Trudeau was our Prime Minister, Richard Nixon was the President of the United States, and the Cold War was still many years from thawing. My point is, Mr. Speaker, that that was a while ago, and the world is a different place. Clearly, a review of our learning system was a project whose time had come.

Alberta's learning system is the foundation of our future. Its purpose is to help Albertans gain the skills and knowledge they require to actively participate in our communities and the economy. Alberta's learning system continues to be counted as one of the best in the world in many ways, and that's something we can be proud of. But the changes we've witnessed over the last 30 years have made it necessary to examine our learning system to ensure that it's relevant and sustainable and meets the needs of Albertans.

Last December the government announced support for 84 of the commission's recommendations because of the clear potential to improve student learning. We took the time to thoroughly and thoughtfully review these recommendations because of the potential impact on the learning system and on the stakeholders who are affected by them. In fact, we worked with the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association on those recommendations that affected them.

Bill 26 will follow up on some of the commission's recommendations and our commitment to those recommendations by accomplishing two things we've already promised to do. It will allow a new practice review process to be established for teachers whose competence is in question, and it will allow certificated, nonteaching central office staff the option to be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

I'd like to begin with proposed changes to sections 4 and 8 as well as some other sections that will deal with the practice review process. There is no doubt that it's vital that we set standards for our learning system to ensure that students are receiving the quality of instruction they expect. We want to make sure that our children are learning the kinds of things they need to know to succeed in the workplace and in the world. This is something that is recognized by society in general, of course, and it's something our postsecondary institutions continue to ensure through their quality training programs for our teachers.

There are certain standards that must be maintained when a student is studying for his or her teaching certificate. In fact, grades are one indication of these standards, and during postsecondary education they can easily be monitored and tracked by the postsecondary institution and the deans of the education faculties.

But once that student begins to work as a teacher, that concern for the quality of teaching must be maintained. That means that we have to have a mechanism in place to effectively monitor this practice.

Of course, the Alberta Teachers' Association has a vested interest in making sure that its teachers maintain quality standards, and we have worked with this organization on these amendments because, in fact, this was something they themselves asked for. This particular amendment to section 4 of the Teaching Profession Act will enable the ATA to assess the professional competency of its own members. We are establishing a teacher practice review with the ATA that will deal with teachers whose competence is questionable.

I want to be very clear that I believe, in fact I know, having been a proud member of the profession for more than three decades, that we have a great many exceptional teachers in this province. Our yearly excellence in teaching awards are just one way we publicly recognize some of the many outstanding teachers we have in this province.

Having said that, the reality is that it is also important to have effective safeguards and a fair mechanism to address the remediation or termination of teachers when there are issues related to competence. Teaching involves a high degree of judgment, knowledge, and skill, and professional educators should be the ones to formally review a teachers' practice to determine whether it meets quality standards. A rigorous peer review process is certainly the most effective guarantee of professional competence. It's in recognition of this fact that the ATA proposed and government supported this new teacher practice review model.

This is a process that will be monitored by the ATA with respect to its own members. It also parallels the current process that is used by the ATA to review the conduct of its members who are accused of unprofessional conduct. These changes will ensure that teachers whose practice requires improvement receive the assistance they need to upgrade their skills. This is perhaps the most important aspect.

But in extreme cases it will also ensure that teachers who are judged by their own profession as being entirely unskilled lose their teaching certificates and membership in the professional association. This amendment is a safeguard not only to ensure the quality standards of the teaching profession in this province but also to protect the education of Alberta's youth.

I should briefly note that the board of reference will also be retained to deal with employment matters outside the scope of the practice review process. I won't go into this issue because it's a matter that is addressed in Bill 25, the School Amendment Act.

I'd now like to go on to the second amendment that's being addressed in Bill 26, and that's the commission recommendation to allow non teaching certificated central office staff the ability to choose their membership standing in the ATA. As a government we supported the commission recommendation relating to the membership of certificated central office staff in the ATA.

Section 5, dealing with compulsory active membership, currently requires that all teachers who are employed by school boards, other than superintendents, must be active members of the Alberta Teachers' Association. The commission recommended that certificated central office staff who are not included in the collective agreement should not be required to be members of the ATA but should have the option of associate membership, as is the case for superintendents.

The amendments being tabled will remove the requirement for certificated central office staff to be members of the ATA and in section 6 ensure the continued option of associate membership. That doesn't mean that they won't be members of the ATA. It simply

means that they will now have the option to decide whether or not to be members. This will affect only central office administrators who are not part of the collective bargaining agreement as well as other nonteaching administrators named in regulation.

I'd also like to note that this amendment has no impact on the government's support for maintaining the ATA as the single organization responsible for professional services and collective bargaining for teachers. This is something that the government supports maintaining.

I've touched upon some of the amendments we are pursuing in our effort to continuously improve the education system and the way our teaching profession functions within that system. These are not only improvements to the process itself. They are also a reflection of the commitment of our stakeholders to working to find innovative paths to the future of education. Our teachers are entrusted with the crucial task of building futures and building dreams. If we are to continue to build on our system's successes, ongoing collaboration between our teachers, school boards, and government will be vital to our progress.

With that said, I urge this Assembly to support these important amendments. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just a few comments about Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004. At least one of the major principles that the act is built on is the principle that the professions have a responsibility to police and to monitor their membership with respect to professional practice, and I think it's a principle that the House has supported over the years with respect to other professions. I'm pleased that Bill 26 will allow the teachers in the province to have that same responsibility with respect to controlling their own profession.

4:30

The model that has been proposed is an interesting one. I think it's the kind of model that has promise in terms of assuring the public that should they have complaints about the practice of a teacher, there is a mechanism for that to be dealt with quickly and

appropriately and for it not to be shuffled off and not dealt with in a timely manner. The fact that the government has worked with the association to make possible a bylaw that would put in place the professional practice board that's being proposed is, again, a good move, and I think it's encouraging with respect to relations between the government and the Teachers' Association, which over the past number of years have been troubled. I think all of us are happy to see that era end.

There is a section of the bill that there has been some question raised about, and that's with respect to the powers of the minister, but I think the more appropriate place to deal with that is in Committee of the Whole, when we start to look at the specific sections of the bill, Mr. Speaker.

So with those comments, I'll conclude. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Any further speakers?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark to close debate.

Mr. Maskell: Question, please.

[Motion carried; Bill 26 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has been another very exciting week, and the city and the province are full of Juno excitement fever. You never know how the weather can turn very quickly in this province sometimes, and I know that safety is a concern for all of our members, who wish to get to their constituencies all across the province in a safe manner.

On that historic note, pursuant to Government Motion 6 agreed to on February 18, 2004, I would move that we call it 5:30 p.m. and adjourn until Monday, April 19, at 1:30 p.m., along with good wishes to everyone for a well-deserved break from the dome for a few days to work hard in our constituencies.

[Motion carried; pursuant to Government Motion 6 the Assembly adjourned at 4:34 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, April 19, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/04/19

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

At the conclusion of the prayer, hon. members, would you please remain standing for the singing of our national anthem.

Let us pray. As we begin our deliberations in this sitting of the Legislature, we ask for the insight we need to do our work to the benefit of our province and its people and to the benefit of our country. Amen.

Now would you please join in the singing of our national anthem in the language of your choice. We'll be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 68 wonderful young students from St. Teresa Catholic elementary school in the constituency of Edmonton-Rutherford. They are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Camille Kauhaahaa-Hamel and Mr. Charlie Stuart. Their parent helpers are Mrs. Julie Thulin, Mrs. Cindy Shearer, Mrs. Trish McGuinness, and Mrs. Marie Reitzel. We'd ask our guests to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a very special guest. This guest was seated in your gallery on March 30, and that was to proudly witness her daughter deliver a member's statement in recognition of Tartan Day. I would ask that Mrs. Colleen Graham, who is the mother of my friend and colleague for Calgary-Lougheed, rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you 23 very bright grade 10 students from the Sturgeon composite high school. Accompanying them is Mr. Norman Zweifel, their teacher, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a great group of individuals from the Horizon Village in Glenwood. Twenty-three of the members are touring this afternoon, and I had a lovely visit with them before entering the Assembly today. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the people in the Assembly Mr. Albert Wagner, a grain and cattle farmer who resides in the constituency. Mr. Wagner, the past president of the Western Barley Growers Association, joins us along with some of his colleagues. Obviously, their interest is Bill 206. I'd ask Mr. Wagner to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you today five very distinguished guests from my constituency. I would ask them to stand – they're in both galleries – as I call their names: the president of the Western Barley Growers Association, Mr. Doug McBain; the Alberta vice-president of the Western Barley Growers Association, Doug Robertson; a past president of the Western Barley Growers Association, Gordon Reid, and his wife, Peggy Reid, from the Cremona area; and Jeff Nielsen, vice-president of the Western Barley Growers Association, from the Olds area. Would you please give them the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly a visiting group from Terrace Heights school this afternoon. The group is made up of 34 visitors, 31 students, and the group is led by teachers Frances Stead, Jennifer Bagshaw, and program aide Marilyn Sloan. They're in the public gallery, and I would now ask them to rise and receive the warm and traditional and gracious welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On your behalf I'd like to introduce Mr. Ed Armstrong from Dapp, Alberta, which is located in the Barrhead-Westlock constituency. Mr. Armstrong is with the Western Barley Growers Association and is seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. I'd ask him to stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly two ladies who will become constituents of Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview when the new electoral boundaries come into effect at the next election. They are here to observe the proceedings of this Assembly and are seated in the public gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly as I call out their names: Mrs. Zoria Grieve and Ms Belinda Pylypa.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a very hard-working couple from my constituency, Mr. Roy Sparks and Mrs. Janette Sparks. Roy and Janette run a grain and hay farm east of Innisfail, and Roy is also a director of the Western Barley Growers Association. They came to the Legislature today to support Bill 206, the Alberta Wheat and Barley Test Market Amendment Act, 2004, brought forward by the Member for Calgary-Mountain View. I would like Roy and Janette to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Mr. Jonson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly several constituents that have travelled to Edmonton to meet with me to discuss education in Alberta. They are seated in the members' gallery. I would ask that they please stand as I call their names: Ron Labrie, Bryan Martin, Brady Teeling, Pauline Mercer, Lori-Ann Hudacak, Rob Haggarty, and Darren Josephson. I'd ask members to give them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Learning Commission Recommendations

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Alberta Liberals said when the budget was introduced, this government's education budget falls far short of expectations. Instead of allowing school boards to implement the recommendations of the Learning Commission, classroom sizes will remain far below standards. Even the Learning Commission's chair said about the Learning budget, quote, I'm not sure this is transparent, open, and it's certainly not understandable, end quote. My questions are to the Premier. Why is this government letting down the children and parents of Alberta by failing to meet the benchmarks of the Learning Commission?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we are not by any stretch of the imagination letting down the children of this province. The hon. Minister of Learning is working through the recommendations. Some have already been accepted. Some, of course, have been rejected. We will work through the recommendations keeping in mind that we have identified learning in our 20-year strategy program as one of the key pillars and a commitment to learning. [interjection] Well, they can laugh like Santa Claus, but basically we have decided as a caucus that learning and education will be top priorities of this government, and we will commit ourselves over the next, well, few years anyway but certainly in the 20-year strategy to address the needs of those not only in K to 12 but in postsecondary institutions and those seeking to embark on a program of lifelong learning.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier talks about accepting and rejecting recommendations of the Learning Commission. Is it the case – because it appears to be – that they have rejected the Learning Commission's recommendation on classroom sizes?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth, and it's time this hon. leader started telling the truth. The truth is this. Now, listen. The truth is that the Learning Commission recommended that its class size guidelines be phased in over five years at an estimated cost of \$138 million. We can't do it all in one budget. We never said that we would do it all in one budget, but we do expect boards to begin reducing class sizes this year with the \$250 million budget increase and to continue to reduce class sizes with funding increases of nearly \$400 million in the next two years.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Is it the Premier's understanding that \$250 million is actually going into the school system? Is that his understanding?

Mr. Klein: Of course it is. Mr. Speaker, it is going to Learning. It is going to the benefit of children in the school system.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Taft: Thank you. As the Alberta Liberals have long been saying, the evidence continues to roll in that a strong public health care system is the best possible way to deliver health services. Recent information from the OECD, the federal government, and from Britain's National Health Service all show that private health care is more expensive and harder to control than public health care. To the Premier: how can Albertans be confident that the Calgary health region is providing value for money when a consortium in which they are a key player was disqualified from contracting with the British government because it could not offer value for money?

Mr. Klein: I have no idea relative to the situation as it relates to the Calgary health region and any contractual arrangements they might or might not have had with anyone, for that matter. I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, relative to a part of the preamble that relates to health care reform, that Alberta is not alone in talking about the urgent need for reform. In February all Premiers wrote to the Prime Minister saying: "It is imperative that [you] understand that without real reform and renewal and an affordable foundation, health care as we know it will not survive the decade."

The Prime Minister wrote a letter on April 13 – I'll be glad to table copies of this letter – to Premier Binns, who is chair of the Council of the Federation. In that he says, and I quote in part: with regard to health funding the additional \$2 billion to which you refer is over and above the commitment under the 2003 first ministers' accord on health care renewal for an additional \$34.8 billion federal investment over five years. That's good news depending on how it is to be distributed. But the important part of this letter is that we are in agreement that the health care system requires not only funding but also structural reform and renewal.

So, Mr. Speaker, certainly the Calgary health region may have had a contract. I can only commend them for trying something new, trying something that possibly could have created revenue, but if it didn't work out, so be it. At least they tried.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Will the Premier admit that his government's health care privatization plans are out of sync with a recent OECD

study which found that mixed public/private systems could not control costs as well as single-payer public systems?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the Liberal leader conveniently alludes to those things that create headlines and make for a good 15-second sound bite, and that's all the Liberals are good for, by the way. I don't know if they're good for 15 seconds, but sound bites they're good for.

Mr. Speaker, relative to health care reform and the whole issue of privatization, this idea or forms of this idea are only one small part of the puzzle. The true health care reform that we contemplate – and the package will be coming to caucus in the very near future – will be a broad process that might take years and must factor in the many complex challenges facing the system. These challenges include how we pay for new technologies, drugs, and infrastructure; how we recruit, train, and deploy health professionals; how we manage and administer the system.

1:50

Mr. Speaker, I believe that Albertans and most Canadians are ready for a change to the system. Notwithstanding what the Liberals say, they know that the system as we know it today is not sustainable. They know in their hearts that a system that requires annual budget increases of 7 to 10 per cent just to maintain the status quo is simply not affordable. The people of this province know; the Liberals don't.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. The Premier talks a lot about health care reform, but how can Albertans trust this government to reform their health care system when it tried and apparently failed through budget cuts in 1994, with the action on health plan in 1998, with the health summit in 1999, and with the Mazankowski report in 2002? What's next?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, all of these things will feed into the health reform. Relative to what took place in 1994, that was the first very significant step under the then health minister, who is now the Deputy Premier. It was a very significant step to take I forget how many health boards – I think there were something like 200 various health authorities – and boil those down into 18 and thus achieve administrative efficiencies. That was a very significant reform in itself.

Mr. Speaker, there have been numerous reforms since then. It's a work in progress, and we will have to continue to keep meeting the challenges of health care sustainability. But I don't apologize at all for what took place in 1994. I think it was very brave. It was a very bold and courageous step, and it achieved very significant administrative efficiencies.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Electricity Exports

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I wish this government would apologize for electricity deregulation. This government has created behind closed doors an electricity transmission policy that benefits power producers at the expense of Alberta electricity consumers. Last week the Premier overjoyed power producers by signing an agreement that could significantly boost Alberta's electricity exports to the United States. While the Premier's decision guarantees power producers even bigger profits, the Marthas and the Henrys in this

province are still struggling with sky-high electricity bills. My first question, Mr. Speaker, is to the Premier. Why did the Premier not consult with Albertans before he went ahead and threw the switch opening this province to further electricity exports to America?

Mr. Klein: You know, I talked earlier and alluded to the 15-second sound bite. Throwing "the switch": you know, all of these things lend themselves to good headlines but have nothing to do with the truth.

The truth is simply a matter of co-operation with the United States. The hon. member should read the memorandum that was signed by Governor Richardson of New Mexico and myself, and he will find that there is absolutely nothing sinister in that memorandum, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to point out that Alberta's rules ensure that provincial consumers pay for transmission lines only to the extent that they use them. That policy has not changed. Exporters pay for the lines to the extent that they use them, and they also pay for any lines that are dedicated for export. That is the truth. Now, if this man, this person, had any sense of honour, he would stand up and tell the truth for a change.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, the truth is in the Premier's own commission, the Bolger commission, which reports that increased exports will make electricity prices in Alberta higher at times. Why did the Premier sign an agreement that will increase the power bills of Alberta consumers?

Mr. Klein: The agreement, as I've said, was a very innocent memorandum. Well, Mr. Speaker, since he won't listen to me, perhaps he'll listen to the Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Ah, Mr. Speaker, I've been speaking to this member for many years now, and let's continue to try because we'll never give up hope for the hopeless.

Mr. Speaker, when he refers to the Bolger commission, it's very clear that it says, "New supply was added by private sector companies rather than by government." That means no debt applied to the backs of taxpayers, unlike the hundred billion dollars worth of debt that stretches across the nation. Our "new electricity capacity is more environmentally friendly." You are in a province that has the largest amount of wind power energy in the Dominion of Canada. In fact, this government has signed the largest green power contract in North America. "The wholesale power market is working well." That's what the Bolger commission says. Don't revise it here in this room. Be honest.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that both Manitoba and British Columbia use the revenue from electricity exports to drive down the price of domestic electricity, will this government step up and do the same to protect Alberta consumers and pass those savings on to the consumers?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, in one breath he's complaining about the whole notion of even considering the export of electricity, and now he's talking about sharing the benefits of export with Alberta consumers. Of course, we would love to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week the

Premier signed a deal paying the way for increased electricity exports to the United States, as we now know. While the Premier's buddies in the boardrooms of the energy industry are no doubt looking forward to fattening their bottom lines, this deal will mean even higher power bills for Alberta consumers. Intertwining ourselves with the U.S. market will only put upward pressure on prices here in Alberta. My question is to the Premier. Given the fact that power in California retails at considerably higher prices than it does here in Alberta, how can the government prevent the further spiralling of costs in Alberta's electricity prices?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I stated quite clearly that an export market will only be developed if there is, first of all, a demand and if we can fill that demand.

Mr. Speaker, this energy conference that the hon. Minister of Energy and I attended in Albuquerque, New Mexico, dealt with all matters of energy: electricity, natural gas, oil, solar energy, wind-powered energy, hydro-powered energy. It talked about how we create a North American as opposed to a Canadian alone or a Mexican alone or a United States alone environment relative to the sharing of these resources. Basically, that's all the agreement that I signed alludes to.

An Hon. Member: Table it.

Mr. Klein: I'd be glad to table it. It's a public document. You can get it on the Internet. You don't have to go to www.lib.com or whatever it is. It's on the Internet. It's a public document. I'd be glad to table it if he doesn't know how to use computers. I'd be glad to.

The whole thing is about sharing and developing – sharing and caring and developing – a continental energy policy as it relates to all forms of energy, Mr. Speaker. There can be absolutely nothing wrong with that because like the cattle industry, as I say, we're all in this, and it is an integrated system.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given the experience we've had with the natural gas industry and the Chicago prices we now pay, how can the Premier assure Albertans that we won't be paying even higher electricity prices when power companies can receive higher prices if they export to the United States?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know how one conceivably relates to the other. First of all, the policy of this province is that we won't export any power that we need and that will be used in the province of Alberta. Any export of power would have to be on transmission lines paid for by the power companies. Any power would have to be absolutely surplus to our needs. So I don't see how by any stretch of the imagination this relates to the price consumers pay for electricity or natural gas or any other energy commodity in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Let me put it simply. If a power producer can get a higher price for their electricity in the United States than they can in Alberta, why would they sell it here?

Mr. Klein: They would have to sell it here because the policy states

that they must meet the requirements of Alberta before any power is exported. So export power would only be power that is surplus to the needs of Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Beef Exports

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The United States Department of Agriculture has announced that all remaining conditions on the import of beef from animals less than 30 months of age have been removed. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What does this announcement mean for Alberta's cattle industry?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, certainly, the USDA announcement is a significant step in moving the agenda forward on the full integration of trade between the U.S. and Canada in both beef products and live cattle. What this means is that bone-in meat can now be shipped, that ground meat can now be shipped, that processed meat from animals that are less than 30 months of age can now be shipped.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this is only about animals and product from animals under 30 months, but it's I think a very clear signal that the USDA is committed to moving this process forward in a very orderly, scientific, rational manner to the end that we want, which is the complete resumption of trade in live cattle and beef products.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. You mentioned that this announcement from the U.S. is a signal on fully reopening the border to cattle and beef trade. Can you tell us how soon you expect the borders to open to all live cattle?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I wish I could. However, we understand that the United States has a process that they have to follow, and of course part of the process concluded on April 7, when the comment period ended. In the discussions that the Premier and I had with Mr. J.B. Penn, who is the undersecretary of agriculture in the U.S., when we were in Washington some three or four weeks ago, it was very clear to us that they have a strong desire to review those comments that were received in this comment period and the one prior to Christmas expeditiously, that their desire is to move this process forward, and that their desire is to resume normal trade with this industry.

I should say, Mr. Speaker, that in the beef part of this industry this takes us to about 90 per cent of normal trade.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Government Expense Claims

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Taxpayers are angry about the lack of transparency on government travel and hosting expenses. While the federal government moves toward greater accountability, the Alberta government is anything but accountable. My questions are to the Premier. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. member does have the floor.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. When will this government require that

all cabinet ministers and staff report every detail of their expenses on their web sites, just as the federal government now requires?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know if that's the way we will go, but I would suggest that the federal government post those small, million-dollar-plus contributions to ad companies in Quebec. Maybe they aren't personal expenses, but certainly they come out of the taxpayers' dollars. I certainly hope these Liberals are not suggesting that we adopt the financial practices of their federal cousins.

Mr. Speaker, we are now evaluating whether we need to change the way that expenses are reported and how we need to do a better job or perhaps don't need to, but maybe we do need to do a better job in the future. Government expenses right now are reviewed annually by the Auditor General. He is involved in this, as is the Ethics Commissioner, and we will act on any recommendations of the Auditor General and/or the Ethics Commissioner. As well, the government's Agenda and Priorities Committee will examine all options related to further reporting on international travel by government members.

So it's a work in progress, but to say that we're going to adopt the federal model, no. We're not going to do it just because the Liberals across the way, these Liberals, say that that's the way we should do it. We'll come up with a plan that is open and transparent and . . .

Mr. Bonner: West Edmonton Mall.

Mr. Klein: West Edmonton Mall has nothing to do with personal . . .

The Speaker: Please, please.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the Premier's Conservative cousins in Ontario brought in strict rules on expenses while they were still in government, what's stopping this government from following that set of rules? There's another choice for you.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I said, we're evaluating this whole business of expenses as we speak, and we want to have the best system. Now, I don't know much about the Ontario system, and I don't know much about the federal government system other than that we know there's a lot of coverage in the news media lately about the misappropriation of money. We want to have a system that is open, that is transparent, and that basically will hold all members of government, whether they're in cabinet or not, accountable for the expenditures they make. [interjection] And the opposition members, who also have expense accounts. You know, this whole thing, this holier-than-thou attitude, is a bit frustrating because they do run expenses.

That reminds me of the story one time when the NDs were in opposition. One of the hon. members criticized me for using a government plane from Calgary to go to Cold Lake when he drove up there and tried to let on that he wasn't benefiting when in fact he was getting 27 cents a kilometre to go up there and back. So he was making a lot more money than I ever made off that trip, I'll tell you that for sure, and these guys do as well.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Well, Mr. Premier, for a government that wants Alberta to win the competition with other provinces, why

is this government allowing Alberta to lose the competition on accountability? You don't want to do the federal system; you don't want to do the others.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I said, we're going through this. This is a work in progress. We have absolutely nothing to hide. The payments made to MLAs are published in public accounts, including all MLAs. For instance, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar received reimbursement for travel expenses, \$10,075. I don't know where he travelled to or what business he was on. If they want that kind of a breakdown, then we're going to demand that he account for every single kilometre that he travelled and what he saw along the way, where he was going, who he spoke to. [interjection] Well, do it. Do it. If you want to, stand up and report right now.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. A tough act to follow.

Electricity Exports (continued)

Mr. Knight: Last week, as we have been informed, the Premier travelled to Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the western governors' North American Energy Summit. That's what the meeting was. On Thursday he signed an addendum to the 2002 transmission siting protocol. That's what he signed. My questions are to the Energy minister. What is the implication to the province of Alberta of signing the addendum?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, you know, the question becomes so much more clear when the actual facts are stated as opposed to going to www.adlib.com. The addendum is to a 2002 original document. The export policy principles as established by this government are of May 29, 2002. So we do know that the Liberals are at least one if not two years behind.

I can say to the member that, as the Premier has stated and as we're more than pleased to table this protocol, this public document, it's a protocol amongst the Western Governors' Association, the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Energy, and the Council on Environmental Quality governing the siting and permitting of interstate electrical transmission in the western United States.

It goes on to say that it does help to facilitate the protocol of being able to establish transmission links and that the Premier hereby agrees

to undertake best efforts to cooperate with the Original Signatories in meeting the objectives listed in the Protocol recognizing, without altering, diminishing, or expanding the existing jurisdiction, statutory and regulatory responsibilities and authorities or budget processes of the Province of Alberta.

Hardly a secret, profit-based document.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Energy: can the minister assure residential and small and medium industrial and commercial consumers that they will not pay for future export transmission capacity?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, if only the Liberals could take a page out of what I think is good question crafting and good fact basing.

Mr. Speaker, we can assure small business, we can assure every

consumer in this province that they will be served first, that this addendum only serves to help lower their prices. It's very, very easy to see where the benefits can accrue to these individuals, businesses, and private persons with the amount of generation that this can attract and create.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The last question, again to the Minister of Energy: given the importance of this commodity, could you tell the Assembly why we would export electricity in any case?

Mr. Smith: Well, I think that's actually the question that those folks have been trying to put together all afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, I will remind the House, and do that by tabling at the appropriate period, of the electricity export principles as crafted on May 29 of 2002. Number one of the five guiding principles: "Alberta's electricity needs will be met while also serving export markets."

Now, if you have, Mr. Speaker, new generation – and the 3,000 megawatts of new generation have given us an average wholesale power price this quarter of 4.3 cents per kilowatt hour.

An Hon. Member: How much was that?

Mr. Smith: Four point three cents per kilowatt hour, Mr. Speaker.

This new generation, if it is used completely in Alberta, can then move forward into other marketplaces. As long as people can know that they have a place to sell all their electricity, as Alberta grows, as other jurisdictions grow, we will have new generation, and the new generation is the fundamental underpinning to a good, positive, nonblackout, reliable supply of electricity at affordable prices.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Low-income Support Programs

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government's decision to give Provincial Court judges a lower pay raise than they wanted was blamed on a commitment to other priorities. A cabinet document states: "Many priorities would come before increases to judge's salaries – seniors benefits, supplements to supports for independence and AISH issues, and other resources required in the justice system." My first question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Where are the increased AISH and SFI benefits that this order in council alludes to?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, the business plans have been released with the budget. I'll be up for estimates I believe next week or maybe the week after. In any case, in terms of AISH we increased the budget line item that we had for AISH. We're going to go into a formal review of AISH this fall. As far as what we've done on the SFI side, we've gone to a more individually based, need-assessed system.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is misreading the reasons that were given and attached to the order in council, and I might just expand for the benefit of the House what he's referring to and why what he's put before the House is a misread of what was said.

Judicial compensation commissions are set up every three years to

establish salaries for judges. As a result of a decision by the Supreme Court of Canada relative to how we determine judicial compensation under the Constitution of the country and the need for judicial independence, we are obliged to follow that format. Once a Judicial Compensation Commission reports, Lieutenant Governor in Council then has to deal with the report of the compensation commission and if it varies from the recommendations of the Judicial Compensation Commission, must provide reasons. In those reasons that were provided and that the hon. member has taken one small piece out of and tried to misrepresent, essentially what we've said is that the Judicial Compensation Commission has said that the raises that they proposed were affordable because the government has an excess of revenue over expenditures.

What we've said in the reasons is that that in itself does not mean that a raise of a particular magnitude is affordable, because you have to look at all the priorities of government and all the things that government has to take into account in determining how to spend and how to be accountable for the public's money. Among all those other things could be included things like raises to SFI or Alberta Works, raises to AISH, raises to seniors. We could have put in the reasons funding for public schools, funding for health care, all sorts of other priorities of government and the people which need to be taken into account.

Therefore, a Judicial Compensation Commission has a very difficult job when it tries to say: there's a surplus; therefore, it's affordable. That's what the reasons said. That's what the reasons mean.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Seniors: where is the increase to seniors' benefits that this document claims to be such a high priority?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, I don't know in the document specifically where it would refer, but I'll make a couple of statements here. In the last four years the increase to the seniors' benefits program has gone from some \$128 million to \$199 million. The number of seniors has not increased significantly. In the past three years I believe the payouts to individual seniors on ASB is about a 15 per cent increase. The number of folks helped on the special-needs program went from 7,500 to some 15,000.

I could go on and on and state where the programs to seniors in need in this province have improved, Mr. Speaker. When the estimates come up in May, they'll also see that there have been increases for the seniors' benefits program, for special needs this coming budget year.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, they forget to mention that Alberta is the leader – and I underline "the leader" – of all the provinces in implementing and matching federal funding in an area that's of national concern, one called affordable housing. So when they want to reference where the money is going within this department, I'd be more than pleased to answer. [Mr. Hancock rose]

The Speaker: We've already spent five minutes on this.

Please. The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier this time: now that we have seen these massive increases in the travel and communications budgets of this government, when will the seniors, the disabled, and those on SFI benefits get a much-needed increase in their benefits from this government?

The Speaker: Whoa. I fail to see the relationship between that third question and the first question. We've spent five and half minutes, and I've got a long list.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenagarry.

Telework

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Teleworking represents one of the most important new employment and societal directions in our world today. Teleworking employment could revitalize struggling rural areas, reduce infrastructure demand and downtown traffic congestion, create employment for the disabled, improve the environment, but it could also steal our brainpower away if we don't provide competitive opportunities for employees here. My first question is for the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Given that productivity gains of 20 per cent average and as high as 50 per cent have been reported amongst large organizations that have introduced major teleworking opportunities, what sort of initiatives is your department involved in that will promote teleworking within Alberta and specifically within the government workforce?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Well, thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. As far as the initiatives go, this is the kind of thing that we would look to for leadership from the private sector. As a government we are aware of the concept and, of course, always want to look at it and stay abreast of current thinking.

I agree with the preamble of the question in the sense of infrastructure, what it can do, and again for quality of life. What I haven't seen addressed in any of the research that I've been able to read to this point is: what is the impact or the downward pressure on wages by allowing people to stay at home? We haven't really had much discussion around those issues to this point but clearly less transportation expense required to get to work, perhaps wardrobe situations. Also, how is the issue of governance handled?

So there are many issues to this, and what looks on the surface of it always as a nice opportunity to provide another means of working – and I do recognize the member's concern about the disabled working at home. This is clearly important. But it's more complex than just a couple of articles out of a paper.

Mr. Lord: My second question for the same minister: given that an EKOS Research survey indicated that 55 per cent of 3,500 Canadian respondents wanted telework options, 43 per cent would switch employers to get telework options, and 33 per cent would choose telework opportunities over even a 10 per cent raise in pay, are there teleworking opportunities on the table in our labour negotiations with our provincial employees now?

Mr. Dunford: Again, as specific as the member would like me to be on this particular issue, the negotiations are going to be coming up later this fall. The demands that the employer will want at the next set of negotiations have not been established as yet, and of course we have no way of knowing at this particular point in time what the demands from the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees will be.

Mr. Lord: My third question is for the Minister of Innovation and Science. Given that the rollout of the SuperNet infrastructure could enable Alberta to become a world leader in teleworking opportunities, what initiatives is your department involved in to promote

telework technology and telework opportunities to Alberta employers?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the Alberta government is committed to a competitive global marketplace. Knowledge, skills, and innovation are important elements in a knowledge economy. What the Alberta SuperNet provides is the infrastructure to enable the opportunity for all Albertans to acquire the knowledge and skills to compete in the knowledge economy, and more importantly this infrastructure provides the opportunity for innovation that talks about the kind of initiative the hon. member is raising with respect to how we do work, from where it's delivered, because connected communities are all the same size.

Anthony Henday Ring Road

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, in its March 2004 inventory of major Alberta projects this government lists the southeast leg of the Anthony Henday ring road as costing Alberta taxpayers \$270 million. To the Minister of Transportation: does this amount include the \$75 million that the federal government will be contributing to the project?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I didn't hear if he said southwest or southeast, but the federal government has made kind of a commitment to the southwest leg. They've said that they will give us \$150 million: \$75 million for Calgary and \$75 million for Edmonton. But we haven't seen that money as yet because we're still negotiating on certain parameters of the agreement, and until those negotiations are done, I can't honestly say that that money is coming, although we are accounting for it in the total project cost.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: does the amount of \$270 million include the annual lease payments and the principal and interest costs for the project?

Mr. Stelmach: Sometime ago when we made the announcement on the southeast leg of the Anthony Henday, we were asked: what do you think the cost would be? At that time we said about \$300 million, but since then we have seen some pressures, mostly on bridge structures, and that's related to just a fast rising increase in the cost of steel. I believe it's gone up anywhere from 15 to 30 per cent, and in fact there are some that are only getting a seven-day commitment on the price of steel today.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: if Albertans have to wait until a contract is signed before finding out the cost of the project, then how do taxpayers ensure that they are getting value for their money?

Mr. Stelmach: A number of points. One, Mr. Speaker, we've said in this House and continue to say that the request for proposal coming back from one of the three proponents has to make economic sense. We have to see value for the taxpayer dollar invested.

Secondly, I cannot say today on behalf of this government what innovation these companies will bring to their request for proposals. They may want to do that particular stretch of road because of the immense amount of traffic – concrete may be the way to go given the number of car and truck travel. They may have other solutions in terms of mitigating the cost of steel and maybe use more concrete on the interchanges. But I would think that at the end of the day every company will seek innovation and also look at huge amounts of cost savings by not allowing for the mobilization and demobilization of

the equipment. Once they're on site, Mr. Speaker, they'll stay there till it's completed.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Health Care Reform (continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two months ago today exactly I first demanded that the Premier make public the Graydon report, the government's blueprint for a two-tiered health care system in this province. For months the government has been working on a strategy to implement the Graydon report and its recommendations for user-pay health care, yet this strategy is being developed in secret behind the closed doors of the caucus and the cabinet room. My questions are to the Premier. Why has the Premier repeatedly promised to make the Graydon report public but consistently failed to actually deliver on this promise made to this House?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, there are some things in the Graydon report that undoubtedly will make for, as I said before, good 15-second sound bites. The problem is that when you feed this kind of material in isolation to the opposition, they say that that then becomes government policy. You know, it's that old saying that yes means yes, maybe means yes, and no means maybe. To them, anything that is mentioned, anything that is on paper becomes government policy.

Now, the Graydon report in conjunction with the Mazankowski report in conjunction with the survey of best practices in other jurisdictions, the national association of ministers of health, the annual Premiers' conference with the Council of the Federation: all of this information will be brought together, and we will consider it as a package. It won't be considered in isolation. That is one of the dangers.

Now, if the hon. leader of the third party will stand up and promise not to highlight and take out of context the Graydon report, then perhaps we'll give it to them, but they won't do that because they will use this for purely political reasons. They will take out the most dramatic and the most sensitive of all issues and they will say: folks, that's what the government is going to do. They will not use it to tell the truth. That is the problem.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, the Premier has my promise. Will he table this report here tomorrow?

Given that the government has been planning radical changes to the health care system based on the Graydon report, how can the Premier justify keeping Albertans in the dark about that report? Albertans demand that it be released now.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, notwithstanding his yelling, he did promise. Well, I have no problems, you know, releasing the Graydon report, but I appeal to anyone, including the media, not to say that that report is the end-all and the be-all. That is like funding. That is like any other issue: one small piece of the puzzle. There are some good things in the Graydon report, some of which might be accepted, some of which might be rejected. But, for God's sake, don't imply or indicate that it's going to become or it is government policy, because it is not.

Now, the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti did a commendable job, spent a tremendous amount of time working on that report, and that report will be given the utmost consideration along with a multitude of other information related to health care reform. So if

the hon. leader of the third party gives an absolute undertaking that he will not politicize this and he will not use it for political purposes and he will not stand up and say that this is where the government is heading, if he will stand up and make that commitment, then he might – might – get the report.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, once again I give this promise to the House and to the Premier that I'll focus on the contents of the report.

Now I ask him: on exactly what date will he release this report to this House and to the people of Alberta?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I only have a promise relative to the contents of the report; I don't have a promise relative to how he intends to use it. I mean, notwithstanding the fact that there are only two of them, they are still politicians.

Mr. Speaker, it will be tabled, as they say, in the fullness of time, and it will be tabled in an appropriate manner so as not to be taken out of context.

head: **Recognitions**

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven to participate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday I was pleased to join you, our Minister of Community Development, the leaders of both opposition parties, and numerous colleagues to mark the anniversary of Yom ha-Shoah, Holocaust Memorial Day.

In 2000 the Alberta Legislature unanimously passed the Holocaust Memorial Day and Genocide Remembrance Act. Through this act we remember the senseless and systematic annihilation of 6 million European Jewish people as well as other victims of genocide.

Today I encourage Albertans to do more than remember. As global citizens we must be diligent in pursuing our responsibility to maintain a vigil, to stand on guard, and to defend others and ourselves against discriminatory behaviour and attitudes. We must listen to the voices of history and educate our children about the horrors of the Holocaust. We must honour those who fought and played an important role in defeating the evil of tyranny. Let's use this time to teach one another that those who live with us are our brothers and our sisters and that together we share the same short moment of life.

Mr. Speaker, as Albertans we will remember, for we must never forget.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Juno Week

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to rise to congratulate all the organizers and volunteers who helped make Juno Week in Edmonton, the first week of April, the most successful celebration of Canadian music this country has ever seen. Congratulations to all our nominees: Sandro Dominelli, Aaron Lines, Terri Clark, John Stetch, Amanda Forsyth, Jessica Linnebach, and in particular the Alberta-born rockers Nickelback, who took home two Junos for group of the year and fan choice award.

Alberta's music and recording industry is a vital part of what makes our province such an exciting and vibrant place to live. Thankfully, our Alberta Foundation for the Arts, which receives its funding from the Alberta lottery fund, actively supports our arts community.

I also extend a special thanks to our Minister of Community Development, who along with Mayor Bill Smith and Senator Tommy Banks worked so hard to bring the Junos to Edmonton and to showcase our city and our province to the rest of Canada.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Alberta Volunteers

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize some extremely important Albertans, our volunteers, and I would especially like to acknowledge the great work of the Wild Rose Foundation and all participants in Alberta's voluntary sector.

I know that throughout this week there are special recognition ceremonies taking place in almost all of the communities across this province. However, as the representative for the community of St. Albert I would like to recognize those five finalists in the volunteer citizen of the year for 2003. They are Lawrence and Doris Burt, Ferne Carignan, Michael Clulow, Gary Jurke, and Doris Lunn.

We also recognize at this time the leaders of tomorrow, who are the young members of our community who give so selflessly to other members within the community and beyond. They are Sara Hickerty from Bertha Kennedy elementary school, Briana Foster from Richard S. Fowler junior high, Jason LaChapelle from Paul Kane high school, Holli Lizée from the University of Alberta, and the youth group the Columbian Squires of the Brother Anthony Kowalczyk Circle 4759.

I'd like to recognize them and ask all members of this Assembly to recognize the wonderful volunteers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:40

National Volunteer Week

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to recognize April 18 to 24 as National Volunteer Week. I hope the hon. members know – and I'm sure they do – how lucky we are here in Alberta. We have a very high level of volunteerism: hours and hours worked with dedication, experience, and, may I say, professionalism.

Coming from the arts, I know that our arts and cultural sector is deeply indebted to volunteers. They work as ushers, build sets and paint them, sell tickets, help with fundraising, transport things. You name it; volunteers do it. Just think of where Alberta's summer festivals would be without volunteers.

I want to honour and thank volunteers that work in some of the other areas like police victim services, literacy, youth sports and recreation, the food banks, blood services, emergency and disaster services, Catholic charities, United Way, the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues, the SPCA and humane societies, child protection and assistance, the YWCA and the YMCA. The list goes on; I've only touched the surface.

To finish, I want to recognize the people who volunteer on various county, municipal, and government committees bringing the citizen's voice to the issues.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Smoky Lake Firefighters' Curling Team

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's great to rise today and recognize four individuals: Ken Osepchuk, Bill Smith, Larry LaFleur, and Jim Henderson. They represent the Smoky Lake fire

department curling team. After winning the provincial firefighters' curling championship, they went on to compete at the 45th annual firefighters' Brier curling championship held in Valleyfield, Quebec, from April 1 to 11. This local team not only represented Smoky Lake but Alberta and competed against teams representing each province, one team from the Northwest Territories, two teams from Ontario.

I would like to thank the community of Smoky Lake for their support and congratulate our local team on winning the Canadian firefighters' championship curling bonspiel. Let's all give them a hearty congratulations.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Grande Prairie Storm Hockey Team

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to recognize and congratulate the Grande Prairie Storm junior A hockey team. The Storm captured their first ever Alberta Junior Hockey League title last Thursday by defeating the Fort McMurray Oil Barons – I see the member has vacated the Chamber; he couldn't stand it – in a dramatic 4 to 2 victory.

For the players, coaches, and training staff this accomplishment represents a moment that will be forever written in the team's proud hockey history. This particular team have only been in existence nine years. The journey continues as the team now moves on to compete at the Doyle Cup in Nanaimo and after that the Royal Bank Cup, which will be held in the city of Grande Prairie May 8 to 16.

On behalf of the members of this Assembly I extend congratulations to general manager and head coach Fran Gow, President Bruce Little, and all members of the Grande Prairie Storm hockey team on this accomplishment. Best wishes for continued success in the year ahead.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Millwoods Welcome Centre for Immigrants

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with pleasure that I rise today to recognize the Millwoods Welcome Centre for Immigrants. This centre is a joint venture of the Indo-Canadian Women's Association, Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, and Catholic Social Services and was established in 1997 after a study conducted by Dr. Laura Ho which demonstrated the need for such a centre.

The centre now assists approximately one thousand newcomers every year to overcome the challenges of becoming Canadian. In addition to offering classes to improve language and computer skills, the centre arranges for work placements for internationally educated professionals. This service is particularly important given the unacceptably high number of qualified professionals who continue to be underemployed and unable to meet their full potential in their adopted country, Canada.

In Alberta we are in desperate need of improved measures to integrate international professionals into our institutions and our economy. Albertans are truly privileged to live in a multicultural society that is enhanced by the contributions of diverse groups and individuals.

I am truly proud of the work performed by the staff and volunteers of the Millwoods Welcome Centre and thank them for the valued services that they provide to new Canadians.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition from Edmonton Police Service signed by 151 people petitioning the Legislative Assembly to "support Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act, which will provide more security and peace of mind for people working in occupations who have a higher risk of exchanging bodily fluids with a potential carrier of a blood borne disease."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise to table copies of the House leaders' agreement that was signed today by the Government House Leader as well as by the House leader of the Official Opposition and by the House leader of the third party. It's my understanding that it has to be photocopied and circulated to all members of this Assembly as soon as possible, so I will provide a copy now to the page for that purpose.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table five copies of the documents I referred to during my question today, and that is the federal government's new guidelines for ministers' offices on disclosure and accountability around personal travel and hosting expenses. It includes some sample pages from the web sites in which they go into layers of detail right down to the purpose of the meeting, how many people were at it, what the cost was, that level of detail. Most informative. I do recommend it to everyone in the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling this afternoon, and that's a letter that I had written on March 31, 2004, to the hon. Minister of Finance, and this is in regard to credit scoring as an underwriting tool for the insurance industry in Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table two documents today. The first is a letter from Elisabeth Ballermann, the president of the Health Sciences Association of Alberta. The second document is a news release from HIV Edmonton dated March 22 of 2004. Each of these documents expresses serious concerns that many Albertans have about Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I have two quick tablings this afternoon as well. One is the Clearwater/Christina rivers management plan, and I would like to just have it noted that this is Alberta's first provincial/Canadian heritage rivers designation. It's intended to recognize the interests of everyone who lives along

that river and uses it for recreation purposes, and it demonstrates the importance and the value of these partnerships in preserving and enhancing Alberta's wetlands and aquatic ecosystems.

My second tabling is on behalf of our Deputy Premier, who is also the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and it is responses to questions that were raised during interim supply estimates on March 17, 2004, in this House.

Thank you.

head: **Orders of the Day**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In accordance with the House leaders' agreement, which I just tabled and which was signed earlier today by the three House leaders and acknowledged by yourself I believe, I would move that the Assembly provide unanimous consent to give effect to this House leaders' agreement, specifically consent under point 5 of that agreement to waive Standing Order 34(2.1)(a) regarding an amendment in that agreement and to allow the removal of the motions for returns identified at 4(b)(iii) and 5(b) of that agreement and to waive Standing Order 34(2) to allow the Assembly to move on to public bills and orders following the Assembly having dealt with Motion for a Return 23 as outlined in that agreement.

2:50

The Speaker: The procedure today is very, very unusual, but I do want to compliment those who've worked together over the last several weeks in attempting to build a consensus with respect to this matter. It was not always easy on previous Mondays in terms of this.

The request is being made here today on the basis of a motion of the hon. Deputy Government House Leader calling for three items which are located on page 3 of 3. This is not all being read into the *Hansard* because we'll have it published anyway in the *Journals* of the House. The request is for unanimous consent to see three things moved, and all hon. members now have a copy of this document in front of them.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: Unanimous consent having been given, as we move through the afternoon, additional comment will be made with respect to this, but again congratulations for attempting to unravel a little roadblock.

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and may I just say thank you to all members of the House for allowing that unanimous consent, which will allow us to speed along and provide as much information as possible and get on with other business thereafter.

Mr. Speaker, proper notice having been given on Thursday, April 1, it's my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 47, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, and 59.

[Motion carried]

Children's Services Contracts

Q47. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report to strengthen the processes used by the Ministry of Children's Services for awarding and managing contracts in order to save taxpayers' dollars?

Ms Blakeman: We have asked for this question in this format as we're not always able to examine every ministry before the Public Accounts Committee. We have put a number of written questions on the Order Paper in order to ensure that we're able to make public the questions and hopefully the responses from the government.

This is a fairly straightforward question. I'm expecting a positive response from the government and provision of the information that has been requested.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased indeed to respond on behalf of the government and accept Written Question 47.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

[Written Question 47 carried]

Lottery Fund

Q49. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

Which reports, consultation groups, and stakeholder reviews have indicated to the government that money allocated to the lottery fund is best spent by the government rather than being returned to the local communities where the gambling revenues came from?

Ms Blakeman: This is an attempt on my part to ascertain the logic behind the dismantling of the community lottery boards. Now, that in fact happened some two years ago now. It came into effect at the beginning of last year I think, and there was a fair to-do when the community lottery boards were dismantled. In response to the concerns raised by the opposition and by the community, the government responded with a different program with different processes, limits, and requirements.

I have been unable to get a clear answer from the government as to why they decided to dismantle the community lottery boards of the time, in which money was allocated on a per capita basis and the decision-making process happened in the communities or on a regional basis very close to the communities. The process that's in place now is a centralized decision-making process, very close to government, does not have that same community outreach. Members of the community continue to make clear to me that they far prefer the other method.

I'm interested in receiving the basis on which the government made its decision. So I am looking for documentation. I'm looking for reports or consultation groups or the stakeholder reviews that did indicate to the government that people preferred to have those decisions made by government rather than in the local community.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. There are two general areas that I'd like to cover by way of response. The first is that the Alberta

lottery fund and the programs, generally speaking, that we have under that are as a result of listening to Albertans. There are specifically three reports – the Gordon report in 1995, called New Directions for Lotteries and Gaming; the gaming summit report in 1998; and the licensing policy review in 2001 – all of which are public and can be found on the ministry web site.

Additionally, I can advise that on an annual basis we in Alberta Gaming do poll Albertans to determine what level of satisfaction they have with respect to how the lottery fund revenue is used, and the most recent information is that 70 per cent or indeed a high percentage of Albertans are satisfied. That is reported in our annual report, and the annual report is also a public document that can be found on the ministry's web site.

The second general point that I wish to make, Mr. Speaker, is that lottery dollars are directly returned to Alberta communities through the fund. The hon. member refers to the community initiatives program, that was established in 2002. There were questions at that time as to why the predecessor was dismantled, and they were answered at that time. The answer with respect to the dismantling is that the previous program was eliminated because of lack of funds in the budget. That was the answer at that time, and it remains correct today.

The program that took its place was the community initiatives program, which over the past two years has had some \$60 million allocated to the communities and the charities in those communities. In excess of 2,500 grants have been granted. The program is again in place for this year and likely will continue into the future.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, that from my point of view the evidence is very clear with respect to this program. There has been no to-do. I do not receive letters from people saying that this program is not successful. Indeed, it seems that on a daily basis I receive letters from all areas of the province which, in fact, say that this program is overwhelmingly successful, that it is incredible.

In that regard, I do wish to file 16 letters directly related to the hon. member who has asked the question, letters of support that she had signed, three in number, and 13 letters from charities in her community which say that this particular program is outstanding. I don't have any letters from this hon. member's community that I'm aware of saying anything other than that. So I don't know who she's talking to, but I know that those people are not talking to me. Perhaps she can make that connection so that I do have some point of view other than one which is that this program is working very well indeed.

So the bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that I have referred to various public documents. I will be filing with the Legislature the requisite number of letters that I've referred to, which are reflective of the dozens and dozens and perhaps even hundreds of letters that we have received over the past two years that simply speak to the incredible success of this program. I therefore urge the Legislature to reject this question.

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'm disappointed to hear that the minister is refusing to provide the information and, further, is making an end run around the accuracy of some of the reports that he quoted. In fact, if we're going to look at what came out of the gambling summit and if we're going to look at what came out of the Gordon report, they were very specifically recommending and, in fact, from those two flowed the creation of the community lottery boards, not the community initiatives program.

So to somehow refer back to them and say, "Well, no, that was the impetus on which the government decided to dismantle the community lottery board and institute a lesser program," it's hard to forgive that kind of use of the truth, frankly.

I'm wondering if he's referring to the recent use of proceeds and licensing around the casino and bingo reports as his third reference there, as a reasoning. Well, there's no connection at all to that report, to the information that I was seeking here, so I wouldn't accept that referral as any kind of information around this.

I'm curious as to why the minister does not receive copies of the tablings. Certainly, at the time the community lottery board was dismantled, I tabled dozens and dozens of letters from organizations. There were media conferences. There were long lists of people that signed letters of concern and petitions. So I'm concerned with the process that exists in the Conservative caucus if information like that is not shared with the minister that needs to be seeing it.

Frankly, to pretend that a letter that I would write in support of an organization in my community applying for funds is some kind of example of my approval of a given program is simply not accurate. To organizations in my constituency that come to me for a reference or a letter of support in order to be applying for community facility enhancement money or any of the other lottery grant, lottery-funded programs that are out there – Wild Rose Foundation, Alberta Foundation for the Arts – I'm not going to say: no, I'm not going to write you a letter of support because the Minister of Gaming might get up at some point in the future and use that letter of support to somehow say that I do or do not support the given program. That's ridiculous, Mr. Speaker. Of course I'm going to assist those organizations. That's who I'm here to represent and support.

But signing a letter that says that this organization, you know, is a well-known organization, has a good volunteer base, manages its money well, has a good project that is worthy of support does not, then, in turn say that I think the community facility enhancement program or the CIP program is a good or bad program. I'm there to support the organizations that are asking for support, and letters supporting them are not – you cannot extrapolate that to a specific support or nonsupport of a government program.

Finally, the minister makes reference to polls that he's conducted, but the polls themselves are not released. What we get is a little tidbit of information here, reference in a performance measurement there that says that there is a 70 per cent satisfaction, but we don't get to see what the polls are. We don't get to see who they went out to, what the polling number was particularly. So that's not useful information either.

I think that at best the minister has ducked around what's being requested here. He's flat out refused to provide the information that's been requested. Remembering well the controversy at the time, it just leaves me saying: what's the government hiding if they refuse to provide the information? So a most unfortunate turn of events in having the minister decide not to give us the information. From this we're only left to decide that they really didn't have any information. I'm disappointed in the decision of the minister.

Thank you.

[Written Question 49 lost]

Seniors' Housing

Q50. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Seniors improve

its system for monitoring the performance of management operations that deliver social housing programs for the ministry?

Ms Blakeman: Now, this is one of the questions that I was specifically referring to with my opening remarks, Mr. Speaker, in that we don't get to see a full rota of the ministries during any given year of Public Accounts Committee meetings. We only meet while the Legislature is in session, which severely restricts the number of departments that we're able to scrutinize. In trying to make sure that we got some things on the record, I did put these questions through as written questions. Public Accounts has in fact met with the minister, but I look forward to his response to this specific question and his provision of the information that has been requested.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the government I'm prepared to accept Written Question 50.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: My thanks to the minister.

[Written Question 50 carried]

Business Resumption Planning

Q51. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Government Services make provision for appropriate recovery facilities and equipment to resume business operations if a service disruption occurs?

Ms Blakeman: We had discovered, in examining public accounts previously, that there was some disarray around business resumption after a disaster. The Minister of Municipal Affairs has answered some of those questions when appearing before Public Accounts, but in this case we're specifically interested in what the Department of Government Services has done and what plans are in place because this is the government department that handles so many of our legalities and technicalities, if I may, things like the motor vehicle registration, the registries, which have now been privatized. Nonetheless, they're still ultimately responsible for them. What plans are in place for resumption of business should a disaster strike?

So I'm interested in hearing from the minister whether he's willing to provide us with his response. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, thank you. We will respond and indicate that the government is pleased and prepared to accept Written Question 51.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: My thanks to the minister.

[Written Question 51 carried]

Licence Plates

Q52. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.

What did it cost the government to recall all licence plates issued with the letters BSE and issue new ones?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're prepared to accept Written Question 52 and also just add into the record, so that folks know, that the total cost of recalling the licence plates that had the prefix BSE on them comes to \$715.10. To recall and actually replace those plates was \$439, and the shipping charges around the province were \$51, and replacing 31 plates that were returned by the public – we gave the public the opportunity, if they had already bought and secured a plate that had BSE as a prefix, to return it – cost \$225, for a total of \$715. We accept that we will send that information back to the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar in writing.

3:10

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wanted to just make a few comments in connection to this. I appreciate that the Government Services minister has given us the amount of money that's involved here, and I also appreciate that the amount of money is relatively small, but this particular question raises eyebrows, I think, when people hear that the government actually took the step of recalling licence plates issued with the letters BSE.

It is one of the, I guess, sillier actions of government, and I would really like to understand why the government felt it was necessary to withdraw these licence plates simply because they had the letters BSE on them and whether or not there's a policy around this if the three letters in a licence plate happen to coincide with some other unfortunate abbreviation. None of them actually spring to mind, but I'm sure there probably are a number that have been proscribed because of any unfortunate connotation. What's the policy with respect to this? When did the government make the decision and why?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for the breakdown in costs associated with licence plates that were issued with the letters BSE.

[Written Question 52 carried]

The Speaker: Now, just a second. There's a very interesting consequence of what happens here. Remember that it is the Assembly that has to give acceptance to the question. What would have happened if the hon. minister, as he did, gave the answer but then the Assembly turned down the motion? Would there then have been a point of privilege against the hon. Minister of Government Services for having believed that he was above the Assembly? This is one of those interesting little procedural questions that today was rather innocent but on another day could have been something else.

Construction Grants

Q53. Mr. Bonner moved that the following question be accepted. What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-

2003 annual report that the Department of Infrastructure require grant recipients to formally accept the terms and conditions of construction grants including roles and responsibilities, consequences for failing to adhere to the terms and conditions, reporting requirements, and the ministry's right to audit the grant recipient's use of taxpayers' money?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Infrastructure we're prepared to respond and indicate that the government is prepared to accept Written Question 53.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: I'd like to thank the minister.

[Written Question 53 carried]

Regional Police Forces

Q54. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

Which communities is the Solicitor General working with to establish regional police forces?

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, this is flowing from the original draft report of the MLA committee that reviewed the Police Act. They came out with some initial concepts which the Solicitor General examined over the summer and fall, came back with some responses, and then we didn't hear anything more from them for two years until just recently when we had the government's acceptance and rejection in final form. This flowed out of that because I was interested in what work was actually being done and which communities were being actively worked with to achieve this.

I think there's still a debate around whether regional policing is the most effective, but I'm at this point very interested in it because I think that's a way for costs to be contained and services to be shared without getting into the more formal structure of a provincial police force, which I am not in favour of. I think this is an interesting proposal, and I'd like to see where it's being considered. So the question is on the Order Paper for the Solicitor General at this point, and I'm hoping that she will support my request and grant the information.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to propose an amendment to Written Question 54 if I may. I move that Written Question 54 be amended by striking out "regional police forces" and substituting "regional police services." So the question will read, "Which communities is the Solicitor General working with to establish regional police services?"

The amendment, Mr. Speaker, uses the term "police services" instead of "police forces" because that is in keeping with the legislation as well as the philosophy and role of policing in Alberta. This amendment has been approved by Parliamentary Counsel, and I believe it's been passed around. I know I have a copy. At this time I move that Written Question 54 be accepted with the amendment.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to this. I appreciate the minister's comments, and I appreciate as well the minister's amendment, which I supported.

You know, it's an interesting question, Mr. Speaker, the question of regionalizing municipal services and particularly police. I happen to think that regionalization of services is a good step to take and one that we ought to support, and I'm pleased that the minister is going in this direction. It doesn't make sense to me, taking for example the Edmonton regional area, to have a number of police forces. In fact, what actually occurs is that we have RCMP operating in different communities and you have the city police.

When I was involved in the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and, as well, at Urban Municipalities Association meetings, I often heard the concerns by municipalities who had RCM Police about the lack of responsiveness to their local needs. It was very difficult, indeed, sometimes to have responsive policing. Particularly, the RCMP had lagged considerably behind. I don't know if they've made up lost ground since that time, Mr. Speaker, but they had lagged considerably behind the municipal police forces of Edmonton and Calgary in implementing community policing. This was very difficult in such a centralized body as the RCMP is. You can't have community policing if it's directed from Ottawa, and that presented a real difficulty.

3:20

I think there are very substantial cost savings that could be realized as a result of this regionalization, but the problem comes, Mr. Speaker, in that smaller communities are very concerned about any attempts to enforce a larger municipality's control over their services. They like to keep control of their local services. So that's a challenge, I think, for the minister. She needs to find ways in which local communities can actually increase a degree of local control in a regionalized police service, and I think there is lots of potential to do that with respect to regionalization if it's done in a sensitive manner.

Mr. Speaker, I guess in conclusion I would like to commend the minister for moving in this direction. I would suggest that there needs to be strong leadership if we're going to overcome some of the parochialism that does exist with respect to different municipalities jealously guarding their powers and authority.

I think there is a tremendous opportunity to improve policing, make it more sensitive, implement community policing more thoroughly, and indeed to save a considerable amount of money, and I would think that one of the first things the government should do is try and come up with some financial information that would indicate what savings ought to be realized. It's been said that there are too many municipal politicians, all of whom are able to, you know, draw a salary, require administrative support, and so on. How many police chiefs do you need? How many fire chiefs do you need? How many heads of sewer departments and so on do you actually need in order to deliver those municipal services?

I think the provincial government does have a leadership role here, Mr. Speaker. I think it's clear that if they do provide strong and firm leadership, they can save municipal taxpayers a great deal of money and at the same time can improve the service, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre has suggested, correctly in my view, in avoiding going to a provincial police service, which I think would not be the best solution at all. There are lots of gains that can be made by co-operation between municipalities and by regionalization, and I'm sure that the Minister of Municipal Affairs would also agree with that type of statement.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would again just want to indicate my appreciation to the minister for accepting the question, to the hon. member

for raising the question, and hope that this will in fact see the light of day and the citizens of Alberta will be the beneficiaries.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I look forward to receiving the information. It should be very informative. Thank you.

[Written Question 54 as amended carried]

Construction Grants

Q55. Mr. Bonner moved that the following question be accepted. What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Infrastructure protect the spending of taxpayers' dollars by strengthening its monitoring process for construction grants?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Infrastructure I accept Written Question 55.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'm pleased to rise to speak to this written question, and I appreciate that the minister has agreed to answer it. One of the things that I think is very important is that we do have a clear understanding of exactly how one might want to ensure that construction grants are well spent. The Auditor General did say in his recommendations in the 2002-03 annual report that the Department of Infrastructure should protect the spending of taxpayers' dollars by strengthening "its monitoring processes for construction grants." So I think it's a very pertinent question, and indeed I would urge all members to support the motion.

You know, the provincial government spends a great deal of money on this type of grant. The Auditor General makes recommendations, and usually these recommendations are well thought out, so it's important that we get an answer to the question. I do believe that the government should be taking strong action. I know that in my experience, again in municipal politics, there were oftentimes construction projects which were approved that were not the most effective use of taxpayers' money, and a good strong oversight I think is absolutely essential if we're going to continue to do that.

I remember one instance, Mr. Speaker, where a project to build a sewer was approved in the city of Edmonton. It was called the Highlands sewer, and since I come from Edmonton-Highlands I know a little bit about that particular project. It was an interesting project. There was an existing sewer that flowed from . . . [interjection] Absolutely. I'm using this as an example of what can go wrong, hon. minister. I'm not saying that it was your project at all, but you see that in the absence of really strong measures to make sure that these projects are well managed and cost-effective, this kind of thing could even happen in this minister's department, believe it or not.

In this particular case an outside company was brought in which looked at the existing sewer and said: "Well, you know, it's 30, 40 years old. We don't even know if it's a valid project. It might collapse. We can't test it. We can't examine it. So what we're going to do is we're going to build a brand new parallel Highlands

sewer, the new Highlands sewer, because we don't know if the old one is in good enough shape."

What happened is that they went along and they started to build this sewer. They got most of the way through it, and they spent close to \$50 million, Mr. Speaker. That's a lot of money. Then a problem occurred in Gold Bar park, and there was an eruption of sewage from this partially completed line because there had been a rainstorm and all of the water got into the sewer and it surcharged and it erupted. It wasn't quite finished. It hadn't quite got all the way to the Gold Bar Wastewater Treatment Plant.

So we got the city auditor general involved, Mr. Speaker, and he began to examine this project and interestingly enough came to the conclusion that there was a big problem with the design of the new sewer but, furthermore, raised questions about the old sewer. Then the department claimed at that point that two sewers were needed to handle expansion, but the auditor general pointed out that even if they were both completed, the waste-water treatment plant only had enough capacity for one sewer.

3:30

So they built a second line to double the capacity of the waste-water treatment plant. They would need millions and millions of dollars to expand the waste-water treatment plant, and that wasn't even in the plan. So the lack of oversight in this case ended up costing the taxpayers \$40 million or \$50 million, yet the administration and the construction and engineering firms wanted to forge ahead and finish the line for an additional \$17 million.

Then it was discovered, Mr. Speaker, that in fact the old line could be inspected, and an engineer was put in charge of inspecting that line. Sure enough, the inspection showed that the old line was not in danger of collapse – in fact, it was in very good shape – and further found that the line could not only be inspected; it was designed to be inspected. If the outside firms had taken the time to actually look at the original plans for this sewer, they probably would've been able to determine that and save the taxpayers a lot of money.

So here's an enormous waste of taxpayers' money on an absolutely unrequired line when the first line could've been inspected all along. Had proper safeguards as proposed by our Auditor General been in place at that time, the taxpayers would have been saved a great deal of money.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to indicate that it is very important. This question is very, very relevant, and I think the hon. Minister of Transportation is quite right in accepting this motion because without these kinds of safeguards a great deal of money can be wasted. I know that all hon. members want to ensure that that does not in fact happen. So I am pleased to support the motion and commend the minister and the hon. member for asking and agreeing to answer the question.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I would like through the Minister of Transportation to thank the Minister of Infrastructure for accepting Written Question 55.

[Written Question 55 carried]

Natural Gas Rebate Program

Q56. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.

How much money in total was distributed to utility customers in January 2004 through the government's natural gas rebate program?

Mr. Bonner: Now, once again this is one of these essential questions whereby the opposition would like to certainly hold the government accountable in that we know where taxpayer dollars are going. So I look forward to the reply from the minister.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Energy and on behalf of the government I wish to indicate that we are prepared to accept Written Question 56.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I again am quite pleased that the government has agreed to this question because I think this is one of the most relevant questions that has actually been put in this session.

You know, we have seen government numbers with respect to this, Mr. Speaker. There were a variety of programs just before the last election. We do have a global figure for this, and it is \$4.2 billion, but that includes a multitude of programs including the electricity rebate program, including the \$150 down and \$150 after the government is re-elected. All of those programs, I think, deserve a great deal of scrutiny from the people of Alberta. So I think the question is quite relevant.

The charge has been made that the provincial government essentially bought its way out of a very difficult position with respect to utility costs before the last election. As we know, just before this election there was a tremendous spike in electricity prices caused precisely by deregulation, and there were a lot of unanswered questions about that around the time.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

For example, there was participation in the energy market at that time by the American energy company Enron, and, Mr. Speaker, as we well know, there were a series of charges brought against Enron in the United States for manipulating electricity prices among other sins. Enron has been subject in the United States to prosecution and heavy penalties for their manipulation, but their role in Alberta has never been clarified. Certainly, with the high prices in electricity at that time the bottom line of Enron and other energy companies did not suffer. The question is: did that kind of manipulation of electricity prices take place in Alberta? This is a question the government, unfortunately, has been unwilling to ask or even to look into.

We've raised this issue before. The Minister of Energy has declined to order an investigation into that period of time. So then the government response was not to get to the bottom of the price spike and the high prices that people were paying both in gas and electricity but to order rebate programs. I just want to indicate that I think that the \$4.2 billion was an outrageous amount of money.

It's interesting, Mr. Speaker, as well, that since that time the government has not spent anywhere near as much money on rebate programs. In fact, before this winter we were able to say that they had not spent a nickel on rebate programs since the election. They spent \$4.2 billion – that's billion with a "b" – before the election, but after the election nada, not a penny, until, of course, finally, finally

gas prices got so high and stayed so high for a sustained period of time that they actually reached the trigger that the government thought it had set outside the reach of the actual prices, and we actually did get some rebates in terms of natural gas over the past winter months. That was the first time that Albertans had seen any kind of energy rebate since the last election.

[The Speaker in the chair]

So the question really is: why would the government spend \$4.2 billion on rebates just before the election and then cut them off, just cut them off, once the election was out of the way? What are the possible election – sorry; that was a bit of a Freudian slip. What were the possible reasons for that? Could it have been that they weren't needed? No. We found that prices for electricity and natural gas stayed high. They didn't quite spike as high in the electricity sector as they did just before the election, but they remained very high, and we saw continued increases in natural gas prices as well.

3:40

Certainly, in the area of electricity there was a considerable sustained increase. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Alberta now has the highest electricity prices in the country. That wasn't the case – that wasn't the case – before deregulation. We now have prices that are anywhere between 60 to 80 per cent higher than before deregulation. The government has not come up with rebate programs to help Albertans handle that nor have they been willing to change their mind on deregulation, which is really the source of it.

But, you know, there's still hope, Mr. Speaker, because we know that Bill 1, not the last Bill 1 but the first Bill 1 after the election, was a bill sponsored by the Premier. I can't quite recall the title of that bill, but it basically allowed the government to implement any energy rebate program for any amount, for any reason, for any period of time. It gave the government, in fact, complete freedom in order to create a rebate program for energy purposes.

So as we approach the next election, Mr. Speaker, I have some confidence that they may wish to revisit this decision to cut off energy rebates after the last election, and we may in fact see new energy rebates. I suspect, though, that that will have more to do with government polling, public opinion polling on their popularity, than it actually has anything to do with the price of electricity or natural gas.

Certainly, we've seen high and sustained prices for natural gas. They're continuing to rise as we run out of natural gas in North America and we continue to pump that natural gas across the border without taking any of the volatiles out of it thereby depleting our reserves to dramatic levels, exporting jobs, all as a result of the government's negligence with respect to this important resource. They would prefer to get as much money as possible for their unanticipated, in quotations, surpluses by selling as much natural gas at as high a price as they possibly can without regard to the future requirements of the Alberta economy or, indeed, the future requirements of people who depend on natural gas to heat their home or their business or their farm.

So, once again, Mr. Speaker, to conclude, I think that this particular motion is indeed relevant, and I think that the people of Alberta will be interested to know just how much money was spent by the government in order to pay the January 2004 natural gas rebate program.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for this.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you.

[Written Question 56 carried]

Construction Contracts

Q57. Mr. Bonner moved that the following question be accepted. What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Infrastructure protect the spending of taxpayers' dollars by implementing a process to ensure that contracts with construction managers protect the ministry's interests as the fund provider and are cost-effective?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Infrastructure we accept Written Question 57.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to indicate to the Assembly that I appreciate the government's response to this written question. The written question specifies what measures the government has taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-03 annual report that the Department of Infrastructure protect the spending of taxpayers' dollars by implementing "a process to ensure that contracts with construction managers protect the Ministry's interests as a funder and are cost-effective." Once again, this is an important recommendation, and I think that it's a relevant question to be asking the government, so I'm pleased that they're going to provide an answer to it.

Certainly, contracts with construction managers need to protect the ministry's interests, and the ministry needs to make sure as the fund provider that these contracts are in fact cost-effective. I know that there are lots of members opposite that believe that providing contracts, or contracting out or outsourcing, is the most cost-effective way to deal with it, but certainly unless appropriate steps are taken and a process is established that would make sure that the ministry's and the taxpayers' interests are protected, this is not necessarily the case, and there are many examples of shortcuts that have been taken that have failed to really protect the interests of the government who has let the contract.

I remember there was a book that I read a few years ago called *Reinventing Government*. *Reinventing Government* strongly suggested that the best way to do it was to outsource contracts, but it also required that you use modern techniques to monitor the contract, monitor the efficiency of the contract, the cost-effectiveness, and make sure that shortcuts weren't taken that would undermine those things.

I think the principle that they used in *Reinventing Government* – and this was a text that I think the government used in their so-called revolution of the mid-90s – is that the government ought to be steering and not rowing. But, in my experience, Mr. Speaker, quite often when the government contracts out, it's actually quite rudderless and steps are not in place to ensure that these contracts actually do what the government department wants done and do so in a way that protects the interests financially and otherwise of the taxpayer.

So I've never really bought into some of the notions contained in *Reinventing Government* in the same way that this government has, but I would draw attention to the authors' contention that unless there are appropriate safeguards in place, you will not be able to ensure that contracts actually provide a more cost-effective means of accomplishing something than government doing it itself.

In fact, we've all heard the famous quotation about the consultant who borrows your watch to tell you the time, and I think we've all had experiences with that kind of consultant. The same thing applies in a general sense to contracts, whether they be directly for construction services or for construction managers to look after the projects, and so on. Their interests aren't necessarily the same interests as the government's. They have their own personal interests, their own businesses to run, and so on, and they need to make a profit on that as well. So they always have an interest, I think, in minimizing costs. That can be a good thing if we can benefit by it, but if we end up paying later for their omissions, it can in fact be a very negative thing indeed, and the result is, I think, that we need to make sure that these processes are in place, as the Auditor General has indicated.

3:50

I would urge members to support the motion. I know that given the minister's comments with respect to this, most members will no doubt look very favourably on this motion for this written question. I hope that it will in fact pass the Assembly. Again, Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the member for bringing the question and the minister for agreeing to answer it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bonner: I thank the minister for accepting this question, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 57 carried]

Construction Grant Payments

Q58. Mr. Bonner moved that the following question be accepted. What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Infrastructure make all construction grant payments through the consolidated cash investment trust fund bank account?

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, again, I think this is an excellent suggestion by the Auditor General, and it certainly will enhance the process of openness and transparency that taxpayers do require and request with their taxpayer dollars.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to indicate on behalf of the hon. Minister of Infrastructure that he and the government are prepared to accept Written Question 58.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to indicate that I always . . .

Mr. Dunford: Filibuster. He's opposed to private members' bills.

Mr. Mason: Well, the hon. minister is saying that I'm opposed to private members' bills. Not in the least, Mr. Speaker. But I do think that we need to examine these written questions very carefully because I think they're very valid. I'm pleased that the government has indicated that it's going to support this particular Auditor General's recommendation.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and I certainly find it an immensely valuable experience

for me as a Member of this Legislative Assembly. The opportunity to ask ministers questions in a less formal setting and in a less adversarial setting is extremely valuable. The Auditor General is always present at those meetings, and I think he, in fact, is a tremendous asset to our work on that committee. His recommendations, I think, are generally taken quite seriously by ministers. But we don't always get enough of an opportunity to ask questions in that committee. There's a significant number of members, and they are all active participants, so we often don't get as many questions as we would like, I guess. So these written questions, I think, have an important function, and they are indeed relevant.

Now, the suggestion of the Auditor General that the Department of Infrastructure make all construction grant payments through the consolidation cash investment fund bank account I think is an interesting one, and I for certain look forward to the answer of the government. The government often does respond very promptly, Mr. Speaker, to the Auditor General's recommendations. Most of them, in fact, are accepted by the department and are implemented within a year or sometimes two, but there are some that drag on year after year, and we often wonder why the government doesn't implement them, because they do seem to be very, very relevant.

Sometimes we're hard-pressed to know why the government is dragging its feet. Quite often in these cases, Mr. Speaker, the government is dragging its feet because of some centralized policy. The departments get individually blamed or named, at least, in the Auditor General's report for not implementing the recommendation, but it often comes back to a policy of the Treasury Board or the Finance department. I don't know if that's the case in this particular instance, but it may well be, and if so, I think the government ought to reconsider that policy. I think one of the big issues is to make sure that all transactions of the government are transparent and paid from the appropriate accounts.

So in this case, Mr. Speaker, once again I would urge all hon. members to support this motion and again give my congratulations to the hon. member who asked the question and to the government for agreeing to answer it. I will look forward to receiving the response to this written question in due course.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. I'd like to thank the minister once again for accepting Written Question 58.

[Written Question 58 carried]

Jubilee Lodge Nursing Home

Q59. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted.

How many times has Alberta Health and Wellness exercised its right under section 12(1) of the Nursing Homes Act to inspect Alberta nursing homes in the last five years, how many inspections of Jubilee Lodge nursing home in Edmonton occurred as a result of this legislation, and when and why did inspections of Jubilee Lodge nursing home occur and what were the results?

Ms Blakeman: Given the number of concerns that have been raised particularly around two incidents at Jubilee Lodge, I'm hoping that the minister can see his way to providing this information. I hope he does.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Yes. In the interest of openness, transparency, and accountability the government accepts.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, I'm pleased to speak to this motion, and I'm pleased that the minister has indicated that they will in fact respond. You know, we . . .

Mr. Dunford: We didn't say we'd respond; we said we'd accept.

Mr. Mason: Well, the minister is making a distinction between accepting the question and responding to it. I guess I'd have to ask why he would accept the question if he has no intention of responding to it. I thought that we were going to get a response, but perhaps not.

You know, Mr. Speaker, there have been some very serious concerns with respect to the Jubilee Lodge nursing home, and when we've asked questions about this in question period to the Minister of Health and Wellness, we have been assured that the government regularly inspects nursing homes and so on. But what we don't quite know is how often and when this has occurred. In fact, you know, there's a real concern underlying it, Mr. Speaker, and that is that we know that the government has cut back on inspectors. It's cut back on these kinds of front-line staff in lots of areas.

4:00

One of them where it's most concerning is in another department altogether. That is the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development, where the number of inspectors has been cut back so far and the budgets have been cut back so far that they've actually complained that their budgets are so tight, they have to buy their own gas. So the real question is not that these places are inspected in theory—because in theory they are; the legislation requires that—but whether or not the government puts the resources behind their official legal requirements is a very valid question and one that I think we need a real answer to. So it would be very useful indeed, from our point of view, if in fact the Minister of Alberta Health and Wellness would respond and tell us exactly when this particular nursing home was inspected.

I'd like to go further. I'd like to know what's entailed by the inspection. I mean, how many people participate in the inspecting? What is inspected? What happened with the inspection reports? I think something that could be really valuable as well that is not included in this question is: what happened to the inspection report? Who dealt with it? What decisions were made on the basis of those reports? If, in fact, they showed that there were serious problems at this particular nursing home, then did everyone take that into account and act appropriately, right up to the minister? I'm not sure that this question actually gets at that, Mr. Speaker, so I would hope that the minister would go the extra mile and provide those kinds of details.

You know, Mr. Speaker, we need to protect our seniors. Seniors, especially those in the final years of their life in these homes, are extraordinarily vulnerable people. As we've seen, sometimes the neglect that can occur can have very, very tragic consequences, and it's important that the government take its responsibilities seriously to inspect these homes and make sure that our seniors are well cared for by trained professional people, that there are sufficient staff on duty at all times to make sure that people are not neglected when they need help or care.

So I would hope that this motion is in fact passed. I think people throughout the province have taken an interest in the tragedies that have taken place here, and they want to be assured that the government is taking its responsibilities seriously. If the government takes its responsibilities seriously, then we can be assured that the nursing home itself will be taking its responsibilities seriously, because the government will be making sure that they do. That's what we expect of our government, and that's what we expect from Alberta Health and Wellness, and we can accept nothing less, Mr. Speaker.

So again I would urge all hon. members to vote in favour of accepting this question. Hopefully the government will then respond to it in an appropriate and informative manner. I commend the hon. member for asking this question, and I also commend the minister for indicating that he's prepared to accept the question.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

[Written Question 59 carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been served on Thursday, April 1, it's my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 18, 19, and 23 as modified by the House leaders' agreement, which was signed and which I tabled earlier today.

[Motion carried]

Office of the Premier IT Contracts

M18. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Ms Carlson that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the office of the Premier on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Ms Blakeman: Now, we have had some other ones for other departments on the same subject turned down by the government. I'm hoping that for this one we will get some information and that we will get it without amendments to it, which render the information more vague and less useful to us. I'm looking for exactly the request that's submitted here. So I'm hoping that the government will comply.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I think the hon. member is correct in stating that similar motions were given considerable debate. As I recall, it was back on March 22 or thereabouts. So in actual fact this particular motion for a return at this point is redundant and unnecessary.

Motion for a Return 10, which was dealt with back on page 610 of *Hansard* on March 22, certainly referred to the same information being requested of the Health and Wellness ministry for contracts

pertaining to information technology services, broken down by company and dollar amount and so on. Then the amendment, which was presented shortly thereafter, in fact removed the specific reference to one government department and/or ministry and made it clear that we were prepared to provide information showing the total dollar amount spent by the government of Alberta on contracts for information technology services, including a listing of vendors who were providing those services for the 2002-2003 fiscal year. So I think that adequately covers it, and as such we do not need this particular motion that is before us at the moment.

That having been said, we would be rejecting it because the amendment I referred to earlier accommodates this particular information that is being sought and is to be provided for the entire government of Alberta, and it will be broken down by company and by dollar amount. Again, I think it's therefore redundant, so on behalf of the Premier's office I'm recommending that we reject this motion for the reasons stated.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. I'm sorry; I was momentarily distracted and missed a few words of what the minister was saying. My concern here with the amended version that was discussed a few weeks ago, mentioned in the minister's response there, is that once again the government has changed the information that was being requested and made it less detailed, in other words more vague, and unattached. The suggestion that they had to provide an aggregate amount, a total amount spent on all information technology contracts for all of the government and then a list of vendors that are unconnected is the kind of unhelpful information that leads to misunderstandings, because from that you really can't tell if there was one vendor who was getting a disproportionate amount.

Perhaps they need to be looked at to make sure that all the tendering processes are as they should be. Perhaps a very reputable company is getting hardly any contracts at all. You can't tell when you get two separate lists where the information has been deliberately disconnected, has been torn apart, unlinked by the government.

I don't understand why the government is so reluctant to provide information like this. It's pretty innocuous information, and it does raise the hackles of people looking at government transparency and accountability. It certainly raises questions in their minds. What are they hiding? This is a very simple, innocuous question. Why can't they just deliver the information? Why this great need to disattach everything so that no clear understanding can be gained from it? As a result of that, you do end up with misunderstandings. You do end up with people making leaps of logic that are perhaps inappropriate, but how do you tell that when you can't find a clear trail of information?

So I'm disappointed to hear that the information will not be provided as requested. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 18 lost]

4:10 Government Out-of-province Travel Expenses

M19. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number and costs of extraprovincial and international trips taken by government Members of the Legislative Assembly who are not members of Executive Council between March 13, 2001, and February 17, 2004, broken down for each member, outlining the trip destination, the costs for meals,

accommodations, entertainment, travel, telecommunications, dry cleaning, and gifts for each destination.

Dr. Taylor: How about including the Liberals in that?

Ms Blakeman: The Minister of Environment has suggested that the Liberals be included in that. I'm sure that he is more than welcome to take advantage of the written question process that's available in this House and put forward such a question, but the question before us today is asking for government Members of the Legislative Assembly who are not members of Executive Council.

Dr. Taylor: Why aren't you honest?

Ms Blakeman: Well, I am going to be heckled on this one; aren't I, Mr. Speaker? The Minister of Environment is questioning my honesty in bringing forward a request on behalf of my colleague for Edmonton-Mill Woods to get this information.

Earlier today I did table the information, that is now available to all members of the Assembly, on the rules that are now being used by the federal government and a good example there. Or, as I said, if the government members are not comfortable with that, then they're certainly welcome to look at those that were put in place by the previous government in Ontario, which would be their Tory cousins.

So that's the information that I'm requesting at this time, and I look forward to the response from the government. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to indicate on behalf of the hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations that we would be prepared to accept this particular motion, albeit with some amendments, and I believe those amendments have been circulated and shared with all members of the House. If I might, I'd like to move this motion as amended and make a few comments as to why these amendments are required, and that may help address some of the concerns that certain members of the House might have.

First of all, by looking at the original motion called for, I want to indicate what I had heard referred to in question period today, and that is to suggest that there is currently some work being done on streamlining this whole process of reporting and doing it on a consistent basis and so on, beyond what is already being done, I need to say, because it is done consistently. So that will take care of part of this request.

Secondly, we're trying to make this fit within the government calendar year, which I hope no one would object to. In fact, we're expanding the time frame of that part of the motion so that it would read: from April 1, 2001, to March 31, 2004.

The third issue pertains to the breakdowns that are being requested. Mr. Speaker, in the original motion – there's nothing wrong with it, of course – there are all kinds of detail being sought. However, we need to keep in mind that if you accept a motion for a return with certain categories and certain undertakings, my understanding of that would be that you would be in breach of that particular acceptance if you did not specifically address every single one of those. In some cases some of those expenses may not be occurring, may not have been incurred, in fact.

So what I am proposing here is that we instead categorize them according to the categories that we ourselves use. For example, by grouping all of these expenses under accommodation, travel, hosting, and miscellaneous expenses, we will effectively be providing all of

the information that's being asked for. So the amended motion for a return then will cater to that particular point. That having been said, Mr. Speaker, I think that the amendment has been shared with our main opposition colleague prior to 11 a.m. today as per requirements and procedures.

Mr. Zwodzesky moved that Motion for a Return 19 be amended to read that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number and costs of international trips taken by government members of the Legislative Assembly who are not members of Executive Council between April 1, 2001, and March 31, 2004, broken down for each member outlining the trip destination and categorized by accommodation, travel, hosting, and miscellaneous expenses.

On that basis I would move that Motion for a Return 19 be accepted as amended.

The Speaker: On the amendment?

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to speak to this amendment.

There are a couple of issues that I want to raise here. There has been no explanation as to why the government is unable to provide the information on extraprovincial trips. They've just merely cut it off and deleted it, exempted it from the amended motion for a return. That basically takes away any trips that are taken out of province but inside of Canada, so any trips taken to any other provinces or territories. There is no explanation given by the government as to why they refuse to provide this information.

Secondly, we did ask for a level of detail. We did ask for cost of meals, accommodations, entertainment, travel, telecommunications, dry cleaning, and gifts for each destination, and for a reason. I don't understand where those expenses were incurred. Let's take dry cleaning as an example. Where a dry cleaning expense was incurred and reimbursed, then the government, in fact, has a record of it and can provide it. Where there was no dry cleaning submitted for reimbursement or as an expense on travel, then there's nothing to provide. But certainly in the cases where it, in fact, was paid for by taxpayer dollars, there is a record of it. I fail to understand – and the government has failed to convince me – why they cannot provide this level of detail.

So once again we see an attempt by the government to group things into a way of explaining expenses that makes it very difficult for people to have to tease out what actually happened, what actually went on. It does raise questions in people's minds including: if you had dry cleaning, why can't you just tell us? If you didn't, well, then it won't show up as an expense. The grouping together masks and hides what the expenses actually were.

So I understand. I've done expense claims. I used to have to do expense claims on behalf of the people that I worked for when I worked for government. I know what those categories are, but I also know that underneath those categories expenses like we're describing can in fact be stated, so I'm failing to understand why the government cannot provide this information. I mean, I'm assuming that perhaps what I'm being told is that ministers and backbenchers are not reimbursed for these particular expenditures, but I'm pretty sure that they are. If they are reimbursed, then they exist on a form somewhere, and they should be able to provide them to us.

4:20

When I'm looking at the federal examples of what's possible here, there are very detailed and extensive and vigorous policy statements on what is acceptable, what is not acceptable as an expenditure. I

was saying: well, maybe dry cleaning is not allowed, and that's why it can't be provided here.

In Ontario they very specifically exclude alcohol, for example, and their policies lay that out. If you are going to have to try and reimburse for expenditures on alcohol, you have to provide very detailed reasons about why the government incurred expenses for alcohol as part of their hosting. It may well be reimbursed and accepted, but the details have to be there: you were entertaining someone from a particular culture that accepts this or expects it, et cetera, et cetera.

I would also like to note that, in fact, this motion for a return was accepted by Parliamentary Counsel. The reason for that in the number of debates and tries at this that we've now had over the last couple of weeks is because there was no attempt to group additional motions for returns underneath it. Therefore, it serves as a stand-alone. So as I try and seek this information from government, having been steered toward this particular parliamentary process to seek that information, in fact, by the Premier and other members of cabinet, I have not received a satisfactory explanation about why the information cannot be provided.

I'm now in the position as the person putting forward the request on behalf of another to say: well, do we accept some information which may not be as useful to us or reject it and get no information at all? At this point I'm willing to try the experiment and support the amended motion for a return and see what kind of information I do get. If it just becomes, you know, a one-line aggregate total of all of this and is deliberately delinked from all accompanying information, then I know that this is a game that's being played here, and I'll be seeking information in another way in the future. But at this point I'm willing to try the experiment. I'm willing to take the government on their good word and hope that they follow through in good faith.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 19 as amended carried]

Out-of-province Travel Costs for Energy Minister

M23. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number and costs of extraprovincial and international trips taken by the Minister of Energy between March 13, 2001, and February 17, 2004, broken down by the trip destination, meals, accommodations, entertainment, airfare/ground travel, telecommunications, dry cleaning, and gifts for each trip.

Ms Blakeman: Again, we are seeking a specific level of detail from the government, but I can see by the amendments that have been circulated that there already is an anticipation that they would be amending this.

Nonetheless, I will argue that the motion for a return as stated is reasonable. Particularly given that the Minister of Energy is our frequent flier on the government side, we would like to see the details of his trips. That's not to say that there will be anything untoward there. I fully expect that it will all be quite as it should. But the insistence of the government to lead us on a merry dance and withhold this information does raise questions in the minds of the opposition and the minds of the public that there is something to be hidden. I think that at this point it's important that the detail is provided so that that can be aired.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member opposite for her comments. She is correct in understanding that some of what is being amended and the way it's being amended here in Motion for a Return 23 stems out of the way Motion for a Return 19 was in fact amended. It's a similar set of circumstances virtually, and in this particular case I'm prepared to move that Motion for a Return 23 be accepted as amended and as presented and provided for in the House leaders' agreement, which was signed today and which I tabled today and which, I believe, all members have received a copy of. So that would constitute the notice required, and it had been shared, in fact, much earlier in the day in accordance with the time restrictions that are needed.

The essential comments that I made for Motion for a Return 19 actually do apply here for Motion for a Return 23 as well. I do note and understand some of the reluctance that has been expressed by members in the opposition, but I just want to assure them that due diligence will be followed through as much as is possibly possible to help ensure that they get as much information as it is possible to provide. That is the spirit under which all of this was done and under which the House leaders' agreement was jointly arrived at, and we'll deal with it in that vein.

Mr. Zwozdesky moved that Motion for a Return 23 be amended to read that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number and costs of international trips taken by members of Executive Council between April 1, 2001, and March 31, 2004, broken down by the trip destination and categorized by accommodation, travel, hosting, and miscellaneous expenses.

So thank you for your anticipated support of accepting Motion for a Return 23 as amended.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the amendment.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I am speaking to the amendment. This did come about through a House leaders' agreement. It is an experiment to see whether, in fact, we are provided with the level of detail that we require. I also want to underline again that this is not a precedent in any way, shape, or form for grouping. This is an issue of trust. It is trying to see if we can get the information that we're seeking. Frankly, we don't get the information that we're seeking here, so right from the word go I'm having to bargain away the information that the Official Opposition was interested in receiving.

I have severe qualms about this process because, to my eye, the government continues to do what they wanted to do, and the opposition is not getting the information that we were looking for. From the top, all of the inside of Canada but outside of Alberta trips again have been cut off, with no explanation given, no reasoning for it, nothing. Just: we're not getting the information.

Again I say: why aren't we getting the information? We should be able to find out why those trips happened, what the purpose was, who went on it, how much did it cost, were those costs reasonable, all of that information. You're spending taxpayers' dollars. We should be able to get this information and have it shared with the public.

The attempt to group this motion is changing it from a specific question to the Minister of Energy to one of international trips taken by members of Executive Council. The reason that the opposition puts in a question that appears to be repeated for 23 more ministries is a lesson learned from bitter experience, frankly, where we have in the past requested information generally and what we got was one line or one figure, which was an aggregate figure. We couldn't tell how much of it divided for each ministry. We couldn't tell who was

included in it or how many staff or any number of things, so we were being played with.

I don't think there was any reasonable attempt to provide us with the information. This was: how can we not provide the information? So we learned by bitter experience to separate it out and to ask the question for each and every ministry because some of them, frankly, provide us with the information and some don't provide us with the information. So it's worth our while to ask for it by each and every ministry. As we grow from 17 ministries, which is what there was when I was first elected, to 24 ministries, which is what we've got now, you get that many more questions on the Order Paper.

4:30

We lose the specificity when we go from ministry by ministry to an aggregate, which is what's being anticipated here by going to something taken by members of Executive Council. In this particular question – and this is why I allowed it – it is broken down by trip destination and then categorized further, so there is a way of us being able to determine who went on this trip and where did it go. So there is a level of detail to allow us to figure out what's going on here.

It's not helpful when things become aggregate to a point where we don't know which ministry provided what information, how many people were involved, where they went, et cetera, et cetera. It's become a bit of a game with the government not providing the information we've requested, and we have been forced into a position of having to separate everything out and ask for the detail one by one. That is happening again here. So we're going on trust that we're going to get the information that has a level of detail that's reasonable in it.

You know, we've been given quite the jolly runaround with this. Back on February 19 the Premier in response to opposition questions on expenses asked us to provide documentation on the expenses so that the questions could be answered. February 23 we were told to ask for the information through a written question. On March 1 we sent a letter to the Premier detailing all of the questions that we would like answered. As far as I know, we've never received a response to that, and we're now at almost a month later. March 22 and other times we had our first of many motions for returns voted down. So we're told to go to motions for returns and written questions, and then we're turned down for the information. In some cases we're told that this is an inappropriate way to ask for that level of accountability.

Well, what are we supposed to do, Mr. Speaker? This is the process that's open to us, and then we're told we're not supposed to use it. Then we do it, and we have it altered in such a way as we're not getting the information that we wanted to see. We've given up the clarity and the level of detail that we wanted to see. We'll see whether we are getting less than what we asked for. We'll see whether this experiment, in fact, was one that was worth taking.

I agreed, and in fact I proposed the House leaders' agreement that was signed here. It's in the form that I proposed it. I did want to see certain private member's bills get an opportunity for debate, so I'm the one that came up with this idea so that we could go forward with that today because I am interested in seeing it happen. But what do I get for that, Mr. Speaker? What I get is that I don't get the information that I was asking for. I'm not the one that's come out even-even on this one; I've come out behind on it. We've yet to see whether this will be worth it. [interjection] The Minister of Environment wants to get in on the discussion again.

You know, we're more than willing on this side for the few trips we take out of province to have people scrutinize the individual personal expense reimbursement claim forms. If people want to see

them, I'm certainly willing to show you the one when I went to Texas last summer. I, in fact, had a clerk who submitted more money than I was asking for, and I had to go back and say: "Excuse me, but you do exactly what I said. I only want to be reimbursed for the money that I spent. I don't want to claim per diems that give me more money than I asked for." I insisted that it be redone. So I'm more than willing to give you that level of detail. That was the concern that the Minister of Environment was heckling me on previously. [interjection] Oh, someone else wants to heckle now too. Okay.

We'll see whether this works. I'm approaching this with trepidation, but we'll see whether this works.

Dr. Taylor: Approach it with good hope.

Ms Blakeman: I am approaching it with hope. I wouldn't have done this if I wasn't hopeful that there would be some kind of realistic information provided. But, boy, there's a hand of trust being extended here, and it better come back with some good detailed information in it, or all bets are off on this one.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 23 as amended carried]

The Speaker: What essentially will run then as a consequence of the agreement that the House provided unanimous consent to today – the House leaders' agreement has absolutely no merit unless all members of the Assembly agree to it, and that was very important. So motions for returns 65, 67, 68, 84, 85, 86, 87, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 181, and 182 will now be removed from the Order Paper.

It's also clear that today was a very abnormal day which required unanimous consent of the House to deal with what happened here. This date will not be referred to further in the annals of the Alberta Legislative Assembly, and what happened here today will not bind this Speaker or any subsequent Speakers in the future in terms of administrative matters related to any of these things. With all the denials and the reluctance contained in this document, it's like saying, "Well, I'll agree to get married for a one-day time frame, and we'll see how it works out, but tomorrow's another day, and I'm not going to be held by what I did yesterday" kind of thing. This applies only for today. There should be boxes put around the *Hansard* of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. This happened. It's ended and is not to be repeated again tomorrow.

Now, Clerk, let's move on.

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than**
Government Bills and Orders
head: Second Reading

Bill 203
Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes
Amendment Act, 2004

[Debate adjourned March 29: Mr. MacDonald speaking]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West. I take it this will be to conclude the debate.

Ms Kryczka: Yes.

The Speaker: Okay. Clerk, how much time is left?

The Clerk: Nine minutes.

The Speaker: Nine? Five to conclude the debate. Okay.

Anybody else want to speak? Then the hon. member to conclude the debate.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe the rationale for the merits of and concerns around Bill 203 have been addressed very well in second reading by speeches from many of my colleagues. I would like to thank these colleagues for their comments and support during second reading: the members for Spruce Grove-St. Albert, Edmonton-Manning, Edmonton-Meadowlark, Vermilion-Lloydminster, Redwater, Calgary-Buffalo, Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, St. Albert, Calgary-Currie, Calgary-Fort, and Edmonton-Rutherford. It is also very important to thank my researcher for Bill 203, Andrea Hennig, for her exemplary commitment to its preparation and all other researchers who have prepared speeches for my colleagues.

As we have heard, the purpose of this legislation is to give Albertans by law an informed, mutually agreed choice whether to split their Canada pension plan benefits following a divorce or separation. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to reiterate a few of the crucial arguments and major objectives of Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. First, Bill 203 would allow divorcing or separating Albertans, upon being informed, to decide how to best divide their CPP pension benefits pertinent to their individual circumstances and personal situations. It will not force Albertans to opt out of the credit-splitting program but, rather, let couples consciously decide for themselves; that is, whether to opt out or not.

Second, Bill 203 will provide for consistent treatment of assets in the province as property division is based on mutual agreement. Most aspects of family property between spouses upon relationship breakdown are subject to agreement.

Third, Bill 203 would bring clarity and certainty to the decisions made concerning the splitting of CPP credits. If spousal agreements have been entered into and waivers signed, then Bill 203 would provide the appropriate provincial legislation to uphold these agreements.

4:40

Fourth, this legislation would prevent an ex-spouse or ex-partner from applying for the split of CPP credits without the other party's knowledge. Bill 203 prevents the effect of creating a future entitlement of pension benefits.

Fifth, Bill 203 will help to raise awareness of the Canada pension plan credit-splitting program. For example, it is little known that all credit-split decisions are permanent unless this decision is challenged through the courts. What is most realistic is that a federal decision is never returned to the ex-spouse even following the death of the applying ex-spouse. This legislation will bring a valuable understanding to all Albertans, especially low-income Albertans, about the possible division of their CPP pension benefit, and with that understanding Albertans will be able to plan appropriately for their future.

Mr. Speaker, with reference to financial planning, especially considering the future impact of an aging population, it is very important to underline that government and the private sector encourage and support Albertans wherever appropriate to be accurately informed and to plan for their retirement. As personal financial plans include a combination of pensions including CPP, RRSPs, savings, bonds, and other investments in residential and other properties, it follows, using common sense, that these same assets would be considered in preparing a divorce or separation agreement.

Mr. Speaker, I believe very strongly in the purpose of Bill 203 and in the advantages and benefits that will stem from giving adult Albertans the right and responsibility of informed choice in making decisions concerning their finances upon the breakdown of common-law and marital couples.

My thanks once again to everyone for their participation in the debate and discussion of Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, I now move that the question be put.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a second time]

Bill 204 Blood Samples Act

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it is my pleasure to bring into debate in second reading Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act. The goal of Bill 204 is to protect good Samaritans, police officers, firefighters, correctional officers, and front-line emergency and health workers who in the course of their work exchange bodily fluids with someone who may have a communicable disease. The bill would create a process to allow a qualified medical practitioner to take a mandatory blood sample from someone who refuses to comply voluntarily.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Speaker, currently the rights of people who refuse to supply a blood sample in the event of an exchange of bodily fluids prevail over those of the infected worker. I have heard a story of a police officer who had a suspected drug user spit in his face. The suspect then yelled at the officer: welcome to the world of AIDS. This man could be charged with assaulting a police officer, but by law he cannot be forced to provide a blood sample to see if he really was HIV positive. His right to privacy prevails over the health and security of the police officer.

Imagine the emotions that went through the infected officer. How could he kiss his wife? The thought of possibly transmitting the disease would constantly haunt him. How could he play with his children without worrying about exposing them to the disease?

After exposure workers begin a grueling drug cocktail. The infected worker suffers numerous side effects caused by the drugs. The victims must also wait for signs of a disease to develop. Passing Bill 204 could alleviate these stressful circumstances. The results may allow the infected worker to end the medication earlier. The results may also offer peace of mind that they pose no threat to patients, victims, co-workers, friends, or, most importantly, family.

People working in firefighting, law enforcement, health, corrections, paramedics and ambulance service employees are subjected to dangerous and potentially fatal occupational hazards. Some of these hazards are avoidable through safety and training and improved safety equipment. There are also safety protocols for preventing the transfer of blood from victims or suspects to front-line emergency or health care workers. These protocols focus on prevention and compliance. The safety training and protocols do not properly address what happens after the exposure occurs.

Other Canadian governments have considered legislation similar to Bill 204. On May 1, 2003, Mr. Speaker, the Ontario government proclaimed the Health Protection and Promotion Amendment Act. This amendment gave authority to front-line emergency and health care workers to seek a blood sample. It also provided victims of

crime the same right to seek a blood sample. The scope of Bill 204 is restricted to people who come into regular contact with someone else's bodily fluids.

Legislation similar to the Blood Samples Act has also been introduced in the House of Commons as a private member's bill on two occasions. Both bills would have amended the Criminal Code to force someone to provide a blood sample. In February 2002 the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights was advised that this legislation governing civil rights and health falls within the power of the provincial government. Using this technicality, the Liberal government has absolved itself of having to deal with this particular legislation, which explains many of the antics which are taking place in this Chamber.

There are implications of Bill 204 that do affect the federal government.

Ms Blakeman: Point of order.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Some have argued that forcing a blood sample . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, there's a point of order here. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Point of Order Allegations against Members

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I'm afraid the member has not clearly been listening to what's been happening in this Chamber today in making – sorry; the citation I'm referring to is 23(h) – an allegation against another member or – I'm presuming that can also be used in the plural – against other members.

The member has no idea why certain issues were raised in this Chamber today. I thought I'd already been pretty clear that the very ability of this member to get up and debate this bill was because of the House leaders' agreement that I proposed. So I think he needs to withdraw that particular allegation that's been made against the Liberal opposition.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, no allegation was waged against any member, and if it offended anyone, I withdraw this comment.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 23(h) states that "a member will be called to order by the Speaker if, in the Speaker's opinion, that member . . . makes allegations against another member." To the best of my knowledge I did not hear an allegation being made against an individual. I think it referred to a group. However, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs has withdrawn those remarks, and I believe that that's acceptable, and we can proceed.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for that ruling. I shall continue.

Mr. Speaker, the Supreme Court of Canada has said that the taking of a blood sample is a very intrusive procedure that can occur only when justified circumstances occur and where there is pressing necessity. I would argue that the results of the blood sample are a pressing necessity for the person most affected. Rights defined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms are not absolute, and the law infringing on them may be upheld if it is found to be within a reasonable limit. I would argue that Bill 204 is within the realms of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as outlined. I think it's our duty as legislators to spell out some of the responsibilities and obligations

that come along with the rights in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Blood-borne diseases are a dangerous reality for front-line workers defined in Bill 204. Someone who knowingly transmits these diseases should be forced to provide a blood sample.

I think it's also important to stress existing legislation that protects the privacy of the individual. The results of the blood sample cannot be used for any reason other than those defined in Bill 204. The process for taking a blood sample for those purposes of Bill 204 already exists through Alberta legislation. The Health Information Act, the Public Health Act, and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act set out the rules for collecting and disclosing health information. These acts also set out the penalties for breaking these laws.

4:50

It is true that most of the support for the bill comes from personal experience of officers and health professionals. However, this bill will help infected workers understand the severity of the exposure. I am confident that most reasonable, caring Albertans will support this bill. I am also confident that Bill 204 will help protect the people who help others.

This Assembly has an opportunity to provide peace of mind for workers exposed to bodily fluids. It's time to give our police, firefighters, prison guards, and health care workers more tools and more security. This bill brings a common-sense approach for balancing the safety of workers with the safety of private health information. I would encourage all members to vote in favour of Bill 204.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, thank you. I rise today to speak in support of Bill 204 for my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. As Solicitor General I have supported this issue from the beginning. I have written the Federation of Police Associations supporting this issue. I have also been approached by various front-line emergency workers concerned about mandatory blood testing.

Bill 204 is designated to protect police officers, firefighters, correctional officers, front-line emergency workers, good Samaritans, and health care professionals. Without exception these workers are worried about the transmission of blood and other body fluids carrying diseases like HIV, AIDS, hepatitis C, and spinal meningitis. I support this bill because I believe it will protect and it will give peace of mind to emergency personnel. This bill would allow specified individuals to ask a medical officer of health for an order to take a blood sample from a third party.

In my contact with police and correctional officers I have learned about the many precautions they already take. Some wear special gloves; some wear soft body armour to protect themselves from gunshots, knifings, blood trauma, motor vehicle collisions, and aggressive behaviour. Just like anyone, correction officers, health, police, and other emergency personnel want to go to work each day with the knowledge that they are protected in the best possible way from all forms of danger. At the moment, Mr. Speaker, these workers are not protected against someone who accidentally or deliberately infects them with body fluids.

There are many ways these workers could be infected, such as when dealing with patients who turn violent and must be chemically or physically restrained, after being spit on, attending an accident scene where there are severe injuries, or being stuck with a con-

cealed needle or syringe. In the United States some estimate that there are 600,000 accidental needle sticks every year.

Over the years I have spent countless evenings doing police ride-alongs. I have seen first-hand what police and other front-line emergency workers have to endure. Mr. Speaker, consider this situation: you're an emergency health care worker; you are accidentally pricked by a needle; the patient is a drug addict, but you don't know if they are infected. You have two choices: one, do nothing and hope for the best or, two, assume the patient is infected and begin extremely painful medical treatments that carry with them severe side effects and prohibit physical contact with anyone else for six months. All this would be unnecessary if the patient were required by law to submit a sample of their blood to determine whether they are infected.

We owe it to the fine men and women of this province who serve the public while providing emergency health services. Their job is already hard enough. This bill can reduce some of the risks they face and provide some additional peace of mind.

Mr. Speaker, this bill goes beyond protecting emergency workers. It also protects the good Samaritan and the victim of crime. Do we want to continue to have a situation where a person may be in desperate need of help and others simply stand, wait, and watch because they are afraid to help because of AIDS or hep C or some other disease?

Some will say that this bill will infringe on a person's right to privacy. Well, Mr. Speaker, I say that the protection of privacy and the release of public information has always been a balance between protection and disclosure. How can we protect the privacy of a known drug addict while increasing the risk for first responders? Often blood samples are given voluntarily, and people should be commended for that.

Mr. Speaker, the debate today is: what should the government do when someone refuses to give a blood sample to hurt someone else? This bill would only be applied on rare occasions when someone refuses to give a blood sample for testing. More importantly, this information would only be shared with the medical staff and the affected individual. The blood test analysis would only be used for medical purposes, with the highest level of confidentiality. I believe this provides an adequate balance between the privacy of a person's health information and the safety of good Samaritans, victims of crime, and emergency personnel.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs and want to thank him on behalf of front-line emergency workers, health professionals, and good Samaritans.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, did you want to speak?

Mr. Mason: Sure. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and speak to this bill. You know, I believe that this bill has some merit, and I certainly appreciate the work that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs has done on this bill. However, I do have a number of concerns.

It's certainly the case that many front-line emergency workers are at risk from accidental or even in rare cases, I believe, deliberate infection from HIV, hepatitis C, and other viral blood infections. It is a concern, and it has I think been taken very, very seriously in all sorts of areas. It has radically changed how many services are in fact delivered.

It's clear that a number of organizations representing people in front-line jobs have expressed their support for this. For example, Michael Rennich, who is the chair of Alberta Union of Provincial Employees local 003, has sent the hon. Member for Edmonton-

Castle Downs a letter in support of this particular piece of legislation. Similarly, I understand that the firefighters' union and police association have indicated their support for it. Mr. Speaker, I entirely understand why this would be the case. These workers are faced day to day with the risk of being infected either accidentally or, potentially, even deliberately by people that they deal with, and if all of the precautions that have been taken – and they are considerable – fail, they want to know as soon as possible whether or not the person with whom they've had contact is indeed infected by one of these agents. That's something that is entirely understandable.

It's interesting, Mr. Speaker, that not all associations or unions that represent people who are on the front line and potentially at risk support this position. We have done some research and have obtained some documents with respect to this issue. In November of 2000 the Canadian Nurses Association published a revised position statement on blood-borne pathogens. It did address the issue of compulsory testing, and here's what they said.

Mandatory testing for blood-borne pathogens either before or after significant exposure is not warranted because current technology cannot always identify persons infected with blood-borne pathogens. In caring for all clients, whether their status regarding blood-borne pathogens is known, the nurse is guided by the values of the Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses.

The nurse has an ethical responsibility to provide care that includes bringing good to the client, minimizing harm, and respecting the right of the client to accept or to refuse treatment.

So that's the position of the Canadian Nurses Association.

5:00

The Canadian Association of Nurses in AIDS Care also established a position relative to this. They stress the urgent need to collect and analyze data on needle sticks and other occupational injuries in Canada to identify the extent of occupational exposures and respond to them in a timely fashion. They have a number of those; for example, "examine current practices for invasive procedures, and design and implement protocols and programs to eliminate registered nurses' unnecessary exposure to bloodborne pathogens." They called on health care facilities to "implement work-practice measures, such as new safety devices, to minimize or eliminate the risk of occupational exposure to bloodborne pathogens." They also called for "comprehensive educational and training programs that address prevention measures and post-exposure management should be included in nursing curricula, employee training programs, and continuing education programs." However, they do say that they maintain that testing a patient without informed consent is unethical. These are the people that deal directly with patients with AIDS/HIV.

The Canadian Medical Association also has a position on this, and the information we have indicates that their policy on HIV infection in the workplace addresses HIV infection and AIDS in the general workplace and the health care workplace and discusses testing for the HIV antibody. It notes that

any policy in this area should be based on scientific, epidemiologic and ethical principles. The primary purpose is the promotion of effective action to control infection among health care workers and the public and the safeguarding of human rights.

They say that in the health care workplace

the nature of the health care workplace carries with it a greater risk of occupational exposure to HIV than the general workplace. A health care worker may be directly exposed to the blood or body fluid of an HIV-positive patient during routine work or through a work-related accident such as a needle-stick injury. Nevertheless, the occupational risk of HIV infection for health care workers, although not absent, is very low. The risk of transmission from an infected health care worker to a patient is also very low.

They go on to say that the risk of infection does not warrant refusal of services. That's fine. That's certainly not the point of the bill. The CMA policy observes that the prevention of exposure to HIV-infected blood or bodily fluids can best be achieved by the routine application of infection-control guidelines for all patients.

I just want to be absolutely sure, Mr. Speaker. When I reviewed this document earlier, I believe that it indicated that the Canadian Medical Association did not support – yes, they had a motion at their convention in 1999 dealing with mandatory testing, and these motions were rescinded by the general council of the CMA in the year 2000. So they are apparently not supportive of mandatory testing.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees, or CUPE, represents all kinds of people involved in the health care field and in particular does represent ambulance employees in many cities, including here in Edmonton. I'm not sure about Calgary, but they represent members in a number of health care or health-related occupations which are at risk of occupational exposure, including ambulance attendants, housekeeping staff, waste handlers, laundry workers, materials handlers, nurses aides, and laboratory technicians and technologists. [Mr. Mason's speaking time expired] Am I finished? I guess I am.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to join debate in the second reading on the Blood Samples Act, sponsored by the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. Bill 204 creates a mechanism that would allow firefighters, police officers, nurses, doctors, paramedics, and correctional officers to know whether or not they contracted a blood-borne virus. I think that this bill creates an opportunity for this Assembly to protect these workers from an emerging danger in their workplace. Similar legislation was proclaimed in Ontario last year, and the concept was also considered on two different occasions as a private member's bill within the federal government.

Opponents of the federal and provincial legislation had several concerns about taking mandatory blood samples from people who refused to give their consent. Their opposition was based on the perceived violation of the right to privacy and security listed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. As previous speakers have pointed out, some people believe the Charter rights are absolute and can't be violated by others, including the government. However, lawyers, judges, and the Supreme Court of Canada understand that the parameters of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms are open to interpretation.

Charter rights are important, but they must be balanced with corresponding responsibilities. Some groups believe that a person has the right to refuse to submit a blood sample after contaminating a health or emergency worker. However, these people fail to understand the mental and physical effects that their refusal has on the affected worker.

We live in a society that places a high priority on mental health, Mr. Speaker, and there is no doubt in my mind that refusing to provide a blood sample under the conditions outlined in Bill 204 causes significant mental stress to the workers defined in Bill 204. My worry is that there's also the possibility of these workers suffering from long-term mental illness due to stress related to drug treatment and uncertainty, and exposure can cause significant anxiety because of the existing dangers related to blood-borne viruses.

Some argue that legislation forcing a blood sample is an extreme measure for a relatively small number of exposures, but I disagree. There is a great deal of fear felt by the exposed victim as well as their

families and their coworkers. These concerns are not only related to the infection but how it may affect the personal lives of the people involved. We know that without a blood sample the infected worker must wait six months after exposure before knowing whether or not they have a blood-borne disease. Needless to say, Mr. Speaker, the anxiety I talked about will not be momentary. It will last for that entire period of time.

Other speakers have pointed out that a blood sample will not cure the infected worker, but it will give him or her peace of mind. Knowing whether or not the test subject has a disease will reduce initial health concerns felt by the worker. The results from the blood sample will also reduce the fear and the distress of infection felt by the victim in the future.

There is also an important scientific reason to take blood samples. A blood sample allows the medical professionals to understand what disease, if any, they're dealing with. The prompt identification of infected source patients will allow the most appropriate and effective use of postexposure drugs.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, I'm very concerned about the safety of emergency workers. Paramedics, police officers, and firefighters put their lives on the line to protect others. I think it's our responsibility to respond whenever these workers are mistreated or a legal loophole leaves them suffering.

Mr. Speaker, to you or I the likelihood of contracting a blood-borne disease throughout the course of our duties is extremely low. I realize that this sounds obvious; however, there have been a number of people who have opposed legislation similar to Bill 204 because they don't believe that the number of officially recorded instances of exposure warrants such strong legislation. Most people would agree that there's a good chance that health care professionals will come into contact with people infected with a blood-borne disease. The chances are even greater for health care professionals working in emergency rooms.

5:10

Some opponents to this legislation claim that the vast majority of people infected with a blood-borne disease agree to a voluntary blood sample after exchanging fluid with a worker in a hospital setting. It's believed that patients agree to voluntary blood samples because doctors and nurses are trying to help them. The relationship between a health care professional and their patient is unique. However, I'm not convinced that doing nothing will help the few people who refuse to provide a blood sample. I believe Bill 204 is an important mechanism that must be in place for the few unfortunate times that this tool is really needed.

A potential carrier of a blood-borne disease may agree to a voluntary blood test if the infected person is a nurse or a doctor. However, outside the walls of hospitals and clinics, in the line of duty of police officers and correctional officers the rules are very different. We've heard other speakers talk about the important role front-line emergency workers play in society. However, these men and women are also subject to a different set of rules. The reality is that some people use their disease or the threat of having the disease as a weapon.

In fact, this was part of the logic for introducing similar legislation at the federal level. It was believed that using the threat of infection has become a new way to assault peace officers. This caused long-term mental health damage to the exposed officer. Inflicting harm on any other person in this manner was believed to have been dealt with through an amendment to the Criminal Code.

I think one of the reasons why refusing to supply a blood sample was considered appropriate for the Criminal Code was because of the hostile exchange between a suspect or an inmate and a peace officer.

There is a far more adversarial relationship between peace officers and suspects, and there have been instances where inmates in correctional facilities or criminal suspects wilfully bite or spit at workers as a way of taunting or intimidating the workers. Obviously, inmates and criminals are less likely to volunteer a blood sample after spitting at or biting a correctional officer.

I also understand that there may be a few interest groups who will oppose Bill 204, just like they opposed similar legislation in Ontario and at the federal level. I think it's a shame that some people would place a higher value on the perceived rights of an individual over the significant mental and physical damage caused by a person's refusal to provide a blood sample.

Mr. Speaker, imagine what would happen to an exposed worker's state of mind after the drug treatment finished and they were able to return to work. For six long months this worker would wonder whether or not they were carrying a life-threatening disease. Imagine the anxiety they would feel when called to an accident scene to help a victim bleeding from cuts from broken glass. I wonder if the worker would hesitate before assisting the victim, knowing that there is no legal way to know if that person has a disease. Right now these workers wear latex gloves and hope that they don't come into direct contact with another person's bodily fluid. If these workers are exposed, their well-being is at the mercy of the test subject.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the workers defined in Bill 204 have the right to know whether or not they have to undergo noxious medical treatment after being infected with a communicable disease. Currently front-line workers have fewer rights than the injured people that they help. This bill will correct the uncertainty felt by many workers, and I would encourage all members in this Assembly to vote in favour of Bill 204.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I forfeited my usual spot immediately following the sponsor of the bill because I wanted to hear some of the debate that was being brought forward. You know, I've had too many colleagues, friends, and acquaintances die from AIDS, so this is a bill that I'm very interested in and very interested in hearing the debate and the ideas that are being brought forward.

As has already been mentioned, this is not the first time that there has been an attempt at implementing mandatory blood sampling for people who might infect emergency workers. Ontario, in fact, as has been stated, did pass legislation in 2002. There was also a federal private member's bill that died on the Order Paper.

A couple of observations. The Ontario legislation requires mandatory blood samples from individuals who expose victims of crime, emergency workers, and good Samaritans to bodily fluids. Now, the former and the latter there are not included in this legislation. I'm wondering when the sponsor gets an opportunity if he can tell me why that choice was made not to include good Samaritans or victims of crime in the coverage.

One of the rationales is that it would reduce the number of preventative drug treatments that emergency personnel would have to take, and the previous speaker talked about that quite a bit, the drug cocktail over the six months and the emotional wear and tear that that causes.

I also note that Ontario's chief medical officer of health at the time, Dr. Colin D'Cunha, stated that the legal and ethical rules of sound public health practice respecting confidentiality and privacy issues involving patients are ignored under the bill. The bill I'm referring to is the Ontario bill there.

There were additional concerns raised by the Canadian Medical Association that knew Ontario law could force blood sample collection. The CMA's director of ethics voiced his concerns that it contravened that association's recently revised policy on HIV infection in the workplace, which reasserted that compulsory testing was unjustified.

I know that the sponsoring member here has already been quoted in the media as saying that since the Ontario legislation there has been a higher rate of voluntary compliance, and they've not had to compel anyone to be tested. I also heard the Member for Calgary-North Hill talking about, you know, even if it was just a few people, we should have this bill to protect those few people who flat out refuse to be tested.

I went looking to see how many people we'd actually be trying to protect here. What is the magnitude of the problem of people who flat out, absolutely, positively refuse to be voluntarily tested? The information that I have is that as of 2002 there have only been two probable cases of occupational transmission of HIV and one confirmed case. The two confirmed cases were lab workers, so they wouldn't have been covered by what's being anticipated in this bill, which is only emergency medical personnel.

The office of the federal Privacy Commissioner had a test that was very interesting. They had four tests. The first one was necessity. Is the bill necessary? I've already talked, so far, about two probable cases of occupational transmission, one confirmed case.

A second test of effectiveness. Is the bill effective? Again, I'm referring here to the federal legislation. The point raised is that it would take time to get an order and carry out the testing, and the results wouldn't be conclusive. Part of my concern around this is that a negative test result doesn't necessarily mean that the person isn't infected. That's part of what's causing me real concern around this bill, and it's been raised in a number of places. I'm not the first person to raise it.

But the Member for Calgary-North Hill was clearly saying that a big impetus behind this was peace of mind to the emergency personnel that may be put in a situation where they would have cause to believe that they had been infected, and my concern is that they don't get peace of mind out of this because those first tests can be false-positives or false-negatives and you still need a repeat testing to be absolutely sure that you've got the correct diagnosis. So if the purpose of this bill is to make sure that we're offering peace of mind to our emergency personnel, I've a real concern that this bill in fact does the opposite because it gives a false reading, if you want.

I would be more concerned that we would actually end up with someone who could contract one of these truly, truly horrible diseases because they believed in initial testing that was taken and in fact didn't follow up. That's part of what causes me to ask questions about this.

5:20

The third test is proportionality. How much of an invasion of privacy is this? I think we have to be very, very careful. If I can use the example of universality of programs and this government's attitude to universality of programs, there seems to be an understanding by the government on that level that: well, it's okay if you break the universality of something because it's just a little bit in any given example that I've ever heard, and it won't affect the way everything else operates. But it does affect the way everything else operates because the next program along they go: well, the last time it wasn't so bad, so we can expand this a bit more and take away more universal programs that are being offered.

That's part of what concerns me about this. As soon as you start to pierce the body wall, pierce that integrity of the person, I think we

venture into very dangerous territory, especially when we're trying to protect someone else who is providing a service, an underpaid service in many cases and often an underappreciated service, to society as a whole, that being police officers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel.

So I am very cautious about that because I think it gets used as a precedent by others whether or not that was intended in the first place. It makes it easier to expand that. If I go back and go: okay; so we're looking at breaking that wall, breaking that level of understanding of privacy for how many people? Again, with the information I have – and please prove me wrong. Please come up with other information. I'm happy to get it. I have not made up my mind how I'm going to vote for this bill. I'm listening carefully to what people are saying. I don't know how I'm going to vote on this, but these are the concerns that I have.

The fourth test from the Privacy Commissioner is: are there less-invasive alternatives? Under voluntary consent I note that most people agree to be tested, and in fact we've had other people discussing that here. In Edmonton last year 19 cases were reported where police officers were exposed to bodily fluid, and in only two of those cases did the people involved refuse a blood test. So I think a lot of this is around improved prevention and management of occupational exposure. Those are the comments and issues that I wanted to raise.

I think it's important that we note that there are only two other instances where we take bodily samples without consent. One of them is testing for alcohol, for example, with drinking and driving, and second is DNA samples relating to prosecution of serious offences. The second one involves a fairly lengthy court process to prove the point. The first one is a less lengthy process. This one is involving going to a medical officer, and there is a time lag there.

So I think there are very, very serious issues that are being raised here, and I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Oh, I'm sorry. There's no question after this.

Is there no other speaker? Nobody else wishes to speak? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs to close debate.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The members opposite have raised some very good questions. I would like to point out to the Member for Edmonton-Centre that she may have by error or omission not noticed, but good Samaritans are included in Bill 204, so definitely all good Samaritans will be covered. But, indeed, she is correct in the fact that victims of crime are not covered in the bill unlike in the Ontario counterpart of this bill where they are. There are a number of reasons for it, and I will perhaps get into that debate in committee to try to explain what the reasons for it are.

Nonetheless, all of the points brought forward by the members for Edmonton-Highlands and Edmonton-Centre are valuable, and those are considerations that ought to be taken in voting for the bill.

At this time, Mr. Speaker, I would like to call for conclusion of the debate on Bill 204 and ask the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:25 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

For the motion:

Abbott	Graham
Ady	Haley
Amery	Hlady
Boutilier	Horner
Calahasen	Hutton
Cao	Jablonski
Cenaiko	Jacobs
Danyluk	Johnson
DeLong	Jonson
Doerksen	Kryczka

O'Neill
Ouellette
Pham
Shariff
Stelmach
Stevens
Strang
Tarchuk
Taylor
VanderBurg

Dunford
Friedel
Goudreau

Lougheed
Lukaszuk
Magnus

Vandermeer
Woloshyn

Against the motion:

Blakeman

Bonner

Mason

Totals:

For – 38

Against – 3

[Motion carried; Bill 204 read a second time]

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:37 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, April 19, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 04/04/19

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Please be seated.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, introduction, if it's okay with everybody.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This evening I have the honour to introduce to you and through you a group of constituents of mine from the McClure United Church, and I'd like to ask them to rise as I call out their names: Miss Veronica Newsdorfer; Miss Hillary White; a lady that I know fairly well, Miss Rosemary Gamble; Ms Deborah Banks; Miss Elizabeth James*; and their nine Pathfinders that are with them this evening. I'd like them to receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly a number of young individuals accompanied by their parents. I'll ask them to rise as I name them: Taddes Korris, Lance Cooper, Scott Chan, Ian Nalbach, James Ryl, Kyle Parotta, Jonathan Luong accompanied by their parents Nejolla Korris, Monique Cooper, Linda Chan, Tony Chan, Joanne Nalbach, and Maggie Ryl. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Tourism Levy

506. Mr. Strang moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to take measures to establish a tourism levy to be dedicated to the province's tourism marketing framework to promote the tourism industry in Alberta.

[Debate adjourned March 29: Ms Carlson speaking]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane.

Mrs. Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to speak to the Assembly today in support of Motion 506, sponsored by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Speaker, tourism is a cornerstone of the Alberta economy and is an industry which all regions of the province can share in and prosper from. As we know, Alberta offers spectacular breathtaking views of the majestic Canadian Rocky Mountains on one hand and rugged picturesque views of the vast rolling prairie countryside on the other. Our province is nationally and internationally recognized as a tourism destination. We offer everything from world-renowned outdoor activities to year-round entertainment at the world's largest mall in Edmonton. Alberta also offers five national and approximately 300 provincial parks, world-class cultural and historical sites, and our urban areas offer a wide range of attractions for tourists of any age.

Mr. Speaker, tourism is crucial to our economy. In a day and age

of reducing pollutants and creating sustainable industries and other sectors of business in Alberta, the tourism industry is a self-sufficient, clean, and sustainable industry that the government could be marketing more vigorously. Unfortunately, I sometimes think that we have taken the wonders and majestic geographical landscape of our province for granted.

But we can't just presume that visitors will come and explore Alberta because we have the geography, because we hosted the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, because we have the world's largest indoor mall or our famous Calgary Stampede. This may have been so a decade ago, but with the competitive nature of national and international tourism we must work harder and smarter at attracting visitors just to maintain, let alone increase, our share of the market.

The need to sustain and increase tourist levels is directly related to the need of sustainable funding so that tourism in Alberta is not left behind by the rest of the world. With globalization and the numerous attractions afforded by the Alberta landscape, the potential to aggressively market and promote Alberta as a destination for global travellers is immense.

Our grandeur and beauty are obvious from the moment you arrive. The province's attractiveness lies in its diversity. Just some of the features which make Alberta an incredibly attractive tourism proposition include accessible wildlife, varied and impressive scenery, unspoiled wilderness areas, diverse cultures in our urban and rural settings, a well-developed infrastructure, and virtually unlimited opportunities for special-interest activities. Such activities include some of the best skiing in the world, fishing and boating, whitewater rafting, hiking, ice and mountain climbing, exploring captivating flora and fauna that is indigenous to Alberta, and unique world-renowned archeological sites located in Alberta's badlands.

Alberta is and should continue to be a holiday hot spot for a plethora of travellers and thrill-seekers alike for generations to come. However, Mr. Speaker, attracting tourists and sustaining our precious and natural tourist resources costs money. Our lack of initiative in allocating a revenue source specifically to promote tourism in our province is worrisome given the fact that tourism is and will be an ever-increasing industry in this province. In light of this, we should consider solely allocating the current revenue accrued by the existing 5 per cent hotel tax to the advancement of marketing, promotion, and sustainability of Alberta tourism rather than its current allocation in the general revenue fund.

Mr. Speaker, in 2003 over \$50 million was collected in hotel tax with the province spending less than one-half of that on marketing. Our potential for increasing this \$5 billion industry could be so much greater. Tourism development in Alberta has the potential to reap massive revenue, an opportunity for Albertans if properly structured and funded. Most importantly it would build upon the already existing 122,000 employees directly and indirectly related to the tourism industry and provide for challenging and diversified employment opportunities in other areas of our province.

Tourism is an ever changing marketplace. I believe that Alberta should be and can be a world leader in tourism if the proper financial steps are taken immediately to capture the natural and cultural essence that Alberta has to offer to the rest of the world. I believe that unlike the many horrific tragedies associated with unsustainable and excessive tourism exposure in many parts of the world, Alberta's commitment to sustainable and viable tourism could be fostered through a provincial levy used specifically for the marketing of tourism in Alberta.

Over the past several years many individuals, including the Economic Development minister, the Strategic Tourism Marketing Council, and our MLA tourism committee, have worked towards converting the hotel tax to a tourism levy dedicated specifically for

*These spellings could not be verified at the time of publication.

the marketing and promotion of Alberta tourism. After carefully examining the options, this seems to be the logical choice regarding the allocation of funds towards increase in tourism marketing expenditure in the province. The \$56 million accrued from the hotel tax in 2003 if allocated fully to the Alberta tourism industry could dramatically increase the already \$5 billion revenue of Alberta tourism and could substantially impact revenues in other sectors of the Alberta economy.

Mr. Speaker, tourism as a viable economic industry will continue to climb in its importance in Alberta. Significant investing in tourism today will enable Alberta to lead the way in innovative and environmentally sustainable ventures in Canada for the future. It is now time for the Alberta government to reallocate the revenue generated by the hotel tax to be solely dedicated to the growth and sustainability of the tourism industry in Alberta. We only have to look at the experiences of some of our major competitors to understand the benefits of effective and significant marketing efforts.

I urge all members of the Assembly today to vote in favour of Motion 506 and ensure that Alberta's tourism future will be sustained for future generations to come.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

8:10

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure again to participate in the discussion this evening on Motion 506, the establishment of a tourism levy. Certainly, whenever we look at this, it looks like a good idea, but the language of Motion 506, in my opinion, is ambiguous, and it is unclear whether the motion is calling for a new tourism levy to be established on top of the current hotel tax. If that is the case, I would have a great deal of difficulty supporting the motion. I certainly hope that my interpretation is wrong. Further increases to the price of hotel rooms in Alberta, in my opinion, would ruin our competitive advantage and decrease the number of dollars collected from tourism.

We're going back a number of years to the introduction of the hotel tax, going back to 1987. It was at that time going to be used to address the provincial deficit. Well, fortunately, after the economic policies of one of our former leaders, Mr. Laurence Decore, were adopted by this government, not only has that deficit been eliminated, but the provincial debt is now also close to being eliminated.

So if we're not going to eliminate this tax – and my interpretation was that once the debt was paid off, the tax would be eliminated – I think it's a very sound proposal to take at least a portion of this money and use it as a source of cash for an extensive North American and European campaign to attract citizens from America and citizens from Europe to this province. The tourism industry certainly is going to be a significant pillar in our future economic prosperity, and we can't start too soon to promote, as the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane stated earlier, the attractions, the natural beauty of this province and some of the man-made attractions that have been developed.

Also, perhaps we could use a portion of this money to develop the tourism potential even further in the West Yellowhead area. I'm disappointed. All the development has happened around Kananaskis, and I, for one, was hoping that there would be some development around Hinton on the east side of the Jasper national park.

Whenever one adds up the total of this hotel tax that has been collected, it has in the last half a dozen years or so, Mr. Speaker, been in excess of \$500 million. That is a lot of money. If we had surplus from the advertising campaign, perhaps it would be prudent to set it aside at least and develop some more attractions in the West

Yellowhead area. A Kananaskis north so to speak. I'm not saying that we would go as far as putting white sands on the golf courses and things of that nature, but certainly a development that would be a destination for tourists.

I think it is much needed to diversify the economy in that area of Alberta, and I think the northern half of the province would certainly appreciate it because there has been talk for some time that there would be further development in the north part of the province. The highway from Edmonton – of course the hon. member would be quite aware of that – is twinned now, and it doesn't take that much time even doing the speed limit to get to the West Yellowhead constituency.

Certainly, I for one would not be disappointed if the revenue that was raised from the hotel tax was used for an advertising campaign at this time. Now, whenever we look at the province's tourism industry, there is an expectation that there will be a drop in visitors, in revenue. There was last year, in 2003. There was a loss of \$250 million to \$500 million, depending upon who you talk to, and this is despite the high-profile attractions of Banff, Lake Louise, and, as the hon. member stated earlier, here in Edmonton, the West Edmonton Mall.

Again, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers' 2003 Alberta tourism survey, Mr. Speaker, 91 per cent of operators, businesses, and organizations in the province's tourism industry stated that increased marketing and additional financial resources are the most critical elements for industry improvement. As a skier that likes to get down to the national parks, I'm astonished to meet skiers from other places and to find out from them that they usually find their information on Banff and Lake Louise and Jasper in ski magazines. I was of the assumption that perhaps they saw billboards or perhaps they saw advertisements in the travel section in their local Sunday papers, but, no, the majority of them tell me that they're getting this information mostly from ski magazines.

I have yet to meet one party on the ride on the chairlift that has been unsatisfied with either the snow or the service they're receiving from their hotel. They are quite impressed with the services provided at the cost, and of course they're very impressed by the natural beauty and the snow conditions. There's no reason why we can't promote our province, I think, with the use of this money.

The language of Motion 506 is ambiguous, and if it could be cleared up, then certainly I would be very pleased to support this motion at this time.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I will cede the floor to another hon. colleague. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise in the Assembly this evening and add my comments to the discussion and debate surrounding Motion 506, the possible introduction of a tourism levy which would be dedicated to the province's tourism marketing framework. This initiative would be established in order to promote and enhance the tourism industry in the province.

The motion has a broad mandate that allows for flexibility to examine various models or initiatives in the industry. I support the idea of proposing a levy. This levy could be added on top of the existing hotel tax or, rather, replace the hotel tax and specifically dedicate the revenue to tourism spending.

The purpose of the hotel tax has run its course, as mentioned by the sponsor. The government of Alberta first established the tax in 1987. It was created along with taxes such as the fuel tax, insurance

premium, and an increase in corporate taxes to reduce the deficit in the province. As all members of the Assembly are aware, currently the province does not have a deficit. Furthermore, there has not been a deficit in Alberta since 1994-95. The province has been fiscally responsible and is working to eliminate what little debt is left in Alberta. The objectives of the hotel tax have been met. Therefore, I agree with the sponsor that one possibility for this revenue or a portion of this revenue would be to invest it into the province's tourism industry.

8:20

As it stands, the money generated from the hotel tax now gets allocated to the general revenue fund. It has been argued both by industry and from within government that this money should serve to enhance the province's tourism efforts. This is not a new idea, Mr. Speaker, and it appears there has been a lot of support for this initiative. Many government MLAs have requested this type of strategy. As well, many in the tourism industry hold the view that by replacing the hotel tax and employing an industry-driven levy, it would bring consistency and predictability in marketing to the sector.

In 2002 the tourism marketing committee first recommended that the hotel tax be converted to a tourism levy and that the revenues be focused on tourism marketing. The idea was to gradually phase out the hotel tax while introducing a tourism marketing levy in its place.

Mr. Speaker, the tourism industry plays an important role in the province's economic base. I offered my remarks regarding this sector in my response to the Speech from the Throne as I believe this is an extremely important industry to the province and one that has great potential for the future. The province's tourist sector gains its strength not only from its exceptional scenery, but also this is complemented by the service excellence and the strong private-sector/government partnerships.

What is left now is for the province to promote this amazing resource and increase its ability to attract national and international visitors. We need to continue to encourage tourists to come and spend their vacation dollars in Alberta. During 2003 the Alberta tourism industry generated over \$5.3 billion in annual revenue, Mr. Speaker. I acknowledge that the revenue estimates are expected to continue to grow over future years, but these projected numbers could only increase substantially with the marketing of our province.

Mr. Speaker, I feel that the tourism effort should be promoting all areas of the province. It seems as though, as mentioned by my colleague from Banff-Cochrane, tourists view Alberta and focus somewhat on the Rocky Mountains and West Edmonton Mall, and if this is the case, then they are missing out on many great escapes that our province has to offer. The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar talked about a Kananaskis of the north. I would like to talk about the Kananaskis of the east. Lakeland has so much to offer.

There is so much more to Alberta. Its splendour ranges over all areas of the province. However, tourists need to be aware that these opportunities exist. We must ask ourselves why people do not know of these opportunities. Why are they not aware?

Mr. Speaker, my constituency of Lac La Biche-St. Paul is the home of Alberta's Lakeland region. Tourism is an important industry to the area. However, it could be greatly expanded if only more tourists were aware that these opportunities are present. It is not typically a location for international visitors. However, the region is appealing to many different types of visitors. It offers great diversity of boreal mixed forests; clean, clear lakes; sandy beaches; marshy wetlands; and prairie landscapes. The area offers many unique wilderness opportunities. The region has over 150 lakes, many with lakeside camping and cabin facilities. The fishing is

exceptional, while the wetlands are a perfect environment for birdwatching, with over 230 different species.

The area of Lac La Biche-St. Paul consistently has over 175,000 visitors annually. However, I don't believe it is a hot spot for international visitors. I do believe the area holds great potential for the future and would be attractive to many different types of tourists. This area is not a hot spot, because we are not promoting these areas to our potential. We must ask ourselves what the positive economic impact as well as other benefits to my constituency would be if we marketed this area properly.

Alberta is fortunate in that tourism is supported by provincial, national, and international visitors. However, we need to raise the profile of the province and the tourist opportunities that exist for travellers, especially, again, international visitors. We need to continue to attract these types of visitors.

Mr. Speaker, it is absolutely critical to promote the province's tourism sector. How are we going to attract more visitors to come to the province if we don't inform them on what we have to offer? It is not a matter of tourist opportunities in the province but, rather, an issue of getting the word out.

Mr. Speaker, we don't need to go far to see how other jurisdictions market their areas and the attractions within these regions compared to what could be possible in our province. In the pedway across from the visitors' centre and our own Legislature gift shop there are stands filled with pamphlets. I am sure most members are familiar with the area I'm referring to. These stands are filled with information on all sorts of different activities. They offer flyers on golf packages, tours, camping, whitewater rafting, fishing excursions, and other activities. The stands break down into categories: information on Edmonton and out of the province. The information pamphlets in the Alberta section, while abundant, tend to be small flyers promoting specific activities. These look as though they are being produced by individual tour companies.

What I find interesting is the information available from the regions outside of the province. There are complete booklets on British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Idaho. There are also booklets on certain regions or areas within the provinces and states. What's more is that there is not just one booklet per province. There are separate information packages on camping attractions and accommodations among other things. I believe there are four separate booklets on Manitoba alone. Surely, if Manitoba can produce that many comprehensive documents, we can match their efforts to promote tourism in Alberta. Granted, there were materials on Alberta, but these were limited in their scope and mostly focused on specific attractions.

This is the same situation that I have encountered while in Jasper and Banff. The visitors' centre and hotel lobbies are filled with information promoting British Columbia and Montana. We might as well be telling people to leave the province and spend their vacation dollars in other locations. The bottom line is that if travellers don't know that these opportunities exist, it is not going to matter how great our facilities are and how incredible the scenery is.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to have the opportunity to rise today and join the debate on Motion 506, sponsored by my dear colleague from West Yellowhead. I fully support the intent and purpose of Motion 506, which is to support and further enhance our province's tourism sector, which is increasingly becoming one of the biggest employers and revenue generators in Alberta.

As has been mentioned before, Albertans are fortunate to live in a province that's blessed with natural beauty and spectacular scenery. Alberta's natural habitat is not only diverse but truly unique. There are very few places in the world where you can find the rugged mountain ranges, the never-ending sea of prairie grasslands, rough badlands, and the flowing carpet of remote evergreen forests all in one location.

Over the past decades this unique setting has attracted millions of tourists from all around our country and the world who choose to come to Alberta in search of adventure in the great outdoors. Alberta's landscape and environment are ideally suited for backpackers, campers, wildlife enthusiasts, and all those who lead active lifestyles and appreciate the wonders and experiences of our backcountry.

8:30

Our two major urban centres of Edmonton and Calgary are great tourist destinations, as well, and offer visitors exceptional hospitality combined with distinctive western flavour. Over the years famous attractions like Calgary's Fort Calgary Historic Park, Heritage Park Historic Village, the Calgary Tower, Canada Olympic Park in Calgary-Bow as well as Edmonton's West Edmonton Mall, Northlands Park, and the Old Strathcona district have become some of the tourists' favourite destinations. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, the Calgary Stampede, Klondike Days, the Calgary Folk Music Festival, and the Edmonton Folk Music Festival not only attract thousands of visitors from all corners of the globe each and every year, but they are also excellent showcases for our rich cultural heritage, identity, and tradition.

While these are all extremely compelling reasons for people to come, see, and experience our province, one of the major reasons why people choose to vacation in Alberta is Albertans themselves. Albertans and Canadians, Mr. Speaker, are known around the world for their tolerance, hospitality, kindness, generosity, friendliness, and warmth, and if we wish to further promote Alberta as a premier holiday and tourist destination, our number one priority should be to sell Albertans to the world.

The reason I say this is because while sightseeing is a very important criteria for a potential tourist, one of the major motives for somebody to come back and visit a place over and over again is the people that they meet and the experience as a whole. I believe that these key ingredients are present right here in Alberta, and furthermore I believe that they serve to provide us with a solid foundation upon which we can further erect the pillars of our tourist industry.

I fully support the intent of Motion 506, which calls for the expansion of this important industry sector through further government involvement and investment. The motion proposes to accomplish this through the establishment of a dedicated revenue source that would provide the much-needed investment funds necessary to boost tourism in Alberta.

As my hon. colleague from West Yellowhead alluded to earlier, one of the ways we accomplish this task is by converting the Alberta hotel room tax, whose proceeds are currently being funneled into the general revenue fund, into a dedicated tourism levy. According to the latest budgetary statistics, in 2003 the Alberta hotel room tax generated about \$58 million in government revenues. If we were to convert this tax and invest its proceeds in the tourism sector, not only would we potentially be tripling the government investment in this sector, but our intake of revenues from this industry would increase substantially.

To put this into numbers, Mr. Speaker, if our tourism investment in 2003-04 was approximately \$22 million, adding on the \$58 million generated from the hotel tax will allow us to boost our

tourism investment to about \$80 million. This massive increase in funding would not only allow this sector to grow and become more competitive with tourism sectors in other jurisdictions in Canada but could also double its overall revenue from over \$5 billion to \$10 billion. This means that with the added financial boost, Alberta's tourism sector could potentially increase from contributing 3.3 per cent to 6.6 per cent of our total GDP.

For the purpose of comparison, if this sector were encouraged to double its output to \$10 billion, it could potentially match and even overtake the output generated by our food and beverage manufacturing industry. This is highly significant if one considers the fact that our food and beverage sector is currently facing some extremely trying times as a result of the border closure to Canadian beef products.

Now, Mr. Speaker, some may disagree with the provisions outlined in Motion 506 on the grounds that funneling such a large amount of government revenue to only one sector of the economy is not only excessive but also an unnecessary government involvement in an industry that was privatized less than 10 years ago. Well, Mr. Speaker, I personally believe that in this particular case such arguments don't hold much value.

Tourism is the fourth largest industry in our province, which, as I said, generates not only \$5 billion in revenues but also provides employment for over 120,000 Albertans. Now, Mr. Speaker, the potential for growth of this sector is enormous, and the return on investment ratio is very favourable. Therefore, if by tripling our tourism investment by converting the hotel tax into a dedicated tourism levy will mean that we can double the sector's output, I think that we would be committing a grave error by not considering this option. Furthermore, the idea of investing the funds generated by this tax into the tourism industry is reflective of the efforts of many government members, and it's also supported by the vast majority of the sector's operators, businesses, and organizations.

Further to this point, according to the 2003 Alberta tourism survey 91 per cent of those involved in the tourism industry indicated that they wished to see increased marketing and additional resources to increase the sector's market share. The survey also indicated that 59 per cent of the respondents believe that our government has a key role to play in the enhancement and further development of Alberta tourism. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, to argue that Motion 506 represents an unnecessary government involvement into a privatized industry sector is in my view invalid, and the majority of industry stakeholders will agree with me on this point.

In the final analysis, Mr. Speaker, Alberta enjoys a vibrant and healthy tourism industry, whose potential for further growth is enormous. As I said in my opening remarks, Albertans are extremely fortunate to live in a province which enjoys breathtaking natural scenery and environment, thriving rural and urban communities, and energetic and friendly people. Alberta has all the necessary ingredients to become one of the world's premier vacation destinations. Introducing a dedicated tourism levy as suggested in Motion 506 will help us to accomplish this goal at a relatively low cost.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, this government has gone to great lengths to try to encourage the diversification of our economy. The latest BSE crisis has not only had detrimental economic effects on our rural communities but has also greatly compromised our overall diversification efforts. I am convinced that giving our tourism sector the necessary boost will help put us back on the diversification track and will also help make up for some of the potential losses our economy has experienced as a result of BSE.

With this in mind, Mr. Speaker, I urge all my colleagues to join me in supporting our tourism industry and vote in favour of Motion 506. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to have the opportunity to rise and speak to Motion 506, a very important motion, which, if implemented, would boost Alberta's very important tourism industry.

Alberta, as has been noted by my colleagues previously, is a really ideal place to visit and to live. By reputation alone millions of people come to visit each year. From the awe-inspiring natural beauty found in the Rocky Mountains to world-class events like the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede to mammoth attractions like West Edmonton Mall, Alberta offers a wide variety of experiences to people all over the globe.

The list of reasons to visit Alberta is long. The Royal Tyrrell Museum, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, the Calgary Zoo, Lake Louise, Jasper, Banff, Fort Edmonton, and the oil sands are just a very few fantastic destinations that quickly come to mind. Alberta's very terrain means that the province is an ideal place to golf, ski, hike, cycle, snowmobile, fish, hunt, camp, and so on, and Alberta has shown that it is capable of hosting world-class events such as the Winter Olympics, the world track and field championships, the Commonwealth Games, the Heritage Classic, the World Police/Fire Games, and most recently the Mars 2004 Canadian juvenile alpine championships.

You might wonder why I happen to mention that. I do mention this event in particular because my oldest granddaughter, 13-year-old Stephanie Irwin, competed at these championships and did very well. Also, I know that when you have competitors, officials, and parents attending these national and international events, they also wear another hat, and it's the tourist hat.

8:40

Add these elements to the reputation Albertans have for being friendly and inviting and you have, as I've said, an opportunity for success when it comes to attracting billions of tourist-related dollars. I'm sure you would agree that Alberta truly has a great opportunity to grow tourism. There are literally thousands of reasons why people would want to spend their holiday time in this beautiful province, and by establishing a provincial tourism levy, we could unlock unlimited potential towards bringing more people into Alberta.

There is no denying the importance of marketing your product. Major companies all over the world have gone to great lengths to ensure that the masses are aware of their products or services. Nike, for example, signed golf sensation Tiger Woods to an endorsement deal worth \$100 million over five years, about \$20 million per year. This, indeed, is a large sum of money but is not a cost to the company. Nike knows that by having Tiger endorse their brand name, customers will line up to purchase its products. Paying \$100 million in this manner is an investment which will lead to dividends of exponentially greater value.

I won't attempt to compare the amount Nike pays Tiger Woods to the paltry amount that this province allocates to its \$5 billion tourism industry annually. I do feel, however, that the Nike example demonstrates the importance that successful companies have placed on marketing their product.

Investment is the key to growth. I believe that this statement is true when applied to Alberta's tourism industry. If we do the necessary work in promoting our geography, events, attractions, and people, we can make great gains in this sector. Also, if we use funds to develop initiatives in which we co-operate with other jurisdictions like British Columbia and Montana, not necessarily at the same time, hoping to increase tourism to a greater region, our province will benefit further from increased activity within the sector.

If we invest more in our film industry, we should see an increase not only in that industry but in tourism revenues. We all know how New Zealand has benefited in the billions by filming the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in that country.

We have already seen that improving the way we manage our tourism industry can lead to increased value. In 1996 after significant restructuring to the tourism industry by this government, Travel Alberta was in charge of developing and expanding tourism in the province. Unfortunately, the industry began to dwindle, not necessarily because of poor work by Travel Alberta but because investment in the industry had dropped substantially. Consequently, the value of Alberta's tourism industry fell to about \$3 billion at the time.

In 1998 the government switched from Travel Alberta and embraced a new approach in the new tourism marketing framework. The change has led to a 53 per cent funding increase to \$16,589,000 in the '99-2000 fiscal year to promote the industry. As the industry is now worth \$5 billion, we can see the value in marketing and investing in our product. In the end it will be Albertans who will benefit from increased tourism. It will mean that Alberta's hotel industry will thrive, restaurants will benefit from more out-of-country clientele, businesses will benefit with more money being spent in Alberta, and more jobs will be created for Albertans. These are all very important reasons why we should commit additional funds to tourism.

Mr. Speaker, it is tremendously important that our tourism industry remain healthy and grow. As I stated before, \$5 billion flows into our province every year because of tourism, and 122,000 Albertans have jobs because of it. Some Alberta towns exist solely because of tourism dollars. We should strive to improve these numbers.

So what are our options in being able to pay for increased marketing of Alberta? How do we find the funds to grow, not just maintain, our tourism infrastructure? These are important questions to consider.

Alberta prides itself on low taxes for its residents, and initially it looks like an increased cost to the taxpayer. However, we are in a unique situation in Alberta in that the opportunities that are afforded to us exceed those that are found in other jurisdictions. As has been pointed out, in 1987 the Alberta government introduced the hotel room tax as part of a strategy to close the gap between what we were spending as a province and the revenue we were bringing in.

In conjunction with other taxes and premiums these funds played an important role in eliminating the province's deficit. Today there's no deficit, and we're nearing the end of the debt that Alberta accrued in the decades leading up to this present government. There are many discussions that revolve around what a debt-free Alberta will look like, and ideas are frequently put forward as to how we can improve the Alberta advantage even further when we are not handcuffed by debt pressures and responsibilities. I believe that establishing a tourism investment by allocating the funds collected through the hotel tax is one idea that we should seriously consider.

At the beginning of this session Alberta's Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour the Honourable Lois Hole, read in the throne speech that one of Alberta's goals was to make the province the best place to live, work, and visit. Allocating additional funding to tourism would fulfill this goal. Alberta benefits from out-of-country visits, but Albertans themselves enjoy Alberta's splendour and spend their time and money within Alberta's tourism industry.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to just point out the importance of the timing of this motion. In the past couple of years there have been a number of critical events that have had a negative effect on Alberta

tourism and tourism in general. Certainly, after September 11 fewer people were willing to fly, and tourism diminished across the world. That trend continued during the war in Iraq. Closer to home SARS, although never detected in Alberta, certainly negatively affected the number of people considering Canada as a tourist destination. Most recently we have dealt with two single cases of mad cow disease. While Albertans know that our beef is the finest in the world, uninformed travellers have been wary about coming to Alberta.

In a 2003 survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers, 55 per cent of respondents said that they felt the Iraq war and the SARS outbreak had a significant impact on the Alberta tourism industry. Most importantly, 91 per cent stated that increased marketing and additional financial resources were the most critical elements for industry improvement.

So I believe this is a crucial time to be beating our drum. We need to let the world know that we are open for business and that Alberta is a very viable destination for people from all over the world. We need to do our part in attracting tourism to Alberta. No one else is going to do that for us.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like to state that I am in favour of this motion and compliment the Member for West Yellowhead for bringing it forward. I believe it is very important to increase our efforts in promoting this very important industry to the world. By allocating revenues generated by the current hotel room tax for this purpose, we can ensure that tourism plays an even greater role in Alberta's future.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder. You have 40 seconds.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, I am unable to support Motion 506 although I do believe it is well intentioned. I think a better idea to help the tourism industry would be to abolish the 5 per cent sales tax and allow hoteliers the option of either reducing the room rates by 5 per cent across the board or, alternatively, they could collect on their own and do for their own industry what they're expecting government to do.

Also, I'm not certain why it is incumbent upon the hoteliers to pay the levy when there are other industries associated with the tourism industry, specifically restaurateurs and amusement park operators. All benefit from marketing tourism, but only the hoteliers are asked to pay under this motion.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead to conclude debate.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank all hon. members who have spoken to Motion 506, establishing a provincial tourism levy. We need to urge the government to move ahead and bring this on stream.

We need to move away from the three Ms: moose, mounties, and mountains. Tourism marketing in Alberta is a lot more sophisticated. We need to move ahead and get this tourism levy moving, and then we can market all the different aspects of this great province of Alberta.

It's great to see the *National Geographic* rank Jasper and Banff as sustainable tourism destinations higher than the Grand Canyon and the Galapagos Islands. This shows how everybody else recognizes the great product that we have, but we still have to strongly sell this message. The big thing that I look at is that this is a sustainable

resource as well as a renewable one. The travelling public is looking for more variety, more interesting places to visit, and we certainly have them in this great province of Alberta.

8:50

We have discussed the aspects of not having a dedicated revenue, but as I review the Community Development business plan for the 2004-2005 fiscal year, a new fee will be implemented in provincial parks and protected areas to ensure that such services as education programs, bus and auto tours, and grooming cross-country trails still remain available to the public. This is why I strongly believe in a dedicated portion of the hotel tax. We are looking at 2 and a half per cent and basically half of what we presently get from this tax.

Mr. Speaker, I have strong support from the chambers of commerce in West Yellowhead – the Edson and District Chamber of Commerce, the Hinton and District Chamber of Commerce, the Grande Cache Chamber of Commerce, and Jasper Tourism & Commerce – on moving ahead to bring in this tourism levy. We will be able to display to the world the products that we have so we can have a great centennial celebration. I strongly believe this will be a great kickoff so that tourism will move up in the ranks of our GDP in our province.

The Alberta Hotel & Lodging Association also supports this levy. They're looking at utilizing this dedicated levy as a strong investment. Statistics Canada indicates that for every dollar of tourism spending, the government raises 3.1 cents. For every dollar spent on tourism in 1998, the federal government raised 14.8 cents, the provincial/territorial government raised 13.6 cents, and the municipal government received 18.1 cents. KPMG indicated that every dollar invested in marketing would increase tourism spending by \$20.

As a final note, I would like to thank the Minister of Economic Development for his strong dedication to this industry, especially moving ahead with his news release on April 2 that an additional \$5 million per year for three year fiscal years has been directed towards tourism marketing and development in Alberta. Adding to the current base funding of \$19.1 million, it brings the total annual government investment in tourism marketing and development to more than \$24 million.

Tourism is one of Alberta's largest industries, generating over \$5 billion annually and employing over 120,000 people. It generates over \$620 million in revenue for the Alberta government through direct and indirect taxation.

Now that the minister has appointed a deputy minister of tourism, this is a great first step. Now all we need is the support of this House for the motion so that we can move ahead and be a stronger contender in tourism marketing for the 21st century.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 506 carried]

Game Conservation Fund

507. Mr. VanderBurg moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to add a fish and wildlife surcharge onto existing fines and penalties related to illegal hunting and fishing practices with the proceeds allocated directly to a conservation fund to support programs that restore and protect game species and species at risk in Alberta.

Mr. VanderBurg: It's a pleasure to begin debate on Motion 507. The intent of this motion is to create a pool of financial resources to complement and assist Alberta's fish and wildlife conservation

programs. I think there should be a stronger focus on the environment, specifically on fish and wildlife species. A wildlife conservation fund would help maintain and improve healthy wildlife populations.

As you may know, there already is a surcharge on illegal hunting and fishing fines, with the proceeds dedicated to the victims of crime fund. I've been reminded on several occasions of this existing surcharge, and some have asked why the Alberta government should consider directing money into this separate fund. The current victims of crime fund works well to assist people by providing one-time funding to help people through the aftermath. However, I do not think that the current victims of crime fund effectively helps conservation officers. There is no doubt that the fund successfully helps human victims, and according to the Victims of Crime Act, the environment is classified as a victim whenever an illegal hunting offence occurs. This hasn't translated into financial assistance from the fund for conservation officers though.

Mr. Speaker, let me give you an example. Let's say that someone is caught night hunting and fined \$2,000. On top of the fine the offender has to pay a 15 per cent surcharge with this dedicated to the victims of crime fund. The penalties listed in the Fisheries Act and general fisheries regulations as well as the Wildlife Act and wildlife regulations are subject to surcharge. The reasoning for this is that wildlife population is directly and negatively affected by illegal hunting practices. I think everybody would agree with this logic. However, this is where the logic ends.

If a fish and wildlife species is directly affected by illegal hunting, there should be an opportunity for people who carry out conservation and enforcement programs to access the fund. However, according to the guidelines of the victims of crime fund, provincial government departments are not considered eligible for funding grants. As a result, conservation officers employed by the Department of Sustainable Resource Development are not able to use any of the funds collected from the surcharges on fines related to illegal hunting. This part of the fund works against conservation programs because the people who need the money cannot access the grants.

Projects within another government department's funding mandate are also not eligible for a grant from the victims fund. As a result, any conservation education or enforcement programs spearheaded by a conservation officer could not use proceeds from the fund.

Under Motion 507 the government would either add a new surcharge on fines for illegal hunting and fishing or take the existing surcharge on these fines and put them into a separate fund. For some members the amount of money in this fund may not seem significant. I think that any additional funding, no matter the size, would help Alberta's economy. Rural areas are relying more and more on existing tourism attractions and building tourism opportunities. As a result, these areas rely heavily on sustainable fish and wildlife to attract tourism. The amount in the conservation fund may not be enough to solve all of the fish and wildlife issues, but it will help conservation officers address some of these problems.

I have several hard-working conservation officers in my area who dedicate a great deal of their time to conservation and promoting responsible hunting and fishing. At times they go above and beyond their required duties to make time for presenting to organizations and helping people understand the need to preserve wildlife populations. I think they do an incredible job, Mr. Speaker, although they tell me that they could do better with a little more help.

A few years ago, Mr. Speaker, a lake was netted in my area, basically wiping out the entire fish population. This caused extensive damage besides the obvious environmental damage to the lake's ecosystem. Any commercial fishing opportunities and the

benefits to the local economy were lost. Access to sustainable fishing for native people was lost. Campgrounds, sporting goods stores, restaurants, boat rental companies suffered because of one poacher.

The netted lake is an example of how additional funding could have minimized some of the damage. An information campaign on the effects of overfishing could have been a proactive step. Also, funding for restocking the lake could have helped our lake recover faster. Neither task would have required a substantial amount of money. Conservation officers, especially those in my area, could benefit from a little more financial assistance to effectively carry out their duties. I've seen what they can do with the current funding they receive, and I can assure this Assembly that those funds would go a long way.

Mr. Speaker, it is safe to say that health care and education will continue to consume the majority of the government's funding. I realize that some of the reforms are underway and others are being designed. I believe that these reforms will stabilize funding so government can concentrate on other issues. However, I do not believe that the immediate problems with illegal hunting and fishing can wait. Furthermore, I think that conservation efforts do not require a major overhaul; they simply require more financial resources.

I see no problem in taking money from people who abuse and destroy Alberta's fish and wildlife and dedicating it to a conservation fund: abuser pay. The added cost to the government to administer this fund would pale in comparison to the benefits to conservation programs and the social, economic, and environmental spinoffs of maintaining wildlife populations. Some of the challenges facing Alberta's conservation officers do not have easy solutions. A conservation fund financed by poachers may help improve Alberta's fish and wildlife resources.

I would encourage all members in this Assembly to support Motion 507, and I look forward to the debate. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. I'm interested in participating in the time remaining on Motion 507.

Mr. Speaker, certainly, when the hon. member is describing this motion, I would like at some time to get clarified in debate what exactly is the use of the money now that we're collecting from fees or taxes on hunting and fishing licences. Is there not a portion of that tax being dedicated to the rehabilitation of streams, for fencing around mountain streams to protect them from cattle? This is perhaps a good idea, but is there not enough money now from the taxes on hunting and fishing licences to restore and protect game species and fishing streams?

Some of the finest fly-fishing in North America is in the eastern slopes of Alberta, and I'm of the understanding that that money is going to protect some of those gravel beds. Perhaps I'm wrong, and if the hon. member could clarify that.

The Speaker: Excuse me. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business is now concluded for today.

9:00head: Committee of Supply

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Orders the first hour is allocated to the hon. minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate in the debate.

The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very pleased to present the 2004-2005 estimates for the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

First of all, I'd like to thank my department staff for all their hard work, and I'd like to introduce them to you. They're seated in the members' gallery, so I'll ask them to stand as I call their names: my deputy minister, of course, Paddy Meade – most of you know her now – ADM Ken Boutillier; Neil Reddekopp; our senior financial officer, Lori Sajjad; and of course John McDonough, Thomas Droege, Gerry Kushlyk, Jay O'Neill, Judy Daniels, and Tom Baldwin.

My ministry's fourth business plan reflects our ongoing efforts to take on a challenging mandate. There is continuing pressure on the Alberta government to address aboriginal and northern issues in a timely manner and to work with a view to success over the longer term. My ministry's vision is "an Alberta that includes the full participation of self-reliant Aboriginal and Northern Albertans in the province's opportunities and prosperity." Our mission is to work with our partners, including aboriginal people and other ministries, to support an environment that promotes well-being and self-reliance for aboriginal and northern people and communities.

As a small ministry we are not in the business of program development. We are in the business of building and strengthening relationships. Our role is to be an entry point for aboriginal communities into government in that we provide advice and support to the other government ministries and other Albertans in addressing policy and service issues for aboriginal people and guidance in working with aboriginal governments and communities. We welcome the role of facilitating, co-ordinating, and advising on the development of cross-ministry policies, strategies, and initiatives.

In other words, our mandate is to work with aboriginal and northern people, communities, and organizations, other Alberta ministries, other governments, and the private sector to respond to aboriginal and northern issues. Therefore, our 2004-2005 estimates I believe reflect this mandate and other legislative requirements.

My budget is \$35.7 million in 2004-2005, up \$4.1 million from 2003-2004. A major portion of the budget is for legislative funding requirements or statutory funds provided to the Métis Settlements General Council or pursuant to the Métis Settlements Accord Implementation Act. This act requires payment of \$10 million per year until April 1, 2006.

As well, under the legislation we provide funding to Métis settlements through the matching grants replacement agreement. Of course, this amount is \$4.9 million in 2004-05. The total for Métis settlements legislative requirements and government efforts is approximately \$14.9 million, leaving under \$21 million for all other ministry responsibilities, which we have allocated as follows: Aboriginal Affairs, \$17.8 million; NADC, \$2 million. I know that the chair, the MLA for Peace River, will speak to NADC efforts shortly. The Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal receives \$0.9 million. We have 79 full-time employees, including 57 in the department, 15 with NADC, and another seven assigned to the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal.

The 2004-2007 business plan identifies four strategic priorities that the ministry intends to focus on. On the aboriginal policy framework, which we always talk about and which everyone seems to understand, I hope, we will continue to lead implementation of the commitments made in the APF. This involves working with numerous external partners as well as leading the cross-ministry aboriginal and policy initiative, which is internally working within government.

Capacity building. We will increase our efforts with aboriginal governments to enhance the capacity to form effective partnerships and manage relations with government, industry, and other parties.

Consultation. We will continue to lead development and implementation of provincial processes for consulting with aboriginal communities in relation to land and resource issues.

On the fourth, northern development, we will work collaboratively with other ministries, northern stakeholders, and other partners to address challenges to co-ordinated and sustainable northern development.

Our business plan goals are linked to five goals in the government business plan, and of course the ministry is directly linked to goal 5, "Aboriginal communities and people in Alberta will have improved social and economic circumstances."

We have identified two core businesses, of course making sure to keep within the new government-wide business planning standards and alignment of our funding with core businesses, goals, strategies, and performance measures. The first core business relates to aboriginal people and issues. It is aimed at improving the participation of aboriginal people in Alberta's social and economic opportunities and facilitating resolution of significant issues.

Our first goal is to proactively collaborate with aboriginal governments and organizations, other ministries, and other parties to identify and resolve issues. We hope to achieve this goal through our ongoing efforts to of course do a number of things: one, enhance provincial relations with aboriginal people; two, facilitate inclusion of aboriginal issues in the development of government initiatives; and three, work with aboriginal communities, other ministries, and other parties to identify and resolve issues.

Strategies under this goal include participating in self-government discussions with Canada and First Nations, leading implementation of provincial consultation strategies and activities, assisting with the effective administration of Métis settlements legislation, and encouraging timely settlement of outstanding treaty land entitlement claims in Alberta.

The APF commits Alberta to a proactive, made-in-Alberta consultation process, and we are now drafting guidelines and implementation strategies with First Nations. We are also getting input from industry and other stakeholders. These guidelines and strategies will assist all ministries and industry to manage their consultations with First Nations.

Since 1986 Alberta has contributed to a total of 12 land entitlement settlements for Indian reserves owing under treaty, the best across the country, and we have the best people to do that. They're led by our legal team. I want to say thank you to them because without them it's not possible. We are also working with numerous partners and aboriginal community representatives in Edmonton and Calgary to address urban aboriginal issues.

Improving relations between the province and Alberta First Nations and Métis organizations is another strategy under goal 1. We have identified two specific initiatives under this goal: leading development of a government-wide aboriginal policy checklist to assist all ministries in ensuring that aboriginal issues are addressed in policy development and, of course, working with the Ministry of

Human Resources and Employment to develop economic performance measures from the aboriginal-specific labour force survey.

9:10

Performance measures for goal 1 include the monitoring of Métis settlements' self-generated revenue, an indication, of course, of community self-reliance, and providing a narrative report on the development of the aboriginal policy checklist. This performance measure was developed through collaboration with the office of the Auditor General.

Our second goal is to "assist in development of strategies and initiatives to promote the well-being and self-reliance of Aboriginal people in Alberta." This goal includes leading implementation of the government's APF. The ministry also leads the API, otherwise known as the aboriginal policy initiative, and participates actively in the cross-ministry initiatives. These include health sustainability initiatives, Alberta children and youth initiatives, and the economic development strategy. My department's participation in these priority policy initiatives provides opportunities to co-ordinate Alberta's responses to aboriginal and northern issues.

Of course, another area of ongoing activity under this goal is working with partners, including the ministries of Learning and Human Resources and Employment, as well as industry and the private sector to promote lifelong learning and to increase aboriginal participation in the economy.

Other strategies under goal 2 include working with Alberta Learning and other stakeholders to address recommendations from Alberta's Commission on Learning. Ministry staff will also continue to work directly with aboriginal organizations to enhance their planning and performance measures as part of capacity-building initiatives. As I mentioned earlier, this is one of our strategic priorities, but we will also continue to engage aboriginal youth and industry advisory committees in setting youth directions as well as our aboriginal advisory committee. We will continue to be active participants in federal/provincial/territorial processes focusing on aboriginal issues.

Our performance measures for goal 2 include the percentage of targets achieved in the cross-ministry API. This is an indicator of cross-ministry progress in addressing aboriginal issues. We also report on the percentage of Alberta ministries addressing aboriginal issues in their business or operational plans. In addition, the ministry will provide a narrative report on the results of our efforts with Canada and of course First Nations to address regulatory barriers to economic development on First Nations' reserves, which seems to be coming quite quickly.

Goal 4 in our business plan is organizational excellence. As a relatively new ministry we have devoted considerable effort to this goal. For the coming year we intend to focus on human resource development, information sharing, and support for government-wide practices. We will be using results from the government-wide employee survey to monitor progress toward this goal.

Our second core business under goal 3 is to facilitate development of northern Alberta. Essentially, this means we will continue to work with other ministries and northern stakeholders to advance co-ordinated, sustainable northern development, such as with industry, municipalities, and anyone that we feel needs to be included and wants to be included. We will also implement the Northwest Territories MOU and of course be specifically involved with the Alaska/Alberta committee under IIR. We will continue to represent North America and northern Alberta in the area of the northern forum.

I will ask my colleague the Member for Peace River to provide an

update as chair of NADC and to talk about issues where he feels free to do so. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and to the minister. As the minister noted, the government has to focus on strategic priorities. Northern Alberta contributes significantly to the economies of this province and Canada as a whole. In fact, a recent study demonstrated that on a per capita basis northern Alberta contributes two to three times the resource revenue compared to the rest of the province. This is a vital contribution to the sustainability of the Alberta advantage. In turn, we believe that we have to ensure the sustainability of the northern economy so that all Albertans can benefit.

The Northern Alberta Development Council and this ministry have focused on that goal. The oil sands development is fairly obvious, and most people have come to recognize its contribution. For a well-rounded economy we also have to be aware of the agricultural industry, the forestry industry, and northern tourism. NADC plays a key role in identifying how vital a good transportation infrastructure is in making it possible to exploit these and other industries. Good road, rail, and air links are essential if we expect people to develop these resources and get the products to market. Recruiting and keeping a skilled workforce is equally important. Training northern residents is the most assured way of keeping people in the area, but with such a huge demand for trades and professional people we have to find ways of attracting outside folks to where it's happening and to make it attractive for them to want to stay.

Mr. Chairman, there are many other programs that we work on such as capacity-building for northern communities, value-added developments, interjurisdictional partnerships, and so on, but I don't have time to elaborate on them in my presentation. I certainly will be glad to answer questions on any of these issues that may be raised, though.

Mr. Chairman and members, the north is an untapped frontier for development, and we are pleased to be playing a part in bringing the opportunities forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chair's Ruling Speaking Order

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition, I just want to put some information out for the record. According to our Standing Order 58(3), as I'd indicated earlier on,

the Committee of Supply shall consider estimates in the following manner:

- (a) the Minister, or the member of the Executive Council acting on the Minister's behalf, and members of the opposition may speak during the first hour.

The chair I guess did recognize the Member for Peace River to speak on behalf of the minister, but as per the Standing Order that is restricted to the minister and the members of the opposition.

Debate Continued

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I can accept that kind of switch to the rules.

Anyway, I listened with interest to the minister's comments and the Member for Peace River. I will mostly focus my comments, my own questions and thoughts, on the comments from the minister and on the business plan from her department.

It's interesting, I guess, in this Assembly that we use a lot of very bureaucratic language, and we talk in terms of monitoring and initiatives and frameworks and all these kinds of things. We in this room all generally know what those kinds of words mean, but when I sit here and look through the business plan and listen to the minister's comments, I'm inclined to want to speak in much more concrete terms and in the language that the ordinary people of Alberta who are out on the streets or in their homes would understand and the issues that I think they would be most concerned about. So my questions may not fit with the kinds of structure that the minister has for her department or her thoughts, but they are going to come her way nonetheless from me, and she can do her best to respond as we go along.

I've ended up making notes on eight different topics: on employment, education, justice, child welfare and children's services, housing, health, culture, and economic development. Those are the points around which I'll be organizing my questions to the minister.

I'm largely prompted to do so under point 1 on page 102 of the Budget 2004 business plans. The subtitle is "Aboriginal well-being and self-reliance." It says, "The Aboriginal population is growing faster and is younger than the non-Aboriginal population. The highest population growth is in urban areas." My questions really are intended not to focus exclusively but largely on urban areas. One border of my constituency is defined by Stony Plain Road in an area where there's a major program, a major agency serving the aboriginal population, and I'm thinking especially of those kinds of people when I raise my questions.

9:20

My first questions to the minister are around employment and job training. Now, it's a common saying that a good job is the best social program, and I think there's of course a lot of truth to that. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate in the aboriginal population is very high, far, far higher than it is in the rest of the population. That stems from many, many issues: cultural issues, education issues, and on and on.

When the minister talks about her department's role as being one of building relations and facilitating the work of other departments when it comes to aboriginals, I'd like some specifics, if she can give them, on the relationship building and facilitation that's going on concerning employment for aboriginals. What are we seeing perhaps in terms of job placement, if anything, and how is that work being facilitated? Are there placement positions or placement programs with private-sector employers? I'm sure there are. Are there placement programs with the provincial public service itself or with nonprofit agencies or other levels of government? Is there any support given to aboriginal small businesses, or what kind of facilitating occurs there? Are aboriginal small businesses encouraged to get involved in chambers of commerce or in perhaps obtaining funding from banks or from credit unions or from the Business Development Bank or something like that? So these are really issues around employment. What work is going on and will be going on this year under this budget to improve the employment prospects of aboriginals in Alberta?

The second topic I'd like to spend a few minutes on of course relates to the first. The second one is education, and this is key to all kinds of things. I'm sure we all know in here that good education is an excellent predictor of good employment, of good health, of minimum contact with the justice system, and generally of a happy

and successful life. Again, the education prospects of the aboriginal population are not what I think we would all agree they ought to be. So what kind of facilitation is being undertaken by her department to improve the education prospects and opportunities of the aboriginal population?

Is there support for any kinds of special school programs? I know that in my constituency there's a special program at Sherwood school under the public school board. Is that something that is occurring on its own through agencies and the community and the school board? Is that something that the minister sees her department having a role in? Maybe it's not necessary in Edmonton, but what about in other parts of the province? I would like some comment on that, for if there's one thing that should be the ultimate priority of this department, I would think it would be improving the educational lot of aboriginals in Alberta.

Of course, that doesn't just apply to schools. It also applies to postsecondary learning institutions, so is there work occurring in this budget to facilitate the success of aboriginals in postsecondary institutions in Alberta, whether that's universities or NAIT or colleges? How are we encouraging aboriginals and supporting aboriginal people to go on after they finish grade 12 to become journeymen blue-collar workers or to become professionals or teachers or nurse practitioners so that they can serve their communities either in remote areas of the province or in areas like Stony Plain Road right here in Edmonton?

What about education support for adult aboriginals who are living on their own? I'm thinking, for example, of upgrading or encouraging adults to return to finish high school or even to get basic literacy and numeracy skills. How is your department reaching out to the community, reaching out to the colleges or to the special programs across Alberta that upgrade people so that they can complete grade 12 and move on to postsecondary education? How are you reaching out to the adults who never had the opportunity to finish schooling?

The third area is justice. I notice the Justice minister is here tonight, and I know he's got concerns and thoughts on the disproportionate number of aboriginals in contact with the justice system. Again, what is the minister's department doing to address the issues that aboriginals face in relation to the justice system of Alberta? Of course, prevention would be the very best thing to emphasize, I suppose, if we had a choice, preventing people from becoming incarcerated or ending up in court. That may well involve improving their education or ensuring that they have a job or giving them better housing and so on. What kind of prevention work is being facilitated through this department so that aboriginals don't end up in the justice system in the first place? Is there liaison going on with police departments or with the court system or with the support systems that are there for people once they're discharged from the justice system?

What about addiction treatment programs? What work if any is being done by this department to address the addiction issues faced by the aboriginal population? I'm not saying that you have to be involved in all of these areas. I'm just looking for the facts here. Is that something that is delegated entirely to AADAC, or is it something that your department has a special role in in terms of connecting the AADAC and other services to the aboriginal community? So those are the questions I would have on the minister's work on justice issues.

Children's services and child welfare were next on my list. I think back to work I did many, many years ago in child welfare in Edmonton and, again, the disproportionate number of child welfare recipients who were from the aboriginal community and the need to be really plugged into that community to intervene as early as possible and prevent small problems from becoming big problems. This would be work, of course, being done through the Children's

Services authorities, but what role does the department of aboriginal affairs have to play in addressing children's services and intervening, for example, or facilitating other organizations to intervene in families at an early stage?

Does the department have a role to play in ensuring culturally appropriate family supports for aboriginal children so that if they do need to be removed from their family, they can remain connected to their culture?

Finally, of course, support for Children's Services agencies in urban areas, where we may have aboriginal families in predominantly nonaboriginal neighbourhoods or communities. They may be isolated. They may be needing support. They may be needing some kind of intervention in urban areas. Is there a role for this department to play to reach those kinds of families and the children either through the school system or through community agencies or through children's services agencies? Or perhaps, quite appropriately, the department has said, "No. We're leaving that to the children's services authorities or somebody else, the school board."

9:30

So I'll stop there. Just to recap, the four general things I was asking the minister about are job training, education, justice, and child welfare. If the minister wants to make some comments now on her department's role in those areas, I'd be quite interested. Thanks.

Ms Calahasen: Well, I can do that, Mr. Chairman. First of all, thank you for the questions. I think it's important to be able to address some of them. I'll try to hit as many as I can, and then we'll certainly write if there's anything that I missed that could deal with some of the issues of my budget.

I want to talk about a very important area which is the language, culture, and places that I feel very strongly about. I think it's important that no matter what happens, no matter where the kids are or where the people are, they should have those connections. So what we do in Aboriginal Affairs is try to make sure that we facilitate. We work with families. We work with individual organizations. We work with industry. We work with whomever we can to make sure that we continue to do that. That to me is really important no matter where we go. We work with schools as well. I want to go into the specifics that you're talking about.

As you were saying about unemployment and job training, unemployment, as we know, is very high in some communities. It's been getting better, and I think this is really important. When you look at the labour force statistics that Human Resources and Employment did – and this is where we were involved with them – just as an example, Alberta aboriginal people off reserve, working-age population by age and gender, all aboriginal people in March 2003 is 85.9 and March 2004 is 86.6.

Then when you look at the breakdown, you begin to see that there are different things that happen as a result of the working age and the population. Just to give you an idea as to statistics, in March 2003 all people in the labour force was 61,000 and in March 2004 it was 60,000. So there's been a slight drop. The unemployed and the employed is really interesting because in March 2003 it was 5.9 per cent and in March 2004 it was 6.1 per cent. That's all aboriginal people. So when you look at that, you begin to look at pretty high unemployment rates.

What we've been trying to do is get information that we never had before to be able to work from. So this was a very important document, and it will continue to work very well when we're talking about economic and demographic analysis so that we can begin to use this as we move forward. If you notice, even in some of our areas where there are measurements, it's really hard to come up with

the data. What we need is the data because this kind of information is really important.

In terms of the job training, as you know, we have had really good success with partnerships with industry, and industry has certainly come to the table. We have something like over 50 partnerships that are happening. This is on an economic development side as well as on a training side. What we have is some 50-plus partnerships, and it's growing. I don't know the specifics in terms of the numbers as of today; however, it's growing. What we have are training possibilities that come about in each different area and each different sector, whether it's in energy or whether it's in environment or whether it's in forestry or whether it's in wind power, et cetera. So we've got different kinds of groups that are coming to the table wanting to bring job training and talk about training the people so that the young kids and the aboriginal community at large can come and be able to be trained for specific jobs.

We'll get the numbers. I don't know when those will come, but as soon as we can get those numbers, we'll certainly provide them to you. I think that's really important. You're right. To get out of poverty you need a job. You need the opportunities in order to be able to get a job, and that's what we've been trying to do.

So what we do in Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development is we facilitate that within the community at large, not to say that you have to hire the people. What we say is that you have to work with the First Nations and the Métis and make sure that there are some training opportunities for them so that they begin to train for those jobs that are available out there.

We've also been looking at ways for us to work with industry so that they can begin to tell us an inventory of the kind of skill development they require for their businesses and their industry. So we begin to look at how we can work with Human Resources and Employment, and from that we can begin to look at training that Human Resources and Employment has and then try to measure and meet up with industry as well as with the aboriginal community so that we can begin to see how the jobs can be a result of that as we train them.

There's been a lot of job shadowing that has occurred. I've got to give industry a really good plug here. What they've done is they've said: we are willing to do this if we know what it is that we have to do. We've got people who have come to the table and indicated: we'll take people on so that they learn what it is that we're doing, and then that way they can move into those positions.

So we've been doing those kinds of things but not only with industry. We've also been doing it within government. We have been doing it within our department so that our department can also begin to see the possibilities of the training that could happen and make sure they understand maybe management or other kinds of responsibilities as well as working with personnel and being able to ensure that we can continue to work in that vein. That to me I think is one of the most important parts of making sure that we hire people that want to be there, that want to be trained for those specific areas and continue to move in that direction.

On education. This is one of my passions. Education to me I think is one of the most important keys to aboriginal people being able to get where they want to go. I know that no matter what happens, we have to continue to educate the people. We have to make sure that kids can reach grade 6, grade 7, grade 8, grade 9. As a person who has been involved in that and interested in that, you know that it is one of the most difficult times in aboriginal country to be able to overcome the grades 6, 7, 8 and 9 level and move on into high school.

I have to commend our colleague the Learning minister, who's been working on a number of different initiatives that will help

students be able to overcome that inertia and move forward. As a matter of fact, there are some 15 recommendations from the Learning Commission that I'm very proud of, that were actually also to be looking at the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis education policy being adopted, which has a lot of recommendations. I think those are the kinds of things where we begin to see some real advances in terms of the areas of concern when we're talking about education.

In terms of connecting for the aboriginal people to become professionals or semiprofessionals, what we've been trying to encourage is work with the colleges and the universities. As a matter of fact, on a yearly basis I meet with the president of the University of Alberta, and we talk about initiatives that are specific to aboriginal communities and northern people. What we try to do is figure out how it is that we're going to be able to look at how they can begin to accommodate the aboriginal community coming in to make sure that they can become professionals as well and that they can be accepted into many of the different faculties. It doesn't just have to be education. There are other faculties that we've been trying to ensure that we work together with in getting there.

The other one, of course, is that we've been talking to NAIT, and of course SAIT has also been involved. How can we ensure that on the technical side and on the labour side and the technical development, we will work with them in terms of how they can also begin to go into the communities and make sure those communities can access the technical side, whether it's pre-employment or pretrades?

As an example, in Wabasca the Bigstone band just graduated some 12 people who were in pre-employment trades so that they would begin to recognize where it is that they want to go. Is it welding? Is it pipefitting? Is it those kinds of things? Then they begin to explore those areas of interest that they would like to see. That was a really great graduation. There were 12 individuals who kind of decided that, okay, some of them wanted to be welders, some of them wanted to be pipefitters, some of them wanted to be electricians, and some of them wanted to be carpenters. So we had a whole variety of people wanting to do different things.

9:40

But those are the pre-employment trade types of initiatives that my colleagues from Alberta Learning as well as Human Resources and Employment have been involved in as well as Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. We facilitate that kind of an idea. We work with the First Nations and the Métis to come to the table and bring not only the NAITs or the SAITs or the universities but the colleges as well to be able to provide that kind of information.

Maybe I'll go to the justice system now. As you know, the Minister of Justice certainly has been improving life in the justice area. I want to say that it's the first time that we've seen some aboriginal judges being appointed, and that's a result of a movement within this government making sure that we work in that direction. We want to be able to see how those kinds of decisions that come from those judges make application on the cultural side. So what they do is they work with the culture, see what they can do to work with the aboriginal community so that the decisions will be better in terms of making sure that we don't have as many people as we do have in the justice system.

The other one, of course, in terms of justice is that we had a few areas where we were working – I can't remember the project, but it was in the Fort Macleod area – to make sure that we can look at relationship building. The community and the friendship centre were working with the RCMP to be able to see how they can improve relations and make sure that they continue to work in that vein so that it doesn't become negative, and it's that whole area on the justice side. My colleague from Fort Macleod certainly knows that one and has been advocating for that.

This sort of ties into Children's Services as well, the family violence round-table. You know, like in most cases when there's anything of violence that happens, people are usually taken into custody or taken to jail. With the family violence round-table we want to be able to see if we can look at not just a punitive system but rather a way of dealing with healing of the whole community and the family. What we've done is we've encouraged the aboriginal community to be involved in our family violence round-table so that they can bring their views of what they see as a justice system that would work for them when it comes to any kind of issue like this. So we see that involvement, and what we do is facilitate that as Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. We encourage involvement, and we try to do whatever we can to encourage their involvement in all areas.

Children's Services. You're right; intervention is really important. It is really totally important. So how does Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development get involved? Well, we do a number of things. First of all, we organize meetings for people if they need it, First Nations as well as their agencies. We intervene for aboriginal families and children. We help ensure that there's going to be involvement of the aboriginal community when there are policies that could potentially affect them. What we do is we also make sure that we encourage a cultural component in things that will affect aboriginal communities.

As an example, region 10 exists as a result of the fact that the Minister of Children's Services wanted to ensure that there was an aboriginal component. We supported that, and we wanted to make sure that we were part of that. We've been working with my colleagues who are responsible for their areas because we're not program deliverers, service deliverers. What we do is we facilitate, we support, we encourage, we advise, we do intervention in some cases, and we certainly try to ensure that aboriginal families are going to be recognized in whatever happens and in any decisions.

So I'll leave it at that for now, and any other questions that I may have, I'll answer as we go through.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks. I appreciate those comments from the minister. I'm trying to picture myself being somebody who isn't normally in here, somebody who isn't normally conversant in the ways of government and is struggling to get along in the world and is attempting to understand what facilitation and monitoring and intervention and all of that means. So I really encourage the minister to be as specific as possible.

The next area that I find myself thinking in terms of is housing and the need for housing that is safe, housing that is accessible, located where people are living and they can use it, housing that is affordable, and housing that is healthy. Again, I know that this department doesn't provide housing services per se to aboriginals, but it's a pretty fundamental need, and I would be interested if the department has specific activities to facilitate better housing for the aboriginal population and how they might encourage a better quality of housing.

I'm thinking of problems that I hear about with, say, safe water, with fire hazards, with an issue that I've raised in other contexts in this Assembly: concerns around toxic moulds growing in aboriginal housing because of maintenance problems. So is there anything in this budget and its many millions of dollars that will facilitate an improvement in the housing of the aboriginal population?

The next topic I'm interested in is health. Of course, it relates, as I said earlier, to issues like education and employment and housing. The aboriginal population has a considerably shorter life expectancy

than other Canadians, has a much higher morbidity rate, many more diseases, from diabetes to mental health issues; you name it. There's a much higher rate of health problems among the aboriginal population. Clearly, those are issues either addressed primarily by the regional health authorities or by the federal government, but is there a role in this department for facilitating an improvement in the health of the aboriginal people of Alberta?

Specifically, I'd be interested if she could comment or respond in writing about health initiatives in urban centres and health initiatives concerning mental health and, also, if there's been any thought given to encouraging the department of health to appoint a director of aboriginal health services or health issues within that department to bring a focus in the government's health system to aboriginal issues.

After health I want to raise the issue of culture. I think it's pretty evident that a strong and vibrant culture produces healthy and successful people, and the aboriginal community in this province and across this country is struggling still to maintain its cultural identity through pressure on its language, pressure on its customs. At the same time, as anybody who has gone to the powwows or other ceremonies has seen, there's a determination to preserve and develop the aboriginal culture and, I think, probably a renewed interest in that culture from the nonaboriginal population.

That culture is sustained through communities, through people coming together to share events, to share stories, to share a language, to share their customs and their food and their dances and their rituals and their music. What's the department doing to ensure a vibrant aboriginal culture in Alberta? Specifics on that would be helpful. You know, not just saying: well, we facilitate that. But some specifics. What are you doing?

9:50

The last topic I'll touch on tonight in this department is around economic development. I know that isn't just an issue for the minister; it's an issue for the Member for Peace River, who is the chairman of the Northern Alberta Development Council. Clearly, there is a lot of interest in resource development in northern Alberta, whether that's oil sands and petroleum resources, forestry resources, agriculture, and maybe even diamonds or other resources. There has been some real success in some of these areas. I know that some of the major oil sands companies are renowned for having excellent aboriginal employment programs.

But, again, I'm concerned about activities in urban areas. The reserves are primarily the concern of the federal government, but the economic opportunities for aboriginal people in urban centres, I think, are pretty limited. I'm particularly thinking of what's been in the news recently around the development of casinos on reserves and whether the minister or her department has any role or any view or policy on casinos as an economic development cornerstone for the aboriginal community because it looks like we're headed in that direction.

I personally have very mixed feelings about that development, and I'd be interested if the minister has comments on that or if there are any proposed activities in the department this coming year to address economic development issues in relation to casinos and maybe spinoffs from that, maybe tourism. Maybe there's an opportunity to do great cultural development or cultural activities and tourism with casinos. I don't know. But it seems like that's going to be a big issue. This is the department of aboriginal affairs. How does the department connect to that issue?

Thank you, and that will wrap up my comments for tonight on this department. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Calahasen: Well, you certainly have asked a lot of questions,

and I want to make sure that we do give all your questions due consideration, and anything that I miss I want to make sure that we will provide that in writing to you. So I will make sure I do that, and the questions that I don't address, I will try to get to you as indicated.

I just want to go back to some of the questions that you asked originally, and I just wanted to talk about the aboriginal populations you were talking about. In all Alberta cities, of course, in 1996 there was 70,800 population, or 45.5 per cent of the provincial total. Of course, in 2001 all Alberta cities, 91,985 population, an increase of 21,185 people in five years that have moved from the reserves to the city.

I want to go back now to the housing component. As you know, one of the greatest concerns that I've heard from aboriginal communities is housing. They always are coming and talking about this. So what we did was we did take this to the western and territorial ministers. We wanted to make sure that we got this on the national agenda, and we want to address this through, of course, the homeless strategy and make sure that we do land claims and other settlements with First Nations to address some of the housing issues.

We've worked on, of course, a number of the fire safety issues on and off reserve. As you know, there's some disconnect there, and we've been trying to make sure that we do that.

We also want to ensure that on the provincial front – and on the FPTA area I've addressed that with the minister of INAC to ensure that we do deal with housing at that level, and most of my colleagues on the FPTA are certainly very supportive of us discussing housing needs all across Canada. So we have housing not only on the western front and territorial front but also on the national front. The First Nations are certainly bringing it to the table as well because they are really going through a housing crunch.

Of course, on the provincial front, as I was indicating, we have the remote housing, which now addresses some of the aboriginal communities, such as in the Grande Cache area and some of the northern communities in the Fort McMurray area and of course in my constituency as well as the constituency of Athabasca-Wabasca. We've got those areas beginning to be looked at in terms of housing. So we're dealing with those communities.

In terms of health, what I wanted to talk about – you said to be specific. What we're looking at is implementing 52 new aboriginal wellness initiatives which are really key to ensuring that we deal with the health issues of aboriginal communities. We are working with a wellness committee that has been established by Alberta Health, and that's the aboriginal component, looking at different initiatives within the health area. As a matter of fact, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development initially, in my view, helped establish the aboriginal health strategy, in which one of my department members was involved. Those are the kinds of specific areas that I wanted you to be aware of.

You asked me about casinos. As you know, I was the chair when we were developing that casino policy, because the First Nations wanted to be at the table when it came to casino development. So what we did was work with Alberta Gaming as well as my department and facilitated that meeting so that we could develop the policy. It is the first of its kind in Canada relative to a First Nations policy that would deal with gaming. There are other policies across Canada, but this was very specific in terms of the agreement that was achieved. I believe that was really an interesting one because that sort of set the stage for them in terms of what they can do.

As a matter of fact, there was one just announced the other day, the Enoch casino, which they've been working on for a long time. My understanding is that as they begin to develop and know what to do, we're going to see a little bit more. It's their wish. They should

be able to determine their own destiny as to what they want to do, and I think it's important as Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development that we help them achieve their goals and become successful no matter what they want to do. If it's their wish to be involved in casinos, then we help them get where they want to go. The casino policy is a very important policy for them. It's their wish to see things happen, and that's where we will be when it comes to determining what needs to happen.

On the health issue, as well, we've been involved in the diabetes strategy. We support the Mental Health Board and, of course, a number of other initiatives that are culturally appropriate in the health area. You wanted me to be specific on some projects here, and I thought that this was really important. In Edmonton my staff are working with the Eastwood community for the health centre project to include aboriginal-specific programming, looking at hiring aboriginal health workers, developing a more holistic core system that will be open to nonaboriginal people.

So those are the kinds of specifics that we're working with. I think that what we will do rather than name all the specifics here is provide you with all the necessary information that we can provide you with and ensure that you get the information.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. [interjections] I can only assume that Calgary scored, and I hope they did.

It's a pleasure to participate in the debate this evening on the estimates from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. I've been listening with interest to the exchange between the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview and the hon. minister and the hon. Member for Peace River.

10:00

My first question would certainly be surrounding the Northern Alberta Development Council. What role, if any, has the council played in the idea of the railway to Fort McMurray and beyond?

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

I know that Economic Development has put forward money to have a look at this proposal. What, if any, activity around the Northern Alberta Development Council has occurred? Does the Northern Alberta Development Council approve in principle the idea of either building a separate rail line or upgrading the existing one to Fort McMurray, and is any wood fibre from the north being considered as a potential freight for that development, if it were ever to be built?

Also, have there been any further discussions or studies done on an east/west road to connect the Fort McMurray region south of Wood Buffalo national park, of course, quite a bit south, across to the Peace country? What, if anything, is going on with that idea?

Now, certainly, you know, this department hasn't been without controversy in the last year. There have been significant discussions, Mr. Chairman, with the Northern Alberta Oilfield Contractors in regard to land claims and land claim settlements. Now, when we talk about the aboriginal land and legal issues within a section within the ministry, I understand that section helps identify and resolve issues surrounding land claims here in Alberta. Co-ordinates all provincial activities or just those within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development? Or does that co-ordination mean also the activities within Alberta Justice, which I would assume represents Alberta's interests in the courts?

Now, I would think that whenever we're dealing with a lot of land

claims settlements and a lot of land claims issues, there must be significant legal costs involved here. Where are those costs? Are they with Alberta Justice? Do you hand over all legal costs to Alberta Justice? If you do, what is the total of those costs? Do you handle them in-house? How many of those legal costs are contracted out to outside legal firms?

Certainly, I know there are over 35 land claims, but it would be interesting to get an update. In particular, I think it would be of particular interest to the Northern Alberta Oilfield Contractors, for one, to many of the First Nations bands. Could we get an update, please, on how many land claims are outstanding? There are over 30. Perhaps there are as many as 35. I think one or maybe two have been settled. What is the contingent liability for those land claims? Also, where would I find the commitment in the budget? I understand that over the next five years there is a commitment to pay out in excess of \$14 million under a settlement agreement with a First Nations band. Which band is that, and where do I find that commitment in the budget estimates? I think it is of public importance.

Now, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview talked a little bit earlier, as did the hon. minister, about when we look at the employment rate, and we look at the percentage of population completing high school, the percentage of population completing postsecondary, or the life expectancy of First Nations people and other Canadians, and there is a significant difference. It's all fine, but it's not.

There is no reason why the employment rate in the aboriginal community should fall behind the nonaboriginal community. One only has to look at some of the public policies that are being discussed in this province. There's a shortage of labour. There's a shortage of cheap labour, but there's not a shortage of labour. I would encourage the hon. minister to look at the First Nations communities as a source from which we can train people for the jobs that have been created in this province. There is no reason for this employment rate to be so different between the aboriginal and nonaboriginal population.

As the north is opened up for development, this is a perfect opportunity to train First Nations people not only, as the hon. member said earlier, in the skilled trades but also in the health care professions, encourage an increase in the number of aboriginals that are attending university. This is very, very important. When we look at the entire population in this province that's between the ages of 15 and 24, over 10 per cent of them are unemployed. I don't know exactly how many of those are aboriginal youth, but we have to work at this. Before we start entertaining programs to recruit workers from other countries, we've got to make sure that we make every effort to train Albertans, and that includes Albertans from the aboriginal communities.

Now, my colleague talked about access to health care, but I would encourage the hon. minister to make every effort, again, to make training programs accessible for the aboriginal population. If that means working in partnership with groups, with trade unions, with community colleges, I don't know. But I know that the bursary program that was initiated has been accessed by First Nations students, and I think we need to see more of that. I would like to see, hopefully next year, a significant increase in the number of First Nations or aboriginal students accessing those available bursaries.

Mr. Chairman, with those questions, I believe I will take my seat. Those certainly are all the questions I have at this time, but I would be very anxious to get an update on all the land claims that are still outstanding and the legal issues surrounding them, because we certainly had quite an interesting debate in here last session in regard to aboriginal land claims and the Northern Alberta Oilfield Contractors, particularly around the Slave Lake area.

There are still, in my view, many outstanding questions. There are

still many issues to be resolved. I look forward to hearing the hon. minister's answers. Thank you.

10:10

Mr. Friedel: Well, Mr. Chairman, the first couple of questions were directed at the activities of the Northern Alberta Development Council, and I'm going to be dealing with those.

The first question that was asked was: did the NADC or does the NADC have any role in the current proposed railway to Fort McMurray? At this point we have no direct role. I'm assuming that your question is related to financial involvement. We have no financial contribution. But we definitely are following this with a great deal of interest because there's no doubt, when you're dealing with the kind of freight that goes to and from some of these northern resource communities, that it takes a tremendous toll on the current highways. If this railway can be developed at a reasonable cost, as has been said, I think, a number of times in this Assembly, with the industry making the financial contributions, it could be quite a boon to the north.

Just as an example, the railway right now from Hay River down to Edmonton has been there for quite some years. It's been developed almost hodgepodge, piecemeal over the years through NAR and such, but I would hate to guess what the development of either that part of northern Alberta or the Northwest Territories would be without that facility.

If I can even stray a little bit, we're working very actively on an east/west connector from the greater Peace Country through B.C. to the port of Prince Rupert: you know, possibly containerization and such facilities. Getting product to tidewater right now is horrendously expensive, and a more direct and, I would suggest strongly, more efficient route could be by rail. I'm just making those comments because, you know, that should suggest why we would be interested in seeing some reasonable development of a Fort McMurray railway as long as it's feasible and reasonable.

As far as the east/west connector road, that's another project we have been working on very actively. We've been working with a consulting firm and a number of industry representatives from the area possibly to promote a P3, or if I can be so bold, maybe a P15 or P16 because of the number of industries and communities that want to get involved in this. Because of the terrain, some of it muskeg and that, it's an expensive road. Right now many industries build licence-of-occupation roads, LOC roads, at their own expense for their own purposes and typically lease right away to other companies.

If they could be on the right alignment to facilitate what could be a permanent public road, these companies, we believe, are more than willing to ante up financially, I would suggest, possibly more than half the cost of such a road. If through that kind of a partnership it could be made possible, we would definitely be putting our technical resources at the disposal of the minister and the department. In fact, we have met several times with the minister and some of the department officials, and in the next few days there are some community meetings to determine what the communities along the way would expect, how they hope to benefit, and what they might contribute. So this is definitely one of those stay-tuned, I hope good-news stories for the very near future.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I believe the minister might be talking about some of the other issues, but as far as the NADC bursary you did ask a question about whether aboriginal students had access to these. The answer is

definitely yes. I can't tell you off the top of my head what percentage, but the bursaries are based on application by the students. It's a very good cross-section of the northern part of the province that the bursaries are distributed through. I think the short answer is the one I gave you. There is no distinction on race, certainly, and many aboriginal children have taken advantage of these. I shouldn't say just children because many students nowadays are adults returning to learning.

I might add that our bursary has been made a little bit more flexible not specifically, again, for aboriginal students but because of the nature of the remoteness. A lot of bursaries people would expect would be the kind that, you know, if you're going to university, you're a full-time student. We've tried to make it flexible so that even part-time students who have difficulty leaving home, you know, going to where the technical schools are and such and possibly even some skills upgrading programs, can take advantage of it. So it's very much fine-tuned to help people in the smaller remote communities.

I think those are the questions that you asked that specifically related to NADC.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, you wanted to answer?

Ms Calahasen: Did you want me to answer, or do you want to continue?

Mr. MacDonald: I have one more question to the hon. Member for Peace River.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, and I appreciate the co-operation from the hon. minister.

Again for the hon. Member for Peace River in charge of the Northern Alberta Development Council: is the council working in any way with any other government departments in regard to this proposal that's coming out of British Columbia for another development on the Peace River on the B.C. side in regard to hydroelectricity? How does the development council feel about this proposal that's coming from the B.C. government to add another dam onto the Peace River on their side of the border of course? Is there any co-operation between other government departments in the province, and is there any discussion with the federal government in regard to this matter at this time?

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The news of, you know, a proposal from the B.C. government to expand their hydro dam network on the B.C. side is about as much news to us as it is to you. There hasn't been any in-depth discussion. We certainly are following it with some interest. The involvement we have probably would be more along the lines of the Glacier Power proposed developments on the Alberta side, the smaller weir-type dam, which has a lot of potential for the Peace River itself not just in that location but maybe even others if it proves to do everything that these people have suggested it will. But NADC has not had any direct involvement with B.C. Hydro on another dam on the B.C. side.

Ms Calahasen: I'll just answer a few questions, and then we can send you some information in written format. I think there have

been questions relative to education and what we are doing with employment and pre-employment and trades, of that nature. I wanted to ensure that you understand that we are working with many departments through the APF and the API. What we've been doing is trying to make sure that we're involved in a number of the initiatives, whether it's through the federal ministries or whether it's through our own ministers or with the private sector and the communities, and we've been working in partnership with those communities to ensure that we look at the greater aboriginal completion and success in learning.

Just as an example, under the API we're supporting many initiatives – mentoring, early childhood development, school readiness programs, those kinds of things – to begin to look at the educational attainment that we were talking about. This year we'll have an aboriginal identifier looking at better-tracked school results to help address, I would say, the progress and make sure that we continue to work with those universities and colleges that I indicated.

10:20

On the issue of aboriginal people training, we'll train our own. That's one of the mottos we've accepted under the FPTA as well: to look at training our own. Then we'll work with the rest as we come forward, but it's very important that we train our own and employ our own. That's a message that we continually bring to the table, and we'll make sure that we continue to do that. So with your support I'm sure that we'll be able to get things done, because we need to continue to bring that message to all tables. I think that that's an important part.

Just so you know what kind of employment or labour – I never finished my comment relative to the unemployment rate. I just wanted to talk about that. It actually decreased 4.8 per cent, from 17.4 per cent in 1996 to 12.6 per cent in 2001. For the nonaboriginal population the decrease was 2 per cent. So we begin to look at the information that you are providing to me. That's why it's important that we continue to work with HR and E and many other departments to participate in what we call the aboriginal labour force survey, so that we can begin to see how we can improve in that area.

In the area of concern that you were talking about, the contingent liability issue, it is actually \$129 billion in litigation. That doesn't include land claims. This is the amount claimed in lawsuits. In the opinion of our lawyers, of course, this does not represent a realistic amount. In land claim negotiations we co-ordinate all Alberta ministries. I don't know if you know that, but certainly we do that co-ordination with all Alberta ministries. Negotiation or legal costs are handled by outside legal firms. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development pays about, I would say, \$400,000 a year. Most litigation is handled by Justice, so we have to work with Justice there.

There are, in fact, three land claims – Lubicon, Bigstone, Fort McMurray – that are outstanding. Payments will be made over the next five years to the Piikani nation, and these are installments in my budget of \$32.15 million that were reported in the year of settlement. That was 2002-2003, if you recall, when we talked about that. That was an important settlement.

Of course, we have a number of other areas that I think it's really important that we continue to work with the treaty land claims. As I indicated, we probably have the best group to be able to work with that. So in terms of why we are involved in the settlement of land claims or what is the status of land claims, as I indicated in my speech, we have done 12 treaty land claim entitlements since 1986. This is really a record. It's really absolutely wonderful. Of course, you know the benefits that the First Nations have as a result of this.

We continue to make sure that we do that, because in the natural resources transfer agreement, under which Alberta received administration and control of Crown lands and resources, the province agreed to assist the federal government to meet its treaty obligations by transferring unoccupied land and minerals to Canada for Indian reserves owing under a treaty. So we continue to do that, and that's directed under my department.

The Deputy Chair: After considering the business plans and proposed estimates for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$25,784,000
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The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Hon. members, if you'll just give me one minute. The minister is indicating that the budget should have been \$35 million. My records here show \$25 million. We need to make sure.

Hon. members, according to the estimates that are before us, the amount requested is \$25,784,000, and that is what we voted on, and that is what shall remain.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee now rise and report the main estimates of the Committee of Supply for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development: operating expense and equipment inventory purchases, \$25,784,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that the Assembly now stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:28 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 20, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/04/20

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. In our mind's eye let us see the awesome grandeur of the Rockies, the denseness of our forests, the fertility of our farmland, the splendour of our rivers, the richness of our resources, the energy of our people. Then let us rededicate ourselves as wise stewards of such bounty on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the pleasure of introducing to you and through you to members of the Assembly a former high school classmate of mine and a former colleague of ours, Mr. Gordon Miniely. Mr. Miniely served the constituents of Edmonton-Centre from his election in August of 1971 to March of 1979. During his two terms as MLA he also served as Provincial Treasurer and minister of hospitals and medical care.

In your gallery, Mr. Speaker, with Mr. Miniely are his wife, Linda, and their grandchildren Alexander Youngblut, Rayne Davis, and Connor Davis. I would ask the Miniely family to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Members of this Legislative Assembly a very special young man. Mr. Réal Gauthier, who works out of Vegreville, is in the public gallery. He is a nephew of mine and my godson. I have had the pleasure of spending a lot of time with him and would like him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a group of students from Rosemary school. They are led by principal Mr. David Blumell and teacher Mrs. Carol Gibb as well as parents Shauna Deschamps, Joanne Fauser, Tammie Cage, Bev Johnson, Vanessa Plett. There are about 13 grade 7 students. I believe that number's correct. I would ask them all to rise and receive the very warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 25 students, teachers, parents, and bus driver from the Mistassini school of Wabasca-Desmarais, Alberta. They are seated in the public gallery. I'd like you to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature a group of 22 students from College Jean de la Mennais in La Prairie, Quebec, which is near Montreal. They are accompanied by their teachers Mr. Jerry Johnson and Ms Monique Mainella as well as four students from l'école secondaire Beaumont composite high school and their teacher Mr. Gino Salvalaggio. So as I ask them to rise, I would ask that the Assembly extend to them the warm traditional welcome of our Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 27 of central Alberta's greatest kids. I'd also like to say that they come from the school that was featured on the Premier's address on TV, the school of Benalto. They're accompanied by their teachers Mr. Kevin Frey and Mrs. Betty Brassard and parent helpers Mrs. Shelley Lambert, Mrs. Angele Downie, Mr. Tom Moore, Mrs. Danielle Venardos, Ms Shari Neis, Mrs. Brenda Mahoney, and Mrs. Rhonda Vick. I'd like them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Premier. Given the minister of health's speech yesterday in Toronto, a copy of which I've obtained, can the Premier tell us if his government is considering taxing the sick by charging extra to people who use the health care system?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't have the text of his speech, but following the speech, there was the usual scrum, and what I'm about to say alludes to what I addressed in this Legislature yesterday, and that is the propensity of the opposition parties to take something totally and absolutely out of context and use that as the 15-second sound bite because it sounds good.

The minister's comments, as I understand it, were given in the context of discussing health reform, and we all know that this government is embarking on a program of health reform. Now, I will say that the fact that the national media latched onto this one idea I think demonstrates quite clearly what I've been saying, and that is that people will focus on the easy, controversial sound bite rather than talk about health reform in the broader context. We just heard it from the opposition. He picks out one simple thing, one thing, one part of the puzzle. There are numerous aspects to this.

You know, I alluded to one time mistakenly – I will remember in the future not even to think, never mind think out loud, because if you think out loud, it becomes government policy. None of this has become government policy yet, but that's not to say that the minister can't think and can't mention and can't say: well, this is an example of what I'm talking about. Nothing wrong with thinking. The only people who are opposed to thinking are the Liberals and the NDs because they're not capable of doing it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that this govern-

ment's policies have already led to higher health care premiums, higher electricity costs, higher auto insurance, higher tuition fees, how can this Premier justify policies that seem intended to charge people more for health care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, no policy has been developed relative to this issue, the issue to which the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition alludes, or any other issue. No decisions have been made about what steps will be taken in health reform other than to say that we will reform the system. The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness has put out a program, a chronology of how he hopes to proceed in this matter. But let me be clear: as long as I'm Premier – and that could be for some time – no Albertan will ever, ever be denied needed health care because of an inability to pay. It's as simple as that.

1:40

Dr. Taft: Well, given that evidence from around the globe shows that user fees for health care are a failure, will the Premier do the courageous thing and rule them out as part of his government's health care reform?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, if we start ruling out one item after the other, then we won't have the ability to bring forward a package to consider in total context what should be ruled out, what should be accepted.

Albertans know that as good as the system is, we can do better. They also know that cost increases of 7 or 8 per cent per annum are not acceptable, and they also know that the system as we know it today is simply not sustainable. They also know that we need to address fundamental and basic things like reducing waiting lists. We need to make sure that people get the care they need when they need it, and that's what our goal is. But we also need to achieve sustainability. [interjection]

Mr. Speaker, we didn't break a thing. I hear some chirping over there about breaking something. No. As a matter of fact, this province is being touted by other jurisdictions across North America and around the world as being the leader in health care reform.

Just recently I read I believe it was in the *Edmonton Journal* that probably we have one of the best heart programs, if not the best, certainly in North America. We see tremendous research taking place in a number of areas. We have committed ourselves to developing centres of expertise for cardiac surgery and bone and joint surgeries. We have state-of-the-art children's care, pediatric care, in the Stollery hospital, soon to be in the new Children's hospital in Calgary.

Mr. Speaker, we are a leader in health care. The only people who don't recognize this are the Liberals, because they are by nature negative people.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Government Expense Claims

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. On March 1 of this year the opposition sent a letter to the Premier asking basic questions about spending on travel and hospitality by him, his staff, and his ministers. Now, the Premier claimed it would cost \$6,000 just to provide answers on only six of the 23 questions. In other correspondence from Economic Development it's indicated to us that it will take dozens of hours and thousands of dollars to get information on other government trips. This just does not make sense. My questions are

to the Premier. When the Premier and his staff spend money out of their own pockets for travel, do they or do they not need to submit expense claims along with receipts so they get reimbursed?

Mr. Klein: When we spend our own money out of our own pockets, no. If it's for government business, I assume yes. I never do it. You know, I haven't done it lately. I can't remember in recent times. Someone else usually picks up the bill. I probably have used my credit card once in . . . [interjection] Well, someone usually picks it up, or else, Mr. Speaker, I just get a sandwich out of the cafeteria and I have a working lunch, which is usually the normal course. During lunch hour I try to have my workout and get a little briefing prior to question period, see what the Liberals will come up with in terms of ridiculous questions, so I can try to provide intelligent answers, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday I did say that the government is evaluating whether we need to change the law and change the policy relative to the way expenses are reported and how we might do a better job in the future. We will announce in the future what changes, if any, will be made, and as I said yesterday at the scrum, I hope that the Liberals will be happy with it.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When the Premier and his staff use government credit cards on travel, does the government receive statements from the credit card companies?

Mr. Klein: We do receive a statement from the credit card company. My staff normally handles that, and I very seldom see the statements. Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that if my statement were submitted today . . .

Mrs. Nelson: Would you read this, please.

Mr. Klein: . . . to the hon. member, he would find nothing for at least the last 10 months on my statement.

I'm sorry; what do you want me to read? Oh, the Auditor General's recommendation. Yeah. Notwithstanding the fact that we are evaluating the system and we hope to do a better job in the future, we can only be better than we are already, and we are pretty good according to the Auditor General, who says in his report, "We did not find any evidence of inappropriate MLA expense reimbursement and we concluded that the systems in place would generally prevent inappropriate payments." Now, that comes from the Auditor General, an officer of this Legislature, Mr. Speaker.

But as I alluded to yesterday, you know, expenses apply not only to the government, the \$27 jug of orange juice that worked out to about \$2 and some odd cents a glass, but they also allude to the expenses of the opposition members. You know, a member of the media asked me yesterday and legitimately so, although we don't FOIP as a rule as government – I don't know what the rules are relative to the government's ability to FOIP. The media brought up: well, what about the \$10,000 in travel expenses to go from Gold Bar to the Legislature incurred by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar? You know, that's recorded, but we don't get into the nitty-gritty as to what he saw along the way, who he was visiting, who he was meeting with and why. Only the Liberals want that kind of information, Mr. Speaker, but they don't want to give it themselves.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Actually, the people of Alberta want this kind of information. So my last question to the Premier is:

why won't the Premier simply have his staff make photocopies of those receipts, expense claims, and credit card statements and make them public so that the Alberta taxpayers can see how their money is being spent? It's as simple as that.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we are doing a full evaluation of all this. [interjections]

The Speaker: Okay. The Premier has the floor.

Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Postsecondary Tuition Fees

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Ontario government has frozen postsecondary tuition fees and provided compensation to universities and colleges for the lost revenue. That province is working with students, parents, and institutions on a long-term plan to provide adequate funding and affordable tuition. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Has the minister considered taking similar action to address funding and tuition concerns here?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I really do sincerely appreciate that question. I've taken a very close look at what has happened in Ontario. Ontario has frozen their tuition fees, but the Ontario postsecondaries are extremely worried about what is happening there because the Ontario government has not replaced the money lost in tuition fees. So what, in effect, we are seeing in Ontario is actually a decrease in the amount of funding that will be available for postsecondary institutions. Mr. Speaker, that is something that we do not want to see happen in Alberta.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: students here are clearly upset and concerned with yearly tuition increases. Why does the minister continue to dismiss their concerns?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, it is anything but dismissing their concerns. Over the past year I've probably had four to five meetings with the students associations, and as a matter of fact in Bill 43, as the hon. member knows, there was a clause put in that would increase tuition at a rate of the cost of living plus 2. This was actually a recommendation that came forward from the student groups in order to increase tuition at a rate that was manageable, at a rate that would not see any large increases. We still have the 30 per cent cap in place for those institutions that have not reached the 30 per cent.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. A cap that's no cap.

My next question to the minister: what solutions other than more student debt is the government seeking to keep postsecondary education in this province affordable? More debt doesn't do it.

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, the student debt in Alberta has consistently gone down. We have increased the student loans that have been available, and it is very nice to know, actually, that for the first time the federal Liberal government is actually coming on board, saying

that student loans are a priority, saying that the student loan program is something that they're worried about and wondering about. I muse publicly: could it be that they will actually get a remission program like Alberta has?

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Health Care Reform

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday in question period the Premier admitted that he didn't want to release the Graydon report because he was afraid of opposition from this corner of the House. The Premier went so far as to suggest that I pledge to not criticize the report in exchange for its release. To justify the fact that his government is developing radical health care policy completely behind closed doors, the Premier is telling the public that they have to choose between their right to know or having an opposition that does its job. So my question to the Premier: can the Premier tell the House if health care reform will be unveiled during the legislative session, or will he wimp out and wait until a quiet Friday afternoon in the middle of summer, perhaps before a long weekend, when no one is paying attention?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there are some advantages to doing that, but no. Quite clearly the Minister of Health and Wellness has laid out a chronology. I don't have it in front of me, but the chronology is basically thus: we will bring together all of the information available to us, including the Mazankowski report, the Kirby report, the Romanow commission, and, indeed, the Graydon report, plus we will review best practices in other jurisdictions and determine why those jurisdictions in studies commissioned by the OECD are better than Canada. We will assess all of that.

We will form some recommendations as a government. Then those recommendations will be taken out for public – underline public – consultation so that the public can comment on what ideas are being put forward, what should be rejected, what should be accepted. So there will be full and open public disclosure of all of these recommendations, Mr. Speaker.

What I'm afraid of – it is a political reality, and I alluded to it before in this question period and, of course, yesterday – is that they will take things out of various reports, various scenarios if we release them one at a time and highlight that as government policy when, in fact, it is not government policy. Mr. Speaker, they have no interest in telling the public the truth. What they will say is: the government is thinking about doing this, folks; are you ever going to get mad about this because this is what the government is going to do. That's what they will say, and that's unfortunate, and that's why we will not release these reports individually.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, I wonder: when did the Premier develop this phobia?

Given the fact that this government has released other aspects of the Mazankowski report with dispatch and shared its position with the public, what is it about the Graydon report that is such political dynamite that it sends this Premier scurrying for cover and coming up with lame excuses for the delays?

The Speaker: Hon. leader, you've asked three questions there. You're only allowed one without a preamble, so the Premier will take the first one.

Mr. Klein: It's not a phobia, Mr. Speaker. It is a legitimate suspicion or a legitimate feeling, based on my many years in politics, that this is what the NDs and the Liberals will do. They will seek out what is sensational to get that 15-second sound bite. That's the way they operate, and I've watched them through this legislative session. I've been around for 13 or 14 years, and I've seen the way they operate.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Straightforward question to the Premier: given that the Premier has indicated his belief that a major overhaul of the health care system is needed, does he not believe that this Legislature is the place to debate major health care reforms?

Mr. Klein: Yes, and there will be ample opportunity, I'm sure, Mr. Speaker, to have that debate. I don't know what changes to legislation might or might not come about, but I'm sure that there will be some as a result of the reforms we are about to undertake. What those reforms might be I can't say at this particular time because I don't know. We haven't discussed them. We haven't brought the package together. There hasn't been the public consultation process. I'm sure that if any of those reforms require legislative changes, there will be ample opportunity, of course, to debate those changes in the Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, that has been done in the past. I recall a very prolonged debate over Bill 11, for instance, which ended up becoming law. Nonetheless, there was a full and public debate and some misbehaviour, of course, that we witnessed in this legislative Chamber. Nonetheless, there was a full and public debate, and I imagine that that will take place if, indeed, the reforms lead to legislative changes.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Canadian Wheat Board

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Marketing choice for wheat and barley is an important issue for Alberta farmers. It seems inherently unfair and unjust that farmers in western Canada have no control over how they market their wheat and barley. I understand that the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development recently met with the minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, the Hon. Reg Alcock, and I was wondering if the minister could advise us of the outcome of that meeting?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, thank you. I did have the opportunity to have a face-to-face meeting with the hon. minister. We had exchanged letters prior to the meeting. It was an opportunity to talk to the minister, to put the facts of our case forward: the fact that the Alberta government is not calling for the demise of the Canadian Wheat Board. The Alberta government on behalf of the producers – the majority of producers are asking for fairness – is asking for choice for our producers. We're asking that our producers be treated the same as all producers in Canada or at least the ones in eastern Canada, that do have that option now.

I had an opportunity to discuss the performance of the Wheat Board with Minister Alcock. I had an opportunity to talk about the election process, the way boundaries were set, who the eligible

voters were. I had an opportunity to question the board's role in wheat and barley marketing, particularly barley, Mr. Speaker, because they handle a very, very low percentage of barley and really control it. I did ask the minister to give a favourable consideration to our test market proposal, which I had forwarded to him previously.

2:00

We had the opportunity to talk about transportation, rail access, car allocations, and, Mr. Speaker, although no firm commitments were made on the specific issues, there certainly was an interest to discuss these issues further. I think we had a very fair hearing from a minister that is not locked in the past and is interested in fairness and choice.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental to the same minister: did Minister Alcock speak to the \$85 million deficit last year and assure you that taxpayers would not have to cover the Canadian Wheat Board losses this year or share with you a plan to pay off their approximately \$7 billion debt created by bad contracts?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, when we talked about the board performance, we did talk about the \$85.4 million deficit payment. I found it interesting that one of the first tasks that the new minister had to do was to write himself a cheque as the chairman of the finance or revenue board to cover the deficit. We did talk again about the \$7 billion debt that the Wheat Board carries in the concept of performance only.

Mr. Speaker, it is very upsetting to Alberta producers that last year when we saw some of the very best grain prices since 1996, somehow this board managed to run a deficit. Everybody should understand very clearly that taxpayers are on the hook for that deficit, and we should all be concerned.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

BSE Testing Program

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta government should consider a different BSE rapid test to boost the credibility of Alberta's cattle industry and improve and strengthen consumer confidence in the beef industry in light of concerns raised about the rapid test currently used by this province. My first question is to the minister of agriculture. Given that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and other international bodies have indicated that tests susceptible to false positive results could seriously damage consumer confidence in the beef market, why did Alberta adopt such a rapid test for BSE, which unfortunately can indicate a false positive result?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, when I saw the press release or news availability or whatever was put out by the hon. member opposite, I was disappointed that he hadn't picked up the phone and called because I think I could have saved him a lot of time in giving him the information.

First of all, I will remind him that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency approved the use of the rapid test, the Bio-Rad test, in Alberta. They approved the laboratory upgradings that occurred, that this government expended to do with no assistance from anywhere else. They approved the level of training of our staff in that laboratory.

What I would have explained to him was that there is a very good reason for using that particular test in Alberta, whereas it may not be applicable in other parts of our country or others. The Bio-Rad test is capable of testing for chronic wasting disease, for scrapie in sheep, and BSE in cattle, and because it is capable of doing those three things and we test for those three things, we use that test in Alberta with the approval of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Mr. Speaker, if there is a false positive, it is quickly run on the gold test, which is the standard test, that takes three or four days. We're not afraid of that. I have not seen where somebody is concerned that this is an issue in credibility. Everybody who knows the science of this understands the tests that we use, understands that when we use a rapid test, if there is a false positive, it is again tested with the gold test.

So next time you come upon something and you think, "Wow; have I found something here?" give us a call, because I'd be happy to give you the information.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that the *New York Times* in an editorial on Sunday – and this was and still is our largest trading partner in the export of beef – expressed a concern over the use of false positives in rapid BSE testing and what it can do to consumer confidence, why is this government continuing with the rapid test when there are better tests on the market?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, there is a distinct difference between this caucus and that caucus. There's no question. We don't use the *New York Times* or other papers' editorials. We read them; it's important to have information. But when you want to deal with the science of this, you go to the scientists.

We have the Canadian Food Inspection Agency in our country, that is respected throughout the world. They make the determinations. They do the studies on these tests. We studied three tests of the rapid variety. We did it in consultation with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. When the Minister of Infrastructure did the upgrading to our labs, we did that in consultation with our Canadian Food Inspection Agency. When we did the cross-training of our staff to ensure that they could read these tests appropriately, we did that with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

I would suggest to this hon. member that if he has questions on what we're doing, he should contact the Canadian Food Inspection Agency rather than the *New York Times*.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I have contacted the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Given that we have in this country a standard identification system for cattle, why can we not have a standard system for rapid testing of BSE?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I answered that in my first question. If we could sort of go from question/answer, question/answer, and if the question that he was going to ask has already been answered, maybe to a new one.

I have explained that in Alberta we test for scrapie, for chronic wasting disease, and for BSE. In other provinces in the country they may not do that. We have a standard that is nationally set, and our test meets that standard.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Armed Forces Personnel

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is the proud home of many Canadian soldiers and police officers who are risking their lives and leaving their families behind while serving in high- and moderate-risk operational missions in the theatres of war. The list of turbulent places where our troops are present at this time is astonishing, and it includes Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Kuwait, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, East Timor, Guinea, and Jordan.

The Speaker: Hon. member, I'll be really patient, but you try and get to a question, because as far as I know, Alberta has no armed forces.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, Alberta is home to Canadian armed forces who are serving in these theatres of war.

While these brave Canadians are abroad, their families are not always as well taken care of as they definitely should be. To the Minister of Revenue: would the minister consider granting all Alberta-stationed military personnel and police personnel serving abroad in a recognized mission complete absolution from provincial income tax for the duration of such a mission?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to first state that this question is very pertinent with regard to today. We have many Albertans that do serve presently, right now, overseas, many of our military personnel. Even recently there was an announcement of another 600 troops from the Edmonton Garrison that'll be going overseas to Afghanistan shortly. Recently the federal government made some announcements.

But I've got to first state that it is important that we as Albertans, despite that it's the federal government's responsibility, are very proud of those that serve in the military from this area. They do a tremendous job in preserving the liberties that we enjoy right here in Canada, and we thank them for their tremendous service.

The federal government recently in their budget announced that they were going to provide an exemption in their personal income whereby they wouldn't pay any federal income tax. We are waiting for clarification on that issue as to seeing how that impacted our provincial income tax, and we are pleased to clarify that they automatically also qualify by that exemption to not pay provincial income taxes.

2:10

We actually have an agreement. The hon. Minister of Finance worked hard with the federal Minister of Finance with respect to a tax collection agreement. In that agreement we have complied with the definition of the calculation of taxable income. If their income is exempt for federal income tax purposes, it is also, therefore, exempt for provincial income tax purposes. So as soon as the federal government implements these changes, that will automatically flow through to those same military personnel now serving overseas.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Human

Resources and Employment: since many of the previously mentioned Canadians are Alberta reservists who also hold regular civilian employment, will the minister consider securing their civilian employment upon their return to Alberta in a manner similar to which we secure employment for maternity and paternity leaves?

Mr. Dunford: Yeah, I think that we would be prepared to take a look at that. Certainly, many collective agreements currently in place, Mr. Speaker, provide provisions for what happens in terms of a reservist when they're called into a theatre of war.

I might add – and I thank the hon. member for the question – that it was something like 17 or 18 years ago that I had an opportunity to change a policy within a company I worked for in order to provide just exactly what the member is asking for.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: No more. Thank you.

Stucco Wall Systems

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, Albertans are concerned that stucco wall systems are not being constructed in accordance with the building code, placing immediate and long-term health and safety risks on Alberta homeowners. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: given that the stucco and home-building industries freely confess that they have long been ignoring the minimum stucco wall thickness of 19 millimetres laid out in the Alberta building code, what is this ministry going to do to enforce compliance?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not aware of the particular situation, but I am aware of this: for those of us in this Assembly that have stucco homes, we want to make sure that our homes are at the highest standard. That is something that the Alberta safety code does certainly assure Albertans, and we continue to work towards that. So in answer to the hon. member's question, we are going to ensure that the safest and the best protection for Albertans is always there regarding the Alberta safety code.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is this ministry allowing the stucco and home-building industries to implement their own industry standard despite the fact that there is no scientific evidence to prove that this practice will not harm Alberta homeowners in the long term?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'm not a carpenter. My wife tells me I'm not a carpenter, but I do know this. We want to ensure that whatever the product is we're using on our building, we want to do the best job possible. I can say to the hon. member that if there is a particular example where there is a relative concern, I'd be certainly willing to work with him to ensure that compliance of what we want to achieve in Alberta.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister: how many complaints of noncompliance has the ministry received in the last three years concerning the improper installation of stucco and the resulting water damage to condominiums and homes?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, at this time I am not aware of any

complaints that have come directly to my office, but certainly I will investigate further within my ministry. But to me personally I have not received any complaints.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Coal Bed Methane

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In March I had the pleasure to attend one of the natural gas in coal information sessions that are being held to ensure that the regulations guiding the development of natural gas in coal, or coal bed methane as it's often called, are the right regulations for the future. About 135 people attended the meeting in Wetaskiwin in my constituency to hear more about methane in coal development and to share feedback for the consultation. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. How will the information from these sessions be used in the consultation process?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, that was an important seminar that was held in Wetaskiwin, and there was one held in Rocky Mountain House and in the south in Pincher Creek. They've been held throughout Alberta. In fact, we've had in excess of 700 people attending these seminars. It's part of our usual brand of transparency, open consultation, and the policy development process. This has been going on for some two to three years.

During that time, of course, coal bed methane, or natural gas in coal, has been treated under the existing regulations. Mr. Speaker, in fact, we will continue this consultation and will be going to Grande Prairie in a short period of time, on May 19. So even though there isn't a great presence of coal bed methane at this stage in that area, we want to ensure that that area is well represented.

What happens, Mr. Speaker, is that these working groups come together. They do provide us with recommendations. These recommendations are fundamental to policy input to the advisory committee and will be taken in as such. I'm actually thankful and appreciative that the Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose would take time out from his busy schedule and attend this seminar.

Mr. Johnson: To the same minister: as I observe that many concerns about possible water issues could be associated with the development of coal bed methane, how many methane-in-coal wells are producing fresh, that is potable, water in the province, and where is this development taking place?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, that is a very important question. It's a question that, as Alberta has developed its important oil and gas resource, has been put into play. I remember the former member from Grande Prairie who used to talk about potable water and drilling in those areas. There are strict supervisory laws and regulations that prohibit open-hole drilling in aquifers. These wells must be cased. It is absolutely illegal to dispose of drilled fresh water on the surface.

As the water issue becomes discussed with respect to coal bed methane, firstly, I can tell you that the exaggeration of water presence in Alberta has been caused by the way the Wyoming example unfolded with their development of coal bed methane. In Alberta, actually, our coal structures are different, Mr. Speaker, to the point where we don't have fresh water associated to a large extent with our coal and with our methane inside the coal.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, thinking and anticipating that a question like this might indeed be asked in the House, we did some research. There are no wells today presently producing potable or drinking

water in Alberta. In the only one that we do know of that made an application for fresh water, in fact, the water became saline or brackish. So there is no evidence of fresh water production to date.

Mr. Johnson: Final question is to the same minister. Would the minister consider a suspension of all drilling of natural gas, or methane, in coal wells?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is, as well, a good question. In fact, I don't believe a moratorium or a suspension is necessary. I would direct members to the latest land sale in Alberta. That land sale brought in some \$95 million in land sale revenues. Some of that may indeed be coal bed methane acreage that is being assembled by different companies to drill.

As I said in my second answer, Mr. Speaker, the presence of water in coal bed methane is not very high at this stage. We want to ensure that wells are drilled and wells are tested with outstanding and world-class environmental practices just to find out: if there is water with it, how much? What could be the issues associated with it? So I believe it's important to continue to collect, assemble this data, and respond with an appropriate policy for Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Programs for Homeless People

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past winter the number of homeless people seeking shelter in Edmonton has outnumbered the number of shelter spaces available and forced the city to open the doors of a fire hall, a warehouse, and other sites to homeless people. Homeless people across the province are not having their needs met, such as in Lloydminster where a social action group hopes to have a six-bed shelter open by September to house some of that city's hundreds of homeless. My questions are to the Minister of Seniors and responsible for housing. What is this government doing to help Lloydminster help its growing number of homeless people?

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I want to take issue with the inaccuracies in the preamble. This year we've kept a daily usage tally of the funded shelters in the province. Very pleased to state that the shelters in Edmonton had an empty ratio of about 20 to 25 a night, with the exception of people who have addiction or drinking problems. There was a shortage there. The Hope Mission through the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund opened up a second trailer to accommodate these people, so they were taken care of. In some extreme cases, yes, for two or three nights this winter in the city there was the need for more, and I am thankful to the city for picking up the slack. But to say that we have a shortage of spaces for the outright homeless in this city is inaccurate.

We have also embarked on opening up significant numbers of transition housing, of affordable housing. As a matter of fact, more units opened up in this province in the last couple of years than in any other province in the country under that program.

So with respect to Lloydminster specifically, I would have to get back on that because, quite frankly, there are specific problems. If they have any, I don't have that at my fingertips.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Then to the same minister: what, specifically, has the minister done to increase the transfer payments to the municipalities to deal with this issue?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should be aware that through my budget, which will be coming up in May, we allocate in excess of \$16 million to deal with homeless people in this province, the funding going to the shelters. We have a variety of arrangements with housing authorities throughout the province where multi-millions of dollars go into supporting people in transitional housing, in social housing, in seniors' lodges, in seniors' self-contained apartments, and the list goes on and on. Those obligations are made continuously, and we honour them. Specifically, we deal with the municipalities where appropriate and with the authorities which they appoint who are appropriate.

Ms Blakeman: Lots of information. No answers.

My final question to the minister: why does this problem arise year after year with no long-term solution being proposed?

Mr. Woloshyn: The member is correct that the number of homeless and our allocation to that have been increasing annually. We have embarked on several initiatives to see how to deal with the problem, but I might add that this problem is not unique to Alberta. It is not unique to Canada. It is a growing problem with a lot of concern.

We have made a lot of progress in getting people out of homeless shelters. A lot of the people in there have problems with substance abuse, have problems with incomes, have problems with addictions, and so on. The problem is not a simple one of just opening up a few more shelter beds. It's a very complex issue, and we are currently having a cross-ministry look to see what we can do to ensure that these folks in these shelters can be moved out and that the people in the province who require housing are housed appropriately.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Calgary Health Region

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week on Friday the British government cancelled a fast-track surgery scheme involving the Calgary health region and a well-connected, for-profit health care company called Surgical Centres Inc. Anglo-Canadian's contract to provide joint replacements and other nonemergency surgeries was cancelled because it would have cost more than those surgeries done by Britain's National Health Service. My question, I guess, is to the Deputy Premier. Why is the government allowing the Calgary health region to run around the world playing health care entrepreneur while at home Calgarians are facing overcrowded emergency rooms and long waits for surgery?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the government of Alberta isn't allowing the Calgary health region to run around the world. You know, rather than trying to make this some kind of a bad issue, which I know is the hon. member's wont in this, perhaps he should look at it from another aspect and commend the Calgary health region for getting out into the world. The Premier stated earlier today that Alberta is looked to in Canada, in North America, and indeed the world as one of the top-rated deliverers of health care anywhere, certainly in North America.

Mr. Speaker, instead of being bogged down in what was – I heard one of the hon. members say: you broke it. Surely that hon. member does not want to go back to the health system of 1990 or '91, where

we had one or two MRIs, where we had none of these new drugs that are offering quality of life to people. They would not be available. It is time that this group started to look forward instead of living in the past.

There are some new realities in the world of health. I've said this many times, and I'll say it again here today: to play politics with a subject like health is absolutely irresponsible and should not be done by any party provincially or nationally. This is too important to the people of this province. They didn't appreciate it the last go, and trust me, they don't appreciate it now.

Mr. Speaker, I have spoken to two groups today, this morning and at noon, and I'll see another one tonight.

The Speaker: Thank you. Hon. Deputy Premier, we just may have an opportunity in the supplementary questions to hear about them. The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. This government has been playing politics with health care for 15 years.

Given that the Calgary health region's mandate is to deliver health care to residents of Calgary, not residents of the U.K., will the government put an immediate halt to the CHR involving itself in any similar schemes in the future, and if not, why not?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, again introspective, absolutely introspective. Look for bogeymen; look for problems.

Let's look at celebrating moving forward and innovation. Calgary health region: first in North America to introduce the operative MRI, designed and built in Calgary; a bone and joint centre will occur there; the best cardiac care and research in Canada. Let's not stop with Calgary. Capital health region: two years in a row top deliverer of health services in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, let's be proud of what we have. Yes, let's look to improve it, but let's do it in a very positive way. This is something we should be proud of. We are moving forward, and I am very proud of the achievements of both these regions, that have dealt with huge growth.

Mr. Speaker, you talk about waiting lists. The fact is that we're doing more surgeries. It's not that we're not doing more. We are doing more surgeries, and we're doing more of them on the same people. Probably a dozen years ago one hip replacement was it. Today it may be three or four with the same person. That gives a quality of life to people. Let's realize that we're living longer. Let's realize that this province will continue to grow, the highest growth again in Canada, and that it will be the place of choice for people to live, and we'd better stay with it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that bidding on overseas contracts can be a very pricey proposition, when can Albertans expect to find out exactly how much the Calgary health region spent on this bidding process and how much the taxpayers are on the hook for this failed venture?

2:30

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, again, introspective. I'm sure the minister of health will be pleased to provide some further information.

But, you know, Mr. Speaker, if we had never left this province, we wouldn't have the innovation that we have here. I realize that philosophically and ideologically we're not ever going to agree on a lot of things, but in Alberta we will continue to strive for a higher bar and to be the best, not for the lowest common denominator.

Speaker's Ruling Cellphone Cameras in the Chamber

The Speaker: Before we move on to the next order in the Routine, I'd just like to make a comment on a matter that I've raised in the House on previous occasions, but with a large number of members here this afternoon I just want to repeat it again.

Our Standing Order 110 alludes to certain media being available in the Assembly. As an example, Standing Order 110(2) says, "Photographers may take still photographs of the Assembly, subject to conditions set by the Speaker." Further it says, "Persons in the galleries of the Assembly may take notes or tape-record the proceedings of the Assembly or of committees of the whole Assembly, subject to conditions set by the Speaker."

Standing Order 111 says that in the case of committees of the Assembly "the recording and broadcasting of proceedings by the broadcast media and the taking of photographs shall be at the discretion of the chairman of the committee and subject to any conditions set by him."

In the letter that I sent on February 12, 2004, to all members with respect to the decorum in the House, item 19 says that with respect to cellular telephones and pagers, "Cellular phones, tape recorders and pagers are not permitted in the Chamber."

We had an event on April 28 of 2003 when certain papers were read by other members of the Assembly, and we had a long discord with respect to a proposed point of privilege. I remember making such comments as that there's an old saying that gentlemen or in this case gentlewomen do not read other gentlemen's mail.

Now, if an hon. member in this Assembly wishes to have a photograph taken of himself or herself, kindly contact my office and we'll arrange to have the photographer located somewhere in the galleries where they might take a picture of the individual themselves. But in recent months there's been the infusion in this Assembly of cellular phones that also have cameras attached and pictures are being taken. That is an invasion of privacy, but more importantly that's an invasion of the privilege of the member in this Assembly. That is not an acceptable practice. There is no such thing with these unique little devices, whether or not they may be in pens or in telephones or anything else. But there's a privilege of being in this Assembly, and I'm asking all members of the Assembly to bear in mind what decorum is.

If you want a picture taken of yourself and you have a professional photographer, we can have them sitting up in the galleries and they'll take pictures of you in your place. But they will not photograph what is on another member's desk, and they will not photograph another member without that member being notified that he or she is being under somebody's gun. It may be a game for some. We're way above that. Way above that.

head: Members' Statements

The Speaker: In 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of several members, but before we do that, today is the ninth anniversary of the by-election conclusion for the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, who joined this esteemed group on April 20, 1995.

The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Calgary Booster Club Awards

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 25, 2004, I was very honoured to represent this government at the Calgary Booster Club's 51st sportsman of the year dinner.

As I have been involved in amateur sport organizations for 35 years, I have the utmost respect for the Calgary Booster Club, a

unique organization which is dedicated to the development and encouragement of athletic endeavour. The club has a 51-year tradition of honouring people from all walks of life for their dedication and commitment to sport. From community-level sports programs that involve young athletes to national-level athletes, volunteer support is needed by parents, coaches, leaders, and administrators, and eventually through commitment many of these grassroots people become very valuable athletic leaders in the larger sports community.

So I was very honoured to join over 700 people at this year's Calgary Booster Club dinner to recognize a constituent of mine in Calgary-West, Stan Schwartz, as 2004 sportsman of the year. Described as a class act by the media, for more than 45 years Stan has made significant contributions to sport within amateur and development levels as well as the professional ranks.

Born and raised in the Medicine Hat area, Stan first became connected to football in Calgary as a player with the U of C Dinosaurs, followed by a career in teaching and coaching with the Calgary board of education with junior football, conducting training clinics, and building football practice equipment. Stan's 28-year career with the Calgary Stampeders included dedication to many critical roles that have earned him the admiration and respect of football players, officials, and fans in Calgary and across Canada.

Also, Calgary's female and male athletes of the year, Taryn Swiatek and Jeremy Wotherspoon, were recognized for their pursuit of athletic excellence, as were a number of athletic leaders.

Mr. Speaker, it was wonderful to be part of the Booster Club dinner this year to connect with many athletic leaders I know, such as Curly Hunt, club founding member, and many past sportsmen of the year: Doug Kyle, Keith Kendal, Deak Cassidy, Marg Southern, Dorothy Read, Tony Anselmo, Margaret Scott, Bill Warren, Eldon Godfrey, John Semkuley, and Frank King. It was truly a happy and memorable celebration.

The Speaker: The hon Member for Calgary-Currie.

Teenage Behaviour

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As someone who has had considerable experience, although not necessarily considerable success, in dealing with teenage kids, it has come as a relief to me to hear that there are now some possible scientific explanations as to why teenagers behave, or don't behave, and think, or perhaps don't think, the way that they do. It isn't necessarily our failures as parents at all, as many fear. It isn't necessarily modern society and too much TV either, as many have speculated. And it isn't even all those raging hormones that are giving teenagers a raging desire to go out and do something incredibly stupid, especially if you've just finished telling them not to. No. It seems that there may be a much better scientific explanation for it all.

It turns out that many teenagers may be, quite literally, a bit insane as the result of too much dysfunctional brain growth too fast from about the ages of 15 to about 20, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which governs logic and regulates the ability to assess risk, as well as the amygdala section of the brain, which plays a leading role in impulsive behaviour. Probably none of this comes as any surprise to most parents.

But there is more. Further research is indicating that the teenage brain sometimes grows too fast for the skull bones to keep up, putting too much pressure on them or at least their brain, something they are often complaining about, actually. The bottom line is that they may not be capable of thinking or acting normally or considering consequences of actions the way we think they should.

Surprisingly, this biological oddity apparently plays a very valuable role in evolution. It might be a good thing overall. However, in the modern world it can also be very dangerous. Children between the ages of 15 and 19 are three times more likely to die from all causes as children between the ages of 10 and 14 are. There are lots of other implications to this finding, such as when we ponder juvenile rights and prostitution or the Young Offenders Act or adult courts.

The facts are that many very good kids really do go through a period of temporary insanity. Of course, the problem sometimes is that they tend to drive us insane as well, and unfortunately we don't have any similar defence.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I think the chair is prohibited from making comment, but did the hon. member say between the ages of 15 and 19? Or did I misunderstand and did he actually say between the ages of 15 and 89?

The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

2:40

National Soil Conservation Week

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize and bring attention to National Soil Conservation Week, which runs from April 18 to April 24. National Soil Conservation Week helps promote soil conservation among farmers across Canada. Soil quality is the foundation for the preservation of agriculture. That's why National Soil Conservation Week is so important. It recognizes the producers and the industry organizations that are managing soils and improving sustainability. All week promotional events take place across Canada to highlight the importance of conserving vital topsoil.

Our producers have always been leaders in conservation. Over the past decade Alberta producers have more than doubled their direct seeded acreage. Nearly two-thirds of our province's acreage is now direct seeded. Certainly, more and more producers are realizing the benefits of conserving topsoil. Those who use direct seeding and other beneficial management practices can significantly improve their crop productivity. Some of the benefits include better water infiltration, increased seedbed moisture, enhanced organic matter, and less risk to soil erosion.

Alberta producers are fortunate to have a very diverse agricultural base: crops, livestock, dryland, and irrigation. This diversity allows Alberta farmers more choices in how they plan their field management systems to conserve their soil. For example, thanks to our sizable livestock industry, producers can choose to plant forage crops, which are better for building up soil quality. Better soil conservation increases soil organic matter, but there is also a larger benefit.

Sequestration of carbon results in reduction of overall greenhouse gas emissions in the province. The prairie region has 85 per cent of the nation's capacity to store additional soil carbon by using good soil management practices. This could contribute significantly to Alberta's climate change action plan.

In short, today's soil conservation practices mean a better environment and a better future for everyone. I applaud the conservation efforts of Alberta's producers, the best in the world, and I'm pleased and honoured to recognize National Soil Conservation Week.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and in all fairness, as two hon. members went nearly one minute over, you can go four minutes.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. When car accidents do happen, it's a relief to know that your insurance company will help you obtain the medical attention or compensation you need to restore you and your vehicle back to preaccident condition without being unduly penalized. But ensuring that this process remains fair – it should not happen as a result of an accident, but the process should be fair.

This government claims that automobile insurance consumers will benefit from low premiums and reliable treatment under its auto insurance reforms, but its haphazard approach isn't setting Alberta auto insurance consumers on the road to fair and affordable insurance. This government should be charged with consumer neglect. Swift and decisive action was promised by the minister, but the response has been slow and indecisive as auto insurance premiums have skyrocketed.

Only when it saw elections being affected in other provinces did this government send out the automobile insurance reform implementation team to try and seek a solution, but it told them not to even consider public insurance as an option. In fact, this group of industry insiders did not even conduct any public hearings. When this crisis came to a head, this government froze insurance rates, but this freeze has so many loopholes that it didn't apply to all auto insurance policyholders. This government's only answer to high rates has been to limit the compensation an injured motorist is entitled to receive. Albertans are still waiting for this government to make affordable insurance changes. Albertans deserve peace of mind and relief in their pocketbook.

The Alberta Liberal opposition saw the crisis in automobile insurance coming well over a year ago and offered its research and findings to the government, but this government rejected a public model of insurance similar to the one in British Columbia without even studying it. The Alberta Liberal opposition believes a public system of insurance is the best way to guarantee affordable auto insurance to Albertans while maintaining fair compensation to accident victims.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to present a petition signed by 82 individuals from the Lethbridge regional police service petitioning the Legislative Assembly to support Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act, "which will provide more security and peace of mind for people working in occupations who have a higher risk of exchanging bodily fluids with a potential carrier of a blood borne disease."

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of many Albertans who petition the government, and their petition states:

We: the undersigned residents of Alberta petition the Legislative Assembly to:

"Urge the government of Alberta to raise the minimum wage in our province and recognize that there is a connection between the low minimum wage and the housing crisis in Alberta"

"Urge the government of Alberta to recognize that our minimum wage is too low and that under these conditions our low

income workers cannot afford the basic necessities of life, and urge the government to recognize that the minimum wage needs to be raised immediately."

Thank you.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table a document on behalf of my hon. colleague the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. The tabling relates to a letter from Les Steel, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, to the Minister of Health and Wellness as well as an accompanying press release dated April 20, 2004. These documents express serious concern about the priorities of the Calgary regional health authority and request a report on expenditures related to the Anglo-Canadian consortium.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is a chart with all the provinces and territories in this country, and it's a chart comparing auto insurance systems and results by province.

The second tabling I have is a copy of an editorial from the *New York Times* entitled A Strange Ban on Testing Beef.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly the appropriate copies of the 2003 College of Alberta Professional Forest Technologists annual report.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I will table appropriate copies of two memoranda today. One, from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs requesting early consideration at Committee of the Whole of Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act, was received in my office at 11:35 today.

The second is the appropriate copies of a memorandum from the hon. Member for Calgary-West requesting early consideration at Committee of the Whole of Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. That arrived in my office at 1:21 p.m. today.

The manner in which we will deal with these bills will be in chronological order. Bill 203 will come first.

2:50head: Orders of the Day

head: Committee of Supply

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: Main Estimates 2004-05

Children's Services

The Deputy Chair: As per our standing orders the first hour is dedicated between the minister and the members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate in the estimates.

The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you very much. It's a great privilege to rise today and deliver the opening comments relative to the Children's Services budget for the year 2004-2005.

I would just acknowledge at the outset, Mr. Chairman, that the hon. House leader from Her Majesty's Official Opposition has indicated an interest in knowing some other material, and I wondered if she was actually indicating that she wanted to have that statement made by herself prior to my statements or following that.

Ms Blakeman: You go ahead.

Ms Evans: Great.

First of all, Mr. Chairman, it's a distinct privilege to introduce some people in the gallery today, more than usual, some coming for their very first time to sit in this Assembly and view the actions in the House and view Committee of Supply and view the exemplary conduct of people in this House who are dedicated to listening to our estimates.

I would be pleased and privileged to ask them to stand as I introduce them so that you have the understanding of who is accompanying me today: the deputy minister for support services, Keray Henke, in whom the responsibility centres in preparing this document; assistant deputy minister Bill Meade, who also has involvement predominantly with child welfare, and we're pleased to have him here today; the person who is director of finance, Shehnaz Hutchinson, is here today, very integrally involved with the development of the estimates; also in our financial support area Don Boisclair and Larry Olatonade; also in support services the communications director, Lorelei Fiset-Cassidy, who is often viewed as she comes with me to the House on a daily basis; and for most of the members of the House the lady that looks after the problems that are received in my office and who is executive assistant to the minister's office, Alyssa Haunholter, is with us today.

Hon. members, it's I think a point of great pride for Albertans to know that among all of the places in Canada where you live and where we travel, Alberta has a Children's Services ministry that strives to nurture, cherish, provide homes for children in need and provide opportunities for families to feel supported no matter what their circumstances. When the rain falls, when the cracks develop in relationships, when there's indeed trouble in paradise, children always need supports, not only children but youth and senior citizens as well. Mr. Chairman, in our ministry we look after children of all ages, and I'd be pleased to explain.

The 2004-05 budget is a total of \$742 million, including about \$8 million beyond the transfers from the general revenue fund. It is up \$33 million from last year, or approximately 4.6 per cent. The great bulk, or two-thirds, of this budget is spent on keeping children, youth, and families safe and protected. This area includes core programs such as child welfare services, resources for children with disabilities, and that represents 68 per cent of our overall budget. I want to take a minute and explain this area because it is the crucial area of child welfare delivery, and it is the area where we provide human and financial resources to support families in several ways.

First of all, we want to provide services that prevent things from going wrong in families. With the new Alberta response model, which means that we provide community capacity to support families that are fragile, we look first to preventing things from going wrong. We look at providing programs such as home visitation for the newborn, early childhood developmental programs, our new child accreditation program for daycares. All of these programs are geared to provide supports for parents, to provide watchful and caring eyes for people who might be undergoing some trauma or strains in their relationships, and to provide those services that

prevent things from going wrong. Our whole emphasis there is from breaking up the family to making that family more complete.

The second part of this child welfare delivery system is really that heavy emphasis on preserving the family unit, where if there are vulnerabilities, a social worker, a caregiver may go in and provide respite, nurture the family, counsel the family, and give that family that extra support so that the child can remain in that family feeling safe and not vulnerable from any type of risk.

The third part of this delivery system is the protection, where we remove the child only because we believe there is a crucial protection issue, an issue of lack of capacity from the family because of drugs or alcohol or a combination thereof and an opportunity to make sure that that child is nurtured.

The fourth and final P of these areas, from prevention, preservation, and protection, is a permanency plan so that that child may return home. So that plan is in place, working to get that child opportunities for capacity back in their original home as well as providing a plan with a caregiver, a foster family, or group residential home that sufficiently looks after their needs. This is a very important area of expenditure and one which predominantly our 10 regional authorities are integrally involved with.

Mr. Chairman, we also spend approximately \$220 million, or approximately 29 per cent of the budget, on services for young children, early intervention, and child care. This is an increase of \$19 million, and it focuses on those areas of support to the community and a heavy emphasis on prevention. I like to look at this as the part where we're out in front of the game, helping families be resilient, helping communities know how to help themselves. In this area of expenditure we have significant support from our partners in the community: nongovernment agencies, local governments, and other people who have expressed a willingness to do the due diligence on behalf of children, youth, and families.

Mr. Chairman, I said that we look after children of all ages. It's no laughing matter that one of our biggest initiatives coming up in this coming year relates to the currently underway round-table on family violence. Elders who are abused receive services in our ministry through our elder abuse service delivery system, either in facilities such as the Kerby Centre in Calgary or in various communities where there's counselling support for elders who are either abused by their children or are abused while they are in a circumstance of a delivery system for their needs, and who feel that there's nobody else to turn to.

Mr. Chairman, our total ongoing activities this year and the ones that are going to focus a great deal of the public's prioritization are family violence prevention, resources for parents, children, and families, and resources for redefining and reshaping our child welfare and children with disabilities systems. Two years ago when we were heavily committed to consultations and bringing the best Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act forward, we were looking at what should happen. The thrust and engine that will drive child welfare will be one which talks about abbreviating the time where children are floundering in places outside the home and looks to re-emphasizing the stability of the home and making permanent solutions for children.

3:00

Well, Mr. Chairman, in this year's budget are the dollars to make sure that that new act is successfully underway, where training is provided, where technology supports that trained professional, where the multidisciplinary teams that assess certain complex cases are in place in child and family services authorities. All of these things have taken some additional provision of dollars, and those are part of the emphasis of what will happen in this year's budget.

I think it's been exciting that the legislation and the legislative framework that was introduced last spring by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North has become a lighthouse piece of legislation relative to resources for children with disabilities, supporting families to make better choices for supports for themselves. This legislation, too, with its regulations is being developed, refinements undertaken, reassessments of children who have needs are being done, and that's a good part of what this budget will cover.

Over this past year we've successfully launched the initiatives relative to family violence with the workshops. Through this next year there are dollars in this budget to support ongoing programs for all members of the family, whether they are men, women, or children. In this year's budget, as I've mentioned, the two pieces of legislation will be supported, the child care initiative for improving the quality of child care delivery to families who have children in daycare or day homes. We have successfully launched over 100 companies as partners in Alberta's Promise, a very small program but a program that while at arm's length from this ministry is bringing new partners on board, bringing ministry partners at the local level, businesses large and small that are committed to helping children in this wonderful Alberta.

We have established the very successful children's forums, Mr. Chairman, just this past week a very successful forum with 100 children in Hobbema who have come forward to provide their chiefs with a letter, a promissory note if you will, asking for a partnership between the children and the community and the First Nations that are in that region.

We've got some exciting initiatives underway in this year's budget which build on the resiliency of families and children, build on the community capacity, build on our supports to communities, and more closely monitor and evaluate the provision of contract services as per the notes in last year's Auditor General's report and look to new horizons, new beginnings such as the office of the children's lawyer, providing children ready access and government officials ready access to defining a lawyer for children who have been abused in care.

This year's budget provides even stronger fetal alcohol spectrum disorder initiatives and more incentives in communities for involvement. It provides for legal services protocols and independent review processes, all things which we believe will help us in our proper due diligence and accountability and improve the outcomes in Children's Services.

Mr. Chairman, many people have asked what the most important thing we do in Children's Services really is, and I believe our privilege is to support Alberta families in receiving those supports that they need to make their lives better, to make their lives more complete and their children ready to face a challenging world. I believe that what we've done by dedicated staff illustrates that commitment.

I believe that what we've done by new programs such as our bursary funding to youth in transition, enabling them to launch themselves in a new way in the world as they gain more education, are examples of lighthouse programs that will further assist us in developing the citizens of tomorrow. I believe that what Children's Services provides is a preventive health budget, preventing bad things from happening to children and youth and families, educating them on how to protect themselves and to go stronger into the workplace and in the workforce.

Mr. Chairman, I don't know how many of you know this, but every year Children's Services was budgeting with an anticipated increase in child welfare delivery of 10 to 15 per cent of new cases. Well, that's not happening. We have fewer cases of children in either permanent or temporary care today than we did two years ago,

and it's because we're building the capacity of families. Even though our population is growing, even though last year we had 40,000 births in Alberta, we are making steady improvement in the resiliency of families. To me that is the best possible outcome of having a ministry such as Children's Services because ideally we're working ourselves out of a job; we're working ourselves to a place where families look after themselves.

Now, because I have had a small signal that there may be some request for information about services to sexual assault centres, I'm only going to make one reference here, and that is that we have provided training dollars this year in the sum of about \$40,000 at the end of last year's budget plus an additional amount toward a group in Calgary involved with the family advocacy centre to make sure that there are supports for people that are nongovernment agencies that are trying to do the right thing, trying to engage community in supports for people affected in sexual assault centres.

They are partners with shelters in many communities. Every community has a different template, but we will be most anxious through this process of the round-tables – and they are very integrally involved – to see where that piece will fit in the future of government service delivery; in other words, not having them ignored like a foster child in our society but integrally involved in the way that we embrace these people.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

These people, these children, youth, and families, are affected not in the same way that some are in the women's shelter system today but very definitely affected by violence in our society, by violence that is as important for us to recognize as the violence of any criminal attack. I know that the Solicitor General though not present at this moment shares my view that this is an important element.

I look forward to our discussion through the remarks of the hon. members that are in the House today. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The minister is correct. She is responding to an indication from me that I did want to raise and have some discussion around the funding of the operations of sexual assault centres in Alberta.

Off the top, the first question that comes to mind to anyone listening to this or reading it later is: well, what does the funding of sexual assault centres have to do with the provision of children's services? Indeed, the same question is often asked around battered women's shelters. In fact, the shelters are funded, operational funding is received through the Ministry of Children's Services. That's just sort of where they ended up when the government decided to hive off the Children's Services section from Human Resources and Employment. The battered women's shelters ended up going into Children's Services.

What I've been interested to find out as I've started to look into the whole issue of provision of services by sexual assault centres in Alberta is that, in fact, they do not get co-ordinated funding. They don't get operational funding from the government. What they get is very piecemeal, and what I'm trying to do today is to start that discussion with this minister, and I'll carry it on during the budget debates with the Solicitor General and any other ministers that we can pull into this discussion. Frankly, I'm astonished that we haven't gotten on top of this up to now, that we're in the year 2004 and we're still approaching this very much in a haphazard or piecemeal fashion, and it does seem that in many cases one ministry doesn't communicate with the other ministry.

3:10

Both the sexual assault centres and the battered women's shelters are providing services to people who are at that point in their life because they have been the victim of a prohibited action, in the case of a battered woman, a victim of an assault. That goes further to even an emotional assault, emotional abuse. Sometimes financial abuse, as well, is recognized. It is a prohibited action. We do not in this society approve in any way of beating on someone, especially an intimate partner.

The same thing comes up around someone who is the victim of sexual assault, but it seems a more difficult subject for people to grasp. I don't want to say that it's less fashionable, because that's putting too crude a spin on it, but certainly the sexual assault centres have more difficulty attracting funds, attracting sponsors, attracting guardian angels, if you will, and now, I discover, attracting reliable, predictable operating funding from the government. Because it is sexually based, there still tends to be a misunderstanding that somehow sexual assault is about sex. It's not. It's about assault. But there's still a reluctance to classify the services and the effect of sexual assault on people more closely aligned with what's happening with the battered women's shelters.

In talking to several shelters across the province and to the umbrella organization, this is what my understanding is. I may not have fully grasped this, but my understanding is that the funding is very piecemeal and their administrators end up spending a lot of time trying to figure out which different grant program to apply to this year to try and get them up to the level of funding they need to operate. Indeed, I'm aware that through the Solicitor General there is funding to cover costs around counselling, sort of precourt and court appearance, but there's a lot more to dealing with a victim of sexual assault than just around the actual court appearance.

In fact, we know that in many cases women choose not to go to court at all, or they may delay bringing charges for several or many years. So that sort of takes them out of the loop of being able to access any assistance if they're not directly involved in that sort of immediate precourt or court appearance activities. The Solicitor General seems to be funding the counselling around that specific activity, but if you get any distance away from that activity, that funding does not cover it.

So, you know, what kind of funding are we talking about here when we talk about operating funding? Well, we're talking about, you know, the administrative staff, the other staff that are involved there that maybe don't have their salary covered by this court-connected counselling, things like the office rent, telecommunications, your Internet hookup, resource materials that you have to buy, resource materials that you would produce to distribute to the public, outreach costs and involvements, and the non court related counselling that I referred to earlier.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I know that many of the sexual assault centres – the one in Edmonton here, SACE, Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton, has been really vigilant in building liaisons and partnerships with community organizations like the police services, the United Way, the medical profession; for example, doing special seminars for emergency room personnel and having them understand all of the issues around sexual assault and how they need to be working with individuals who have been victims of sexual assault.

I need here to clarify that in a lot of cases – and I don't have the stat at the top of mind – we are dealing with adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and that's a particularly difficult one for people to deal with. It's hard to understand what the circumstances were around that. It makes people very uncomfortable. As a result, that group of

people, you see, is not imminently involved in the court process, so there's a perfect example of what I was talking about. If you're an adult survivor of child sexual abuse, you're left out of this loop and you don't really qualify for the funding that is detailed under the Solicitor General.

On Saturday night I was at the Jim Shewchuk banquet, the labour appreciation night, and they were honouring their twenty-four 2004 graduates from their union counselling program. What that really turned out to be is that these are 24 people from across the province who work for various unions who are trained over an extended period of time – I think it's six months or even a year – in all of the services that are available in the community that they can help plug their union colleagues into. So if they see someone on the job who's troubled, they can approach them and start to help refer them to a group in the community or to a service provider who can help this individual. One of the groups that was specifically mentioned was the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton that had been out and had done a seminar to help educate these 24 colleague counsellors.

So there was another example of how hard these groups work to build that partnership in the community. But, you see, that activity is not funded either by the government. So we have a group out there that's really struggling to keep up provision of services. This gets more complicated, not less complicated. We seem to have more people that are in need of the support, that are victims of sexual assault, whether it's child sexual assault, adults, and we don't have any kind of consistent funding program from the government.

So I'm bringing this to this minister at this time. She has acknowledged the involvement of sexual assault centres around the round-table on family violence. You know, as I was reading through some of the documents, over and over again it talked about the round-table on family violence, and it almost always said "and bullying." The bullying was attached to this round-table, and good on the minister. You know, that is something that's a form of violence. It's certainly an incubator for violence and the attitudes that people carry into adulthood that may well result in some of the other perpetrations of violence upon people. Bullying should be brought into that, but you don't always see "and sexual assault" tagged onto that as well.

So even though there has been some attempt to bring the sexual assault centres and those providers and workers under the umbrella of family violence, sexual assault, number one, is not always about family violence. It's often involved with strangers or with acquaintances, for example acquaintance rape – assault. You don't say that word any more; my apologies. So there's some struggle here with definition and with inclusion that I am just underlining so that the minister is aware of it.

Now, she mentioned that \$40,000 had been provided at the end of the last fiscal year, and there was some amount of money around family advocacy, I think, or to a family advocacy group that was included in this budget. But, you see, I've just spent 10 minutes talking about the kinds of things that these sexual assault centres are not funded for, and nobody seems to be picking them up. The Solicitor General is picking up a piece that is directly related to the area she covers; that is, you know, policing, corrections, and victims' services. She's picking up just that one piece around court appearances for victims that are involved and close enough to court to be covered by that, but nothing else that I've described in the many costs that these organizations have is being picked up on a regular, predictable, sustainable basis by any government department.

3:20

I guess I'm starting my own personal campaign here to start to bring this issue up repeatedly until I can see some sort of threads being knitted together from the various ministries that are affected here. I would assume that the Minister of Justice also should have

a piece of this pie, the Minister of Children's Services, the Solicitor General certainly, perhaps the Minister of Community Development in his role overseeing human rights and particularly issues specifically affecting women.

Again, that's not quite accurate either because, as we all know, sexual assault can be perpetrated on both men and women and is equally devastating to both genders. I'm not going to pick one out as being more affected than the other. Frankly, I don't even know how the numbers stand right now. It used to be overwhelmingly a crime committed upon women, but I don't know that that's true any more.

So what we have here is a very uneven approach to this. I know that it's an uncomfortable subject, but it is 2004. We should be able to, you know, be adults, be grown-ups about this, and be able to work with it. I'm really concerned about the lack of co-ordination and even awareness that the government is exhibiting around this issue and around the funding of these centres.

Now, perhaps the minister has a reason and she's been in cabinet discussions where there's been a discussion and there's a concrete, identifiable policy about: no, we will not fund sexual assault centres because . . . If so, fine; then let's hear it, and then we know where we stand on this.

But I suspect that that has not happened, and it's simply a matter of this being a group that has fallen through the cracks over and over and over again. They pick up a little bit of funding this year from a Wild Rose grant, a little bit of funding next year from some other kind of grant, a little bit of a CFEP, a little bit of a CIP grant, a little bit of court counselling from the Solicitor General, and every now and then something from the Minister of Children's Services.

I'm afraid that it's going to end up coming to rest on the table that the minister is responsible for, and I am looking to her to see if . . . I guess what I'm hearing is that there was no specific funding coming for these sexual assault centres in this budget. If there is, I'm delighted to hear it and, you know, please share the good news with me. If there isn't, then can I ask her to start looking for ways to support these groups? As I said, we're not ending up with fewer victims here; we're ending up with more victims. As we have learned, of all the lessons that we've learned around the effects of domestic violence and how much that costs society in very real terms – lost production, lost work days, hospital costs, effect upon children, the likelihood of the cycle repeating, all of those lessons that we've learned – most of those can be transferred into the sexual assault arena as well.

So I think that there's a fairly large human deficit that's been created by a lack of coherent policy and funding around sexual assault centres, and I'd like to start working with the minister to address that and move forward. I was hoping and I had heard, actually, a rumour that there might be some specific funding for sexual assault centres in this budget. It doesn't look like I had my rumours right, but the minister, I know, will answer me on that. If that's not the case, then we need to start to look to this.

I know that there are expectations and an idea that something will come out of the round-table on family violence that would capture the sexual assault centres under that umbrella, if you will. My concern is – I've already pointed out – that even as you look at the literature in the workbooks and in the explanatory notes around the round-table on family violence, the bullying is always added in; the sexual assault is not, and it's not consistently added in. So it's not top-of-mind to people. I think in a lot of the discussions and in the responses and answers back in the workbooks you don't get people going, "Oh, yes, and sexual assault centres," and adding in what all of that means and how people expect that it should be dealt with. What kind of services should be provided? What kind of funding should be set aside?

So, you know, there is an attempt to bring it under that umbrella. That's good, but I also think that you're not going to get a true picture of it just because it isn't always spoken of on equal terms, and it has tended to be hidden. I admit that there are historic reasons for it being hidden. Not good reasons, but nonetheless there are historic reasons for it being more difficult.

So I don't want to take up any more time, but I appreciate the minister starting to think about this, and if she could answer me about specific funding this year and what we can look to accomplish over this fiscal year around sustainable, predictable operating funds for these groups.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, of course, just to address the obvious, there has been no discussion in cabinet about not giving acknowledgment to sexual assault, or I wouldn't have just announced that we did give some money.

I would like to indicate that the issues of sexual assault, when I have talked to people either with sexual assault centres or relative to shelters, are not simple ones. In the past sometimes sexual assault activities in a community were part of the shelter network and have broken away for one reason or another. That's a very interesting phenomena because of obvious differences.

In some communities sexual assault is being dealt with through the victims of violent crimes and through the justice system as it's delivered through the police. They are delivering programs, victims' services, to those groups, and there are community programs for that.

In some communities family and community support services provides dollars for prevention programs, and so Children's Services funds in that capacity a lot of prevention programs, which would be under the whole auspices of the 80-20 funding through FCSS. As you'll note in this year's budget, it's increased to about \$63 million in FCSS.

So, as the hon. member opposite has indicated, it's fragmented at the community level. Within the individual budgets here the definition of responsibility for assault because of the criminal nature of this has predominantly placed it under the authority of the Solicitor General.

However, I commit to this House that the work of the family violence round-table is not exclusively limited to family violence. The issues of sexual assault have been raised in the 13 regional forums. In our \$2 million in the prevention of family violence budget this year, part of the \$2 million that's the increase will support operating funding, but other supports will be provided in conjunction with Alberta police forces in co-ordinating collective responses.

Zebra in this city is an ideal example of a one-stop shop where the police are involved; family violence counsellors are involved; sexual assault counsellors are involved; the doctors from the Stollery centre are involved with the children. It's a co-ordinated community response that's also being attempted to be emulated subject to the results of a study four years ago in Calgary, and that's the family advocacy centre and the groups down there that are working to put those agencies together.

I think that what we have to find through the outcomes of the round-table on the 7th and all this information – I've been very pleased to extend this opportunity to Members of this Legislative Assembly to join the other members of the Alberta children/youth initiative ministries – is to see whether or not there is an appetite for a parcelling of specific funds towards the sexual assault.

Let me also provide you with some other thoughts. We have a

record of those that are disabled in our disabled community where adult disabled people tell me that 80 per cent of their numbers have been assaulted or victims of family violence, whichever category you want to put it in. We have the gay and lesbian community that have come forward to talk to us. We have former and existing prostitutes that have come forward and talked to us. We have men's groups that have come forward to talk to us. We have grandmothers and mothers of men who believe that they have been traumatized by wives and families in violent situations that have compromised their mental health. We have, obviously, mental health issues. We have about 15 separate groups, identifiably separate groups, that are coming forward in the round-table on family violence – cultural groups, immigrant groups – that have their own unique needs.

3:30

I am fascinated that I thought I knew something about this subject before we had the round-tables, and now I realize that today I stand before you and know almost nothing because there's so much out there to learn. I think that what we, hopefully, will find during the action as a result of this round-table is what the hon. member opposite has suggested: at least a co-ordinated provincial support, a co-ordinated federal/provincial strategy on this issue, because I know that the Justice minister and the Solicitor General have discussed that at their ministers' meetings, as we have on the social services end.

I do sincerely hope that we have some willing federal ears to listen to that co-ordinated response who'll understand the passion in this House for making that happen because that is exactly what has to happen. It is not an island performing this or a ministry performing it but, better yet, a collaborative performing what needs to be done for those victims of sexual assault. You know, our new identities for victims of violence in the office of prevention of family violence have addressed a number of victims of sexual assault cases in the past. So we have in that capacity provided them supports through the NIVA program, which the hon. member opposite is fully aware of. But we'll just take a look again through this process to see if there can be some redefinition, a profiling in one centre.

Maybe I should take my quantum leap and go one step further. Because the hon. member opposite who has just spoken is so knowledgeable, she knows that the women's shelter groups have wondered about the opportunity to develop some sort of commission that would embrace this, much like AADAC. The whole issue of violence is affecting one another in society. Not necessarily were they looking at the bullying piece but the rest of it. That might be an outgrowth of this discussion, this dialogue, so that there is a formal, collaborative framework for delivering services to all of those people, not only the operational expenses of shelters but dollars to provide children and the elderly and all people of all ages some considered support.

Until we have gone through that process of dialogue, I hesitate, Mr. Chairman, to go further on the subject except to say that I think there are willing ears in all of the ministries involved in this partnership because we do want to make Alberta much more safe as a society for families and we take seriously the fact that there have been so many deaths in Alberta relative to family violence and, no doubt, relative to assaults of a sexual nature, that impact families in a very devastating way.

So I'll be prepared to answer further questions, and thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to address the Children's Services budget this afternoon. I'd like, I guess, to make a couple of opening comments.

I listened to the minister speak about support for families and her enthusiasm for what's being done in the province, and I quite understand that. But it strikes me that the words are so different from what I experience in my constituency office when I have a call from a mother with a daughter who's in junior high school. The mother is on SFI, and her daughter is unable to take part in the art classes that the school's offering, some of the extracurricular activities. It seems to me that there's this disconnect, with one department so enthusiastic about supporting families and trying to ensure that families are treated as a whole and another department not involved in providing the resources that make that happen and, in fact, helps create conditions of poverty that lead to some of the very problems that the Children's Services ministry has to address.

So I would be interested in a comment from the minister with respect to the kind of co-ordination that goes on among ministries, between Human Resources, in particular, and the Children's Services ministries, so that one department isn't really creating the kinds of problems that Children's Services is trying to solve. It did strike me.

The other thing that struck me was as the minister was speaking. I have before me a multipage complaint from a handicapped parent. I continue to get those: parents who are caught in the system between the Learning department, Health, Children's Services, local school boards. I'm not sure any longer, when these parents contact me, what kind of advice to give them. They have a severely handicapped youngster, they've been to department after department, and all you seem to end up with is a sheaf of paper and reports and appeals and a parent who is still begging for service for a youngster. I guess my question to the minister is: is there a one-stop place for that person to go so that this bouncing from ministry to ministry can stop and parents can get the services that we all know those youngsters deserve?

Those were two things that sort of struck me. I'll pass this one along to the minister; I know that she's had it before.

As the minister commented, I think none of us would argue with the goals that the minister has outlined: preserving the family unit, protection and permanency plans, prevention, and trying to make sure that we're there first in creating the conditions so that youngsters and families don't find themselves in difficulty.

It does lead me to some specific questions about the budget. I don't have last year's business plan with me; I had the 2002. But as I looked at the current business plan, there's a subtitle that keeps coming up: "Source: Child Welfare Information System." That's under a number of the performance measures. It's the performance measures that I'd like to address and I would really like the minister to address because they seem to have changed quite dramatically.

I think I know what it means, but I'd like the minister, if she would, to explain on page 125 of the business plan the performance measure that says: "Percentage of expenditures in the children/youth project and service category of Family and Community Support Services." Then it says: "What it means: Alberta's children and youth, aged 0-19, account for 28% . . . of Alberta's population." It goes on to talk about this being jointly funded. What exactly is that measure going to do? Is it going to say that because they account for 28 per cent of the population, that's the resource that should be allocated to it? I didn't find the "what it means" actually very, very helpful.

I would be interested in the kind of criteria that have been used for the "percentage of childcare centers that provide a developmentally appropriate environment for children."

Underlying these performance measures, I'd like to link it to an increase of \$1.2 million in corporate administration and a news release that came out today from Cognos. It was to the attention of

business and technology editors from Cognos. Cognos ReportNet is evidently being used by the department. Can the minister give me some background into the corporate spending, the changes in the business plan, and this announcement by Cognos? How deeply involved is Cognos? What's it costing the province?

3:40

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to take the last comment first because it relates to an announcement made by Cognos today on behalf of Children's Services. I think they were jumping up and down with pride, probably got out a little ahead of giving me an opportunity to say something nice about it. Quite frankly, the reason for Cognos's involvement is this. I know that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is so knowledgeable about children, youth, and families and about child welfare that he'll appreciate that when we decided to bring in the ARM model and look at providing preventive social services in the home, obviously these children were not being brought into child welfare for protection. So the same CWIS system wouldn't necessarily apply.

You might have a Big Brothers & Big Sisters agency working with mentoring in that family. You had a very new definition of how you track the records and the family supports that were provided to somebody who wasn't technically part of child welfare. So it was important to look at new software to create a different kind of capacity for making sure that if you were the child welfare director in region 6, for example, you went to sleep at night knowing that the people that needed permanent supports got them, that needed temporary supports got them, and those that simply needed to have community strength built through linkages through counsellors and local community support agencies were there.

Cognos is providing us better quality of data both in the collection and reporting of how effective the systems are in delivering what I would call soft children's services to those families that may be vulnerable. We've enhanced our information technology with Cognos. The capacity on investment in Cognos software is going to give us some interactive capacity to talk about our issues and for social workers to communicate through the system, front-line workers with supervisors.

The company itself has been instrumental in giving us a better ability to organize and disseminate the information. You know, when you consider all the tremendous number of files, if you look at even the number of complaints that come to a crisis line being significantly more than the actual case files that are opened, there's such a tremendous responsibility that child welfare delivery has to do the records management properly, and it's probably somebody today in social welfare who needs to have an opportunity as a decision-maker to understand the use of technology in the best possible fashion.

I will table at a later time exactly what the costs were attributable to Cognos for that particular system. But we are so satisfied that for the first time we're going to be more interactive in our conversation with it. Overall this year our shared support service agreement with the ACSC has grown only by \$2 million over last year, yet we are dealing with many more intricate file adjustments. We've moved from \$36 million to \$38 million in our shared corporate support service delivery, and that includes payroll and a lot of other capacities that we have responsibility for. I will get the breakout of what this particular cost will be for Cognos in helping us with the community-based ARM model.

I'm going to be pleased to take a couple of minutes and just say this. I will refer to the Minister of Human Resources and Employ-

ment some further discussion based on the member's comments on SFI and will be very anxious to see whether we can resolve it. The member said handicapped parent. I assume that it was the file of a parent of a handicapped child. Now that we're in transition on our new resources for children with disabilities legislation, I think there may be some confusion. We can get somebody to sit with that person – and I promise that – and go through this file very solidly.

We've had two schools of thought in this city from parents coming to me. Some want to choose their programs and be reimbursed, and others want us to be very hands on in the delivery. If it's something that relates to the Minister of Learning, he's a very willing and compliant member. His estimates are up on Thursday, and perhaps he will be able to share the good news of the gospel on his part of that.

The hon. member has done me a great favour in giving me a chance to talk about some of our core businesses and our performance measures quite specifically. I think that in terms of the questions, although I may not have received all of them, in the performance measures we've reduced from 17 measures to 13 with a consolidation to better do a couple of things: fit with the national measures on early childhood development and not have so much wordy discussion about what outcomes should be but to simplify the measures so that everybody, both in the community and throughout, understands them. So we have tried to make our targets more understandable.

I want to look at just a couple of them; for example, giving children and youth a healthy start in life. The targets are constant at 29 per cent for each of the three years. The last result for this measure in 2001 was 29 per cent. We're looking at 29 per cent in close proportion to 28 per cent of Alberta's children being between the ages of zero and 19. We're trying to target the measure to the actual demographics of the children so that when we're making a contribution of 29 per cent to 28 per cent, it's because of the range for the age of the children. Information for this measure is from the audited financial statements of FCSS.

As you know, that program is actually a favourite of mine. It enables communities to take a look at: what are my demographics here? In communities where they have a larger elderly population, then it seems reasonable to target the dollars to that population proportionately, but if they are a very young community, then it's very useful to contemplate that the dollars should go to that population.

Twenty-eight per cent represents the 840,000 children that are zero to 19, so FCSS, generally, as a rough guideline should be spending about one-third of the dollars that they receive from the government on children, youth, and family programs. In the case of a community like Calgary receiving about \$17 million, they look the biggest on the sheet, but actually Edmonton has \$13 million, and then the surrounding satellite communities make up almost the equivalent of \$17 million. So you look across Alberta at the dollars that FCSS receives and say: what are the demographics, and how are they apportioning the money? I would only be concerned if a community took 100 per cent of the funding they're getting from the province and made the decision to support, for example, all middle-aged adults from 20 to 50, because if they had children and elderly, then those two groups would be missing out.

So that's how that measure dealing with FCSS is written. It's just making sure that there's a target of support for the demographics of children in Alberta. When you look at other measures, they are almost all trying to target and focus on the number of people that really require them.

Let me talk about core business 2 and goal 2: "Families . . . safe, healthy, and able to promote children's development." We've got a

target of 85 per cent over the three years, and this percentage is through our child welfare information system data, hoping to achieve a delivery system that resolves issues before they escalate, requiring child protection.

So to the hon. member and his questions, I'll look very clearly at whether or not later we should provide you a more complete breakdown on those performance measures, but the thinking is to make it readable so that the FCSS community understands it.

3:50

One final thing. There is incentive funding in this budget for FCSS partnerships with child and family services authorities and other agencies so that if they would have formerly received a dollar, they'll get \$1.50 because of the partnership adding an enhancing value to the partnership so that we get more agencies collaborating and co-operating to benefit the family.

The Deputy Chair: I guess we have passed the one-hour mark. I'll recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for permitting me to join the debate of the budget for the Children's Services ministry. When I look at the amount of money that we spend on children's services in Alberta, I have mixed feelings. On one hand, I am very happy that we are able to set aside a significant amount of money, in the neighbourhood of \$735 million, to provide services for the children of this province. On the other hand, many of my constituents have concerns about the rate of increase as far as the budget of this ministry is concerned.

We remember that about 10 years ago, in 1994, the budget at that time was somewhere between \$175 million to probably about \$285 million because there were different things being covered under the ministry of family and social services at the time. Over the past 10 years we've had an increase in the population of Alberta, but certainly we don't have that many more bad parents or that many more children at risk. Looking at the budget, it has increased at least a hundred per cent or even more. Some people had said that it has increased as much as 200 per cent. This begs the question: are we spending the money in the most cost-effective way?

You could take a look at the number of children that are in the system today. There are around 13,000 kids, 5,000 in permanent care and about 8,000 in temporary care of the government. Also, the ministry is helping about 7,200 handicapped children. If you look at those numbers and look at the amount of money that we spend on it, then we have to ask ourselves the question: can we find another way to spend this amount of money on that number of kids? Should we wait until the children come into the custody of the government to provide that kind of help, or should we spend that money at the family level to provide support for the family to reduce those numbers in the first place?

Going further down to look at how the money is being spent, you can see that there are nine regions that are receiving money from the ministry. When the money passes the ministry level going down to the region, what kind of control mechanism do we have at that point to ensure that the money is being spent at the right place, at the right time, and for the right purpose? Many of my constituents have expressed concern about the ballooning bureaucracy and the very heavy administration associated with each region.

In the year 2000 I had the pleasure or displeasure of working very closely with region 3, and I'm glad that Mr. Bill Meade is here this afternoon to hear this. My experience at that time was not a very good one. The practice of some of the staff at that time, in my humble opinion, was not as straightforward as it should be. I'd be

more than happy to repeat what I say in the House outside this House if needed. The practice of making up stories and misleading the minister's office and misleading elected officials certainly is not something that should be taken lightly, and when you add that with the huge percentage increase year after year, it begs the question: who is actually controlling those monies once it has gotten down to the regional levels?

Looking at the money that we spend for the minister's office, I have absolutely no problem with that. I have no doubt that the minister is very committed and very responsible when it comes to spending taxpayers' dollars, but once the money is passed down to the regions, then we look at this and we see right now region 6, Edmonton and area, which I think Mr. Bill Meade is responsible for, spending \$211 million, there is very, very little explanation as to exactly how that money is being spent.

Today if anybody is suggesting that the government should reduce spending money on Children's Services, that will not fly because as members of this House we'd love to see more and more money spent in this high-priority area. However, if we look at the number of children in the system and the things that we are doing today and the things that we used to do 10 years ago and the number of children 10 years ago and the amount of money that we spent 10 years ago, maybe we can learn some very, very useful lessons.

Tough questions need to be asked of the regions who spend more than 70 per cent of the budget of the ministry. Each of these regions should submit a detailed breakdown of how they spend their money. We should go over it line by line and compare how the money was spent in the past to ensure that the taxpayers receive the best value for their money.

I am not advocating reducing the amount of money for this ministry, but I'm advocating that we should have detailed reviews of how the money is being spent, and maybe we can refocus the money on the children rather than on the administration.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Evans: Mr. Chairman, just briefly I want to make a couple of observations. Coming back to the end of the discussion at the beginning of the hon. member's comments, let me point out how \$203 million is spent.

Now, 10 years ago we didn't have a program for resources for children with disabilities, but 10 years ago we weren't identifying a hundred new cases of autism every year. So this year when this budget includes \$72 million as support for resources for children with disabilities, that is a brand new program that wasn't there before. Ten years ago we spent a fraction of the \$63 million that we currently spend on family and community support services going directly to municipalities to provide supports for preventive programs. Ten years ago we didn't spend money on daycares trying to improve the qualifications of their staff. We were subsidizing the daycare directly, but we weren't subsidizing the parents, and we didn't have the number of working poor, that were so-called categorized as working poor, that required assistance. So that would account for at least \$203 million of the expense that has not been something that you would have seen in the same capacity 10 years ago.

I believe that the hon. member behind me here in the House has raised some issues that the Auditor might take an interest in, and he does. Every year, annually, we get reports and management letters on every single authority, how they've spent their money and how they perform according to their business plans and the expectations of the department and the legislation.

4:00

This past year in our letter to the Assistant Auditor General we cited and agreed with the issues that he raised specifically relative to

recoveries from Canada Customs and Revenue Agency dealing with provincial systems and reconciling the dollars in that particular area. We agreed with and accepted recommendations on the expenditure and accounting officer role directly related to our articulation with Alberta Finance principles and making sure that our expenditure officers in the area of child welfare delivery were designated appropriately and that the delegated First Nations monies were properly accounted for. We dealt with access security for information systems. In short, we have now complied with everything that the Auditor General raised in his letter.

I'd like to take a moment and just address one other thing. I really appreciate that the hon. member wouldn't necessarily spend less on children but just challenges to see whether we're spending the appropriate amount in the appropriate way. I think that the families themselves receiving the more preventive style supports, a greater aggression in keeping children in the home with the Alberta response model, the two new pieces of legislation that work to more rapid family reunification, are very strong indicators that we're moving in the right direction.

In terms of the services that have been delivered in a region now identified as Calgary and area, I'd like to go on record as saying and stating that I believe that they are well delivered, delivered with integrity and in the appropriate fashion. Although there has been a question raised about them, I would be more than pleased once again to discuss those services and that history with the hon. member. I know that he would be prepared to do so as well if another occasion provides that opportunity.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, and thanks to the minister for her responses.

I have some specific questions about the programs. I would like to go back to the question about the \$1.2 million increase in corporate administration. If we could get some indication of what that involves. The second item: under program 1, ministry support services, there was a \$1 million decrease in expenditures on financial support to child and family research. I wonder if the minister could give us some information, some background on those two items.

Ms Evans: Mr. Chairman, could I just beg the hon. member to give me that last item one more time, please?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thanks. Sure. The decrease in expenditures on financial support to child and family research. This is program 1, page 49, and it's the last item.

Ms Evans: Mr. Chairman, we established, as the member would remember, last year some monies to be spent on a centre for family research. In fact, we had \$5 million set aside, and they are currently exploring the ways in which we can put out an RFP, establish an appropriate mechanism. This is all related to that. The original amount of money was considerably more. If I'm not mistaken, it was an assignment of \$5 million.

Now with the centre for family research this is to assist in the solicitation of proposals to fit with the fetal alcohol initiatives. The expectation that we have is that we will award some state of evidence reviews in the area of intervention to improve outcomes for children and youth affected by FASD. We are looking at a project right now, for example, in Lethbridge with the University of Lethbridge and

looking at how we provide funding to look at comparisons and performance measures in Success by Six programs both on the Blood reserve and with the community of Lethbridge.

The research centre, being an arm's-length establishment from government, is in receipt of some administrative funding, which is a million dollars, but beyond that has an additional endowment of \$5 million. They have not yet come back with the completed business plan for the sustainable development of those programs.

So until we really get a good look at what the dollars will be for each of the programs, this research centre – let me give you a little bit of the background on it. The research centre, which will be a part of our ministry but also a part of the broader government prospectus, will start by identifying programs for fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, early intervention for children with autism, family and community capacity building, and identifying the needs of rural and urban First Nations and Métis communities. The work they've been doing currently is to try and solicit proposals that might assure that there's adequate prevention in place and respite quite specifically for Kids Kottage.

So rather than a reduction in the research money, this is an amount of money to assure that there's an administrative fund in place while they are looking at the proposals for the \$5 million. Ultimately they will be raising some funds, either through federal contacts or through national and international foundations that will hopefully help.

You asked about the \$1.2 million in corporate administration. This represents the legal services protocol that I mentioned briefly in one of my opening remarks, including increased legal representation and supports for justice. You might later talk to the Minister of Justice, but we're accounting differently for the management of legal cases that are received under the auspices of child welfare, everything from claims that have been made, liabilities that have been claimed against our ministry, and this gives a way of accounting for how we serve those costs in government and how we represent the costs, more clearly exhibiting them under Children's Services.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister, you talked about the research projects – I suppose the research being done on FASD in Lethbridge – and you made some reference to things that are being done in Edmonton. I have a question in regard to rural Alberta and what initiatives you have that would affect rural Alberta as far as FASD.

I tried to ask it in one question, but a supplemental to that would be: how do you co-operate or partner with other ministries in that direction? It is a serious problem – at least I see it as a serious problem – and it is a very preventable problem.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the hon. minister to respond, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

4:10head: Introduction of Guests
(reversion)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my honour today to introduce a constituent from Vermilion. The Webb family is one of the longest inhabitants of the town. The family are the biggest private employers in Vermilion. It's been a real treat to spend an afternoon with Scott in some meetings. I would ask Scott Webb to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Children's Services (continued)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As the hon. member may be aware, the original composition of local community FASD program delivery systems had representation from Health, from Learning, from Children's Services, and the initiative was built on the basis of a collaborative framework where we would see a tremendous amount of partnership. The difficulty, obviously, arises when one partner chooses to withdraw and solicit other initiatives.

The fetal alcohol initiative has an amount in this year's budget added over last year, a 21 per cent increase to \$2.85 million, along with the estimates of work that will be done through the FASD research. So there's a tremendous, I would say, increase in monies that are spent here. The frustration level for people in some of our outlying rural communities is when partners make other assignments for their funds and don't always follow through with initiatives that had been promised, with FASD for example.

We've been working to bridge that gap, have opportunities for local child and family service authorities to help bridge the gap and make sure that programs are in place. There's an excellent program in the hon. member's area. That is the Lakeland program that he's valiantly championed. We're doing our best to see that we can link in and continue with their excellent public education program. They are probably a leading light in Alberta. Perhaps through the research program that's being done with Lethbridge and the Blood reserve — we have actually mentioned to them that this may be another linkage with Lakeland so that we are assured that that rural partnership will not diminish.

Overall we believe that this year because of the additional grants for the FASD pilot projects and the initiatives, there will be some fruition, I think a better collaborative framework for understanding where the dollars go, and hopefully a little bit more prevention as well.

I thank the hon. member for his question. The research framework and capacity that will come under the research funding will give us, I would suspect, a very significant amount of extra money in this initiative by the time that projects are awarded. We'll assure and we'll make sure that the hon. member's issues of rural supports are kept front and centre of that group. I believe that Dr. Sutherland at the University of Lethbridge was very sensitive to the fact that that was a most needed item.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A supplemental to the question.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, the chair is recognizing the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to, if I may, move to program 2 with some specific questions. My question is: how much of the \$12 million increase across the regions is going to be used to help pay for the new licensing laws by agencies?

I have a couple of questions. Why is there a \$6 million increase, more being spent for accreditation services? How much of that \$6 million, if any, will be going out of country? Will it be going to American companies?

The final one with respect to that accreditation: is the \$6 million going to be given to the agencies and then passed on to the accrediting bodies, or is it going to go directly to the new and existing accrediting agencies?

Ms Evans: It's actually, in this coming year's budget, about \$9.5 million that will be given, 80 per cent of which will be given for supports for salaries for the daycares themselves; as you know, the ones that have applied to be a part of the accreditation model, about 95 per cent of the daycares, about 98 per cent of the day homes. Eighty per cent of the monies that come directly to those daycares and day homes will be provided for supplements to staff salaries and training so that those daycare providers can't, as it were, take up those things for themselves.

So we're not charging more for the licensing. We're still in the consultation process. I haven't yet been satisfied that I've seen the final framework for what it really should look like to make sure that we're getting the quality of delivery standards. I mean, today the daycares have licences that are protecting the child, giving the child safe toys, safe food, safe environment, but the issues of enhanced quality development of the child are what we want to put the focus on in the accreditation process.

Whether this should be an arm's-length body represented by the people and arm's length from Children's Services and government or whether it should be under the auspices of the ministry, what the final form will be is as yet an undecided point, but what I think is most crucial to get is a proper accreditation framework or proper quality outcome delivery measures and then make sure that those monies get to the front line with a minimum amount of money spent on the administrative supports for accreditation.

Now, you asked originally in the House a question about contracts for outside agencies and people from out of country that might apply. The collaborative that's currently working on the accreditation project represents a number of different groups, even the Child Welfare League of Canada and other groups, that have come together to sit at the table and wrestle with the problem of defining an accreditation model that'll work for Alberta. We are somewhat hamstrung by the fact that nobody else in Canada, nobody in North America has an accreditation model for child care delivery services. But I believe that if our children are as important to us as our patients are in hospitals, we should have that type of a modelling and that we should be able to publish the ones that are accredited and the ones that aren't so that people can make educated choices about where their children should attend.

Ultimately, I'll go one step further on this gangplank. It's my belief that the government should support subsidies to quality care delivery systems at all costs and that someday we may be so well equipped with accredited facilities that that type of standard should apply before subsidies to parents would be provided. In other words, nonaccredited would not be given subsidies unless it was a situation of kin care or some other kinds of care provided to children that made it reasonable to assume that it was quality care.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. A bit of a supplemental going back to FASD. Madam Minister, excuse my ignorance, but, you know, what I want to say is that I think that the programs that we do have are very, very important, and I think that we end up in a situation sometimes in budget restraint times of some of these programs not being adequately funded. When I say inadequately funded, it does give me concern when some of the funding or some of the programs go through health authorities and the health authorities get themselves in some tight situations and the possibility of FASD being reduced or cut back. I guess I would just like to know your comments about: when this funding takes place, could it be a direct funding or at least a designated funding as

opposed to into the general revenues of health authorities? Could you comment on that, please?

4:20

Ms Evans: Well, without the minister of health present, I would be loath to get too much into the actual mechanics of how Health supports programs like FASD. Suffice it to say that with our cross-ministry initiatives, the one Alberta children and youth initiative that we deal with, Health is a partner, and the member has given food for thought for our collaboration. I know that we're all trying to assure some type of co-operation, and perhaps the way that we can best address this in a cross-ministry framework is to provide members an opportunity to disengage in program delivery if there's been due notice.

Health authorities are relatively independent in the distribution of their own funds and priorities, and as you know, the child and family services authorities don't have quite that level of independence although they're very representative of the community initiatives.

So we'll take that up as a challenge and look at that. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I'd like to commend the Minister of Children's Services for her commitment to families and to children. I firmly believe that children are our most important resource that we have in this province and that we have to do all we can to help them to grow up to be responsible, accountable adults. I happen to be of the philosophy that families are the best way to do this and that the best thing we can do for children is to encourage the continuance of viable, functional families to raise children.

I think it's unfortunate that in our society we have gotten away from that a little bit, and therefore I realize the role the Ministry of Children's Services has to play, and I commend the minister for her philosophy in what she's doing. I know that she agrees that families are important and does what she can to keep the family intact.

My specific question to the minister this afternoon has to do with the current Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying, which I believe the minister has underway at the present time. A few weeks ago she had a seminar in Lethbridge on this session, and I want to ask a couple of questions for the minister to respond to.

First of all, following the seminar in Lethbridge, I did have some contacts from one or two people who were at the round-table, and they felt like the representation at the round-table was too much weighted towards government people who were there versus people who would speak from the grassroots of the community. I wasn't there, so I'm not sure of the validity of this statement, but their point was that we needed to have more representation from grassroots at the round-table. So if the minister could comment on that and what her thoughts are on that.

Secondly, on the expectation that the minister has from the round-table: the results, how she would expect to implement the suggestions and ideas that come forth, and will that create an expectation in society that perhaps will be a challenge to meet?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I thank the hon. member for the question. In the first instance, one of the things that we found very challenging in organizing the round-tables in communities was that there were varied expectations when we first sought points across the map for Albertans to come and become involved. Many

of the providers of service immediately signed up. There was no doubt about it that people who worked in justice, police, people who were counsellors in schools, social workers, a number of those folks, came and were almost first up to the plate. So in the 13 regional round-tables we had a significant number of people that were practitioners for social change, who delivered essential change and support services and were accountable at the community level either through agencies or delivery systems.

What we have found in our other focus groups is that we have been able to engage regular community people. Let me give you the list: the aboriginal community; the youth services and youth in two separate groups identifying youth across the province for bullying; elder abuse best-practice groups; faith community leaders; I mentioned previously the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered victims; immigrant women victims; male victims; the military community, which has been a mixture; older adult victims; perpetrators; persons with disabilities victims; women exploited by prostitution; women in emergency shelters; obviously, the male victims group; I mentioned the youth; and so on. What we have now in the final gathering of the guests for the May 7 round-table is a session that's being held on May 6 that's wide open to anybody.

Now, I say that advisedly because as soon as we advertised – Mr. Chairman, you're going to hardly believe this – that we were bringing in experts to talk about violence and bullying, we had 800 people registered at the Calgary Roundup Centre. Unbelievable. It's like they all knew that there had been five deaths since Christmas relative to family violence.

I don't know who all of these people are, but I do know that these people want to come forward and listen to what we've discovered in the round-table, fill out questionnaires, react to the issues that they see, listen to experts talk about bullying and how communities can build capacity and resiliency, and finally to make sure that the final product that we have will be a framework that the community will see fit to commit to, that the person and individual will see fit to commit to, that the province will see fit to commit to, and so on.

There are actually nine other ministries that are involved, and you could ask the Minister of Gaming, if you wish, because he so frequently funds shelter replacement and shelter programs through lottery dollars and has a very big stake in this as well. We have got almost half of the government ministries that are involved in hosting this round-table. I am simply the co-ordinator. I can assure you from the passion and compassion that I've seen in getting all the deputies and ministers together at least for meetings, sometimes two a month, that we've got people who are willing to take up the causes that come as a result of that dialogue and bring forward meaningful change.

Now, when this happened in Ontario, Ontario developed a three and a half to five-year plan with 140 recommendations, and I'm expecting no less in Alberta, recommendations that cover the gamut from what happens to the elder that's abused in a seniors' place or left by neglect to starve alone to what happens to the baby that might be unwittingly a participant or a victim in a family violence case. So the recommendations that will come back will come both to government and to the community level.

I'll make just one final promo on this. When we did one of our very first round-tables, at Fort McMurray, they told us at that centre: do you know that if nothing else happened as a result of this family violence round-table, the very fact that we've got all of these people in one room talking to each other is probably the first step towards making this community a safer place? So although there were some that were disappointed that at the local level the spots were predominantly filled by practitioners or people integrally involved in delivery of some form of service, what we will get on the 6th and 7th of May

is a much broader spectrum of Albertans that will be considerate of all of those impressions from across Alberta. We'll consider as well the questionnaires, that we've received literally hundreds of.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to ask the minister if she would talk a little bit about the changes to the regional boundaries and if she sees the present boundaries now being in place holding for the next few years or whether there is going to have to be some further adjustment.

A couple of other specifics, Mr. Chairman. How much will the new regulation of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act cost to implement?

4:30

A third question: with the goal of the ministry being the enhancement of aboriginal children, why did the Métis settlements receive less than a hundred thousand dollars of the \$12 million increase?

I guess those are a few questions, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you. In terms of the implementation of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act the implementation supports in the estimates this year are \$4.3 million. They relate almost exclusively to training and to providing a lot of staff training. It's not simple to train the staff, because there have to be staff in place on the front lines. Removing those staff, talking to them about how they represent the legislative framework, how they respond on that is an important element, how they respond in court, how they work as multidisciplinary teams in assessments, and so on. But this particular amount of money is predominantly for training. It's an amount over and above last year's by about \$1.8 million to make sure that we have adequate resources in place to make sure that that training is sufficient.

Now, in terms of the reduced amount of money for the Métis settlements I'll attempt to get you a response on that shortly. But let me just talk a bit about the number of regions. As you know, nine regions plus Métis settlements is really the 10th region. When you look at the way the dollars have been apportioned, it tries to account for both the demographics as well as the unique needs of each region.

In the Edmonton and area region, the newly created region 6, there are a considerable number of people that are a part of this region that may originate from other regions, predominantly from northern Alberta. There are a significant number of people that come from northern Alberta points, stay here for several months of the year and become part of our child welfare case rolls, either off-reserve in some instances or people along with families that have located here to be a part of the oil sands development, the military as a group who have located here. Ten years ago we didn't have that, so there are additional pressures as families who have been more transient than others try to find new systems of support.

So I hope that these will be, roughly speaking, the correct amounts of dollars for each one of these regions. Thus far with the business plans that I've received, I think that those supports should be there. There are not as many additional dollars being profiled in the regions, but that's predominantly because some of those dollars are in place in other places; for example, in the family violence initiative and in other initiatives that we have provided.

But as to the specifics of the reduction of dollars for the Métis settlements I don't note that on program 2, for example. In the

operating expense I have, it looks to me like an increase of \$300,000 over last year, so I might be missing the place. Could the hon. member clarify again?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The question was that the Métis settlements received less than a hundred thousand dollars of the \$12 million increase.

Ms Evans: Mr. Chairman, give me a moment or two, and I'm sure that one of my angels will make sure that I get that amount clear.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, if you so wish, you may provide a response in writing as well.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to make a few observations on the estimates for the Ministry of Children's Services and to ask a question or two of the minister. Most of the specific questions that I had have already been raised, so I won't waste the time of the House in repeating those.

By way of general comments, Mr. Chairman, I first want to commend the minister for attempting to address the questions with some useful information coming out and trying to do the best job that she can. She may want to respond to some other questions in writing so that the House gets the benefit of more detailed information on the questions that have been asked. Some answers that the minister attempted may have addressed some of those questions only in part, so she might want to look at those answers and then see if she wants to supplement them in writing.

Mr. Chairman, I was looking at a couple of news releases from the department from last year and this year. I'll start perhaps with one of the more recent news releases concerning the minister's travel to San Diego in January to attend a conference dealing with maltreatment of children. The conference was designed to "increase professional skills and knowledge in the prevention, recognition, assessment and treatment of all forms of maltreatment including those related to family violence and substance abuse."

Then in the next paragraph the minister is quoted as saying, "I am looking forward to hearing from the experts in the area of child protection and family violence prevention." I'm sure the minister benefited from being at that conference and brought back some ideas. I'd like to ask the minister if some of those were reflected in the budget decisions that the minister has made since and if she would draw my attention to it.

I have one specific question in terms of needed improvements perhaps. I'm interested in asking the minister to respond to the training of child and youth welfare workers who provide services to children and families who are in the care of the government or are supported by the government while they remain with their families. Are there some changes or improvements being sought and made in the training of the service providers in order to both enhance the quality of service and to ensure that the measures that we take are directed as much to the level of prevention as are needed for the protection of children who are in need of those services? Has the minister made provisions in the budget to encourage professional development of these service providers? If so, what kinds of steps are being taken to enhance and encourage and increase access to professional development? So that's the one specific question related to training and professional development, if you wish.

I was looking at another news release from the minister's department in September of 2003, Mr. Chairman. This deals with the

annual report for 2002-2003 from the Department of Children's Services. The minister refers there to "a child care initiative that will improve the quality of child care settings and help families select quality child care that meets their child's developmental needs."

4:40

In this budget what changes or what particular allocations reflect that continuing commitment, I guess, of the minister and of the minister's department? How are the child care facilities in the province going to receive more attention both in terms of the level of training required of child care workers and the accreditation of either agencies or families who provide that child care in their homes for, I think, four to six, eight children? So the question of requiring certain standards in terms of the quality of care to be delivered is what's begged by this particular commitment, and I want to ask the minister what kinds of budget decisions reflect concrete actions, to match the words with concrete actions.

Another item that's mentioned in the same September 30 news release is the publicly accessible adoptions web site to "promote the need for families of specific children in the permanent care of government." I'd like to ask the minister to perhaps give us some update on how that web site is working. It wasn't in use for a while, and some improvements have been made to it, I know, to make sure that private information on children is secure and appropriately protected. How is it working? What are the costs of it, if there are any costs associated with it? Where are they reflected in the budget if the program is to continue? So that's yet another question.

Now, I was looking at the budgets of regions in particular, taking a quick look at them, and noticed that, unless I'm mistaken, there's a pattern there more or less with respect to the budgets of each of the regions with the exception of one, I think. I think it was region 5. This was under expenditure programs dealing with child care and early intervention. Both of these programs, in my view, are exceedingly important to prevent harm to children, to make sure that they get very early on appropriate care and that early intervention is available when problems are diagnosed and detected.

The pattern that I notice, Mr. Chairman, and to which I want to draw the minister's attention and invite her comments is as follows. In the case of both child care and early intervention there's a reduction in the budget allocations for these regions. The only exception is region 5. In some cases the budget allocations are less than last year's for both cases, early intervention and child care. In other regions it may be that for child care there's a reduction and for early intervention there may be either stagnant funding, same as the last year's, or only nominally increased this year.

If I'm right in seeing a certain pattern of a general decline in the budgetary allocations, how does it square with the budget figures here in the Budget 2004 document where there's a \$5 million increase with respect to child care, for example, from the forecast for 2003-2004 to the current budget, which is \$68 million something? So there's close to a \$6 million, \$7 million increase on the child care side, yet I see systematic reductions in the allocations to that particular item in the budgets of most of the regions, if not all of the regions.

These are some of the questions for the minister to address.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to try and succinctly capture the essence of most, and if I miss any, I will submit them in writing. I realize that we have only a few minutes left.

With the indulgence of the hon. member that just spoke,

Edmonton-Strathcona, I'd like to just provide that the Métis settlements that was referenced by one of the previous speakers from the opposition, page 67, was to remove the variances in the removal of matching funds from the federal government. There's a minimal increase, and there's a low child welfare caseload, low resources for children with disabilities caseload, and provision has been made for community collaboration and delivery of service. So it's predominantly a reconfiguration of the federal funding there that's caused the change.

In the conference in San Diego – and I'm so glad you mentioned it. I actually could spend hours talking to the hon. member about what I learned there. I reacquainted myself with Judge Milliken and talked about the things that are fundamental in our Child Welfare Act that relate to what we really did develop, and that is a reduced time for families to be separated. You know, if you keep a child away, you can risk developmental detachment, a number of other pathologies in terms of the psychological profile of a child.

In California they work very closely with their courts to try and put families together as quickly as possible, so they've got a pretty stringent guideline to a reunification process. We talked about that, and we talked a lot there about bullying.

The additional dollars here in two areas, both in the parenting resource initiative as well as the additional dollars for family violence, relate in part to things experienced after our discussion with the experts in San Diego in child welfare, and hopefully after the round-table on family violence, the other ministries' profiled supports for those areas will show the hon. member opposite that we made some significant difference.

The training for the child welfare legislation I had mentioned previously was in excess of \$4 million this year, and there are significant training dollars there for not only the service providers that are our staff but for those that are on contract to the ministry. So I can assure the hon. member that we believe that sufficient provision for this new legislation in the area of training has been made as well as some support for the advocate, as well, in terms of developing community-based mentors. There are significantly more dollars in this budget for that.

4:50

In terms of child care accreditation and the extra dollars provided there, I mentioned just a few moments ago that we have been looking at an elevated quality status for those dollars that are expected. The overall increase there is approximately \$9.8 million, looking at early childhood development programs and increased respite for families and in the child care area more funds to provide supports to the staff so that they will be able to complete additional training.

In terms of parenting resources there's \$2 million that wasn't in the . . .

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Children's Services, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(4), which provides for not less than two hours of consideration for a department's proposed estimates, and after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Children's Services for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, I must now put the question.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Equipment/Inventory
Purchases

\$735,801,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Children's Services and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Maskell: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her

Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department: Children's Services, operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$735,801,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that the Assembly adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we return in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 4:52 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 20, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 04/04/20

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order. Before we commence our deliberations on the Department of Transportation, I wonder if we might have unanimous consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, all members, for allowing me to make a brief introduction. I'm very privileged tonight to introduce to you and through you some very special constituents of mine. They are known as the Burnewood 207 Beavers, and they are accompanied tonight by their Beaver leader Mike Utley and some parents and helpers: Ken Bowridge, Wayne Kendall, Tracy Bunda, Gerald Bara, Rhys Davies, Randy Resler, Chris Spracklin, Tim Janewski, Catharine Schoendorfer, and I think Walter Bredevelts is here as well. I hope I've got all the names.

Mr. Chairman, many of us in this Assembly have come up through the Beavers or the Cub Scouts or the Girl Guides or the Brownies, and I am one of those. I'm very proud any time I have a chance to meet . . . Well, in actual fact I belonged to the Cubs and the Boy Scouts, but I think you all know what I mean. If I could ask these special Beavers and all of their helpers to please rise and receive the very warm welcome of all members here.

Thank you very much for coming. As soon as you're ready, I'll join you for a photo down on level 2.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any further introductions?

We'll begin this evening by giving a little bit of information to the people who are in the galleries and a reminder to all hon. members. This is the informal part of the legislative session. People are allowed to move around quietly. We still adhere to only one person standing and talking at a time, but it allows for, in this case, members to ask questions to the minister, the minister to give the reply, and to go back and forth rather quickly in that way. The first hour is the minister and the opposition members who go into response. After that it's anyone in the Chamber.

So we'll call on the Minister of Transportation to begin the 2004-2005 estimates on your department.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Transportation

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a real honour to serve as Transportation minister in the province of Alberta and, of course, present the ministry's estimates for 2004-2005 and also provide a few details about some of the ministry's programs and activities.

Before I do that, I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the colleagues in the Assembly tonight our ministry's senior staff,

seated in the members' gallery: my executive assistant, Ron Glen; Jay Ramotar, the deputy minister; Rob Penny, assistant deputy minister of transportation and civil engineering, and have a good look at him because he's going to be changing here in the next couple of days; Brian Marcotte, assistant deputy minister of transportation policy and planning; Gregg Hook, assistant deputy minister of transportation safety services; Gary Boddez, who is also the chair of the Alberta Transportation Safety Board and who will also be having a bit of a metamorphosis here soon; Winnie Yiu-Yeung, executive director of the finance and business management branch; and Leanne Stangeland, director of communications.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. minister. May we again have permission to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

(reversion)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. On behalf of my colleague the MLA for Edmonton-Strathcona it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to other members of the Assembly 24 guests. These guests are members of the 66 Girl Guides in Edmonton-Strathcona and are here this evening to observe the proceedings of the Assembly. They are accompanied by Mrs. Donna Wilkie. Unlike the hon. minister I was never a Guide or a Brownie, but I was a Cub. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Transportation *(continued)*

The Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. When I said that both Rob and Gary will be changing, they're going to be going bald for cancer. They will be having their heads shaved this week, so anybody here that wants to donate towards a very worthwhile charity, now is the time to do it.

I wish to publicly thank all my senior officials and of course all of the ministry staff for their outstanding work. As minister I get a number of kudos, praises from the colleagues and all Albertans, about the quality for our department staff, and I'm really proud to have such a great group of hard-working people in Transportation.

This upcoming year marks the second year the department's estimates have been done using the new fiscal framework. That means that the committee this evening will have two votes: one for the operating expenses and equipment and inventory purchases and one for capital investment. The new framework has worked well for Alberta Transportation. The ministry budget is more stable and predictable, and we've thankfully seen an end to significant mid-year spending adjustments. This stability is also beneficial for our municipal construction, design, and maintenance partners. They're better able to plan their operations because they can base their activities on solid assumptions.

The department's estimates include approximately \$1.1 billion for operating expenses, equipment, and inventory purchases – that's really the preservation, municipal grants, and rehab component – and \$442 million for capital investment. That's an overall budget of approximately \$1.5 billion. Now, of that \$1.5 billion, \$257 million

is for noncash items such as amortization and consumption of inventories. Consumption of inventories would be like sand, gravel, et cetera. This translates into an actual spending target of approximately \$1.25 billion.

8:10

Safety is the ministry's number one priority and the prime motive for ministry activities and programs. The ministry will spend approximately \$29 million directly on transportation safety programs and activities of the Alberta Transportation Safety Board. It's the entire traffic safety budget. This includes all of the inspection services of commercial vehicles as well.

I believe our current programs and services contribute to better safety on Alberta roadways, but it's important to keep looking for improvements. That's why I recently appointed one former RCMP assistant commissioner Don McDermid to review all of our traffic safety programs. Mr. McDermid will report back to me in May, and I'm looking forward to seeing what ideas and recommendations come from his review. There is no doubt that we need to reduce the number of collisions on our roads, and we all can do a lot to improve driver behaviour.

Another way to of course reduce collisions is to continue improving and expanding Alberta's highway infrastructure. There's a direct correlation between infrastructure improvements and improved collision rates. For instance, adding an interchange reduces collisions at that intersection by approximately 45 per cent on average. Twinning a highway when the traffic warrants are there reduces collisions by approximately 47 per cent.

So during 2004-05 Alberta Transportation capital investments in the province's highway network will be \$411 million. Now, of that \$411 million, \$266 million will be invested in what is called the strategic economic highway corridors, such as the north/south trade corridor and ring roads in Edmonton and Calgary. Economic corridor development is a ministry priority. The remaining \$145 million will be invested in other points of Alberta's highway system. Now, this does include \$4.5 million for the new tourism highway signage initiative. This is a cross-government initiative, and it will convert existing tourism signage to new standards that are consistent with other North American jurisdictions.

On a final note regarding highway construction Alberta Transportation plans to begin building the southeast leg of Edmonton's ring road using our new made-in-Alberta public/private process. As you'll note in the estimates, the capital investment vote for 2004-05 does not include funding for this potential P3 project. The \$24 million shown for this project on the statutory program page represents the projected first-year funding requirement if traditional delivery methods were used. Though we are partway through the process, the final decision to proceed has not been made yet, and we won't be able to make that until later this year. This is subject to the selection of the potential contractor and potential final contract negotiations.

The ministry will continue to support municipal transportation, waterways, water infrastructure through a number of grant programs. Overall the ministry will invest \$355 million through its own municipal programs and a further \$27 million through the infrastructure Canada/Alberta partnership program with the federal government. Edmonton and Calgary will continue to receive funding based on 5 cents per litre of road fuel sold within city limits. Other cities, towns, villages, and eligible municipalities will receive funding based on \$60 per capita. Rural municipalities will continue to receive formula-based grants. They are also going to continue to be eligible for the resource road program. This program provides funding assistance to address increased industrial resource-based or

heavy truck traffic on local roads. It was a real success in its first year, and in many cases the private sector contributed funding along with the provincial and municipal governments.

Now, cities other than Edmonton and Calgary can also apply for funds under the cities special transportation grant. The program, which assists these cities in addressing transportation infrastructure affected by rapid growth, will provide approximately \$32 million through the Alberta municipal water/waste-water partnership. This partnership provides funding assistance to municipalities to address water/waste-water infrastructure issues. This amount is higher than last year due to almost \$7 million provided through the water for life strategy for regional water systems. The program formula is enhanced by 10 per cent.

I did mention the infrastructure Canada/Alberta program, or ICAP. It's entering its fourth year and is winding down. Ministry officials are in negotiations with the federal government for the new municipal rural infrastructure fund, which will be similar to ICAP. There likely won't be any projects approved this year under this program, but we are continuing to negotiate the program with the federal government, so that's why there's no mention of it in the estimates this year.

Finally, we will invest \$30 million in the construction and rehab of the province's water management infrastructure. This includes such components as dams, reservoirs, and spillways. Of course, the major project is rehabilitating the Carseland/Bow River headworks system in southern Alberta.

So, Mr. Chairman, it's been a real pleasure to present the estimates for 2004-05. I'd be pleased to answer any questions the hon. members may have, and certainly if they're technical in nature, if I can't get the answer today, then I will certainly get those answers as quickly as possible.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to rise this evening and speak to estimates and to thank the minister for his opening comments and also his staff who are present here with us this evening to certainly facilitate a very open and frank discussion about the Department of Transportation.

My questions this evening, Mr. Chairman, are going to centre around the overview of the ministry and certainly regarding the improvement of road, driver, and vehicle safety; the improvements of provincial highway infrastructure; the support of municipalities in the provision of their transportation and water/waste-water needs; and certainly talk about Alberta's interest in provincial, national, and international policy, which impacts transportation here in the province.

I was quite happy to see that in the estimates the ministry expense for 2004-2005 is going to be over a billion dollars, which is an increase of \$166 million, or 19 per cent, from 2003-2004; that the ministry's capital investment will be \$501 million in 2004-2005, another increase of \$94 million, or 23 per cent, from the 2003-2004 budget; and to make note of the fact that the capital investment includes internal statutory funding of \$24 million for the potential public/private partnership to build the southeast portion of the Edmonton ring road.

Certainly, as the minister indicated in his opening comments, we have many areas of growth here in the province. The cities of Edmonton and Calgary have experienced incredible growth over the last few years. I think that long-term plans that were made for the systems inside these cities to move traffic were based on projections that in no way could forecast the rapid growth that we've had, and

it certainly placed a great deal of stress on our transportation systems within these cities. It is an enormous job to play catch-up and to try to provide these facilities for the drivers in these two cities. I think, certainly, that any of the people that have to drive in these cities, particularly during rush hour, would agree that there is much work to be done in order to facilitate the smooth, safe flow of traffic.

Looking over the operating expenses – and I'm referring to page 360 of the budget – transportation infrastructure and safety expenses have risen by almost \$150 million since 2003-2004. Could the minister please give us a breakdown of these expenses?

8:20

As well, on page 360 under Capital Investment the capital investment in transportation infrastructure and safety has increased by almost \$70 million. What will this money be going for?

When we flip over to page 361, ministry support services, the budget for the minister's office is increasing by \$10,000 while the budget for the deputy minister's office is increasing by \$14,000. If the minister could give us some explanation for the increase in costs in these areas. As well, if the minister could indicate the average salary of the employees in the ministry as well as the highest and lowest salaries. As well, if the minister could indicate how much was spent on bonuses last year and what is anticipated to be spent on bonuses this year. If he could also indicate what was the largest bonus that was given out.

Switching to program 2, transportation infrastructure and safety, on page 362. Highway systems expenses have increased by almost \$36.5 million. If the minister could please give us some indication of why and where the \$36.5 million in increases would go. Also, if the minister could indicate to us why the operating expenses funded by lotteries for road transportation partners decreased by \$5 million. What services will be lost? As well, will the minister provide a breakdown of the operating expenses for the streets improvement program? Also, why has the operating expenses funded by lotteries for the streets improvement program decreased by \$5 million?

Again, Mr. Chairman, when we look at the overall business plan for the province and for Transportation, we did ask questions earlier in the session as to why the business plan provides that they're allowing a decline in the quality of highways in Alberta. Is part of the reason that there is \$5 million less here attributed to the decline in the quality of our highways here in Alberta? If the minister could please indicate, as well, why the operating expenses for municipal water and waste-water grants increased by more than twice the amount this particular year.

As well, continuing with program 2, the capital investment in provincial highway systems has increased by \$8 million. Other road infrastructure has increased by \$4.5 million. The strategic economic corridor investment initiative has also increased by over \$61 million. Will the minister detail these increases and what Albertans can expect to see as a result of these increases?

The capital investment in water management infrastructure has increased by \$1 million while the capital investment funded by lotteries has decreased by \$5 million, which would indicate an overall decrease of \$4 million. If he could please indicate why we have this decrease of \$4 million.

I'd also like to make some comments on the southeast extension of Anthony Henday Drive, particularly in light of the announcement today. I have not confirmed this yet, but it was indicated that the cost of the Calgary courthouse, which is going to be built under a P3 model, has soared immensely. What protection do taxpayers in this province have in regard to the cost of the southeast extension of Anthony Henday Drive so that they will not be faced with these enormous increases in the cost of construction at this particular time?

Estimates say that for 2004-2005 \$23,900,000 will be invested in the Edmonton southeast ring road. The minister had gone on to say that this would be the first-year funding requirements if we'd use the traditional methods for road construction and freeway extension along these ways.

In March of 2004 in the inventory of major Alberta projects Alberta economic development outlined that the southeast extension of the Anthony Henday ring road would cost \$270 million over three years. How much can taxpayers expect this project to cost per year? Again, does the \$270 million include the annual lease payments and the principal and interest costs for the project?

On the government of Alberta web site under Transportation a release on the southeast leg of the Edmonton ring road says that the federal government will be contributing \$75 million to this particular project. Now, in question period the minister indicated that he had not yet seen the \$75 million. Will this amount be deducted from the \$270 million that it has already been indicated the project will cost, or does the \$270 million that is forecast at this particular point not include the \$75 million which we expect to get from the federal government? As well, does the minister have any indication from the federal government when we could expect to see this \$75 million?

As well, yesterday in question period the minister suggested that because of the rising cost of steel, 15 to 30 per cent, taxpayers can expect to pay more for projects such as the southeast leg of the Anthony Henday ring road. Has this been included in the \$270 million? As well, what percentage of the entire cost of the project does steel account for, and is there any way we can get a ballpark idea of just exactly what we are looking at in regard to an increase in the amount of costs for steel?

At one time we had asked about the cost of the southeast leg of Anthony Henday Drive, and it was indicated that this cost would be in the neighbourhood of \$300 million. Since that time we've seen pressures, mostly on bridge structures, and that's related to a fast rising increase in the cost of steel. The minister goes on to say, "I believe it's gone up anywhere from 15 to 30 per cent, and in fact there are some that are only getting a seven-day commitment on the price of steel today."

In fact, the government's web site said that this particular project would cost \$300 million minus the \$75 million from the feds as a public project. So theoretically the project should cost less as a P3, accounting for any increase in building materials. As yet we still have many relevant and basic questions that have been asked on this issue, and we still are awaiting clarification on those questions.

Certainly, when we are looking at \$300 million of taxpayer money, we should know where that money is going and how it's going to be spent before we make the commitment.

8:30

Albertans are wanting to know these particular costs in light of the fact that the whole idea of P3s has been a very controversial subject, and in many areas where they have been used, whether it be for the construction of schools, for the hospital programs, they have certainly not proven to be more cost-effective; they have not proven to be more efficient. As well, the ongoing costs to taxpayers down the road have also been immense. In the case of hospitals we certainly have not seen the level of service being provided to the claimants. It is a brand new area, and it's one where Albertans have to be protected not only from the cost of these but the services that they are to provide down the road.

That has covered my questions on Anthony Henday.

Now, then, as well, as I indicated earlier, I do have some questions that constituents have asked. One certainly refers to the funding for

accessible specialized transportation in Alberta. It's one of these topics that crosses ministries, and it seems that at this particular time nobody's taking responsibility for it. It's one of those areas where those vulnerable Albertans that require transportation are losing out.

I heard a story today of a family who had to transport their mother to the hospital at 7 in the morning so that she could undergo dialysis. She underwent dialysis and then had to sit in the waiting room until 5 o'clock that evening before they could come and retrieve her. That was because they could not afford alternative transportation for her.

This is a huge issue, particularly in rural areas and particularly in light of the fact that I don't think there's been a full survey since 1994 with the Alberta Transportation study of seniors and disability transportation in Alberta. Certainly, nine years later one of the conclusions is still very relevant: given the current economic situation and the inclusion of the PTOAG money in the unconditional municipal grant program, it will be important that organizations co-ordinate services and pool their resources; failing this, many service providers might be forced to cease operation. That statement has certainly proven to be true.

What these providers require is certainly some clear comment and commitment on funding for this type of transportation. There are issues here when it comes to transporting people that require transportation but not ambulances because of medical needs.

Another situation that was brought to my attention was where a particular patient in Strathmore when they were not part of the Calgary health authority received funding and transportation to go to Calgary to receive their dialysis, and the trip home was covered as well. Since Strathmore has been absorbed into the Calgary health authority, this person is now bound by the policies of the Calgary health authority. This puts quite a strain on that family in that where once there was transportation for this type of disability, there isn't any more.

As well, when we look at Innisfail, it is my understanding that their bus was taken off the road because it failed inspection. So what's happened in Innisfail is that they haven't had any provider that's been able to come in and replace that bus, so the residents there that require accessible transportation don't have it any more. Particularly for those who require accessible specialized transportation, these are quality of life issues. Certainly, people are wanting to know who is going to take the bull by the horns and settle this issue, and it becomes a huge issue for those people in rural Alberta. The impact on families of not having accessible transportation is also huge.

I'll continue later. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Stelmach: I'll certainly start answering some of your questions, but do you want to finish?

Mr. Bonner: Go ahead.

Mr. Stelmach: Okay.

Well, we'll start right from page 360. I do agree with the hon. member that both Edmonton and Calgary have seen phenomenal growth and put a lot of pressure on their transportation system and their roads, but equally as important is of course the situation we face in rural Alberta, where we may not have the traffic volumes but certainly heavier traffic on country roads in terms of the oil and gas industry and more in manufacturing. They see the large cities benefiting with the growth here, of course, and they certainly sympathize with the pressures, but they also would like to see some balance in kind of the infrastructure dollars that are spent across the province. So definitely growth is happening across the province, and it does raise a number of safety issues for us.

First and foremost, in terms of the budget increases for the minister's office and then the ministry operations, those reflect the 3 and a half per cent increase from the AUPE contract negotiations, and part of the ministry operations increased as a result of that. Now, we applied the same percentage to our staff in the minister's office, which is the people that are determined to be excluded from the agreement.

On page 360 there have definitely been increases in '04-05. This is now comparing to '03-04. Now, it's due primarily to a number of areas. One, \$134 million, or 50 per cent, of the increase in 2004-05 was provided via the 2003-2006 budget cycle. There was an increase of \$78 million for municipal transportation grants, \$38 million for the strategic economic corridor investment, and also increased amortization expense because we took over all of the secondary highways, and we had to write those down in terms of the amortization.

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

The \$19.6 million approved for 2004-05 during the '04-07 cycle does include \$46 million for the construction and rehab of the provincial highway network system. Part of the additional \$98 million was allocated to the ministry for '04-07. The balance, \$52 million, is allocated to '05-06.

Now, \$6.8 million is for the water for life strategy. It's part of the additional \$16.1 million that was added to the ministry's '04-07. The balance, at \$9.3 million, is going to be allocated in '05-06 at a rate of \$7.2 million and '06-07 at a rate of \$2.1 million for that year. It does include the four and a half million dollars for tourism highway signage and \$2 million, of course, for the salary increases.

8:40

There will be, of course, \$500,000. It's a recovery from the federal government for the Dead Man's Flats crossing. That's for wildlife, and that's to be built on the trans-Canada. It's part of a federal-funded project.

The increase of \$165.7 million for '04-05. It's \$78 million for municipal transportation grants, \$13 million for increased amortization. The '04-05 estimate compared to the '02-03 actual shows a \$366 million increase. Now, it's primarily due to the \$220 million restoration to municipal transportation grants, \$63 million for provincial highway systems, \$20 million for the infrastructure Canada/Alberta program, and again the \$6.8 million for water for life, \$2 million for manpower, and \$1.2 million related to transportation safety services.

With respect to page 362, transportation safety services, they did see an increase of 4 per cent. It's \$1.058 million. Salary increases are \$0.7 million, and \$0.3 million is for the traffic-related electronic data strategy. It's called TREDS, and it's a credit-recovery program with the government of Canada. That's why you'll see on the revenue side that we're expecting about \$800,000 from the federal government in a recovery, about \$500,000 for the National Safety Code – and it's partial costs from the government of Canada to the provincial government to assist in achieving consistent implementation of the National Safety Code – and \$0.3 million for the traffic-related electronic data strategy; that's TREDS.

Now, traffic safety services. They're responsible for quite a list: vehicle driver safety programs, their driver licensing standards, licence monitoring and enforcement, impaired driver remedial programs, dangerous goods control, monitoring the motor carrier industry and provincial railways, and also the traffic safety initiative, which is a collection of safety measures and initiatives developed and delivered with stakeholders. This could be snowmobile clubs,

the AMA, checkstop, safety education built into, actually, the Alberta Learning curriculum, and it's a very important program.

Now, with respect to the traffic safety board, it had a 2 per cent increase, \$19,000, related to salary increases. This is a board that came into effect following the May 20, 2003, proclamation of the Traffic Safety Act. It replaces the previous Driver Control Board and Motor Transport Board. It functions as the appeal body for decisions to the registrar relating to driver training schools, driver instructors, examiners, vehicle inspection stations, vehicle inspection technicians, safety fitness certificates, carrier safety ratings, and administrative penalties assessed. It is responsible for appeals surrounding decisions and actions taken under the Railway (Alberta) Act, administers the ignition interlock program for impaired drivers. It does hear appeals under the Alberta administrative licence suspension program. That's where licences are suspended for either refusing to blow or blowing over .08. We do administer the vehicles seizure program, aimed at reducing the number of drivers who drive their vehicles while under licence suspension.

With respect to municipal grants there was one on street improvement. There are a number of municipal grant formulas. One of them is street improvement. Now, these are grants that go to cities, towns, villages, et cetera, that are smaller, of course, than Edmonton and Calgary. Edmonton and Calgary get the 5 cents a litre, and the rest are based on \$60 per capita. The street improvement program provides \$60 per capita, like I said before, and they're cost-based grants at 75 per cent government, 25 per cent municipality. It's really capital for street improvements. The eligible projects include grading, gravelling, chip seal paving, signal upgrades, just anything tied to the improvement of the infrastructure in those communities.

We did add water and waterline replacements in conjunction with roadworks. Sometimes the community would get the \$60 to repair the street, but they didn't have enough money to repair the water infrastructure under it, so we made it part of the program if they were repairing the street. It's worked well in the past, and the program helps municipalities across the province immensely.

There was a question with respect to water. There is an increase of \$6.8 million. Over the three years there will be \$16.1 million into the program, and it's really cost-shared grants to eligible municipalities, those with populations less than 45,000. It's also to assist in the construction of very high-priority municipal water supply and water treatment and disposal works. Now, it does not pay for the distribution. It pays for the main line to the community, and of course it does ensure that all Albertans have equitable access to safe water supplies and environmentally acceptable waste-water treatment.

The next question was with respect to the southeast Anthony Henday extension. There have been a number of figures that have been thrown about in terms of: what is the anticipated cost of this particular road construction? When we made the announcement a few months ago, we estimated the cost at about \$300 million, and since then there have been a number of figures that have been used, one that came off our web site and then the other, quoted by the hon. member, of \$270 million. Of course, it raised a lot of curiosity because they couldn't figure it out. If we said \$300 million, how did the price always seem to be decreasing over the last few months?

So we did a little bit of research, and with respect to today's question in the House that was asked by the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, it was an amount that was given by the Alberta Economic Development Authority where on a monthly basis they list construction projects and attach value to them. Our information is that there might have been a little overzealous individual in terms of reporting the cost. Where we said that it will be \$300 million, the media asked: what do you think the savings might be? I said: "Well, it could be 10 per cent. Who knows?" Apparently they subtracted the

10 per cent from the estimated value, and they put it on their web site as \$270 million when it should have been the \$300 million. So that's the difference in the price.

The question raised earlier by the same member in terms of an amount shown on the web site really piqued my interest because I wasn't aware of that. We did a little bit of checking and found out that the information that was put on the web site for the southwest corridor – unfortunately, a staff member used that very same information and attached it to the southeast leg. That's why those two amounts were the same. Since then, we've made the adjustments appropriately.

8:50

The federal government has indicated that they will contribute \$75 million towards the Edmonton ring road and Calgary. We are including them in the estimates on the revenue side. We did put them into the revenue from the federal government. We anticipate that we will be receiving the \$150 million over the next three years as the road is being completed. It will be deducted from the total cost of the road, that was estimated to be \$300 million. I don't know how much the inflationary pressures will increase the cost or if they will. There are 22 structures on this particular stretch of road. Maybe it will cause some innovation in the industry to look at other ways of constructing those structures, and they might look to some other method, maybe a combination of steel and concrete other than just steel. But there is definitely a potential for some of the prices to increase as a result of the huge and inflationary pressure on steel.

Now, are Albertans going to get value for their dollar? We're doing two things, Mr. Chairman. One is a public-sector comparison. What would that road cost if we were to build it ourselves? Secondly, we're going to follow that with what's called a dummy bid. We'll have someone bid on the project, just as if they were a regular construction company, and give us and all Albertans an idea of some of the costs – you know, where would the costs come in? – and use that as a cost comparative in terms of the public/private partnership.

The value, I believe, in the public/private partnership is in innovation. When a company will be responsible or has to share the risk of maintaining that infrastructure for the next 30 years, they would have to look to first of all innovation to build a product, a material that would last a lot longer and require less maintenance because they're going to be stuck with that maintenance by agreement.

Secondly, they can then manage the construction of that total road – bridge, grading, asphalt, all the interchange construction, the railway exchanges or the overpasses – bring people in as they're required and the equipment as they require and not mobilize and demobilize as dollars become available in a budget and build a long stretch of road in a multiple of years, generally through the traditional method.

We're looking forward to the RFP coming forward. As I said, we'll use those measurements, and we'll determine if we're getting value for the dollar.

With respect to special transportation, definitely mobility is a predeterminer of health, and we are hearing from some communities, especially small communities that are requiring some special modes of transportation, especially for seniors. Many communities have taken it on themselves in partnership with some of our lottery programs to buy vans and involve volunteers. There are a number of different strategies employed by municipalities, but between the Minister of Municipal Affairs and the Department of Transportation we'll be looking at that over the next year and seeing what adjustments we can make.

I believe that could be the end. Maybe I've missed some, but we'll follow it in *Hansard*, Mr. Chairman.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Minister, for those responses.

When we look at the Transportation business plan, the business plan refers to the changing demographic of our population on page 409. Again, when we were talking here, we were talking about specialized transportation services, and certainly the industry has felt pressures as well.

Quite interestingly, when I was talking with them, they've certainly seen some increases in their insurance, but what they find is that their fuel costs are the thing that's affecting them as well. At one time it was so much more advantageous to use propane in the buses that a lot of them converted their buses to propane. That certainly isn't the advantage today that it was at that time. So what we do have is a fleet of buses out there that is aging. Some of them are starting to have issues as far as safety goes, and the decision has to be made whether it is more beneficial to repair the bus or put it out of service.

One of the suggestions from the industry was that we certainly have seen an increase over time with the tax on aviation fuel. For those people that are providing specialized transportation, one of their questions was that if they are providing this specialized transportation and certainly to a very small percentage of our population, they would like to know if there's any possibility that there could be some adjustment in the cost of taxes they pay on their fuel bills in order to be able to continue serving this particular group.

As well, another group that is having a great deal of difficulty when it comes to the quality-of-life issue of transportation is our seniors. With our aging population and certainly more and more people getting to the point where they no longer wish to drive or they physically can't drive or their families don't want them to drive, then we have to provide some type of transportation. So that is certainly one of the areas where I think we have to start putting plans in place whereby we can have transportation for this particular segment of our society.

When we look at the performance measures on page 413 under the heading Performance Measures, why is the mechanical safety of commercial vehicles, both the percentage of inspected vehicles requiring on-site adjustments and the percentage of inspected vehicles requiring attention of a mechanic, targeted to decline as of 2005? It doesn't seem to me that if we are decreasing the percentage of inspected vehicles, if we're decreasing that number, we can improve road, driver, and vehicle safety. There just doesn't seem to be a situation here where we can decrease the inspections yet increase the amount of safety. So what has the ministry done in order to counteract the safety risk? Why are the percentages so low?

9:00

As well, one of the questions that I would like to ask the minister is: when will the actual and targets for involvement of commercial vehicles in casualty collisions be determined? Why is the percentage of drinking drivers in injury collisions in Alberta targeted to increase in 2004-2005?

In the business plan it was indicated that we were going to allow the physical condition and usability of our highways to deteriorate. This, to me, would seem to be a situation that if we were going to allow the decrease in the physical condition and usability of our highways at times when we are increasing traffic on these highways, then certainly as we've discussed in the past, the rate of deterioration

and the cost of maintenance and repair is not a linear function but an exponential function. Does the minister have any indicator as to when we can allow highways to deteriorate and at what point those costs are going to escalate greatly because of the poor conditions of those roads?

If the minister does have some type of plan which indicates that we can have roads in a deteriorated state from what Albertans have been used to, if he could share with us that research that indicates that in the long run this will be a benefit or a cost savings.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

Again, why are provincial highways in good condition targeted to decline through to 2007 and those in poor condition targeted to increase through to 2007? Once again, why is the percentage of those in good condition so low? Why is the percentage of utilization of provincial highways set to decline in 2004-2005? Why is the functional adequacy of provincial highways set to decline through to 2007? Why is the percentage of 79.5 so low?

Another issue that Albertans don't have clear-cut answers to. In October 2003 researcher Lisa Prescott prepared a report for the Parkland Institute. The study was entitled Un-accountable: The Case of Highway Maintenance Privatization in Alberta. The study attempted to compare the highway maintenance before and after privatization of the system. Specifically, its purpose was to answer the following question: "Has the switch to private highway maintenance resulted in lower costs for the Alberta government while maintaining the same level of service?"

I think that after the number of years that we have experienced the private model of highway maintenance, we can go back and compare it to any research that was done prior to the privatization of maintenance for Alberta highways. If the minister has any information that he could share with us where comparisons at this point have now been done to determine whether or not this was a cost-saving venture for Albertans.

As well, one of the recommendations of the Auditor General was on the driver examination program, not only the driver examination program but the driving school education. In talking with a constituent who is in the industry of driving school education, he did make a number of statements, he asked some questions, and he did provide some answers. The first one he indicated to me was a road test. What he suggested here was that there be an advanced road test given to those who come from another country with a licence.

One of the reasons that this particular recommendation was put in by him was that a person came to Alberta from another country, within three weeks of arriving in Alberta he had a class 1 licence, and just a few months later he was killed in an accident driving a rig. It upset the whole community quite a bit that a person could come to Alberta from another country, obtain a class 1 licence that quickly, and not have, certainly, the training and experience required to drive a big rig.

Another suggestion that this individual had was that there should be a road test fee cap on the amount an examiner may charge for a road test. Again, he went as far as to say that he's heard where some driving schools and examiners are involved in kickbacks, where they purposely fail a student and get some of the proceeds back to the driving school.

When I look at the Auditor General's recommendations on the testing in recommendation number 41, he goes on to state:

We recommend that the Ministry of Transportation strengthen its monitoring of and audit processes for driver examiners by:

- preparing annual plans for monitoring and auditing examiners
- promptly monitoring and auditing driver examiners, and reporting the results to senior management

- training driver program administrators to identify the risk factors of unethical behaviour and to investigate problem examiners
- making the license renewal process as rigorous as the application process

So could the minister please tell us where the department is in fulfilling this particular recommendation 41 of the Auditor General.

As well, another area that was indicated by my constituent was that “the examiner may not force the student to use the examiner’s car whereby they charge an extra fee for usage of their car.” Again, it just adds extra expense to people trying to get their licence right now.

He indicated that he felt it would be a very good recommendation that “every driving school must have their own classroom.” He goes on to say that this would “force many in our industry to clean up their act and provide better service and not treat it as a side business based only on profits.” I think that’s an excellent recommendation.

He goes on to provide some statements in regard to in-car lessons.

Currently the minimum driving time required for in-car lessons is only 10 hours. This is not sufficient enough for many drivers to become a safe and knowledgeable driver. The minimum amount of hours should be raised to 20 hours for the in-car portion. This should be also completed within 60 days but no faster than 30 days.

Again, a very solid and sound recommendation.

He goes on to make some comments about a computerized system using a database. He says that his recommendation here is to make a computerized system whereby every examiner enters into a database system where all registries are linked together along with the government. In the computer/database system there should be:

- The examiner giving the road test
- The name of driver and other personal information (Ex., date of birth, license number, etc.)
- Pass/Fail of driving exam – if failure occurs a reason why should be stated.

Again, I think this recommendation would also help to satisfy recommendation 41 of the Auditor General.

9:10

The last point that he raised was failure to pass a road test. He goes on to say:

- If someone fails the road test, there should be a minimum of one week before they can retake the road test again.
- Some fail one day and pass the other day. This is unusual because without any serious preparation or practice a person can pass the next day.

So, again, I think that would tie into this whole idea where he gets back to perhaps there are some cases where people are being failed and there is an association perhaps between the driving school education program and the road testing system. He did have a number of recommendations here.

Just before our break there was some question as to the retesting of drivers. I was wondering if the minister has done anything in regard to this. Certainly, it was quite a hot topic there for a couple of days, and I think we should not think out loud. Anyway, if the minister has given this any more thought and if, in fact, he is looking at further study into this particular issue.

The graduated drivers’ licences. Again, there are a number of concerns with the graduated drivers’ licences. One of those questions that I would like the minister to address if he could, please: what measures has the government put in place to ensure consistent practices with regard to the graduated licensing system in Alberta? What measures has the government put in place to ensure consistent practices with regard to drivers’ examinations?

I’ll stop there and give the minister a chance to answer those questions. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you. I must commend the hon. member for spending a considerable amount of time talking about traffic safety because, without a doubt, traffic safety is, as I mentioned, the number one priority in the department. Also, if we’re ever to significantly reduce the tremendous cost to society, which some have pegged at over \$4 billion annually, the only way, of course, is to reduce the number of incidents, not accidents but incidents. Accidents are something that we can’t prevent; most of these on the highways are incidents because they’re all preventable.

With respect to the aging transit system, there’s no doubt that public transit is an important component of the transportation system in the province. We have always taken the position with the grants we give to municipalities that it’s up to the local municipality to decide how much of that they’ll invest in their road infrastructure and how much they’ll invest into the transit system.

I will say, though, that with respect to the observation on the decrease in aviation fuel, that was done from a point of view of initiating and encouraging more wealth creation. I don’t know how I can simplify it in terms of what wealth creation is, but really government’s revenue comes from taxing the profits. We tax income, of course, and as a professional you sell your services as a teacher or lawyer or those kinds of professional services. That adds to the revenue stream. But it’s also that people sell things, and when they sell those things, they make, hopefully, a profit. The profit is calculated many times on how much it costs to transport that gadget to market.

Whether you’re selling a car, whether you’re selling a particular technology in terms of computers or whatever, you have to get them to the marketplace. Right now we’re finding that the average cost, the final cost of a product allocated to transportation is about 16 per cent, but that’s increasing. In those areas where transportation costs sometimes exceed 50 per cent – in grain, for example, there isn’t any profit left because the cost of transportation takes away any amount of profit that may be available.

Efficient transportation systems are very important. They’re important to Albertans because we export 60 per cent of what we produce. Most of that, of course, goes to the States. I think it’s about a billion and a half a day of trade between the two countries across Canada and the States. So that’s very important to our continued quality of life.

It’s significant that in Alberta close to 40 per cent of our GDP is transported by a medium where once it’s in the medium, nobody interferes with it, and that’s a pipeline. Okay? As opposed to a highway, where we would have someone out there inspecting the truck and, you know, the driver’s licence and checking what they’re hauling, et cetera, and maybe intercepting that vehicle at every boundary, most of our GDP is done by pipeline. It’s the most efficient. I believe that leads to the significant wealth that we enjoy in this province. Can you imagine if we had to haul by truck what we were selling to the States? It would be impossible.

Rail does contribute; 16 per cent is by marine. We’re, of course, very, very concerned with respect to the ever-increasing costs of marine shipping. For grain it just increased 50 per cent. It’s putting additional burden on the agricultural community, and there is nothing in sight to indicate to us that those costs will be going down.

What’s even worse is that we can move product from Alberta, but we can’t get it to the ports in B.C. To give you an example, containers, the amount of container handling. China in one year built 132 container handling facilities – 132 – when I say that we can’t build two. What’s even worse is that we have a trade deficit with the country that built 132, China. But you can’t get a truck or even a train very easily now into the Vancouver port.

We’re going to have to strategize and work in co-operation with

not only the B.C. government but also the federal government because there may be one port still open. It gives us three days' quicker access to Asia, and other than some improvements, you know, to the railway, heavier rail line, it would be Prince Rupert. It's the deepest port on the west coast and gives us additional options in terms of reducing those costs. That's just a bit of an example of how important transportation is to the economic well-being of the province of Alberta.

When the hon. member talks about our highways in terms of the deterioration, it is a very important statistic. We're not going to modify it to make it look good; we're reflecting what Albertans are telling us. We are applying very rigorous targets, and it's telling Albertans that we have to invest more in transportation infrastructure.

The other thing that's going to impact us as Albertans is that in the late '70s, early '80s there was quite a large number of kilometres of highways that were paved, and that life expectancy now is coming to an end. So that's going to add more to the inventory of roads, of provincial highways that have to be rehabilitated, preserved.

9:20

Highway maintenance is a topic of discussion, it seems, every year. I know that collectively when you calculate the costs that municipalities have spent, a saving of about \$53 million, roughly 25 per cent. Just by travelling Alberta highways, I do know that the summer maintenance in terms of crack filling and sealing has certainly been improved.

Also the movement of goods. Here's something that does not come up in many of these calculations of savings, and that is for the trucker. Let's say, for instance, under the old system if you were loading pipe in Nisku and you were hauling it to Fort McMurray, well, before you got off highway 831 you would have travelled through four municipalities, and they all set their own road bans. So you phone the first municipality on the long trek to Fort McMurray and say: "What's your road ban?" "Well, we're 90 per cent." Same country, same province, same weather: nothing different. Well, when you cross the North Saskatchewan River into the next municipality, you find that their road bans could be 80 per cent. So the poor trucker has to either turn around and leave 10 per cent of the load back someplace or risk facing a fine. Here we are just from one municipality boundary to another having a different road ban. Engineeringwise does it make sense? I doubt it.

However, now with the new one-call system the trucker can make one call to a 1-800 number, get all their road bans, and they are consistent in the province. Yes, we do have road bans on some roads that we have difficulty with, depending on the construction, often, and the age of the highway. Generally we like to allow as much free flow of truck traffic given the kind of appropriate weights, those that are legislated in terms of the weights in the province.

With respect to snow clearing, this year was quite unusual with the kinds of temperature changes and the amount of snow. As a reeve in the county of Lamont in the mid to late '80s I remember that there were a couple of years when we never had any road bans. There was hardly any frost, so why would you want to ban the road? Then, of course, we hardly moved any snow. The weather was excellent right through. Costs were down.

In the last couple of years we've had some unusual storms. It started with reasonably warm temperatures. The pavement structure was above zero. A front moved in, a lot of snow. It froze up the highway. Given the number of pieces of equipment out there and the fact that maintenance contractors do not get paid idling their trucks in the sand shed — they've got to be out on the highway, monitored very closely.

I know that there are some municipalities that feel that there could be improvements, and we're working with them, but generally speaking, when you compare the road maintenance in this province with our neighbouring provinces, I stand up and say that we're better and challenge them to show that we're not. That doesn't mean that there isn't continued room for improvement and for applying innovation to road maintenance as well.

Now, with driver education I'd like to inform the House and the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry that we are working very closely with the Auditor General. The first step, of course, was to send out a survey to the driving schools and the examiners, and the survey responses are coming back. We did meet with the Professional Driver Educators' Association of Alberta just this week. They've given us some information, but there are a couple of issues here.

I know, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry indicated, that there are these — I hate to call them stories — situations that may come up, and the person says: I feel something didn't quite happen right in this driver education school. So you would ask that member to make a complaint. Well, once they get their driver's licence, they're going to say: well, there was something wrong, but I don't want to complain because I'll lose my driver's licence and might have to come back and get it again. So that's something that we're facing. I can assure you that from meeting with the driver educators' association, they are committed to working with the department, with the government, and with the Auditor General to find ways we can ensure not only better service delivery but improve the integrity of driver education and driver testing.

The question came up with an other-country person getting a driver's licence. I'd be interested in getting information later in terms of the country of origin because we do have some reciprocal agreements with some jurisdictions and, you know, it may be one of those; I'm not quite sure. We'll certainly work on that. I can't answer this evening because I'd have to check into whether it applies also to class 1. I'm not quite sure, but we'll certainly find that out.

The comments raised by the hon. member actually are very close to those raised by the members of the Professional Driver Educators' Association: road testing, use of the car, classroom instruction. Right now, today, if any one of us took a road test and failed, automatically there would be a flag on the computer. Let's say I wanted to do a road test in Andrew, and I failed, so I figured I'd drive to Lamont and do my road test there the same day. There would be a flag that said, no, I've run the road test that day. Extending it a week, you know, might have merit. In many areas in rural Alberta they probably do that because the driver examiner doesn't come back until a week later, perhaps. That doesn't mean that you can't do that in the city, though, in a larger population. At least there is that flag for the one day, but we'll certainly look at one week.

You know, the House adjourns and allows members to be in the constituency, and there's always some issue that comes up very innocently. Retesting of drivers. Of course, this came to the House as a question raised by the Member for Medicine Hat reflecting a question asked by a grade 10 student, who said: "Boy, you're so concerned about testing young drivers, but what about these drivers who might have had their driver's licence for 50 years? When have they ever been retested?"

Well, following all the cards and letters and flowers, there was one perhaps common theme. Some felt that it would be a money grab: "Well, I have to go get retested, so all you want is more money." Okay; fine. On the other hand, some of those same people that were looking at a money grab did indicate that it makes sense to test those that lose their driver's licences to violations of the Traffic Safety Act. We'll see what Don McDermid puts in his report at the end of May

and what he presents. That was something that was supported, actually, quite vigorously. Those that create the incidents on the highways, that create the cost to us in terms of insurance, that create additional risk should have to be retested and pay for it out of their pocket and not have the insurance industry or the average Albertan pay for their mistakes.

There are, as mentioned, the graduated driver's licences. This is the first year of operation. We're looking at the statistics at year-end to see how it's working for Albertans. One of the areas we are working on is the exit exam. It's part of the GDL in this province. Some provinces don't have the exit exam but do have some other restrictions in terms of number of passengers in the vehicle driven by an inexperienced driver and also have some curfew hours.

Again, many different ideas are coming forward on the GDL, support across the province for the program, but after we get the statistics and get the information, we're also looking at how we might have to change it or modify it or improve it. We are, though, working on the exit exams as well. We'll have to have those ready here soon because those that have got their probationary licences will then have to do their final exam next year before they can get their full driving privileges.

I do believe that it will reduce injury and fatalities. It certainly has in those provinces that have implemented it. Once we receive all the information and statistics, then we'll make the adjustments based on that evidence.

I think that's it so far.

9:30

The Chair: Before calling on any further members, just a reminder to all members that we're now in the second hour, and as it were, the net is cast wider.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Just a few more comments and questions here of the minister. When we talk about the retesting of drivers, I think one of the comments you made at the time that this issue came about was that we certainly in retesting drivers cannot test for attitudes when they're behind the wheel. One of the recommendations that has come forward to me since that time has been that perhaps more valuable than retesting might be sending these people to driver education again. So that was one of the things that came up.

Another issue that came up as well was the cost of whether we retest or retrain. Certainly, those costs should be borne by those people who violate the privilege of driving on our highways. One of the recommendations that did come forward is that perhaps those people that reach a certain number of demerit points are great candidates to go back, number one, to drivers' school and, secondly, to be retested.

If, for example, people have had numerous at-fault accidents – and I don't know what number we would pick and what period of time we would use. Certainly, another way that we can start to put pressure on these drivers that are abusing the privilege of driving on our roads and making them unsafe is that they have to start bearing the cost as well as receiving the training. I think there is merit in some type of program, and I don't know what the final model would look like, but I will be interested to see what does come forward.

The Premier was talking earlier about the government funding \$1.25 million for a feasibility study on a rail link to Fort McMurray. Is this \$1.25 million coming from the Department of Transportation? Again, why would government fund a study for independent business here in the province, something for the private sector?

In speaking to a number of people who are involved with the

railroads between, first of all, Edmonton to Boyle and then Boyle through RailAmerica to Fort McMurray, they certainly are all great fans of continuing rail line. Just a few years ago they did upgrade that section of the line between Edmonton and Boyle. If we are going to have an increase in traffic on the present line, then certainly some work would have to be done. Whichever route is chosen, any route that goes over muskeg is going to be very costly, very costly to build a new line and even costly to upgrade the present line.

There are some pieces of equipment that are going to be required in the \$50 billion of approved projects that have to be hauled by rail. They're just too heavy for our highways. So there definitely is a place where we can use both the rail and the highway. Certainly, one of the suggestions which might be a quick fix to the highway and the problems with the great amount of traffic on that highway is that there would be more passing lanes so that when we are hauling heavier pieces of equipment or in slower traffic for whatever reason, they do have a chance to pull over and allow others to pass.

Would the minister have any indication yet as to what the alternative route to the existing route is if there is to be a new rail link, say from Boyle to Fort McMurray, or would the present one be used? As well, would he make available to us the report which is going to be done on the feasibility study for the rail link? Will there be public consultations in regard to any new rail line or improvement of the existing line?

An issue that I brought up earlier was about highway safety regarding the intermodal yards on the west end of Edmonton and particularly during a strike, when we do have a disruption of skilled workers at a job and management is brought in to do some of the other jobs. Certainly, the skilled workers that were on the picket line were able to prevent, I think, some accidents there just by stopping traffic and letting people know that loads were not properly secured.

With other unions now entering into the negotiation part of their contract, we could have a situation again where there's going to be some disruption with Canadian National and perhaps with the movement of intermodal traffic. Has the minister thought about putting some type of contingency plan in place whereby if people that are not regularly doing that job or if the job is being done by management – and of course we have a skinny workforce at that particular point – there is some sort of contingency plan where we can ensure the safety of those vehicles leaving the intermodal yards with a load on and travelling on Alberta highways and that those loads are properly tied down?

I think that with that, Mr. Minister, that concludes my questions for this evening. Thank you very much.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Very quickly, on some of the questions I will respond in writing and also pass the question in terms of studying the rail over to the Minister of Economic Development. I can tell you, the money is not coming from the Department of Transportation.

When we talk about transportation, there are certain things that we don't normally think about, and one is of course the environmental emissions with the literally thousands of trips that'll be made to Fort McMurray if we don't have another way of hauling them there. Secondly, the social costs. Can we move people from Fort McMurray down towards Edmonton, towards their families much quicker? Wouldn't that save? And the other, health costs. You know, I think those are sort of important considerations.

Even if we calculate them for future major roadways, that's what we should be looking at also. We always look at the capital costs, but there are other savings that we don't really normally consider.

As time progresses, I think those will actually be calculated into the value of highway infrastructure.

With respect to the rail, the report, the public consultation, we'll make sure that the Minister of Economic Development gets those.

9:40

With respect to the disruption in intermodal yards we do have very strict rules in place once those trucks get out on provincial highways. We have the only accredited motor transport officer force in, well, Canada at least, if not in North America. They're very professional. Our percentage of incidents in terms of large trucks compared to passenger vehicles and compared to other provinces is below the number of accidents in other jurisdictions.

I can tell you that in this province you don't hear the horror stories of wheels flying off trucks, et cetera. We have a pretty good, stringent system, and we did add to the complement of our MT officers a few years ago when we took over the additional 15,000 kilometres of roads.

To the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, I will get back to him on the questions that I've missed and, of course, in more detail as well.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to listen to the minister's response to questions this evening and appreciate his being available and as well his staff taking the time to be here.

I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry has covered a lot of ground here. I have questions specifically related to the Fort McMurray railway project, first of all. The Department of Transportation has been named as the, quote, other department, together with Economic Development, that is collaborating on the Athabasca Oil Sands Transportation Corporation, but it is not spelled out in the Transportation department's business plans or budget estimates. On page 411 of the business plans reference is made to research and development under Economic Development Strategy, but there's not a line item in any of the department's budgets to deal with this.

So the first question is: can the minister explain what role his department is taking on this Fort McMurray railway study since it's apparently going to go ahead although the source of the funding has not been identified? And I'd like to know what the rules are with respect to tendering on studies and projects under his department, recognizing that it's important that we have some rules around that. So those, I guess, Mr. Chairman, will do for now.

I guess there are a couple more questions. Why is it that the Minister of Transportation isn't conducting the feasibility study? I guess that's a question that I'd really like to know. Maybe it has something to do with what's in the feasibility study. Is the feasibility study just looking at the economic value of such a railway, its economic impact on the oil sands development and so on, or is the feasibility study with respect to transportation aspects of a railway, the economics of the railway, and so on?

So those, Mr. Chairman, are my questions for the moment.

Mr. Stelmach: Very quickly, there is no line item because we're not paying for the study. We play a supportive role. We have people in the department that are experienced in calculating various costs, you know, and I'll put one out to you. Does anybody know what the costs of bridge repair and bridge strengthening will be over the next 20 years if we don't ship anything by rail and just ship by truck? You know, I don't have that information, but sooner or later we should cost that out or get an idea, because if we don't, a few years from now someone's going to criticize us and say: well, why didn't you even ask those questions?

So in terms of the Department of Transportation we're playing the supportive role in providing as much information as we can and facilitating the collection of that information, but the Minister of Economic Development is the one that will be conducting the study. He'll be responsible for it. We're there to provide the information.

Mr. Mason: To follow up on that, I guess the question I'm trying to get at is: is this a feasibility study that has to do with transportation infrastructure, and if so, why is Economic Development dealing with it instead of Transportation, and when will the Transportation department take over doing the studies for this project? Is there some particular point in time when you determine a particular mode of transportation or a particular line that the Transportation department will start doing the work on feasibility planning and so on?

Mr. Stelmach: We do a number of studies in the department in terms of five-, 10-, 20-, or even 40- or 50-year projections in terms of what highways require interchanges, trying to estimate growth in population in certain areas. With respect to this particular study our purpose here is to calculate the cost to Albertans in terms of transporting the number of vessels that will have to make their way to Fort McMurray, the cost of maintenance on highways, the cost, as well, perhaps – I don't know if it's the cost or just a real irritant. The hon. member doesn't travel on a daily basis those highways that these heavy vessels are on.

Quite frankly, the other hon. member says: well, maybe build more passing lanes. Well, when you're moving at five miles an hour and from one passing lane to another it may be 10 miles, that person behind that vessel is quite irritated, you know. We'll find that there are only certain routes that we can take because there are only certain bridges with the particular strength and also the design of those bridges. So those are things that we have to consider, and that's strictly from the Transportation side. That's our purpose there.

Like I said, there's the human cost, the human savings, and the environmental issues as well. One trainload hauling X number of pieces as opposed to – what? – maybe 15 trucks in one convoy, and they're only hauling one vessel. You've got two trucks up front, two in the back, all the flag people and the flag trucks, et cetera. And that's just one consideration, to see if we can bring those social costs down as well. But our purpose there, as I said before, is to provide that information as much as we can, that evidence in terms of some of the costs that we think will impact the Alberta taxpayer 10, 20 years from now with the unprecedented growth in Fort McMurray.

You know, I think we're in a very good position now in Alberta for something that happens internationally in terms of increasing the value of the tar sands, the oil, to the North American market. We should be planning. Yes, studies do cost money, but on the other hand if they save us a few hundred million dollars, it's a good investment. Let's first calculate, though, what some of the costs will be, and then Albertans will know those costs and make the determination whether it's wise to ship by rail or do it the traditional way.

Mr. Mason: Well, I'm still a little puzzled. I would certainly hope that at some point the planning for the project will be turned over to Transportation. I would be quite nervous travelling over a trestle bridge that was designed by the Ministry of Economic Development. I don't know that they're exactly qualified for that type of work. So at some point I hope that the government as a whole makes the decision to turn this project over to the appropriate department.

9:50

Now, I just have a question relating to the use of photoradar by the province. I'm wondering if the provincial government is going to go

ahead with approving photoradar for Alberta highways and, if so, what criteria they'll use to do that.

I guess a related question has to do with the Edmonton/Calgary corridor. The four-lane highway I think is beginning to suffer at certain periods from a certain degree of congestion and overcrowding. I'd like to ask the minister if the government has any plans to expand the number of lanes in the highway between Edmonton and Calgary from four to six or whatever combinations would be appropriate at various points.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Stelmach: With respect to highway 2 I believe we have something like 30 projects in our capital plan. Sooner or later we'll have to look at adding some lanes in certain stretches of the highway. There's a fair amount of the highway that has to be preserved as well. But it's a very interesting thought.

I don't know if the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands was born when this happened. I think I might have been; I'm not quite sure. When that highway was first introduced by the Social Credit government of the day, the headlines in the *Edmonton Journal* were something to the effect of what a stupid idea, spending all this money on this road joining Edmonton and Calgary. You know, just look at the economic growth as a result of that transportation link. So I guess I just pose the question: did the roads in this province build the wealth, or did the wealth build the roads?

If we're to continue with the excellent quality of life that we enjoy in this province, we're going to have to give some serious thought to that question. I submit that it's the roads that built the wealth. It's the transportation links. So, yes, future investment in highways in this province will determine future economic wealth generation and, as a result, the quality of life. You can't put it any simpler than that.

With respect to photoradar there's no move on behalf of this department to make any changes to the current deployment policy.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of comments. It seems that we're into this rail-versus-highway discussion here this evening, and there has to be a role for both. The railroads can haul much heavier loads, but they're restricted to a maximum width of 14 feet 6 inches. Some of the projects that are built right now for Fort McMurray get up to 24 and a half feet wide. I think that's the maximum that can be hauled by highway. So we do need both of those systems in order to get these materials to the site.

As well, when we have a number of prefab parts for Fort McMurray that are built offshore, then certainly the best way to get those to Fort McMurray is by rail. So definitely there are advantages for both, and both serve their niche very well.

As well, we have to realize that any time we're going to take product and put it on a rail car and transport it to Edmonton or wherever and then unload it and put it onto trucks or move it by truck, that's going to take a lot of time. You're looking at least at a two- to three-day delay by the time you load it, you transport it, you unload it. So that highway is always going to be under tremendous pressure. As of right now I think that there are roughly only a thousand rail cars per month that are used, so, you know, ballpark, 30, 35 cars per day. So to rebuild a line that's worth \$300 million, we have to increase traffic quite a bit. As well, one of the concerns I have is that a major product that is moving from Fort McMurray is moving through a pipeline. So we're really building almost a one-way railroad.

I think that there is a very big need for both a good rail line and a

good highway. That will serve the development of the north very well.

Thank you.

The Chair: After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Transportation for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$1,073,732,000
Capital Investment	\$442,000,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Transportation and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Transportation: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,073,732,000; capital investment, \$442,000,000.

The Deputy Speaker: All those who concur in this report, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Those opposed, please say no. The motion is carried.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 22

Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to make some comments with respect to Bill 22, and I have an amendment. So if I can get that photocopied now, I will bring that forward sometime in the future this evening.

10:00

Mr. Chairman, I want to indicate that I think a bill such as this, that regulates our elections, is probably one of the most important and fundamental pieces of legislation that we can deal with because it regulates our entire democratic process. So it's very significant when it does come forward, and it's important that there should be widespread consideration of this.

Chair's Ruling Amendments

The Chair: Hon. member, the chair has some difficulty. The regular practice of those members who are proposing an amendment is that they have them available first of all to the table and, secondly and equally importantly, to all members. We have none of those, so it's hard for us to be able to have you continue your explanation of the need for this amendment without a copy of it.

Mr. Mason: Sorry, Mr. Chairman. Perhaps you didn't follow my convoluted explanation of what I'm doing. I'm making comments to the bill.

The Chair: If you're on that, then that's fine.

Mr. Mason: I didn't know for sure what the Government House Leader intended with respect to it, so I haven't copied it. I have plenty to say on the bill, and when I get the copies of the amendment, then I'll switch to speaking to the amendments.

The Chair: Okay. As long as you're just making comments on the bill.

Mr. Mason: Yes. I'm not talking about the amendment at all.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Debate Continued

Mr. Mason: I'm talking about the bill, and I was saying, Mr. Chairman, that I do believe that the bills which regulate our electoral system and our electoral process are fundamental and need to be given a great deal of scrutiny. I just want to indicate that there are a number of issues related to this bill that I think bear some comment.

There are some good things about this bill, Mr. Chairman. First of all, there are sections which will increase the access of candidates to mobile homes and gated communities. One of the things that we've probably all experienced and I think more particularly those of us who live in built-up urban areas is sometimes the difficulty you have getting access to apartments. There are different ways of dealing with that, but sometimes building managers are unfamiliar with the legislation or ignore the legislation or don't care about the legislation and refuse to allow you access to the citizens. This is a basic democratic right, that candidates have the right to contact voters at an election. The voters have every right to slam the door in their face, but the candidate has the right to make the initial contact with a voter in order to present themselves as a candidate for election.

There is lots of difficulty. Those of us who have high-rise apartments with security systems and so on, condominiums as well, find that it is often very, very difficult to contact significant numbers of voters. I don't have a lot of gated communities in my constituency, but some may.

Ms Blakeman: You have some.

Mr. Mason: Do I?

Ms Blakeman: Yes, you do.

Mr. Mason: Okay. I'm sure that there can be similar problems there, so that's a positive change that this bill presents.

I think there is quite a bit of clarification and updating of the legislation, housekeeping changes; for example, having polling officers wear identification badges instead of wearing tags around the neck. You know, these are small things that clean up and improve the legislation, and I think nobody can find any difficulty with those kinds of things.

I also want to indicate that we support changes that would make funds raised through events considered to be contributions. That will have the effect of making them reportable and will also have the effect of increasing the transparency.

Now, there are some things we're not really clear about, and maybe the hon. Minister of Justice can help clarify that. There are significant changes which are being made to the advanced poll system. We're unclear on how this will affect the process of election campaigning. So I think that's one of the things that we want to talk about.

One of the issues that we have problems with is the increase in the deposit. Now, that will disproportionately hurt smaller political parties, of which we don't include ourselves. I'm talking about other groups that we've contacted, small parties like the Alberta First Party, Alberta Social Credit Party, Alberta Green Party, Communist Party of Canada, and so on. These are other parties that add to our democratic vitality. They increase the choices that are available to people, and they often have a very important function of raising issues that some of the mainstream parties may not want to talk about. I think that anything that affects their ability to participate in elections in this province has got to be seen as a negative thing. So that's a concern.

The government news release talks about this increase in the deposit as an attempt to reduce frivolous candidates. I have to pose a question, Mr. Chairman. In a democracy what is a frivolous candidate? The government has not defined that. I think it is very difficult indeed to define what a frivolous candidate is. Perhaps someone who is obviously intent on ridiculing the political process could be considered a frivolous candidate, but I think another point of view would be that if someone wants to ridicule the political process, that is a legitimate political point of view and should be expressed.

I feel that we have to reject the idea of frivolous candidates, although we've all been in elections where there were some candidates that we really wished weren't there, but I think to take concrete steps to exclude them through financial means is not appropriate. Mr. Chairman, in the election of 2001 nearly two-thirds of the candidates who ran lost their deposit. This is not an insignificant financial issue, and I think we ought to reconsider this question.

Now, I do want to talk at some point – and maybe I will wait until third reading for this – about the archaic first past the post system that we use in this country to elect candidates. It marginalizes smaller voices, and it tends to increase the representation in the Legislature of the larger parties and in particular in this case the government party. I think increasing numbers of Canadians are coming to see the first past the post system that we use in this country as a fundamental affront to democracy and one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a better and more functional democracy in our province and our country. Perhaps I will speak a little bit more

about that at third reading, but I do think we need to get serious about bringing our election statutes into the 21st century, and this primarily housekeeping legislation doesn't do that.

10:10

As well, the contributions to constituency associations are being increased in this bill. Now, currently the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta is the only party that accepts donations in this fashion. Donations to the other parties – I stand to be corrected by my Liberal colleagues – certainly in ours, the contributions are not made to the constituency association. They're made to the party. [interjection] You can do both. Okay. It seems to me that there is some built-in bias here in the legislation in that it is being changed in a way which benefits the government party over and above the other parties. So we don't support that particular aspect.

Now if I can come to my amendment, I'll ask for that to be distributed.

The Chair: Hon. member, would you move it? We'll call it amendment A5 once you have moved it, and then we can have it distributed.

Mr. Mason: Yes, Mr. Chairman, I'll do that. I will move that Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, be amended by striking out section 98.

The Chair: Okay. That's amendment A5. We'll just take a minute. Please hand it out to the people that are actually at their places.

Edmonton-Highlands, you may proceed. Most people now have them. There are only a few that have yet to receive them.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. This amendment will amend the Alberta Corporate Tax Act by striking out the entire section which provides tax breaks for campaign donations for corporations. The original section provides a 75 per cent tax reduction for the first \$150, then \$112.50 plus 50 per cent of the amount contributed up to \$825. The proposed legislation will increase the top end of these tax reductions from \$150 to \$200 and from \$825 to \$1,100.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, it would be considered out of order to eliminate the tax breaks entirely by amending the particular bill that's before us, but this amendment would prevent the tax breaks for corporations' political donations from becoming any more generous than they already are.

Dr. Taylor: Only because you don't get any money from corporations.

Mr. Mason: The hon. Minister of Environment is saying that we don't get any money from corporations. We don't take any money from corporations, Mr. Chairman, and we don't think that the corporate sector should be influencing the policy of the province in such a profound way as it clearly is in this province.

Dr. Taylor: Do you take it from unions?

The Chair: Hon. minister, when the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is finished, we will call upon you to give your comments so that we all may hear them.

Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now, we've all read the various donations that have been released for the political parties in

Alberta in the last little while, and anyone that takes a look at the contributions from corporations to the Progressive Conservative Party and their enormous war chest will clearly understand that corporate money in this province has an undue influence on who gets elected as the government of this province and thereby secures their own interests very well. Anyone with any political sense whatsoever and two eyes to see, Mr. Chairman, can see that that is in fact the case. The enormous war chest from corporate donations that has been raised by the Conservative Party creates an enormous imbalance in the political situation in this province and is largely to blame for the enormous tenure of this government. So I believe that we should change that and reflect a better balance.

It's my personal view, Mr. Chairman, that the only people who should have an interest in politics in a democracy are the citizens themselves. Other organizations such as corporations and unions should not be in a position to influence political policy and who is in fact the government. Only the individual citizens should be parties to the democratic process, and that is where we need to move. That is, in fact, where the federal government has moved in a fitful way with its changes to its election finance legislation.

The government of Manitoba has led the way by eliminating corporate donations altogether and also union donations altogether so that the only people that can contribute to election campaigns and political parties are individual citizens. That's how it should be in this province as well. Instead, the government is going in the opposite direction, and they're expanding the tax deductibility of corporate campaign donations. This amendment is designed to try and stop that from happening, and I think it's an important situation.

You know, I just want to indicate to the Minister of Environment and anyone else that is interested that we would gladly forgo union donations if the Conservative government and, in fact, the Liberal Party as well would forgo accepting donations from corporations. That would put it on a fair balance. I should point out, Mr. Chairman, not to brag or anything . . .

Dr. Taylor: Far be it from you to brag, Brian.

Mr. Mason: Far be it from me to brag indeed. In the most recent financial disclosures of campaign donations the party with the highest donations from individual citizens was the Alberta New Democrats. So I think it puts it a little bit in perspective.

Dr. Taylor: You're not speaking out of self-interest.

The Chair: Hon. Minister of Environment, the invitation still stands that once the hon. member has finished his comments, then you can make your comments.

Dr. Taylor: He's provoking me, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Mason: I could read a speech from the Premier and I would provoke the hon. minister, I guess. I don't know.

Nevertheless, Mr. Chairman, just to conclude, we categorically oppose the direction of the government in expanding the tax relief or tax rebates for political donations for corporations. They get far too much money from corporations. Corporations have far too much influence in this government's policies, as can be seen in any number of areas, and ordinary citizens have far too little influence in the policies of this government. To go even further and expand the ability and the capacity of corporations to influence who is the government of this province and what their policies are is unacceptable to us, and that's why we have proposed this motion, though by

scant chance do we expect that this government will move away from its addiction to corporate donations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on amendment A5.

10:20

Ms Blakeman: I'm sorry. I should have allowed the Minister of Environment to speak. Oh, well, perhaps after me then.

This is an interesting amendment that the Member for Edmonton-Highlands has proposed. It's interesting because it doesn't strike out the sections which allow for an increase in the contribution limits or in fact strike out the ability for either corporations or unions or individuals to contribute funds to political campaigns, but it takes away the incentive that is offered through a tax receipt. In other words, the corporations would not be paying income tax on the amount that has been donated. There's always a percentage that's involved there as well.

So it's quite a canny way of approaching this. Corporations don't get any additional incentive through the sort of reward system of having a tax receipt issued for the amounts of money that have been donated to political parties or to individual candidates during campaigns. So it would really show where the interest was from corporations. Quite an interesting idea.

I always approach that from the point of view of forgone revenue, because essentially that's what's happening. When a tax receipt is issued, the government is saying: okay, we're not going to collect our income tax on that amount of money. So if they're not collecting that income tax, they're forgoing it. In the same way, there needs to be a measurement of what they expect to get from that forgone revenue, from that policy implementation that's happened through that.

As my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Highlands has already pointed out, there can be a very close connection between corporate donations and government policy. I think that closely connected to this, it also shows us the need for a lobbyist registry. In fact, I was able to attend last September as a member of the Legislative Offices Committee, an all-party committee of this Assembly, a COGEL conference, the Council on Governmental Ethics Laws, in Texas. Some of the most well attended sessions in there were around campaign finance and lobbyist registries, interestingly enough, because there is a close connection between government policy and who's contributing to campaign coffers.

The choice in the United States has been to say: okay; there's no limit. They actually view political donations on the same par as freedom of speech, and they say: we will put no limits on that. But they are very clear that it all has to be above-board. You have to readily be able to access who is giving money where and through any possible source, including things like corporations that give bonuses to their senior managers with the expectation that those managers then in turn donate to political parties. That kind of information has to come out as well, because there's a recognition that there often is an influence between decisions that the government makes, policies they implement, programs that they introduce or withdraw, and those who are supporting candidates and political parties through political contributions. The saying that he who pays the piper often calls the tune is often brought forward in these discussions as well.

You know, I have to say that on a free vote I would certainly go towards severely reducing or eliminating corporate donations because I think that what's important here is the individual. I think that as legislators we're elected to represent the individual, not to

represent corporations, and increasingly we see corporations take on larger rights than individuals have in our society, where we have multinational corporations that have more power than governments of countries. We're now facing that sort of a situation.

So curbing the influence I think is a good idea, and this is an interesting way to approach it. It doesn't set any limits on what corporations can donate, but it takes away that additional incentive, that icing on the cake that corporations have been able to enjoy. Not only are they able to help finance the campaigns and often the successful campaigns of the political parties and candidates that they support, but they get the additional incentive of being able to pay less taxes on that equivalent percentage of money.

So at this point I'm willing to support the amendment that's been brought forward by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands, and I encourage other members to join in. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wasn't really going to join debate on this, and I won't speak for long. Obviously, the amendment deletes a section, purportedly the section of the bill which really just is updating the amounts available for tax receipt, and there's nothing nefarious about that. There's no public policy process that's offended by that, in my viewpoint.

What is offensive about what I've heard tonight – and I don't mean this with any intention to denigrate the contribution of the two members opposite that spoke. I always find it offensive when people make the automatic assumption that by making a donation to a political party, somehow people are buying favour. I don't know what world they live in, but people do not buy my favour by making a contribution to my political campaign. I assume that people who are contributing to my political campaign and my constituency association and my party are doing so because they believe that the political process is important and ought to be supported, and whether that's done as an individual or whether that's done as a corporation, it's something that the citizens of Alberta do because governance is important and the Legislature is important and supporting people in the quest to represent people in the Legislature is important.

I get tired of people getting up – and I particularly get tired of people who ought to know better because they're elected representatives – and talking about how he who pays the piper calls the tune. That's not the way it works in my world. It may be the way it works in your world. I hope it isn't.

The reality of it is that you can't buy favour with a paltry donation to a political party in this province or, I would dare say, in most places. The fact that the Chief Electoral Officer publishes every year the donations to the party keeps the process above-board and makes sure that everybody knows who is making contributions. But I don't think we should sit quietly in this House and allow people to denigrate the political process by suggesting that those citizens, whether they're acting individually or through their corporations to support the political process and ensure that people who want to run for office are supported by more than just their own financial resources and those of their families, are somehow a denigration to the process. I just felt that I had to say that before we go to a vote on this.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on amendment A5.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. To close, well, I fear that the minister doth protest too much. You know, I didn't want to put it so crassly as this, but it is not individual favours that

the corporate sector buys through their donations in this province. It is a government whose whole policy is favourable towards them, and they support this government because it's a right-wing government that supports corporations at every turn. They give this government a tremendously unfair financial advantage, which they use to secure massive majorities to ensure that the province is kept safe for the corporate sector, and that's what they're getting. They're not getting individual favours from individual ministers, but they give their money to this government because it's a right-wing, pro-corporation government, and that's why their provincial political party has \$3 million in the bank and the election is still a year off.

An Hon. Member: How do you know?

Mr. Mason: I know because the financial disclosure statements were just released about two weeks ago, so it's clear. So I just want to say that.

10:30

The role of corporate financing of elections in this province is a scandal, in my view. It needs to be corrected, and it should be corrected. The Manitoba government has given an example of just how to do it, Mr. Chairman.

So thank you very much.

[Motion on amendment A5 lost]

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, I had hoped that some of the amendments that had been brought forward during Committee of the Whole for Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, would have passed. I think there were some really innovative ideas whose time had come, particularly the amendment brought forward by the Official Opposition around the citizens' assembly. Certainly, we're seeing a movement from that from British Columbia. There's a movement happening in the Northwest Territories around those sorts of ideas. They're discussing things like citizens' initiatives, the assembly idea that they're doing in British Columbia. We need to move further forward on this than what's been allowed for in this bill.

This is, for the most part, a housekeeping bill. It's a little tidy up, a few adjustments of the lines, the parameters under which things operate. But I was really hoping to see some larger leaps forward, some movement towards a proportional representation, some of the things that would engage some of our younger voters. Unfortunately, everything that was brought forward that might have moved us in that direction was defeated.

I go back to my original comments when I spoke in second reading on this bill. I think we have a problem in this province at the point where governments are being elected with 50 per cent of the people eligible to vote and that percentage is dropping. We reach a point where the government itself has no credibility because it's been elected by so few people. I guess it's at that point that the government will be roused to start to engage in some of these more innovative modernizations of the democratic system that we have in Canada. I had hoped that that would happen sooner rather than later but obviously not with the co-operation of the current government.

The second amendment that had been brought forward by the Liberal opposition was eliminating the increase in the filing fee, that my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands also referred to, because it does make it more difficult for the smaller, some would call fringe, political parties, not because it's difficult for them once or twice with

just a few candidates, but certainly if they're looking to field five or 10 candidates, then that increase in the filing fee does become a barrier to candidates running. I think that's wrong. I don't think that we should be putting up more barriers to people getting involved in the political process. I think we should be trying to take those barriers down. So I was disappointed that the government wouldn't support that.

Finally, there was a shared amendment, or I guess both the Liberal and ND oppositions had amendments on striking the introduction of the unique identifier number. In fact, it was brought forward with agreement but by the third party, the ND opposition. That was also defeated. There's been a fair amount of discussion, looking back over the *Hansard*, a fair amount of concern expressed by people over the use of a unique identifier number. I understand the argument that it was to make sure that where we had people with similar names in the same household, you know, to get rid of the confusion with the increasing commonness of names, or where people are living in one place and working in another or they're students or whatever, this identifier number would assist with that.

The concerns that have been raised for the most part are around the protection of the personal information that's attached to that identifier number, and the concern is that we've not been terribly successful at protecting that information thus far. We have to continue to find ways to safeguard that information.

I came at this from a different point of view because I felt that that unique identifier number could be used to start to help us move towards electronic voting, Internet voting, which I hoped was going to bring in a younger generation of people that are much more hooked into the use of the Internet, and that sort of participatory introduction or that way of participating in the process. Certainly, the younger people that I'm working with are indicating very clearly to me that that's what they find exciting and that's an entry route that they'd be interested in using.

So I think what we have here is a caution that's been expressed, and I hope that the government hears it and works hard to try and protect that personal information. We really will have a problem if it's not able to be protected and people can't trust that that information is not going to be misused in some way or stolen or left in a box in somebody's backyard or left on a computer hard drive and all the other things that have gone wrong recently.

One of the other things I was pleased to see was the firming up of the definitions around access to secure buildings, and that included gated communities, trailer parks, multifamily or multi-unit buildings like apartments and condominiums, very important for those in the urban settings and increasingly important to everyone else. That is about a basic tenet of democracy. It's about access to candidates, and it's about the candidate's ability to present themselves at the door of the voter. If the voter doesn't want to open the door, fine, but the candidates have to be able to get to that door, and they should not be stopped by an additional barrier that they can't get into the building itself. So I'm hoping that that strengthened definition is going to help us in the upcoming elections.

There are increases in the contribution limits on all levels that are allowed for in this legislation. I would prefer to see that decreased, particularly around unions and corporations. I would prefer to see campaign contributions limited to individuals, not get involved with corporations or unions at all. I think the key entity that we need to work with here is individuals, not larger groupings of bodies or legal entities, but that wasn't to be.

I was one of the people that was lobbying to have this legislation held over for a period of time to allow the public to be aware that the debate was happening and to get involved in it. I have to say that I didn't hear from a significant number of people who were keenly

interested in what was going on here, but we also have gone through the Easter period and a number of other world events that may well have distracted people.

At this point I suppose we'll have to let it go and vote on the bill and see what happens once it's all implemented. But I am glad that we were able to give some people an additional few weeks to be able to access the proposed legislation through the Internet and be able to contact some of us and comment, or at least I hope they contacted some people and commented. I heard from a few, and for me that's worth it to hear from those few people.

So I appreciate the opportunity to add my comments in Committee of the Whole debate, and I look forward to discussing the anticipated effect of the bill during third reading. Thank you very much.

[The clauses of Bill 22 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report Bill 22.

[Motion carried]

10:40

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 22. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? The motion is carried.

Before I recognize the hon. Government House Leader, we did have a notice on all of our desks, but just a reminder. Tomorrow morning the young people that are with MLA for a Day are going to be in here, so if we could put all of those things either underneath or in the drawers or take them with you, that would be appreciated by all.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:41 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, April 21, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/04/21

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We give thanks for our abundant blessings to our province and ourselves. We ask for guidance and the will to follow it. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

Mr. Shariff: Mr. Speaker, the Royal Canadian Legion's Alberta-Northwest Territories Command takes a keen interest in promoting the value of good citizenship among young people throughout the province. The Legion is in partnership with the Legislative Assembly Office in a program that reflects that good work. It is Mr. Speaker's MLA for a Day. We are very appreciative of both the Legion's financial support and their involvement for this annual event. In your gallery are Lenore Schwabe, command vice-president, and her mother, Mrs. Cecile Boyer, a life-time member of the Royal Canadian Legion. I would now invite our guests to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I am also pleased to introduce to you and to all members the 30 students participating in your MLA for a Day program. Our shadow colleagues are seated in both galleries today. They are accompanied by their Legion chaperones Dutchy Enders and Gord McDonald. I would now ask them to all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes. Hi, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. I have two introductions today, actually. First, it is my pleasure and privilege to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly several valued staff members who are participating in a public service orientation tour today. These staff members are dedicated public servants who provide human resources services to both the Solicitor General's department and the Justice department. Would the following please rise and then we will give them the warm welcome from the Assembly: Alissa Klapstein, Diann Connelly, Claire Paterson, Valarie McLeod, and Cindy Christman. I'll ask everyone to give them the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly former Alberta competitors and trainers from the 2003 WorldSkills competition and representatives of Skills Canada Alberta. I would like to introduce Bob Patterson from Drayton Valley, who competed in industrial wiring; Kirk Quast from Bassano, who competed in machining; Kirk's trainer, Mike Desjardins, instructor at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology; Chad McConnell, trainer for Auto Service World, who is a trainer and was also a team member at the 36th WorldSkills competition in Seoul, South Korea; Guy Brookes, who is a trainer for the plumbing competitor Mark Chupik and is also an instructor at SAIT; Brian Pardell, who is the

executive director of Skills Canada Alberta; Chris Browton, who is a communications co-ordinator for Skills Canada Alberta; and Karen Fetterly, program manager for Alberta Learning.

Mr. Speaker, before I ask everyone to acknowledge them, I will just put a plug in that Calgary has been chosen for a representative for Canada to compete for the 2009 WorldSkills Competition, and we will be putting forward this bid on May 10 in Hong Kong.

I would ask everyone to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a constituent from Coaldale. Mr. Peter King has brought his daughter Christa to be your MLA for the day. Peter has been in Coaldale for seven years, met the Premier a couple of years ago, has a general contracting business, NCA Development, and also operates, along with his wife and three children, Garden Grove Mobile Home Park. I would ask Mr. King in the members' gallery to please rise and receive the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly an old friend and past president of my constituency association, who is just finishing his articling as a lawyer. His name is Bill Smith, and I'd ask him to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We are honoured today to have in our members' gallery, I believe, 33 visitors from Strathcona Christian Academy. They are attended to by their teacher and group leader Mr. Doug Zook. If they would rise, please, and this House give them the warm welcome that they so richly deserve.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Automobile Insurance Rates

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans can't wait for lower auto insurance rates. While the government continues to fumble this issue, Albertans pay the highest auto insurance premiums in the west. An Alberta Liberal government would have solved this issue by now through our public auto insurance plan. To the Premier: why is the government locking in the highest auto insurance rates in Alberta history for another 15 months while it dithers on auto insurance reform?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are not dithering. You know, it's really time the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition started telling the truth – dithering – and stopped using controversial and confrontational and inflammatory adjectives to describe government programs. Quite simply, our government insurance program is to lower rates – lower rates for young, good male drivers; lower rates for older good male drivers – penalize those who are bad, and reasonably compensate those who are injured in accidents.

Dr. Taft: Well, does the Premier really believe that a 5 per cent rollback will compensate for average rate increases of 59 per cent since March 2002?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to get into comparing apples and oranges and pears and grapefruits and all of those other things. I will say, however, that this government took very proactive action to address an issue that had been brought to our attention not only by young good drivers who were being severely penalized but by employers, especially small business employers, people who wanted to employ summer students, for instance, but couldn't, if these people were required to drive, because of the high insurance premiums they would have to pay.

So we have done a commendable job on behalf of the people of this province to address an issue. It was us, this government, that addressed the issue, not the opposition. The opposition only picked it up and started to complain and natter about it once we started to deal with the issue.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, if it's not dithering, then will the Premier tell us exactly when the new insurance grid will be implemented in Alberta?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, obviously, the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition is focusing on media reports that surfaced as a result of the SPC meeting last night.

Relative to the time frame as to when the whole thing unfolds, I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance respond.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, clearly, we've said all along that we would put forward a package that addresses the issues that were raised by Albertans: first of all, having an accessible insurance package, one that's affordable and one that's comparably priced, that meets the needs of Albertans. We will have that package move forward this summer.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Calgary Courthouse

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, it looks like public/private partnerships, or P3s, will work for this government very much like a government credit card: the government will spend now; the taxpayers will pay later. The clearest example of this so far is the Calgary courthouse P3, which was first estimated at costing \$150 million, then \$300 million, and now half a billion dollars. To the Premier: given that the government was so sure that P3s would save money, how could it let the cost of its flagship P3 project spin so far out of control?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, this had nothing to do with P3s or any other form of construction. Had the government decided to go on its own on this particular project, the costs would have escalated. We are revisiting the project to bring the costs back in line. Now, if the Liberals, who are complaining now about this project, want to spend \$500 million, well, let them do it. That is their nature – spend more, spend more, spend more – whereas this government will revisit a program, bring it back, scale it back to something that is reasonable, and even at the reduced scope we are

confident we can build an excellent facility that attends to the needs of Calgarians and consolidates the Provincial Court and the Court of Queen's Bench.

Dr. Taft: Well, why is this government even considering providing public financing – a taxpayer loan, for heaven's sake – to its private partners in the Calgary courthouse, as the Premier indicated yesterday?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know where the hon. member is getting his information. No decision has been made. We're in the process of evaluating the project. This is so typical – so typical – of the Liberals: if someone was thinking about it or if someone was thinking out loud or someone suggested that that might be approached, then it becomes government policy. You know why? Although it isn't government policy, it makes for a good 15-second sound bite, and that's all they are concerned about.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Well, until this issue is resolved, will the government declare a moratorium on further P3s with for-profit partners, given that they're just a way to spend taxpayers' money?

Mr. Klein: No, Mr. Speaker. We will not abandon the concept of P3s. We will continue to abide by our policy, and that is that if P3s work, if they work over the long term – and you have to understand that we're talking only about the construction costs; we're not talking about the long-term maintenance costs related to keeping up court facilities; we are talking about construction costs only – and in the short term, we will consider a P3 project. If it doesn't make sense, it will be discarded.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Government Expense Claims

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two months after the Alberta Liberal opposition raised the issue, the government still won't provide details on its spending on wining, dining, and travel. Yesterday the Premier failed to explain why he won't simply photocopy expense claims, receipts, and credit card statements his staff has and show them to Albertans. My questions are to the Premier. Can the Premier explain why he still can't show us the receipts for a \$26,000 trip to India in January, given that the federal government can provide detailed information on all expenses in less than three months?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again they allude to the federal government. You know, I've had the opportunity – let's put this in perspective – to be on Team Canada trips. Now, if they want to have this government spend like the federal government, here's an example of the Prime Minister taking the lead car, which is a stretched limousine, arriving in Air Force One or Two – you know, a great big A320 plane done up like a living room – leading a procession, having all the roads blocked off, the Premiers following in vans, the Prime Minister taking a huge, humongous suite. Oh, this is the way that these Liberals are suggesting we should spend. They're saying that we should follow the example of the federal government. Well, that's the way the federal government travels.

Ms Blakeman: Again to the Premier. Why is the Premier making

vague promises about re-evaluating the system when all he needs to do is tell his staff to photocopy a few documents and show them to Albertans?

Mr. Klein: Well, I go back to what I said. I want this hon. member to stand up and say that we should spend like the feds, like their Liberal cousins. I would like this hon. member to say that the Premier should have this huge, humongous A320 done up like a living room. I would like this hon. member to say that I should have a house like 24 Sussex and all the trimmings that go with it. I would like this hon. member to say that the Premier should arrive in a stretched limousine and have all the ministers follow in vans. I would like this hon. member to say that I should have 25 or 30 or 40 security people around me, all at taxpayers' expense.

Mr. Speaker, they want us to spend like their Liberal cousins in Ottawa. Well, we're not about to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. All I'm saying, Mr. Premier, is: will you crank up the photocopier and give us copies of your travel and hosting receipts? Come on.

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, again the same answer. They would rather talk about \$25 or \$23.50 items or a \$27 jug of orange juice, which boils down to \$2.70 a glass, than the multi, multi, multimillions of millions of dollars that are being wasted by their Liberal cousins in Ottawa.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Calgary Courthouse (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Another week, another cornerstone of government policy crumbles into rubble. The centerpiece of the government's P3 strategy, the Calgary courthouse, has been put on hold after costs soared 66 per cent higher than originally planned. After months of hype about the advantages of P3s the government has finally had to face hard financial reality. My question is to the Premier. Will the Premier admit that the government's P3 policy is in shambles as a result of the Calgary courthouse cost overrun debacle?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it is so typical of both the Liberal and the ND opposition to pick out any little thing that is negative about any project. This is a major project; there's no doubt about it. It hasn't been a failure. We have revisited the project. Had the government done it on its own, there was no guarantee that those costs wouldn't have escalated in the same way. As a matter of fact, it's quite common in government circles that if they know that it is completely a government job, the costs go sky-high.

1:50

Well, Mr. Speaker, this person was on city council when the costs of the Edmonton Convention Centre – or maybe he wasn't. I certainly remember reading about them going up and up and up and up and higher and higher and higher, and had he been on council, he would have said: oh, great; spend, spend, spend, spend more. Because that's the attitude.

Mr. Speaker, as I said, the Calgary contract was a good contract, as a matter of fact, and when the Saddledome went \$16 million – we're not talking hundreds of millions of dollars – I put a stop to it.

I put a stop to it. As a matter of fact, I said that if you want more information, here's Tom Chambers' number. He was the minister of public works for the government at that particular time and opened everything up relative to that particular project.

So, Mr. Speaker, when they want to talk about overruns, this hon. member, the ND member, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands, is the king of overruns. But he likes them because that is the way of the NDs.

The Speaker: Hon. member, you rose on a point of order, but I think there was clarification that you were not a member of council at that time. Is that what the point of order is going to be?

Mr. Mason: Well, subsequent things that the Premier has said. We may have a few more by the time my questions are over, Mr. Speaker.

Given that I got involved in politics fighting the Convention Centre and warning of cost overruns, will the Premier admit that he has nothing to teach me about fighting waste in government spending?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have learned more about waste in spending from the Liberals and the NDs in my 15 years in this Legislature than I've ever learned before. All of those lessons have come from the Liberals and the NDs, and that is how to spend, spend, spend, and spend more.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Given that the courthouse is on hold and, hopefully, will be stopped altogether, will the government consider as an alternative to this project building a new hospital for the city of Calgary without going through the nonsense and expense of a P3?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the two projects are separate. I will agree with the hon. member that a new hospital is needed in the southern part of the city. The Calgary health region is now working on a plan, a concept. It is the Calgary health region's request that they proceed via the P3 process. That project will be evaluated, and hopefully it will turn out to be a good project. We are very intent and very committed to going ahead with that project.

I find it interesting, Mr. Speaker, because he said: put a stop to the courthouse. Put a stop. All you have to do is look at the Calgary court situation and you will see a hodgepodge, really, of court facilities throughout the city to the point where the Provincial Court judges especially, who, I understand, adjudicate about 80 per cent of the cases, both criminal and civil and family, are absolutely cramped. It's costing the government, because we have to maintain these facilities, a huge amount of money. So it makes sense to consolidate these activities. Now, if this hon. member wants to go down to Calgary and state publicly that this project should be halted, that there should be no consolidation, I would invite him to do so.

Organ and Tissue Donations

Ms DeLong: Mr. Speaker, April 18 to 25 is National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week, and a number of activities are taking place in Alberta and across Canada to increase our awareness of this important issue. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What is the government doing to further reduce the number of Albertans waiting to receive organ transplants?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is true that the shortage of organs and tissues for transplantation is a long-standing problem here in the province of Alberta, but it is also a long-standing problem throughout Canada.

Right now, Mr. Speaker, over 400 Albertans are on waiting lists to receive an organ transplant, and unfortunately every year some Albertans do not survive the waiting period for that gift of life. Hundreds more are awaiting tissue that can restore sight, restore mobility, or improve quality of life.

Now, what the Department of Health and Wellness is currently working on, Mr. Speaker, is a comprehensive and co-ordinated provincial system for organ and tissue donation. An improved system to increase donation will decrease the number of Albertans waiting for a transplant and improve the quality of life for those individuals and their families.

We do need to make legislative changes to the Human Tissue Gift Act, that was originally proclaimed some 20 years ago, in 1973. Policies for the new legislation have been drafted, and the process to introduce such legislation will soon be under way.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, my department is working with our tissue programs to improve self-sufficiency in providing tissues for transplantation.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. Just one supplemental. Deciding to become an organ or tissue donor is a very important personal decision, one that can have extraordinary results. What can Albertans do to increase their awareness and help reduce waiting lists so that more people who are ill can receive the gift of life?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I will say this about Canadians and I'll say this specifically about Albertans: Albertans are extraordinarily generous individuals. Some 81 per cent of Canadians have indicated their willingness to donate their organs and tissues, but only 65 per cent of Canadians actually advise their families of their wishes. If there is one thing that we could do to help improve the donation rate for tissues and organs, it would be to do as I have done with my own family, and that is to indicate your desire to donate tissues and organs.

Automobile Insurance Rates (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Albertans can't wait for lower auto insurance rates. If the government really cared about consumers and not just about the insurance industry, it would table its latest proposals in this Assembly this afternoon. My first question is to the Premier. Given that this government always discriminates against Edmonton, what proof does the government have that new drivers in Edmonton should have an entry-level premium that is \$180 higher than new drivers in Calgary?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, they're rehashing old, old, old news. The package went to SPC. I would remind the hon. member that we are the government and we are charged by the electorate to develop policy, not the Liberals. The Liberals do not develop policy. We go through the process. We're now in the standing policy committee process of developing that policy and finalizing that policy. There is a procedure that will be followed. It will go to cabinet and then caucus, and we'll make a final decision, and it will be reported.

2:00

Mr. Speaker, as we go through this process, we have to keep in mind what we want to achieve in the end, and what we want to

achieve is commendable. We want to achieve a premium rate for young male drivers, in particular, that is fair. We want to create a premium rate for older male drivers that is fair, and as one of the newspapers reported, rates will generally come down for these drivers. We want to make sure that those who are injured in accidents are fairly compensated, not overcompensated but fairly compensated.

Mr. Speaker, these goals, I believe, are commendable goals and will not only enhance economic opportunities, particularly for those who operate small businesses and need young drivers to drive their vehicles, but it will also benefit the Alberta public at large. I can't understand for the life of me why they are complaining about something that is so good, that is commendable, and something that this government, by the way, saw as a problem and took head-on, addressed the issue, and brought a solution forward or is now bringing solutions forward.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: will the proposed auto insurance grid also apply to commercial auto in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, relative to any details that might or might not come out, I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance respond.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, our focus has been on noncommercial vehicles, and we have been moving forward in that frame. We are not contemplating any further reform at this point until we complete this package. Quite clearly, we have taken a lot of time on this package because we're determined that we will meet the needs of Albertans: one that rewards good drivers, one that penalizes bad drivers, one that takes the discrimination out of the equation and provides affordable, accessible, and comparably priced insurance for all Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the premier: given that the freeze has been extended until 2005, is this government just teasing the auto insurance companies and secretly planning to implement public automobile insurance in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know if he lies awake thinking about these things or if they come to him as dreams or nightmares and then he gets up in the morning and he says: I think that this is a good question I'm going to ask. I've often said that one of the most difficult things in politics is to provide intelligent answers to stupid questions, and I'm stumped.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Graydon: Well, I hope I don't fall under that category, Mr. Speaker.

Educational Opportunities in Northern Alberta and B.C.

Mr. Graydon: Earlier this week the Minister of Learning and the B.C. Minister of Advanced Education met with the presidents and board chairs of 16 colleges, institutions, and universities to discuss ways that their ministries can further educational opportunities in the northern areas of the province. My questions today are for the Minister of Learning. What objectives were identified as a result of this meeting, and how can they benefit Alberta's postsecondary students?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As a result of the B.C./Alberta cabinet meeting that took place in the fall, we were tasked by our Premiers to go forward and come up with ways that we can co-operate and collaborate between British Columbia and Alberta. On Monday was the result of that, in which case the Minister of Advanced Education in British Columbia and myself sat down together with some 35 or 40 other presidents and board chairs of the various institutions in northern Alberta and northern B.C.

Mr. Speaker, specifically, one of the issues that was looked at was barriers to mobility between B.C. and Alberta. One of the issues that has come forward is that welders, for example, electricians cannot go back and forth on the border. We have ironed that out. We will have solutions to that coming forward.

Another very important thing took place, Mr. Speaker. When it comes to distance education, what we have in B.C. and Alberta is BCcampus, we have eCampusAlberta, we have Athabasca University, and we have the B.C. Open University. The discussion was tailored around: why on earth should we be duplicating these services when we can actually consolidate them and use them together? Why should one province have a course in English 101 and the other province have a course in English 101, the same courses? So we are looking at how we can do this.

It was an absolutely excellent meeting, and just for the hon. member's information – and I think it will be particularly critical to him – we will be having the next meeting in October in Grande Prairie to continue discussions on this very important topic between B.C. and Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we've proven that you can get an intelligent answer to an intelligent question.

My first and only supplemental question is again to the Minister of Learning. Can the minister advise what other stakeholders will be involved in achieving these objectives?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of other stakeholders that need to be involved. There are the First Nations. There's another very important stakeholder that was not at the meetings, and that's the Northwest Territories. Much of what is going to be happening in the upcoming future is going to be geared towards the Northwest Territories when we start looking at the diamond mines, when we start looking at the potential Mackenzie Valley pipeline coming down the Mackenzie Valley. There's also a huge bridge project that is occurring in the Northwest Territories. Realistically, the training elements of the Northwest Territories are very intimately tied to northern Alberta and northern British Columbia. So the Northwest Territories is one of these groups that has to be involved. The Yukon Territory also has to be involved.

Mr. Speaker, the meeting that we had on Monday is just the start of what I see as a truly great amount of collaboration and co-operation between two and possibly three or four jurisdictions as well as the First Nations. The very interesting part – and I think we can all learn from this in this Assembly – is that we had the Liberal Party from B.C. and the Conservative Party from Alberta sitting together and actually working together for the betterment of the citizenry.

Automobile Insurance Rates

(continued)

Mr. MacDonald: This government was embarrassed when it

released on its web site the new auto insurance grid last year. Alberta drivers checking out the new proposed auto insurance grid found that in most cases the rates went up, not down as promised by this government. My first question is to the Premier. Will the Premier guarantee now, this afternoon, that auto insurance rates for most drivers in this province will go down as a result of this proposed new auto insurance grid?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, no, nor can he guarantee that rates will go up or down. That is subject to the market, unless of course they have a socialized insurance company that they want to publicly finance out of taxpayers' money to stabilize rates and to make sure that they remain stable.

Mr. Speaker, what I will guarantee is that rates for young good drivers will go down and quite dramatically. I will guarantee that. I will guarantee that rates for older good drivers will go down dramatically. I will say that the rates for bad drivers will not go down. They will go up. If the hon. member is opposed to that, let me know now and state it publicly, because we would like to know where he stands on this issue. Generally – and I can't guarantee it – those in the mid-range, male or female in the mid-range, the people who are not affected because of age or gender, will remain, I would say, ostensibly the same. Our rates will stabilize.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I would point out that I've asked this hon. member before, and I will ask him again. Assuming that he is a good driver, assuming that he doesn't have a lot of traffic tickets, speeding tickets, and hasn't been involved in an accident, I have challenged him to table his insurance rates. I would be glad to table mine. Mine are comparable with what I would pay anywhere in Canada, and I'm sure that his would be comparable too. So to stand up there and try to tell the public that they're paying more is not being honest. It's not being honest at all, and he should be ashamed of himself.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: what specifically are the lower rates? What prices are older drivers with good records going to pay under your proposed scheme? Surely, you know that.

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, the policy hasn't been adopted yet, but certainly a chart has been prepared. It deals with those in the so-called special categories. If one were to look at the charts, one can naturally assume that the rates for good young male drivers will go down and for good older male drivers will go down. So what is happening is good, and it's also good for those that are in the mid-range, whose rates will remain pretty well stable.

But again, Mr. Speaker, I would ask this hon. member to table in this House, because I'm willing to table mine, his insurance bill for the last three years. I would ask him to do that, and we would compare that against the rate that he would be charged in B.C. or Saskatchewan or Manitoba or Newfoundland or anywhere else in this country.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: if this proposed chart is as you say it is and it's going to reduce rates for so many drivers, will you put it on the government web site this afternoon so Alberta consumers can check it out for themselves?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance

respond in detail, but the final policy has not yet been adopted. That is the function and the responsibility of government: to develop policy and bring that into effect.

The hon. member still hasn't answered my question. The question that I pose not directly to him but as a challenge – maybe he won't state it here – is: will he table his insurance premium for his private automobile for the past three years? I'll do the same thing. Will he do that? Maybe he'll answer that question outside.

The Speaker: Very, very briefly, please.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, insofar as the insurance grid going on the web site today, it's amazing how this hon. member can be almost a day late and a dollar short. We put a phantom grid on the web site last year to give Albertans an idea of how a grid would work. It's not been there for quite some time because we've been working on how an actual policy would fit so that Albertans could, once we've completed it, go to the web site directly and figure out where they would fit. That won't go back on our web site until we have completed all of the regulations and the policy direction over this next three months. So the hon. member is going to have to wait until we complete the final process through our policy development. Then he will have the picture on the web site.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Occupational Health and Safety Code

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Some of my constituents who own medium-sized construction businesses have expressed concerns about the effects of the occupational health and safety code, that was enacted in November of 2003 with a five-month grace period for employers to comply, which ends April 30, 2004. My first question to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: what changes do employers have to make to their workplaces in order to comply with the new code?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, I would think that in most cases there really wouldn't be any change that would be required because, in essence, the code replaced, actually, 11 regulations that were already in place. Clearly, we believe that one code will be easier for all employers and employees to keep track of and keep up to date with than 11 regulations. There were some new industries that have risen that might cause some change. We think of the biohazard industry, and of course robotics are increasing in Alberta.

There is one area, though, that would affect all employers if they haven't done this up to this particular time. All hazards that exist in that particular workplace will have to be put in written form, and of course as common sense would tell you – it's probably already been done – these would have to be shown to the employees.

So given the fact that employers have always been responsible for the safety at their work site and the safety of their workers, I don't think there's any big deal here about assessing the hazard. It just might be putting it in writing that would be the big change.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: what education and communication process was adopted to inform employers about the changes to the code?

Mr. Dunford: One of the ways that this government provides

communications for employers and, really, for Albertans generally, of course, is the Queen's Printer. We actually have a best-seller on our hands here, Mr. Speaker. The demand for the printed version of the code has currently outstripped, as I understand it, the ability of the Queen's Printer to keep up with that particular demand.

Now, this can be had for free by going to the Queen's Printer web site and then simply downloading the code that way. In any event, we do have a workplace health and safety call centre, and that would be available. We have a call number, and of course we have the web site, and I won't ad lib any further than that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister, a final question: what will happen after April 30 if an occupational health and safety officer finds an employer who is not fully in compliance with the new provisions of the code?

Mr. Dunford: This is an area where we're going to have to be quite vigilant because over time we all are aware that there has been some grinding between some contractors and sometimes our safety inspectors, so we want to make sure that we keep our eye on that particular area.

The kind of information that we as a ministry provide, though, to our people is that we have an education responsibility first. To take a page out of the Premier's book, if I could, within this area we have the five Es, and of course in that case we want to educate and we want to educate and educate and educate some more. Finally, of course, if we are dealing with people who are simply obstinate or recalcitrant, then of course we'll have to enforce.

But when you look at what's actually taking place, the contractors themselves would know of the hazards and should be in a position, then, to be able to correctly identify these hazards and correctly portray that information to their workers.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Child Care Services

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. *Today's Parent* ranks Alberta child care services among the worst in the country with respect to the number of trained staff, wages, and overall quality. The Alberta advantage definitely does not apply to children in daycare. My questions are to the Minister of Children's Services. Can the minister explain why Ontario has 82 per cent of its child care staff with two years of training or higher and this province has only a miserable 43 per cent at the same level?

2:20

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, the *Today's Parent* review was done in 1998 from the document *You Bet I Care!* and, following that, from data that was generated at that time. That preceded and predated the efforts that we've made on child care accreditation, which will put us first in the country. It will elevate the quality standards for children in daycare and day homes. It will address the issues of standards and rates of pay. In the last year we have provided dollars through the advance on the accreditation. Eighty per cent of those dollars, by the way, will go towards staffing and giving staff modest increases to get involved with the program.

Mr. Speaker, there was a recognition that in Alberta we wanted to do more to enhance the child care services, and building on that, we wanted to do even more than that. We wanted to improve staff

training and improve the qualifications of people who run daycares and day homes. If you look at Canada and if you look at the United States, there is nobody doing accreditation and improving as fast as we are.

Dr. Massey: This is a survey done this month.

Again to the same minister: why does the government continue to pursue a child care policy that is driving interested students and practising staff out of the profession?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't believe that. I don't believe they're being driven out of the profession whatsoever. We have got enrolments at Grant MacEwan Community College, a lot of work being done on assessments of the effectiveness of that training tool. [interjection] I'm getting a lot of help here.

We are doing a lot with the scholarships for First Nations staff that want to become trained child care professionals, and we are working with the University of Calgary and the sociology department there to improve and enhance training.

I think most of all, Mr. Speaker, the new Alberta response model, which enables the child care delivery system to look at delivery in a new way, not removing children from placements but going into the home and providing support, means that it's not just the social worker that's involved. It is the nurse, it is the psychologist, it is the speech pathologist, and multidisciplinary teams are becoming more commonplace in the administration of child care and child care ancillary work that's being done in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: why has the government underfunded our daycare so badly that Alberta now leads the country in staff turnover rates?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, we don't fund the daycares. We fund the parents through a subsidy program, that they can apply for, based on the working salaries they receive. There's a sliding scale right up to and over \$40,000. We subsidize the parents, and it's our premise – and I think it's the best premise of all – that the parent is responsible for the child and that the parent will do the best due diligence in any daycare or day home. They become daily monitors of what happens in those daycares.

We don't subsidize daycares. We subsidize parents who have children who attend daycares, and we subsidize them based on our belief that we should be putting our dollars where those people can less afford to do it. People that earn \$60,000 and \$70,000 can pay their own way. We are subsidizing those people that need the pay and those children that need that support.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Automobile Insurance Rates

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Any hope that Albertans might some day have car insurance rates as low as other western provinces was dashed today. Although the Premier once promised that this government's reform package would result in rates as low as in B.C., Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, that promise has mysteriously disappeared from the government rhetoric. Instead, the highest car insurance rates in western Canada are going to be locked in for yet another year or more. To the Premier: when the government

finally gets around to implementing its reform package, will Alberta drivers be paying more than other western Canadians for auto insurance? Yes or no, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll explain it one more time. Our rates will be comparable, but on the good side, on the very positive side the rates for good young male drivers will go down. The rates for good older male drivers will go down. The intention, of course, is to end the discrimination against these people because of age and gender if they are good drivers. Having said that, we will continue to make sure as a matter of policy that the insurance companies have the ability to penalize bad drivers. On average it's proposed that within 5 per cent, give or take, the rates will remain pretty much the same for those in the mid-range.

Notwithstanding what this hon. leader of the third party says, these rates are comparable with rates paid in other jurisdictions. Mr. Speaker, my insurance rate is comparable to what I would pay in Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario. It's comparable. I would be glad to table that, and I'd be glad to table what I would be paying anywhere else.

My insurance rate for PL and PD and collision on a classic car which is insured full-time, which is a 1977 Volkswagen convertible, Mr. Speaker – and because of its age and because it is designated as a classic car, it's valued higher than it normally would be – is around \$770 a year. That includes collision and PL and PD. That, according to the information I've been able to obtain, is very comparable, within a dollar or two, of what I would pay in any other jurisdiction.

I would invite the hon. member, as I invited the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, to table, providing he has been a good driver, his insurance rates. I'd be glad to table mine.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the government's reform package is so beneficial and so reasonable to drivers, why is the government waiting until after the next election is safely out of the way to implement this glorious new system?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, they say that it's a lousy plan. Then they say that it's so good that we're waiting until after the election, you know, that we're holding onto it. The truth is that we're in the process now of finalizing that plan. It is going through the political process. It went to SPC last night. It will go to cabinet within a week or so or maybe two weeks, then to caucus if necessary. So I would say that within the next two months or so it will be out, and I can assure the hon. member that an election will not be held within the next two months or so.

Dr. Pannu: My final supplementary to the Premier, Mr. Speaker: given that the Consumers' Association of Canada has found that public insurance provinces are providing dramatically lower insurance rates than Alberta, isn't it time for the Premier to stop protecting his pals in the insurance industry and admit that private insurance is highway robbery?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I said before, I would be more than happy to table the insurance premium that I am paying right now for collision and public liability and property damage. That rate is comparable to the socialist rates charged in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, that are backed by taxpayers' dollars. Comparable.

2:30head: Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven members to participate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Big Brothers Big Sisters

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was going to do a recognition today on the marvellous Mr. Speaker's MLA for a Day, but it's already been done.

I have another that is equally important, and that is that children matched with mentors do better in life because of improved self-esteem, school performance, and communication skills. They're more likely to finish high school and less likely to be involved in criminal activities. That is what Big Brothers Big Sisters of Edmonton area is all about. We can make a big difference in a child's life by supporting Big Brothers Big Sisters. As the leading mentoring agency in North America, they pride themselves on the high quality of service provided to children, families, volunteers, and supporters.

The total number of school-age children and youth in Edmonton and surrounding area is around 200,000. It's generally accepted that about 20 per cent of these young people need extra supports to succeed in school and life. This year approximately 2,000 young people will be helped; by the year 2010, about 5,000.

On behalf of all Albertans we thank those who have contributed and ask others to become so involved. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

National Aboriginal Achievement Award Hon. Pearl Calahasen

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 1993 the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation established the national aboriginal achievement awards in conjunction with the United Nations' International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The awards recognize individuals of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis ancestry who have reached a significant level of achievement in their respective occupations.

Myself and the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie had the great pleasure of attending the national awards ceremony in Calgary at the Southern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium on Sunday, April 4, 2004. Among the honorary recipients is a particular person that I'm going to talk about. This person was born and raised in Grouard, Alberta, and earned a Bachelor of Education from the University of Alberta and a Master of Education from the University of Oregon. So far this person continues championing for aboriginal issues, especially in the areas of education, children, and families.

Mr. Speaker, this outstanding national award winner is no other than our very own colleague the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake and the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. I would like to congratulate her and ask all members to applaud her for this award.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Dianne Greenough

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to recognize a superb teacher, gifted coach, and volunteer extraordinaire, Dianne Greenough.

Dianne is well known for her work in having cheerleading

recognized as an exciting sport in this province and nationally. She's been a teacher/coach at Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts for 26 years. She is worshipped by her students and is as enthusiastic as the day she first walked into Vic.

Dianne has received many awards for her commitment to cheer-leading, volunteerism, and teaching, including the CFRN Great Albertan award, city of Edmonton salute to excellence, ITV's woman of vision, Alberta's excellence in teaching, and she's been inducted into the American Cheerleaders Association coaches' hall of fame.

This year her Vic team won its 15th city championship and also its 15th provincial championship since 1985. Her team just placed third in the U.S.A. national cheerleading championships, the first Canadian coed team to reach this level.

In her spare time she is coach of the Edmonton Eskimos cheer team, and she is also the producer/choreographer for the 2005 Masters Games.

Congratulations and thank you to a great teacher, colleague, and friend.

Calgary Flames

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker and colleagues, how about those Flames. Wow. The 15-year dry spell for hockey fans in Calgary has ended, and our entire city has gone hockey crazy watching some of the absolute best games ever seen in recent years as our Flames have battled the Canucks to an edge-of-your-seat, right-down-to-the-wire victory these past few weeks. It has been an incredible experience. Calgarians have been completely riveted to their television sets, culminating in that last hold-your-breath 3-2 overtime victory.

Our team, which consists of just about everybody in Calgary right now, has had to overcome incredible challenges to get to this point. Management, staff, and owners have had to meet the financial challenges. Our players, led by Darryl Sutter, with stars like Iginla, Kiprusoff, Gelinas, and Yelle and all the other great 28, have had to overcome almost insurmountable injuries, fatigue, and pressure playing against absolutely evenly matched opponents and have had to dig really deep, relying solely on sheer grit, determination, and hard work. Alberta qualities they obviously excel in.

Congratulations, Flames. We're all really proud of you. On to the Stanley Cup.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

University of Calgary Law School

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise today in recognition of the University of Calgary being named best institution on the *Canadian Lawyer* magazine 2004 report card on Canadian law schools. The U of C achieved number one status based on some of the most important opinions, those of recent graduates. All recent U of C law graduates surveyed recommended the school, and the final grade given to the program was a B plus.

The Calgary law school admits about 70 students into the first-year program each fall. Small class sizes add to the school's learning environment, and teaching staff includes faculty members and practising lawyers. The university's curriculum was given top marks for its balance between theory and skill development, which, according to one graduate in the survey, gives, and I quote, an excellent foundation in theoretical aspects of law and particularly excellent practical experience.

Congratulations to the University of Calgary law school, and keep up the great work.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Civil Air Search and Rescue Association

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That others may live: this is a noble and honourable motto that motivates the 2,700 Canadian volunteers who give of their time and energy to be ready at a moment's notice to search for a missing aircraft or missing persons.

Armed with pagers and airplanes, 300 Alberta volunteers are members of CASARA, the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association. These volunteers are trained to Canadian military standards in fields such as aviation safety, meteorology, survival awareness, and search techniques. Whatever time of day or night it might be, CASARA members are capable of being airborne within 45 minutes of an emergency call by the military rescue co-ordination centre at CFB Trenton in Ontario.

This weekend Edmonton will host a provincial training officers conference. Jim Thoreson, the national vice-president and director for the province of Alberta; Ted Sherback, the deputy director; Pat Fahy, the provincial secretary; and Bob Jablonski, the provincial training officer, will review training procedures with other CASARA members, once again all giving freely of their time and expertise so that others may live.

Our Voice: The Spare Change Magazine

Mr. MacDonald: I am pleased to have the opportunity today to recognize *Our Voice* magazine, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this month. *The Spare Change Magazine* is published monthly by the Bissell Centre in order to increase the ability of people to become self-reliant and to raise awareness of issues related to poverty and inner-city life.

Our Voice aims to provide an opportunity for economically marginalized people to gain employment and income while drawing public attention to the issues they face. Vendors buy the magazine at the Bissell Centre and sell more than 5,500 copies a month in high pedestrian traffic areas of Edmonton for between \$1 and \$2 each. Members of the community can also get involved by contributing stories, photographs, and poetry for publication. *Our Voice* has a strong, regular readership, and those people come from many diverse backgrounds.

Our Voice has meant a great deal to many people over the last decade, and I am certain it will touch many more lives in the future.

Thank you.

head: Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I would like to present a petition signed by 127 capital region citizens from the Alberta Fire Fighters Association petitioning the Legislative Assembly to "support Bill 204, the Blood Sample Act, which will provide more security and peace of mind for people working in occupations who have a higher risk of exchanging bodily fluids with a potential carrier of a blood borne disease."

Thank you.

2:40head: Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to table with you some information that Albertans and MLAs here have been

waiting for regarding the Alberta centennial. It is the announcement of three new programs today.

The first one is the Alberta centennial per capita municipal grant program totalling \$10 million; secondly is the Alberta centennial legacies grant program, phase 3, totalling \$16 million; and the third and final one is the Alberta centennial planning program for provincially run programs totalling \$4 million.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: For tablings?

The Speaker: Yes.

Mr. Mason: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I do. It's my pleasure to rise today to table a letter from Dianne Strilaeff, which is addressed to the Premier. The author of the letter is very angry that while the insurance industry announces multibillion dollar profits, the government has locked in auto insurance premiums at the highest level in western Canada. She proposes a nonprofit, public auto insurance program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first is a program from the district finalists excellence in teaching awards, 2004, that was held at the McCauley Chambers Centre for Education last night. This was hosted by the public school trustees from Edmonton, and there were eight finalists nominated from different schools in the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar.

The second tabling I have this afternoon is a copy of a long list of individuals that was prepared by Daniel Dufresne of the Sundance Housing Co-op here in Edmonton, and this list is urging the government to raise the minimum wage in our province and also wants to advise the government that there is a connection between the low minimum wage and the housing crisis in Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on a point of order.

Point of Order

Allegations against a Member

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise on a point of order under Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j); that is, "(h) makes allegations against another member; (i) imputes false or unavowed motives to another member; (j) uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder."

The Premier in his response to my questions engaged in a number of comments which were, in my view, entirely speculation on his part respecting my role on city council, specifically in reference to the construction of the Convention Centre. He used language – I jotted it down from memory; you will of course have the actual transcript – something to the effect that I was the king of cost overruns.

Now, Mr. Speaker, when one is in politics, really the only thing that they have is their reputation. During my time on city council I worked very hard to develop a reputation as a financial watchdog and a fiscally responsible member of city council. I have some examples which I think are important for the record and your consideration. There are four of them.

Before I was on city council, as a private citizen I opposed the construction of the Convention Centre and predicted the large cost overruns which later occurred. The Premier's comments in that respect are directly contrary to the facts. I fought and successfully stopped the construction of the unneeded Highlands sewer project, which saved taxpayers 17 and a half million dollars. I opposed and stopped an unneeded expansion of the E.L. Smith Water Treatment Plant, proposing instead a water conservation program, which saved the taxpayers of Edmonton over \$100 million and which has reduced water bills in the city of Edmonton ever since. Finally, Mr. Speaker – these are just some examples, certainly not the entire record – I blocked a proposed P3 for an indoor soccer complex in Clareview and worked to put together a proposal for a city-owned and -financed project which saved hundreds of thousands of dollars for the taxpayers.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the Premier doesn't know what he's talking about, and he ought not stand up here and cast aspersions on other members when he's supposed to be responding to questions unless he has some basis of knowledge for making the statements he has. So I'd submit that he is in violation of these sections of the Standing Orders, and he ought to return at an appropriate time and apologize.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader on this point of order.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think having heard the hon. member and his concerns with respect to his reputation as a fiscal conservative, it would be . . .

Mr. Mason: Responsible individual, not conservative.

Mr. Hancock: I'm sorry. Fiscally responsible individual.

It would be appropriate just to reflect for a moment on the give and take of question period as it's developed over time and particularly over the course of this session, and I think the Premier in response to another question today said it right. It's particularly difficult at times to respond to questions when the questions are nonsensical. That's my paraphrasing of what he said. The problem we have is that the rhetoric in the question promotes the rhetoric in the answer.

I take the hon. member's statements as he's put them, and I would acknowledge that from what he's said – and in this House we take people at their word – he has taken a fiscally responsible approach with respect to his actions on city council and being a fiscal watchdog, particularly with respect to the Convention Centre. I would be prepared to offer apologies to him for any suggestion that he was somehow a profligate spender or promoting spending in those circumstances in those comments that were made today.

I think there's a larger issue for us here, and that is that when questions are posed, the rhetoric of the answer often comes from the rhetoric of the questions or the rhetoric of the previous questions. Often the preamble to the questions is so rooted in inaccuracy, hyperbole, and rhetoric that it is very, very difficult to keep the answers to anything other than the same.

So while I think it's important to take the point made by the member opposite today with respect to the specifics of that particular question and the comments that were made, I think there's a broader question which all of us ought to be cognizant of, and that is that if you insist on twisting and creating hyperbole in the preamble to the question, you should expect that you'll be answered in kind.

The Speaker: Well, both representations are very important ones, and with respect to the actual question, to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, the Blues basically say – there are two points. One, it says, "Well, Mr. Speaker, this person was on city council when the costs of the Edmonton Convention Centre – or maybe he wasn't." There was an intervention from the chair suggesting that, well, perhaps the hon. member wasn't, so that perhaps was clarified.

Then the hon. member advised me that, well, there might be more coming, so then when I read the Blues, I quote the following: "So . . . when they want to talk about overruns, this hon. member, the ND member, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands is the king of overruns. But he likes them because that is the way of the NDs." That certainly was in the Hansard Blues.

Now, I've heard the response from the hon. Government House Leader, and as I understand it, there was a withdrawal or an apology with respect to this after hearing the position put forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. So I presume that that will settle that in terms of parliamentary tradition.

I do want to make a further comment, though, with respect to what the Government House Leader has said. The Government House Leader is absolutely correct. This is a game of give and take. Somebody gives it; somebody else will take it and then give it right back. If you throw the boomerang, just make sure that you're standing when it comes back, because if you duck, it's liable to get you in the neck.

2:50

So, let's see: ad nauseam now on the part of the chair, maybe the 50th time or something like this. I won't go on to the same length that I've normally gone on. I'll just be brief today. Okay?

Beauchesne's 409 says, "It must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate," and it "cannot be based upon a hypothesis, cannot seek an opinion, either legal or otherwise, and must not suggest its own answer, be argumentative or make representations." Now, those are the rules about questions. Today in the question period actually most of the questions could have been ruled out including most of the government members' questions because they either asked for legal opinions or something else.

There also is a similar rule that applies, then, to people who answer questions. It says, "Answers to questions should be as brief as possible, deal with the matter raised and should not provoke debate."

One day – one day – we will have arrived when we actually have questions and answers in the question period dealing with government policy rather than speculation, innuendo, personality attacks. Questions and answers. When we arrive at that point in time, we will be there. We will be there, hon. members.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I now call the Committee of Supply to order.

Hon. members, before starting consideration of the estimates for the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, the chair wants to bring to the attention of all members the provisions of Standing Order 58(5), which indicate that "the Committee of Supply shall be called not later than 3:10 p.m." on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoon and "rise and report no later than 5:15 p.m."

The chair realizes that there's been some confusion about when afternoon deliberations of the Committee of Supply are to end. In

accordance, then, with Standing Order 58(5) this afternoon's consideration of the estimates will end just prior to 5:15 in order to allow the committee to rise and report by that time unless, of course, there are no members who wish to speak before we reach that time, in which the case can be made.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Agriculture, Food and Rural Development

The Chair: I would call upon the hon. minister to make her opening comments.

Mrs. McClellan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have a few comments to make about the department's estimates for 2004, but before I do, I would like to introduce some very important people that are in the gallery. I am going to introduce the executive members that represent, I think, one of the hardest working, most talented and dedicated staffs in our government. I'm going to ask them to stand and remain standing until I conclude their introduction, if that's okay with the chairman, because I'd like all members to be able to recognize which of these members are which.

I'm going to begin by introducing my deputy minister, Mr. Brian Manning. I want to introduce Mr. Les Lyster, who is the assistant deputy minister for sustainable agriculture. Les is leaving us at the end of April, and I know that everybody will recognize the great service that Les has given to this department over the years. I would like to introduce John Knapp, who is the incoming assistant deputy minister for sustainable agriculture. Many of our members in this House on all sides of the House have certainly had reason to discuss programs with Mr. Knapp over the last couple of years because he has very ably steered his staff through some very complex programs that were certainly important to our industry. So, John, welcome with some regret from me because I don't know how we'll possibly replace you in your past job. However, I am confident that you've left very good talent there.

Ken Moholity is our assistant deputy minister for planning and competitiveness, no stranger to any of you. You should know that he is affectionately called Super Moho outside the committee. Mr. Brian Rhiness, assistant deputy minister for industry development. I am not going to describe Brian's costume that he sometimes wears to show his support for the hog industry. We have Faye Rault, executive director of administration, who very capably keeps our financial activities on track. We have Krish Krishnaswamy, who is the vice-president of finance from the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. We have Terry Willock, our director of communications. Jeff Haley is here from my office. Jeff is special policy adviser.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm proud to present this talented and dedicated workforce to you.

Mr. Chairman, I don't think anyone will disagree with my opening statement, and that is that this was a year unlike any ever experienced in Canada in the agricultural community, but I must say that thanks to the support and guidance from our industry leaders, we have been able to travel these uncharted waters with some success, I believe.

Despite the difficulties that we've experienced over the last year, agriculture continues to be a very constant and significant contributor to our province's economy. We continue to account for a high percentage of our nation's farm cash receipts. Employment in 2003 rose to 94,000 people; that's direct employees in our agrifood industries. Cash receipts including program payments were \$7 billion. But maybe more importantly for the year of the last statistics that we have, Alberta farm capital assets were valued at just over \$55

billion. I believe that signifies a huge confidence from the people in this industry to their industry.

At this time last year I don't think anyone could have imagined what type of year we would have. I was sure that the focus of 2003-04 was going to be on growth. We started the spring with some good moisture, prices were pretty good, and it looked like this was our year. Instead, we learned about the single case of BSE.

But by working closely with industry – and I must commend the industry leaders because, Mr. Chairman, at all of our meetings we have had the industry represented at a very high level right across the industry, whether they were small or large packers; whether it was the Canadian grocers and retailers association; whether it was the five beef cattle groups, including our dairy producers, because, of course, they're affected; diversified livestock, which was also effected; financial institutions. The list goes on, and the dedication from those folks to steer us through this was unparalleled in my experience.

We did move 1.2 million head of fat cattle through the system. Considering that we thought we had 650,000 in Canada, I think we did pretty well. We have to again thank the people of this province that I believe led the country in support for our industry. Thanks to our good fiscal management and the sustainability fund we were able to dedicate more than \$400 million to the industry without impairing any government programs. We are very proud of that. We make no apologies for our programs. They indeed work. I have had letter after letter after letter, far too many, of course, to table in this Legislature, saying thank you to the government and to all members of the Legislature that supported this industry over the years, and believe me; the people out there know who those people are.

3:00

But the discovery of BSE also highlighted many areas where Canada can improve, and we have recognized that. We're ready and willing to do our part and, in fact, have started that. I raise that because that is part of our new budget estimates. The ability for us to do the new rapid test, the Bio-Rad test, in our level 2 biocontainment lab is a great boon to us. We're building the level 3 lab, which will not only aid us in testing but also offer us some opportunity for research, which is incredibly important.

I've explained, Mr. Chairman, why we chose the Bio-Rad test. I think that's well understood now. It is a multi-use test, and it is completely accepted and has been approved for use, as has our lab, as has our staff, for testing for BSE, for chronic wasting disease, and for scrapie. This certainly assists us in reaching the surveillance targets that the federal government has laid out.

I had the opportunity to accompany the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister when the Prime Minister toured our provincial labs in Alberta, and I think I would be correct in saying that the Prime Minister was very impressed by the calibre of the labs and the staff that man those labs.

We are committed in Canada to testing the number of animals that are required to prove statistically that we have an incidence of 1 BSE case in 1 million. That will come to be about 30,000 animals a year. At that rate we are considered a minimum risk.

I want to remind all members that testing is done for herd surveillance to understand the incidence of BSE in our herds. The safety/health side of it is kept safe by the removal of specified risk materials, or SRMs. By the complete removal of SRMs the safety factor is 99.96 per cent. That, I think, is the information that our consumers are most interested in.

The year ahead will see us implementing a number of strategic priorities that will help our industry in the future and contribute to the BSE recovery efforts; that is, our growth strategy, the rural

development strategy, the research and innovation strategy, and the agricultural policy framework.

Our budgeted expenditures do increase this year by \$17.2 million. These increases include the commitments under the ag policy framework, such as the Canadian agricultural income stabilization program, the farm water program, and some other programs included in the agreement. It includes industry-supported research initiatives. It includes ongoing operating funding for the level 2 lab and the new level 3 TSE lab. As all members know, it's incredibly important that you not only build these but that you have the funds to operate them on an ongoing basis.

We have added 68 full-time equivalents in staff. They are there primarily to manage food safety programs and the new CAIS program, the Canadian agricultural income stabilization program.

Our budget is based on a number of assumptions, as it usually is in agriculture. Some of those assumptions are that commodity prices won't decline further, that interest rates will remain relatively stable, and that we will not have another disastrous claim year under the farm income disaster and crop insurance programs. We are hoping for good moisture conditions. Parts of the province have those now, parts of it need them badly, but it's still early for spring moisture in much of our province. We are of course assuming that we won't have any further major disease outbreaks such as foot-and-mouth.

When we're talking about disease outbreaks, I just want to mention avian flu because I know it's a concern to a number of people. I want members to know that when avian flu was detected in Asia – that's some months ago – our chief provincial veterinarian sat down with our feather industry, and they reviewed all of their biosecurity measures. Our feather industry has been very, very forward-thinking in implementing on-farm biosecurity, but it was important in view of this outbreak in Asia to talk about that.

That was before there was a breakout anywhere in the U.S. and certainly long before the unfortunate experience in the Fraser Valley and the lower mainland. I am confident, in discussions with the chairman of the Alberta Chicken Producers, that they are maintaining those biosecurity measures and that they are doing everything within their power to prevent this very highly contagious disease from entering our flocks here.

Other things that, of course, we have to watch for are changes in interest rates and changes in the Canadian dollar. The changes in the Canadian dollar have a huge impact on our export industry.

So those items can affect farm income dramatically and can impact the indemnities that we might pay out, but we are hopeful that this year is going to be a better year.

I just want to close by assuring all of our hon. members that the prosperity and sustainability of our agricultural industry remains a priority of this government. I want to thank each and every member in this Legislature for their support during the last year. It has been an incredibly difficult year for our industry, and your support on all sides of the House is appreciated.

I think we have to acknowledge that we have been treated fairly by media in this issue, and I think that is important as well. But I also thank the dedicated people that we have at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, our own provincial veterinarians for their openness and transparency with the media and with all inquirers to make sure that people understood very clearly the issue and the science that surrounded the issue.

Our industry is growing and changing rapidly – we are not any different than any other industry – and we know that we have to change and grow with it. We believe that our business plan and our budget recognize that change and the opportunity for our industry to move forward and be stronger and better than it ever has been in the past.

With those comments, Mr. Chairman, I will take my seat, listen to the questions, respond to some now. If they're technical or lengthy in response, in the interest of getting as much information out as possible, I will respond to some of them in writing, as I have, and I make the commitment to have those responses back to the hon. members that might ask them before our budget process is over. I have been able to respond to some questions that were raised during interim supply and will continue to do that.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to questions. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm looking forward to this afternoon's discussion on the budget estimates for the Agriculture, Food and Rural Development department.

Certainly, at this time on the record I would like to say that I agree with the hon. minister that it's been a very difficult year for this province's agricultural producers, specifically beef producers. It started off with such promise last spring, and unfortunately for all there was the detection of the single case of BSE in this province in the Peace River district.

3:10

When you look at the case in the Peace River district and how famous that cow has become and if you look perhaps before that, the most famous cow in North America would have been Mrs. O'Leary's cow in Chicago. Mr. Chairman, if you look at these two events – they've been separated by many years – exports are involved in both of them. The Chicago fire led to a lot of economic development in northern Ontario around the Lakehead because of the demand for lumber to rebuild Chicago. The contrast in this and the Peace River cow is that the Americans closed the border to our largest market for beef exports.

So there's a lesson here, and I would urge the hon. minister, perhaps in conjunction with the Minister of Economic Development – I'm surprised that we have such limited exports of beef to China. Certainly, I know that the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East has a fondness for ginger beef and Szechuan beef, and I have this view that we could increase our markets there. The Australians and the New Zealanders are exporting beef to China. There is an emerging middle class in that country with disposable income. I would hope that we would explore this market in detail, because if there's a lesson to be learned here, it's that we have all our eggs in one basket, Mr. Chairman, the American market, and hopefully we can diversify our export market.

I'm not predicting that this is going to happen again, a repeat of the identification of BSE in Peace River, because I think that since we've had the feed ban, since 1996, new cases are going to become less and less likely. Hopefully, we've seen the one and only case of BSE in Alberta. The cow that was found in Washington on the dairy farm that originated in Calmar was born a few months, I believe, Mr. Chairman, before the feed ban.

Now, we may have to change some of our feed regulations. We certainly have to work with other jurisdictions. As I said in this House yesterday, there's certainly a standardized form of cattle identification in this country. I think that a lot of people and, I'm told, a lot of people in the Alberta department of agriculture put a lot of work into this before it finally became standard.

I would hope that our department of agriculture this year is going to work with other departments provincially and with the federal government to convince the Americans that we need to have a North American licence plate, so to speak, or bar code for all cattle that are

born on the North American continent, Mr. Chairman. This needs to be done in light of the difficulty they had in Washington around Christmas of tracing back and detecting possibly other examples of BSE-infected animals. This needs to be done, and I'm sure this hon. minister and this department are going to work very diligently with all jurisdictions.

I'm told by industry representatives that they have been working very hard to resolve this issue and have been working co-operatively. There's no doubt in my mind that this is being done in the interests of Alberta producers first and foremost, but we've got to convince others of some of our own sound practices.

Also, last year the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East was talking about having a committee. I don't want to call it a supercommittee of all jurisdictions in North America but representatives from both sides of the border. Of all industries, including the automotive industry, I would say that the beef industry is perhaps the most integrated in North America. I don't think we can stop this, nor do we want to. If the Americans want to buy our beef, they're welcome to it. If they want to buy our beef genetics, they're welcome to that too, as far as I'm concerned, because it's some of the best around.

Now, the Member for Lethbridge-East wanted a committee struck with representatives from all the provinces, the federal government, I believe, and the American jurisdictions, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the American beef council, I believe. It was an idea that, oddly enough, like many of the hon. member's other ideas, was before its time, Mr. Chairman. There has been a report that came out from the U.S. Department of Agriculture near the end of March – I believe it was March 26, to be precise – that indicated just exactly that. There should be a committee struck, and it should be dealing with science, not political rhetoric, and resolve this issue. This committee would understand, unlike some of the American members of the Senate, that this is an industry that is integrated across North America, and we have to look at solutions to our problems with that understanding, that this is a North American industry.

So hopefully the advice of the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East is going to be adopted and there will be significant new dialogue and we will ensure that the Alberta beef industry has strengthened credibility and the consumers, no matter whether they're in Edmonton, New York, Montreal, or Toronto, will have confidence in Alberta beef products.

Now, the hon. minister talked about the Bio-Rad test, and I can understand that this was a test that was initially used for chronic wasting disease in elk populations. I believe every animal that was slaughtered from those populations was to be tested . . .

Mrs. McClellan: Is tested.

Mr. MacDonald: Is tested. Okay. I find no fault or no harm in that.

I had the pleasure of attending a conference that was organized by the University of Lethbridge, the University of Calgary, and the University of Alberta last week in Calgary, and it was very interesting. Experts from all over the world were there to discuss and educate on this whole issue of BSE. It was a very good conference to attend. I learned a lot there, but many of these experts from around the world were expressing caution about rapid BSE tests that could possibly indicate a false positive. I would hate it and be very disappointed if the hon. minister did a lot of work with her staff and with others to promote and enhance our industry and have some false positive test ruin all the hard work that would be done.

Food safety and food safety issues. The hon. minister talked about the situation in the poultry industry in the Fraser Valley in B.C. We have our own situation with beef. Previously there were national news stories in regard to fish farming and salmon. Consumers are

getting suspicious, but consumers have to realize that some of the food safety initiatives that are going on now are really second to none.

3:20

I have learned in the course of my research on BSE that more people will get sick from hamburgers that are barbecued improperly, where there is a lack of proper food handling techniques used in the barbecuing of the patties. In America 1 in 4 people, statistics state, will get sick on an annual basis because of contaminated food or water, and if we educate consumers on how to properly handle, in this case, hamburger patties, we can significantly reduce the number of people who will get sick from the consumption of barbecued hamburgers.

Now, hopefully that will come later. There's no doubt that this department is making every effort to enhance excellence in food safety. There's no doubt in my mind. That was one statistic that certainly caught the ear of this member, that 1 in 4 of us at least once in a calendar year will get sick from either contaminated water or contaminated food. It has nothing to do with poultry or the production of the poultry, the production of the beef, or in another case the production of fish. So there are a lot of stories that are sensationalized, but that's one that isn't, and it's centred around the preparation of the food that we eat.

Mr. Chairman, this is a very interesting department. There are a lot of programs in this department, and there is certainly a lot of use of these programs. This afternoon I hope to have many of my questions answered, and if they cannot be answered, I would certainly appreciate those in writing within a reasonable length of time from the department officials.

The total gross department spending is down slightly, by .3 per cent, from last year, Mr. Chairman. The department is largely the same as it was last year. There are a few real increases of merit with one notable exception, food safety, which is up 54 per cent from last year's budget, and that's probably for obvious reasons. Gross department spending is down, from \$433 million to \$431 million, I believe. This is interesting given last year's experience with agriculture. Does this reflect a restructuring of the department, especially the major restructuring of farm safety net programs?

The standing policy committee spending is up by 4 per cent from last year, Mr. Chairman. Why? Where is the money going? The chairs of the committees got, on average, \$23,000 in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2003. What sort of hours have they put in in order to get almost as much salary as, say, a researcher in our caucus simply for serving on this committee?

Also, can the minister clarify some of the activities of the policy secretariat? Their gross budget has gone down almost 10 per cent from last year; however, the policy secretariat is forecast to spend 27 per cent over the line item from the 2003 budget. So why is that? What activities have they been engaging in?

Under Economics and Competitiveness, item 2.2, administrative support is up approximately 10 per cent, or \$36,000. What is very interesting is that the forecast spending on administrative support for the fiscal year just ended is 1,460 per cent higher, or \$5.1 million, in the line item from last year, which I believe was \$374,000. What's up with this? Why is it so much greater than budgeted?

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

Now, the greatest increase in expenditures in the department is under the food safety reference, 4.3. The total increase for this reference is up 52 per cent, or \$6.9 million. Obviously, this increase is due to the BSE situation in Alberta.

Hopefully, Mr. Chairman, we're going to have more time later on to talk specifically about this BSE situation, but there are some questions I want to get on the record in the meantime.

More directly, the agrifood systems element, 4.3.2, is up 43 per cent, or \$1.6 million, and agrifood laboratories, 69 per cent, or \$2.3 million. This is all to deal with the upgrades to the Provincial Lab in light of BSE I assume, or is this a separate lab?

Mrs. McClellan: Same lab.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. Same lab.

Now, the chief provincial veterinarian's office has had an increase of 230 per cent, or \$344,000, for this budget when compared with last year's budget. What are we going to get for this money? Is there going to be an increase in their recruitment of, let's say, senior 4-H club members that have a very good report card coming home in their satchels, a good science report card? I would really think we need in this province to attract, train, and retain a lot of young Albertans not only in the veterinary professions but in the pathology end of that profession. Is this what's going on here?

Now, element 4.3.3 under Equipment/Inventory Purchases deals with those purchases for the agrifood lab. The amount budgeted is exactly equal to last year's purchases, \$380,000. It is interesting that the comparable forecast of money spent for the department in this line item for the 2003-04 fiscal year was 320 per cent higher, or \$835,000. Can the hon. minister detail these expenses? Also, can the minister please tell us why the budgeted amount under these line items remains the same as before the single case of BSE was detected in Alberta?

In regard to this lab precisely what is going to be the final test cost for one rapid test of BSE, whether it's Bio-Rad or some other one, Prionics? What exactly is the department going to pay for that in this lab? There was a report in an editorial in a local paper where it was between \$25 and \$30. Now, the total cost of this surely has to be \$80 or \$90 or maybe . . .

The Acting Chair: Hon. member, your time has lapsed.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Chairman, I'm going to just do kind of a quick answer to some of the questions because it may help for further questions.

The lab upgrading is in Infrastructure's budget, not mine. Infrastructure builds and does all restoration or re-formation of buildings.

3:30

The increase in my budget is in operating, and I did mention in my opening comments that part of the increase of I think it was \$17.3 million to my overall budget is for the operation of that lab. So that's staffing, test kits, and so on. The kit cost does run somewhere around \$30 a kit. Doing a thousand tests a week, if you were doing that many, your cost would probably be about \$100, somewhere between \$100 and \$150 depending on that range, and of course it depends on volume as to the efficiency of the use of staff and so on that are allocated to that. If you can double that, you bring it down. If you double the number of tests, you can bring the cost down because of the efficiency in volume.

Turnaround time on a rapid test is some three to four hours. While we're on testing, I want to go back to false positives. That would only be an issue if you didn't have a confirmation test. I might say that we used the rapid test in testing some 2,700 animals that we had to test and eliminate from our herds from that incident in May of last year. We did not, as far as I know – and I think I'm

absolutely correct on this – find one false positive, but if you had a false positive, it would be tested using the gold test. That is the more expensive test. That is the test that takes up to three, four days to conclude. It's an immunohistology test. I'm trying to learn the jargon – that's not jargon; that's scientific – the names of some of these.

So false positives are not the issue. If that's all you were using, yeah, it would be an issue. But if you had one, you would immediately go to the gold test and substantiate it. That would be the practice. So that kind of covers testing.

One of the reasons that you don't see as high an increase in food safety as you might expect given the one case of BSE is that we've been very proactive in food safety, and we've increased our budget over the years prior to BSE being found. Of course, it was a distinct advantage to Alberta that we were forward-looking. We did add dollars. I don't remember the exact amount. I do know that I think two years ago it was a million something. The year before that was more money. We've been increasing in food safety over the years, so we don't have to swallow a big gulp when an incident does happen.

The 4-H program was alluded to, and I'm going to give you the detail on that line item, but I can't let that go without saying that we have the best 4-H program in Canada. I will boast of that, but those aren't just our words. That is recognized across Canada. We're the envy of Canada.

I had an opportunity last evening to visit with a group of 4-H leaders. When I concluded a meeting I had, they happened to be meeting in the basement of the same hall, and we had an opportunity to talk about the program. There were some of their young people there, and I can tell you that they are extraordinarily pleased with and proud of the program that we provide in this province. There is no question that it does lend itself to outstanding young people in the industry. For the future we tend to think of the industry as going to the farm, but these are the leaders that go into food safety, food science, into veterinary services.

The number of veterinarians and pathologists is of concern to us. We're working with the Minister of Learning on that. We buy our spaces at the Western College. There's no question that we're not graduating nearly enough food animal veterinarians. It's difficult to control that, because while a student may go in with that intention, they have the right to switch their specialty as they go through, and they have the right to practise in whatever area they want to when they graduate. We do our utmost. As you know, we fund a chair in large animal practice at Western College. So we're doing what we can to improve that, and I must say that we're recruiting world-wide for pathologists. The shortage is not just here. It is a world-wide shortage, and that's of concern.

I want to just mention a couple of other things briefly. Mrs. O'Leary's cow. I didn't think you were at any of the things that I was talking at. I used that as an example of how one cow can disrupt the whole world as we know it. The difference in export ban in this case is that that is what happened. It's what we did when an incident was found somewhere. Immediately your borders are closed.

What's different in our experience – and it is unique to this experience – is that our borders opened with the U.S. within seven months, not seven years, which would be the norm, that as of Monday of this week a tremendous announcement, I believe, where all edible cuts of beef will cross the border. Prior to that, we had been limited to boneless cuts. Now bone-in cuts can go, like T-bone steaks, rib roasts, ground beef, and that's huge. Of course, we're all waiting with anticipation for the rule to come out, and it certainly was encouraging to us when they added product from over-30-month cattle to that rule. I'm hopeful that that rule will be implemented.

The difficulty we have, even with the expanded cuts taking place, is that we are at packer capacity. We had an industry meeting last Friday. We had all of our major packers there, the three of them, talked to them. They're going six days a week, full shift, flat out. We're slaughtering and shipping more product than we were prior to BSE, but we simply don't have the capacity in Canada anywhere. Remember: we slaughter 70 some per cent in Alberta.

An Hon. Member: How much?

Mrs. McClellan: Seventy some per cent of the slaughter occurs here, and that is of concern to us, because even with this additional product going, the capacity is an issue. There's a lot of activity happening in that area, but we have to be realistic. To build a plant, if you started today, you're looking at eight, 10, 12 months for it to be operational, and it's also a huge investment. That's why it's important to us to have live cattle be able to move. Personally, I think that every agricultural product that goes out of this province, whether it's in grains, animals, vegetables, or fruits, should go in a box. It should be value added. Frankly, we don't have the capacity right now.

The other reason that you need this opportunity is that you need arbitrage in the market, you need price determination, and you don't have that in a closed market. It is encouraging to us to see that American buyers are buying here now and have been for the last several weeks. The Premier has championed this idea. It's taking different forms. The Prime Minister has carried this forward. We're pleased about that. Our officials, provincially and federally, are working on this. We had a discussion about it at our federal/provincial/territorial meetings a week ago, 10 days ago. We did discuss this with the undersecretary of agriculture in the U.S. as to their interest. They are also interested, whether we would do it together or we would do it singly. But we recognize that.

The other thing that is of great interest to us on the North American side is harmonization. We'll always be competitors, but if we can harmonize as much as possible some of our regulatory areas and scientific areas, it will be of benefit to all of us. We have to remember that one of the players in the North American market has perhaps not got all of the institutional ability yet, the scientific ability yet. That is a challenge, but those are challenges we are definitely committed, as Canada, to work on with the U.S. and Mexico.

ID system. It would be wonderful if it would be harmonized. But I think we are individuals; we will choose our own. I am most proud of the fact that the animal that we had in Alberta was traced back absolutely as to the origin of that animal and in very short order. The animal that was found in the U.S. was traced back into Canada very quickly. Their trace out beyond that was, frankly, less than good, and that speaks to the fact that we do have a national identification system and the U.S. does not. They recognize that they must, and they will work towards one. They will have what suits their industry the best. We will have what suits our industry the best. I can only say: thank goodness that our cattlemen did proceed with what was a very, very contentious issue on a national identification system. I am so pleased that they persevered and did it.

3:40

You talked about China. We are in China. It would be helpful if you had an opportunity to talk to some of our producers that are over there. They've been there for some time. They have been working on embryo and semen mainly because, obviously, transportation and utilization in that area is quite often easier, and it's that that they want.

We had a bit of a halt, obviously, with BSE, but those companies

are still in China. We see that as a growth market. We are also in Russia. When I say "we," I don't talk about government. Our producers are the best salesmen. We're there to help them, to open doors if it's necessary, to work on issues around health protocols, regulatory things, but our producers go out there. We are well recognized in the world as leaders. Russia is another potentially important market.

Just as a reminder, today the U.S. is our largest market. That won't change. There are too many reasons for it to stay that way. We have an integrated market now. We have a natural advantage in transportation proximity, similar cultures, same languages, and so on. So it's going to be our largest market.

Japan was our second largest market; today Mexico is. You should look at the graphs that show the growth in the Mexican market. The Canada Beef Export Federation put an office into Monterrey. I'm trying to think of how long ago that was, maybe five years ago. It's somewhere in that range. The growth in that Mexican market was just absolutely phenomenal, and there's huge opportunity for future growth there. Then Japan is third, and on it goes.

One of the important things for those external markets is that they take product that we don't necessarily use as much here or in the U.S. They buy offal cuts that we are not as prone to use here, and they buy it at a very, very good price, because that's a premium item in other cultures. So that's important to us. But our industry recognizes that they have to diversify and expand their markets.

The Minister of Economic Development may want to comment because they're the salesmen in the world for us, and there have been additional dollars provided to Economic Development to assist our industry in enlarging our market base, and I can tell you that those dollars are working well.

The other thing that we increased that I should just mention quickly is product development, and those were dollars that were put in place to develop utilization of product for over-30-month animals, because that's going to be with us for a long time. We have put the Leduc processing centre at our industry's disposal. We have purchased some additional equipment there. There are some excellent initiatives.

I think that some dozen or 14, at least that I have seen, Alberta companies hold great promise in that they are going to develop more home for that over-30-month product, value-added right here, because that's going to continue to be a problem.

I'll point out that we're probably killing almost as many cows now as we were pre-BSE. Our difficulty is that we cannot and are not killing the 70 per cent of those animals that went into the U.S. mainly for slaughter, processing, and then sale. We don't have the capacity to do it. If you'd just look in western Canada, there's one major cow plant – it's at Moose Jaw – a small plant by plant standards. Tyson kills cows on a limited basis in Brooks, and there are some smaller plants in eastern Canada, Quebec and Ontario.

But if you were killing cows, B.C. cows would come to either, as we know it, Lakeside/Tyson or go to Moose Jaw. Some of the cows that our producers shipped went to Quebec.

Not a very good deal on the value of a cow today, so we need to do more there. We have probably five, six, or seven groups that are very serious about increasing our capacity in Alberta. We provided some dollars to help them develop business plans and expertise around this – you want to make a good business decision – and Ag Financial Services has a loan program that is available to people who are looking at developing plants.

So there's a lot of activity going on. I think you could spend three days talking about what is happening in this area, and you'd miss something. I just want to assure you that market development has

been occurring, but the U.S. will continue to be our biggest market for all of those reasons that I laid out.

I would, though, certainly hope that at some point in the afternoon, the Minister of Economic Development might share with you some of that information, or if he can't do it here, when his estimates come up, I think it would be an excellent opportunity to get that information.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have one further question at this time before I cede the floor to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East. If the hon. minister could clarify – she spoke about the trips to China, and they were there selling embryos. Now, I'm of the impression that when the BSE ban occurred, the border was closed, it was for live cattle and also embryos. I'm told now that the export of embryos to a large number of countries has resumed.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

I have not read about this in the media. Maybe I overlooked it; maybe I missed it. Who's to say? But I think it's a good-news story that this trade has resumed, and it has not to my knowledge been reported. If it was reported, I missed it. It's the stepping stone we need to open the border to live cattle. Could the hon. minister confirm that, please?

Mrs. McClellan: Semen and embryo do travel. The disruption that I talked about was the total disruption in all trade initially, right after BSE. You didn't probably read about it in the newspaper too much because, you know, usually if it's kind of good news, we don't get an awful lot of coverage on it. I wouldn't get it because I'm not probably as prone to reading the newspapers for information as you are. I find other sources might be just as good to get it.

Embryo and semen are moving and continue to move. So the disruption is just overall in trade in beef. We're not only interested – and when I say we, I'm not talking government. I'm talking we the agricultural industry, in this case the beef industry. We are interested in expanding those markets to meat products.

I said, when the border opened in Macao, how important that was, and some people thought: really, Macao is a little peninsula. I said island, and somebody corrected me very quickly. It's a peninsula, a very small country, but it has proved since how important the opening of Macao was, and product is moving to Macao. It's a step in opening all of Asia.

There have been so many things that have happened over the last months that may not seem significant to others but to the industry are huge. This is a marketplace that operates a lot on signals, on information. It's a commodity, and prices can be affected up or down. We have tried to be very careful as government members in what we say because we don't want to impact the market in the wrong way, and we know that that can happen. A statement by the Premier, a minister, or somebody in government can have an impact on the market in a negative way as well as a positive way. What we want is a true market situation, not one that is based on something that might or might not happen.

3:50

The actual announcement of the U.S. opening its border to all edible cuts of beef occurred Monday morning, but actually it was out late last week. If you followed the markets, you would have seen the markets on Friday and the TEAM sales went up 8 to 10 cents. Now,

for the people that sold that week, the guys that sold before the rumors started would be a little sorry and the guys that sold after it were of course elated with the better price. What was important to us was that Monday opened with that same 8 to 10 cent increase. So this is a marketplace that's very fluid and reacts.

I'll leave it at that, and we'll have some more questions, and on we go.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to start by joining the minister in saying thank you to all of the individuals in the Agricultural, Food and Rural Development staff. They've been great to work with over the last 11 years, and it's been a real opportunity, I think, for me to learn a lot about their approach and the way they deal with policy. I commend them on their willingness to be open and to work for the industry, which is what we're all in it for.

I guess that I just want to conclude with a couple of comments and questions about some of the things that went on. I'd kind of break it down into maybe three different areas. Again, we all have to start with the crisis that faced our industry this year in the BSE area. Minister, you were talking about the idea that the use of the quick test might lead to false positives and that automatically transfers the test on to the gold standard test.

A question came through my mind as you were making that comment. This is going to mean a four-day confinement, in effect, for that product both in terms of the carcass, in terms of the head, all of that. What is being put in place there to deal with that, and how will that be handled in the context of who's going to take the impact? Will it mean that all of the meat at a plant is all of a sudden on hold, or can the carcass be isolated? Are these kinds of plans in place within the industry to deal with that contingency?

As much as we never want it to happen, I think we're learning that we have to be prepared. The potential, then, for the perceived contamination of other meats from the carcass that has that potential positive sets a whole mood for the industry, especially the consumers. I guess, you know, in terms of the industry and the public, maybe the best thing would be that that all happens quietly, but that doesn't necessarily always occur. So we have to make sure that there is a public awareness of this whole process so that the confidence stays there: okay; this may have happened, but precaution has been taken. If you could outline whether or not those discussions are even going on, I think that at this point that's all we can ask for because this whole process is both reasonably new and dynamic, so we have to be prepared for adjustments to go on continuously in this process.

[Mr. Klapstein in the chair]

One more comment on the BSE, then I'll move on to some others. You spoke about the 99.96 per cent risk. I guess the question comes up – and I've dealt with this when I was teaching at the university before – in terms of what constitutes appropriate levels of acceptance for risk, and we hear constantly the people say: well, we've got to test more. I've always answered back: you know, well, we've got this to 99 per cent. And I thank you for the extra few decimals that I can now use. You talk about improving beyond that just by testing a few more. The only thing we really can do is test everything.

What we need is some kind of an information process for the average Albertan, the average Canadian so that they understand that we are testing at a level which in effect is more than sufficient, is standard sufficient. To do anything other than that is just . . .

Mrs. McClellan: It's a waste.

Dr. Nicol: Yes. It's extra cost, extra effort which we don't as a public get a benefit out of. This is the thing we have to really look at. How do we get that kind of standard for Canadians and, I guess, for the international market?

A lot of people have come to me and said: what do you make out of this instance that occurs in the press all the time about this company in the United States that wanted to undertake the tests, prove that the animals were clean, and then enter the international market, in effect create a market niche or a market-differentiated product? Then they're saying: well, if they can do that for an international market, why can't they do it for us? I think we've got to start under the food safety initiatives and start talking about risk in all aspects of it, not necessarily just BSE, but we've got to get the consumer to understand that no matter what you do, there's a risk.

I went down to the grocery store when I came into town and bought my week's supply of groceries. You buy a can of something, and everybody says: well, canned food is ultimately safe. No. There is a risk factor to that. It's not a hundred per cent. If the consumer can understand this, they'll accept the fact that our beef is probably safer than that can I bought.

This is the thing that we have to look at in terms of: how do we make that transition now? It's so easy to have a bad-news story get out and create questions in the minds of Albertans and Canadians and our international trade partners about what the real risk they're facing is. So some kind of an education program in the future, Madam Minister, when we get to dealing with the new food safety initiatives that are coming out of the realignment of the ministry is something that we really need to look at.

I just want to conclude my comments now on BSE by saying that every Albertan and every Canadian, all of us, have to thank the scientists for the great job they did. They created an international standard on how to handle this that has been recognized and been commented on in Europe, in the United States, all around the world. That just shows the dedication that we have in terms of both our provincial vets and the CFIA, in terms of their actions. So I want to join you in putting it on the record that from the science perspective we really came through on this and showed that consumers can have confidence because of the work that our pathologists and our vets are doing.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

I just want to touch briefly on a couple of other areas that we need to deal with. You talked a little bit about the incentive for the industry to grow and the way we wanted to do that. I guess that this is a question that comes to my mind every time we talk about, you know, the new directions of our ag initiatives. The ag summit process went on at length a few years ago. I guess there was a real initiative there to talk about what we need to do in each of these areas. There are a lot of initiatives, you know, in the food safety area. There are a lot of initiatives coming out now in environment conservation, all of these from that ag summit process. What's missing is how the ag summit talked about the vision for where we want to be.

4:00

I was looking back at, you know, the mission statement of the ministry, where you start off: "To enable the growth of a globally competitive, sustainable agriculture and food industry through essential policy, legislation, information and services." You know, that says a lot, but it doesn't tell Albertans what you see as the role

that agriculture needs to play both in terms of public policy and the area that we're going into in terms of transition.

You know, if you read that and say, "Okay; this is great," being a free-market economist, I say, "This is going to mean that the market's going to work and we're going to let the market drive forces." Then you find somebody that says, "Well, if you let the market drive forces, we're going to end up, in effect, with great big farms in Alberta and nothing else." That's not what we want for rural Alberta.

So information needs to be presented to Albertans that talks about, you know, how we see this transition and how we see an end description, if you want to call it that, of the rural community. I got into a real debate last week in Lethbridge when somebody asked a question of me about what they called "factory farms." My response was that in many cases – and I think we've seen it in some crisis situations in Alberta – the big producers have the wherewithal to actually adjust and respond to a crisis more so than the small mixed operation. I made that comment, and it wasn't accepted very well by the individuals who asked the question in the sense that they said, "Well, if you've got it spread out a little bit more, then you don't have the concentration; you don't have the impact."

Well, you know, this is the kind of thing that if we're going to have the magnitude of an industry that we want in Alberta, we're going to have the same number of animals, whether there are 10 on each farm or whether there are 10,000 on each farm or whether there are 100,000 on each farm. There's going to be the same number of animals if we have that economic incentive and opportunity to produce that product in our rural communities.

So I guess that what we need to do is help inform Albertans about this area of what we see as the driving forces behind agriculture. If it's going to be the market in that way, then Albertans need to be made aware of the fact that the big farms are going to become more and more the standard rather than something to say: why do we have these? You know, that kind of vision needs to be put together.

Just a final comment on that. I was making a presentation to a bunch of individuals involved in the federal arena as well. I suggested that as a policy economist the ag policy framework provided me with all kinds of opportunities to deal with really constructive policy-making, but until you knew what you wanted in terms of agriculture, you didn't know what policy to put in place because you didn't know what the end was.

I think that's missing out of the ag policy framework as well, you know, in terms of an overview statement about what we see as the future of agriculture. If we're really looking at the commercial production of a safe food product for the consumer, then we have to separate production from this concept of what is a rural community. The rural community has got to be based on a diversified economy, not an agriculture/farm vision. I think that kind of a statement is good because at least if we have that kind of an answer, then when I get up in these meetings, it would be easier to give an answer as to what we wanted our end to be.

I've got a couple more issues that I wanted to raise, but I think I'm just about at the end of my time. I'll sit down now and let you get to those, and then when my turn comes up again, I'll hit the other ones. Just to give you a little forewarning, it deals with crop insurance and some of the other CAIS programs.

Mrs. McClellan: I'll try and be brief and, as I said, will respond in detail in writing when it's appropriate.

On testing. We have the capacity to deal with holding animals now. Primarily the animals that are tested are tested from provincial abattoirs, obviously, because the target group is over 30 months. So they have that capacity now. That's one of the issues that would be

around testing every animal, but there are more issues than that. If we asked, even with the rapid test, one of our major plants how many animals they could kill if they were required to test every animal, they thought about 1,000 a week. We kill up to 6,000 a day, so obviously we wouldn't even satisfy our domestic market. If we were asked to do that, they would probably have to increase their freezer space by 10 times and even more.

A lot of people don't realize – you know, you have to stop and think this through – that when you test an animal for BSE, you have to kill the animal. There is no live test. You have to remove that small part of the brain, and then you have to put it through the process. But you also have to remove all of the SRMs from the animals when they are tested. So you today have to remove all specified risk materials from that animal. If you're going to test every animal, you have to contain all of those separately. So you would have to take all of the SRMs and bag them or whatever you'd do for that individual animal and store them until you had your results. Then you would have to take your sides, because this animal is now going to be sorted, and they would have to be tagged and bagged and separated. Every part of that animal has to be identified and held until your test results come back.

There's no point in saying: okay, we'll test every animal. You couldn't do it. We don't have the capacity. Even with our additional labs we couldn't do it.

The more important point in all this is that you shouldn't do it. There is no scientific basis to do it. The USDA in their decision on Cold Creek, as I understand it, is based strictly on that they are going to make a determination on the level of testing based on science. The danger is that once you stray from using science and the best information you have for making decisions, you get onto very dangerous ground. If you do it for one thing, then why wouldn't you do it for another? You shouldn't go there. Otherwise, why would you use the science? You know, what we're trying to do on feed policy, on testing policy is use the best science available.

The other thing is the cost. You are going to put in a cost that has no benefit to human health. I don't know how I could recommend to the people in this Legislature that we spend another \$90 million or \$100 million in our province, somewhere in that range, to do testing that has no scientific basis and is not going to improve or impact human health when we have people who need cancer treatments, when we know that if we vaccinated every baby for influenza, we would save lives. People are actually dying from that; children are dying. People died from SARS. The money would be better spent there.

I don't know how you would ever advocate or should advocate doing something that doesn't have a benefit on either herd surveillance or, more importantly, on the impact on human health. As you said, there is some level of risk in everything you do. I think a risk at 99.96 per cent is one that our public accepts. It's an interesting area how this thing with BSE went so wildly out of control. In Europe or the U.K. perhaps you can understand it: 183,000 positives that they know of prior to putting in the precautions that science said you needed to do. We have to step back and say that the U.S. and Canada both put in feed bans in 1997 that ban ruminant-to-ruminant feeding. Science says that that is the way this disease would be transmitted, so you've minimize that. The removal of specified risk materials, science tells us, takes us on the human health side to 99.96 per cent.

4:10

Now Japan. Interesting because it's always brought up that Japan is still finding younger cases. Of course they are. They did not implement a feed ban in 1997 when much of the world did. In fact,

we did here in the U.S. and in Canada. Their feed ban went in in 2001, so they have some time before they can feel some assurance that, in fact, there isn't a transmission or cross-contamination problem there. So it's a different issue.

It's amazing that a disease that is so isolated, that so few human beings have contracted over 10 years in the whole world, has caused such a furor. I feel safer eating beef in this country than almost anything because I know the security and safety measures we have and I know that food safety is a priority for this country.

I know that three years ago when we began the ag policy framework discussions in Whitehorse, this was a key element of the ag policy framework for Canada. The ministers of the day, federal, provincial, and territorial, made a commitment to develop a policy that made food safety a priority, that branded Canada as the best supplier of safe food products. All of our work to this date has gone to that, whether it's in the food safety area, research, areas like that. So I am confident that we're on the right track.

Food recall is an interesting thing. Some people see it as a negative; I don't. You know, I feel much better knowing that they can detect problems in food and trace it back and take it off the shelves. The attitude that something else is better, like "if I don't know about it, it's okay," I don't feel real good about. So I'm pretty happy that we have these systems, whether it's in fish, poultry, beef, or vegetables, that we actually can trace it and identify it and remove the risk from our population.

I appreciate very much your comments about our scientists, whether they're with CFIA or our provincial vets. You're absolutely right; they are top-notch. They have delivered service far beyond any value of their salaries that we could have given them in this instance. They've been amazing.

The ag summit process, the vision. I think the key words in that are: enable growth and policies. We have to be careful as government that we understand that it's not us that will grow this industry, but it's the industry that will grow, confident that we will put in policies that enable it to grow in a safe and viable manner down the road. Agrivantage teams have done a lot of work in this area. I met with the Agriculture and Food Council yesterday and, in fact, coincidentally, talked much about the same thing. I think you're right. We could do a better job of enunciating some of this, but you always wonder who really is going to listen because it's too good of news.

I am so tired of the words "factory farms." I know you hate it as well. What you're really talking about are corporate farms. I want to remind everybody that in the last information that I saw, less than 3 per cent of the large farms in our province are held outside of families. So your so-called factory farm, or corporate farm, could have five family members that if they were individually not incorporated that way would be operating as a unit. What they've done is come together for management practices, for efficiency, and sometimes – let's be honest – for tax purposes. It just makes more sense.

So before we start talking about some corporate takeover of our farms, remember that the corporations are families. I have families around me where five family members are making their living off that corporate farm. It might be called a factory farm by some people, but I don't think they feel good about being labelled that way because they are contributors.

It's going to be an increasing difficulty for us because in many of the areas we do not find commodity prices rising at the primary level commensurate with the cost of providing them, and the grain sector is a very good example of that right now. If you look at the value of a bushel of wheat today compared to the value of a bushel of wheat 30 or 40 years ago, it hasn't changed a heck of a lot, but I can tell

you the cost of producing that has. The only thing that has really worked for our industry is good research, good husbandry, good management practices, and their ability to increasingly become more efficient and more productive. But you do wonder where that line ends, and I think we're very close to it. I think it's going to be very difficult to produce product if people don't recognize a higher value at the primary level.

People wondered why the price of beef didn't go down more than it did. It did go down 20 per cent in Alberta. That's documented. But you know what? The cost of buying your meat at the counter is quite different than it was when it was produced at the primary level or, indeed, slaughtered at the packer level. None of the workers who work in any of those areas took a 50 per cent reduction in their wages. We continued to pay the people, whether they were the processors in the plants – and obviously we should. So all of those costs remained constant. The hit came down at the producing level. No question. That is one good reason why you will not see a huge difference in the cost of that product. It had to be retail, and the people that retail it had to be paid and should be paid. I mean, they work for their money.

So these are issues that I think are going to be of huge discussion by our industry, and I think the more sessions and conferences we have where people in this industry come together and debate and discuss these issues the better. But the marketplace has to be the final determinant, in my view. I think the hon. member that asked the question is totally a believer in that as well. The marketplace must be the determinant. Our responsibility in government is to ensure that we have policies in place that allow the market to work yet protect the areas that need to be protected, like air, soil, and water quality.

Of course, we've done a great deal of work to do that with the introduction of the Ag Operation Practices Amendment Act and the work that the NRCB is doing through the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development to make sure that we maintain that protection.

The ag policy framework does provide a vehicle. An interesting comment. I will have that discussion with my colleagues on whether the vision is well enough defined. The vehicle is there. I guess you should know where it's going. I'll have a look at that.

Part of the answer here is our rural development strategy. Again I want to commend the members for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and Wainwright for the work they did in going out and listening to rural communities and then writing a document that reflected what they said, not what the government said but what they said. I believe that there is a huge amount of interest in our rural communities in being a part of this.

4:20

We are now in the process of gathering information from other ministries. Obviously for rural development you have a large impact by Health – you've got to have Health – and, of course, Learning, Infrastructure, Transportation. There are many ministries that need to be involved in this. We're proud to be tagged in with our Minister of Economic Development to work on these strategies together. Our hope is to have that work done . . .

Mr. Smith: Don't forget the oil industry. Hands across rural Alberta.

Mrs. McClellan: Yeah. We work with them very closely because, frankly, in some areas that's what's keeping it going. It is the energy industry.

That strategy should be redefined. Go back to the communities

and say: "Now, this is what we've put together. Is this really what you believe will move us forward in our vision for our rural communities and growth, and if not, where is it wrong?" It's my hope to have that information all completed and back to us so we can incorporate it into our new business plan.

Those are just a few comments. There are some more specifics that I will provide to the hon. member at a later date.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome this opportunity to ask some questions of the minister related to her department's budget for this fiscal year, 2004-2005, but before that I have some general observations to make.

I was listening to the very last part of the minister's response to the questions just before she sat down. She made two comments which I thought needed some clarification. The minister said about the corporate and factory farms, the one area on which she commented, that the farms in Alberta owned by corporations, or corporate farms, constitute only about 3 per cent of the total ownerships, I suppose, related to farms. That certainly is one way of looking at it. I think that perhaps a more critical question is: what percentage of our total volume of production is related to corporate or factory farms, and what percentage is, you know, associated with the production of family farms? So that would be additional information that would be useful.

The second comment that caught my attention as she was concluding her comments had to do with the controversy over the BSE crisis problem and who got the hit and who benefited or didn't. She particularly, I think, focused on drawing the attention of the House to the fact that the packers' costs related to labour didn't disappear, that they remained in place, and I agree. Yet we do know that while the producers lost revenues – many of them, of course, complained bitterly about not receiving the benefits from the government aid plans – the packers' profits certainly quadrupled during the same period. So that's a question that needs to be addressed, I think, seriously.

Although labour costs didn't decline – and I presume they stayed more or less the same as they were around May of last year; they may have increased only incrementally, you know, by 3, 4, or 5 per cent over that period since – then why is it that the profits of the packers quadrupled? I was talking to our research people this morning, and I was informed that although the packer profits did go down a bit over the last few months, they've come back up to the level of having a fourfold increase in them. There is something there that needs to be addressed.

As a matter of fact, the House of Commons committee on agriculture I think is questioning packer representatives today, those who agreed to be available, on that precise question. I hope that the minister will pursue this matter seriously to get to the bottom of it. Consumers didn't benefit, although the minister claims that the consumer prices did drop by 20 per cent, but they dropped by 20 per cent only with respect to certain cuts and in particular, I think, to ground beef. So when we brought the figures back to the House, we did bring, in fact, the department's own figures from the department's own web site. [interjection] I want to set the record straight on that one. Not all cuts.

As a matter of fact, there was a letter in the *Journal* yesterday where a consumer complained that a T-bone steak that he bought in, say, May of last year, in the pre-BSE period, cost him \$5.90 and a T-bone steak that he bought, the same size, this month or last month cost him \$6.90. He was asking: why is it that the prices of these cuts have not been affected by this crisis while the incomes of the producers have been hit very, very hard?

So those are some of the questions that I just wanted to draw the minister's attention to related to her remarks which were, I guess, in response to the Member for Lethbridge-East's questions.

I have some general questions here, Mr. Chairman, to the minister with respect to some of the performance measures. I'm looking at the business plans, and there was interest in strengthened rural communities as one of the key programs that the minister's department has. Looking at the performance measures under Strengthened Rural Communities, I notice that the target for this year for investment in rural businesses is in fact at least 10 per cent lower than the actual for 2003-2004. Will the minister please comment on this particular reduction in the target from the actual by 10 per cent in terms of investment in rural businesses?

The other related questions to that are: what are the types of rural businesses that are covered under this reference with respect to this performance measure? What kind of businesses are you talking about? Are they agriculturally related businesses, or are they businesses related to retail? What forms does this investment in rural business take? I'm just curious. Is it in the form of loans, grants, development of some technologies, business strategies? Where is this investment made? What form does it take?

Another target there under the same performance measures is the per cent change in total employment in rural Alberta. You know, that certainly is a concern. I know that the minister is concerned about it. Rural communities are certainly concerned about depopulation, about their ability to maintain and keep the young people in rural communities and, of course, jobs there. The last actual I think I gathered is for the year 2003-2004 and shows a .4 percentage drop in employment in the rural areas. The projected target for 2004-2005 is zero, so it will stay at the reduced level. There'll be no change in it.

What measures in the budget are in place in order to address this potential threat to the health of rural communities and their vibrancy? If employment goes down, clearly the rural communities' sustainability comes into question. So I'm asking the minister to perhaps shed some light in terms of budget allocations that will address the question of this potential drop in rural employment.

4:30

There is another quandary that I have. It's primarily because of my ignorance, I think. In the business plan under Continued Excellence in Food Safety and under Performance Measures, on page 114 at the top of the page, there's something called a "meat (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP-based))" measure. What is it, Madam Minister? What exactly is meant by it, and why is it at level 0 at the last actual if it's an important sort of measure? What does it measure exactly, and why is it at that level, you know, as we speak? And how is it going to go up by 6 per cent in the year under question? So these are questions that came to my mind as I was going through it.

Now, looking at the core businesses, goals, strategies, and measures, I was looking at the strategies. "Encourage market access, market responsiveness, diversity and industry competitiveness." Under diversity there was a news item in the paper just last week, I guess, with respect to some producer group, beef producers in northern Alberta who want to set up their own packing plant where they would test a hundred per cent of the animals that are slaughtered there.

Two questions on that. To me it's good news that there are efforts underway to reduce the concentration of packer capacity, you know, by these co-operative efforts made by producers themselves. What is the government position with respect to these initiatives, and is there a way in which to assist, in fact, the development of such

diversity with respect to packer capacity in the province? And, secondly, what's the government's view with respect to this intention of this group as expressed publicly to move toward a hundred per cent testing of the animals?

I know that the government has taken a very clear position driven by science, but here's a group of producers who want to move to a hundred per cent. What's the view of the minister with respect to that sort of initiative that this group of producers in northern Alberta proposes to take, and will they be supported by this minister and by this department if they get, I think, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's okay to go ahead with it?

So those are some general questions. Now, let me look at my notes here. Oh, yes. With respect to diversification, the second part, the minister mentioned, Mr. Chairman, about Japan in the pre BSE crisis period being our second largest market. I've forgotten the figures. What percentage of our exports would that have constituted? Japan, that is.

Mrs. McClellan: Four per cent.

Dr. Pannu: Four per cent. I see. Still very small. So our primary dependence is on the U.S. market, I guess.

Mrs. McClellan: Mexico too.

Dr. Pannu: Right.

Now, what will it take to recapture that 4 per cent? I presume that every percentage is important from the point of getting a diversified base for our exports. What measures would be needed in order to recapture that market, and is it worth the cost that those measures will entail in order to capture that market?

I do want to make the general point, though, that the diversification into export markets is critical. I think that's one of the lessons that we've learned from the BSE crisis. Every effort should be made without compromising our ability to take advantage of the market next door, which is huge in itself and is easiest in terms of access, in terms of, you know, historical flows of our goods in that direction, cultural sort of continuity, geographical contiguity. The minister mentioned all those factors. But I think the fact that our export markets are so dangerously heavily concentrated in the U.S. is something that is cause for concern, and I think it's something that needs to be addressed.

I want to therefore encourage the minister to share with the House any plans that she has to seek dilution of that concentration of export markets across the border, and if we can do that, I think it's something that's very much in the interest of the industry, the interest of producers, and the interest of the economy in Alberta.

One or two other questions here. What general lessons are there to be learned from this BSE crisis in terms of our testing capacity, testing intensity? I think we've already taken some steps, and I'm pleased to note that we are testing more now than we did before.

I remember the minister and I chatting on the day that she heard the news. She called me at home, and we chatted about how serious this crisis was going to be, and I think events have proven the seriousness of that crisis. One of the, I think, weaknesses of that crisis really was that we had rolled back our capacity to test, our lab capacity. So the question is: have we expanded our lab capacity? Is it the same as it was before, or is it sufficient now to deal with any new emergency that might arise?

The third question related to lessons from BSE. Is the program designed for helping producers directly? I think the fact that the whole controversy with respect to who really benefited from the very well-intentioned efforts perhaps on all sides to help the producers

who were faced with this crisis because the animals weren't moving fast enough and the prices had plummeted – many families were facing bankruptcy or a complete economic disaster. What program design weaknesses have we discovered which explain the problems that these families faced in spite of the fact that a huge amount of public dollars were spent on that program? Are we now ready and willing and prepared to sort of plug those loopholes if we have learned about them and know what they are? That's another question, and as I say, it's a serious one.

It is the case that the producers didn't benefit very much from the initial sort of phase of the aid package, and certainly consumers didn't benefit very much. So the question is: how can the program design be improved to make sure that this does not happen in case the unfortunate case of the BSE crisis arises again.

Another question that I have for the minister – and this came from my reading of the general statement on strategies. One of the things in the strategies outlined in the core businesses of the department is enhancing “the development of new products and processes to assist industry in capturing additional value added market opportunities.”

Now, the first part of the statement: enhancing the development of new products. I haven't seen any reference in the plans here with respect to organic agriculture. There's obviously a growing interest in organically grown food and agricultural products. There's controversy over GM foods. Is there any attention paid to this growing interest among consumers here at home and abroad in organic agriculture and concerns about the safety of GM foods and GM products either in terms of consumer education or in terms of, in fact, encouraging alternative food products along organic production lines? Are there any commitments in the budget or any plans here that the minister can draw our attention to where organic producers and organic food consumers can be assured that due attention is being paid to this growing interest in this area of food production and consumption in the province?

A few other questions if I can get my pages straight here.

4:40

The Chair: Hon. member, your time is up. You'll have another chance.

Mrs. McClellan: There are a lot of things in this, and it's going to take a longer explanation than we have. Organics. Interesting subject. Niche markets. No question. However, there's a lot of work to be done in that area. How do you enforce the statements that are made about how it's grown? How do you audit that? I sell carrots; I tell you they've had no pesticides, no fertilizers, nothing. How do you know that? A whole issue around labelling.

I am concerned. I'm a supporter of the organics area, but I'm concerned that we don't have the methodology or the ability to actually back up these statements. It's a big concern. I'm a little more comfortable eating product when I actually know what they have to label and tell us what is in it and where it has been and what it has had applied to it. So I think we have a lot of work to do there. No question that it's a growth area. No question that I support the fact that there will be a niche market for that, but, boy, we better watch how we manage this whole area.

Capacity in testing. We're the only province in Canada who several months ago, in June, put out an overall plan. In fact, nobody else has done it at all yet. Fortunately, our Premier, although he may not have experienced this industry, understood the importance of it and definitely directed us to bring in an overall plan that included all of those things, such as program development to ease us through the situation, the importance of having the lab capacity that we might require.

I invited the Prime Minister to invest in this lab. I'm still hoping

that he will. They've built a new lab in Quebec. I thought it would be nice if they just put a little money into this one. It was recognized that there was one needed. We have the level 3 lab coming up, and I'm still inviting them to participate. It would be great. But we did do it.

The Canada Beef Export Federation. I don't know how familiar the hon. member is with that organization. They are our salesmen of our products in the world. They've done an absolutely fantastic job. I mentioned earlier about them opening an office in Monterrey, Mexico, and the increase in sales there. We're there in government as supporters if we need to work with them on opening doors to get meetings, to get into countries, diplomatic ways, if they need us on policy, the federal government on health regulations and so on. That's government's role. Our industry is the best salesman. They don't need us to do that. They need us to be there as supporters and make sure we have policies that do that.

One of the lessons we've learned is that we'd better pay attention more to international protocols because I think we were all just a little easy on this issue around BSE. We didn't have it. Now we realize that there's a lot of work that needs to be done to update those.

I've already I think clarified off the record that the U.S. is and will continue to be our largest market. It just makes all kinds of sense. Beef is a perishable product. Most people want to buy it fresh. Most of the countries that we talk about have long transportation times and costs associated. It doesn't mean that we won't be there and that we aren't there now. We are. The other thing is they want a different product. If anybody really has ever butchered a beef animal, it is a very diverse product line. You know, there are people that eat virtually almost every part of it. I'm not there. I'm pretty imaginative and innovative and all of that, but I draw the line in some spots.

The issue around a packing plant in northern Alberta and testing: that is the CFIA's issue. As far as I know, they have not put that forward. The CFIA will determine it. Do I have a concern? I think every decision we make should be based on science. As I understand it, in the U.S. that's what happened with Cold Creek. You take one small plant for a niche market, and they do something that then becomes imposed on everything, everyone, and you take yourself right out of the marketplace because you're up against people who don't have to do that. I think you have to have a balance in the whole industry. I hope that CFIA and their determination in this will look at a balance in the whole industry.

I did make an error earlier. I said that we had some dozen or 14 projects under our using over-30-month beef. My goodness, I just added them up. There are 45. These are Alberta companies, and I'm excited about that. That says that they're going to do this. We had \$7.1 million that was set aside to assist our companies in developing a home for this over-30-month product, because we know we're going to have it for some time. So we'll be value adding that product here instead of shipping the live animal to the U.S., where they value added it and sold it back to us. Some of that meant that they had to get new equipment or expand their operation. This, I think, is great.

There was a 20 per cent reduction, and, yes, most of it was in the lower end, but if you understand a beef carcass, you know that 26 per cent, 28 tops, is the high end, and something has to pay for the whole animal. So you didn't see the reduction, but the high ends did go down. You know, darn it, if you're going to use our web site, use it right.

Dr. Pannu: We did use it right.

Mrs. McClellan: You didn't. The information that you took off that web site was not used appropriately. Those were different dates and

different cuts. What we were talking about was a period of 10 months on the whole animal. So, you know, I appreciate people giving me information, but I like it based on facts.

I'm going to say my last comment on this. You made the statement that the packers' profits quadrupled. I would appreciate the information that backs that up because, frankly, I haven't seen it. As the minister responsible for this industry and with the passion that I feel for this industry, I will not be somebody that flings statements around that I can't back up with fact. That is the most dangerous thing that could happen to this beef industry today. The one thing I've been proud of in our industry is that they have stuck together. They have had those debates and those discussions and I think have made responsible statements, and I believe I should do that. I don't have any facts that say that packers quadrupled their profits. I don't know whether you're referring to one week or one month, but I'll tell you that when we look at it, we will look at it over the period of time that this happened.

I'm looking at the time when packers were killing at 28 per cent. I know enough about the industry to know that they were in deep red ink in that period. So should I pick that period? Or should I pick the period in August where, thanks to the federal government's reluctance to listen to us on the issue of putting an adjustment period in and/or not putting a dollar figure on it, they announced the end of the program? Everybody panicked, threw their cattle into the market, and it crashed. You bet the packers made money, if they took the animals at all. Many days they refused them totally.

4:50

This is a complex, complex industry, and you have got to look at it in the whole, not just pick parts that maybe make for: oh, gee, this will sound like packers quadrupled their profits. I want to know whether that was on May 21 or May 30 of last year or August 30 or in September, and I then would look at who was taking the profit before May 20. The fact is that in this industry there will be times when the packers take profit; there are times when the producers take the profit. You know what? In a normal marketplace it all works out because they know when the ups and downs in the market are.

The fact is that for the last 11 months we have had a totally dysfunctional market. For the first several months of this issue, the first seven, we really had a dysfunctional market until some product started to move. The fact is that until we have the opportunity for free trade in cattle, we will continue to have a dysfunctional market. I will be the last person that will stand up and make statements unless I can back them up with facts, and I can't for a fact say that in the last 11 months, from May 20 to April whatever it is today, packers quadrupled their profits. I don't have that kind of information. I, frankly, will make this statement: I don't think anybody in this industry is going to get rich over this one. I don't care whether you're on the retail side or the packer side or the producer side.

I will defend our programs, and anybody who reads the title of them knows they were applied to fat cattle, and that meant cattle that were in a terminal feedlot. I will tell you that 90 per cent of that money went to the owner of those cattle, which is where it should be. What happened from there on is the producers' business. They are the ones. But I do know that the feedlot owners that received that reinvested that money by buying the cow-calf producers' calves last fall in the marketplace at as high or higher than the year before's prices. I do know that when December 23 came and we had another incident, those same people that invested that money stood to take huge losses on those purchases that they made in good faith.

I commend Minister Speller for coming in with a program designed between the federal government and industry that helped respond to that. Do I agree with the per head payment? No, I never did, because some people will benefit more than others. I always

think it should be on the degree of the loss. However, I didn't design the program. It was their program. I'm just thankful they came in and recognized that there were still some huge losses.

I will respond in writing to some of the detail on rural development because it's a very, very important initiative. I'll sit down and let some of my colleagues speak.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the minister for many, many good comments and to those that have spoken and asked questions before.

Like for a lot of people here on this issue, the BSE issue, agriculture has had a phenomenal ride, and it hasn't exactly been a great ride this year: everything from May 20 preceded by record droughts that everyone was aware of last year.

I would like to mention, just as a way of starting, that although there aren't that many of us colleagues in the Legislature that are actually from rural areas any more or those that actively farm, the riding that I do represent has what is commonly referred to as Feedlot Alley, and that area is the livestock feeding capital of Canada. Now, if anyone, you would think, should have received an awful lot of calls from producers, it should have been me. But as I've told people at various meetings that I went to, my biased opinion was that without a strong minister and a champion in agriculture, a department that was totally dedicated to trying to help the industry through this difficult time, no doubt I would have gotten a lot more calls than I did.

The thing that I felt strongly ever since the minister asked that myself and a couple of my colleagues, like the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, who attended a lot of these beef industry meetings – the point I was trying to get at was that the people in the industry themselves helped the minister and her staff come up with programs and solutions, which I think is a very solid way to deal with a very significant problem. I know that had it been up to many of the MLAs or any committee that a government might create, it's impossible, number one, to ever come up with a program that's going to satisfy everyone all of the time. It's far more acceptable to know that as an industry you've helped put the solution together, that you've identified the problems.

I would almost guess that the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner and I could very much agree that as we sat in on some of these meetings, not to offer a solution or to make comment as much as to hear the concerns and hear the discussion on how we were going to see this problem through, the industry people that were there I think needed to have a pat on the back. These were the elected representatives from the various cattle groups, whether it was the Western Stock Growers' Association, Alberta Beef Producers, the Cattle Feeders' Association, the Alberta Milk Producers' Society. The meat packing industry was there and is there today.

It's a phenomenal thing to see these people with their own angst, because they all have operations of their own that are undergoing various degrees of financial difficulty or potential financial difficulty, be able to park all their personal problems at the door and come in and look at a solution to a huge, huge problem and look forward a year or six months or whatever time was required. I think it is a credit to the people that helped the ag department staff and the minister come up with some of these solutions.

Secondly, I know this doesn't specifically deal with the dollars that the minister has presented to this Assembly, but at the same time I do want to talk about the staff because there is a dollar implication. In earlier question periods we've heard questions about how much money was spent on this trip, how much money was spent on that hotel, and how much money was spent on this vehicle. Well, I

would like to submit that without the staff that are in Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, who, by the way, from my understanding are the very same staff who are making sure that all these programs that the minister has come up with are in place and being applied for, adjudicated, and paid out to the various applicants – they are all done by the same people throughout many different programs.

Now, if I was worried about the rent of a Ford Econoline van or the price of a bottle of orange juice or a jug of orange juice, I think that maybe you'd be most pleasantly surprised to see that a lot of these people who are devoting six, seven, 10, 12, 14, 16 hours a day are the very same people who aren't getting paid any overtime and who have since May 20 been in that building probably six, sometimes seven days of the week, every day, making sure that the programs are up and running, handling not just one program, Mr. Chairman, but maybe two, three, and four different programs from a variety of producers across this province, anywhere from 20,000 to 35,000 different producers who might at various times submit applications.

So I do think that the industry, especially, is very much aware of the strong team that the minister has. I know that many of the MLAs are. I think they deserve a great amount of our gratitude.

The other thing that I think people in general, the general public, may not totally be aware of all the time – and the minister alluded to it in her last comments. Some of the programs were devised, the first one and the very last one, by the federal government. It's totally their own program. As the Alberta minister of agriculture had indicated, the very first program, which was put out as a reaction to a dire need for immediate injections of cash – well, our minister and the department had indicated that it wasn't being properly designed, that if it was in fact to be on a per head calculation and if there were no criteria established around it, that the market price would in fact drop, and it did.

5:00

You know, in retrospect, again going back to the group that has worked with the department and the minister over this period of time, they came up with programs that were more suited to the flow of dollars, that helped keep a marketplace much more in tune with what you would expect to happen in a normal situation. Probably the one thing that a lot of the public weren't aware of was that some of these programs excluded the packer cattle from payment. I think that's probably one of the best secrets that many people aren't aware of, because there were allegations that the government simply wrote cheques and it all went to the packers.

I don't think a lot of people understood that even before this issue came up, there were a varying number of cattle held by packers throughout the province, and it could have ranged from 10 to 18 per cent, which varied and would continue to vary according to market conditions. So my hat is off to a program that actually worked more to the benefit, although when you're hurting, you don't see it, of the smaller and the mid-sized producer than it did to the larger and especially to the packing plant.

I would also like to comment on the standing policy committee. Our members, who range from south to north, east to west, and urban and rural, have been involved, have been the most vocal critics within the committee to our minister and also have been very supportive of the efforts that have been a result of the work done by the program director people and by the industry. Our committee has in fact been able to vet their constituents' feelings to the minister, been able to talk to the department people and keep us in tune with what has gone on and what will go on in the future.

I do want to make a comment. I think I heard one of the former speakers ask about a cost overrun, perhaps in a standing policy

committee. I would like to tell you, Mr. Chairman, that the minister of agriculture did ask me to attend a trilateral meeting on her behalf in Mexico, and that wouldn't have been something that would have happened had it not been for an issue like this. It's no deep, dark secret that if you suddenly have to go on a commercial airline from Edmonton, Alberta, through Phoenix to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and back, it's not very cheap. It's 1,500-plus dollars just for one person and hotel accommodations for the three nights that you are there. By the way, we never really left the hotel. It was meetings.

Mrs. Gordon: Did you have orange juice?

Mr. McFarland: No, I drink apple juice. I didn't have any orange juice, member, and I didn't have any *dos cerveza*. Is that the name?

The meetings that were set up rotate each year. They're held between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. This year it happened to be in Mexico, and it was at the state and provincial levels. They would have our equivalent of ministers of agriculture from the various U.S. states, from the 38 Mexican states, and from our 10 provinces and territories. Fortunately for us we had a very strong contingent from Ontario back to B.C. There were probably half of the Mexican states represented there.

What happened was most interesting. It was at a time when there was some resolve to the anaplasmosis and bluetongue issue. That was basically settled during the course of this meeting.

The other thing that I think was most worthy of note was that during the time that I spoke to commissioners of agriculture, for instance, from Arizona and New Mexico, never once did I hear a comment that the border shouldn't open. Never once from any of the Mexican state secretariats of agriculture did I hear any comment that the border should not open. Every one of the Mexican state departments of agriculture wanted the border to open.

Do you know what I think was most important, Mr. Chairman? It was towards the end of the wrap-up. There had been an overview of the benefits of NAFTA between the U.S. and Mexico, between Canada and Mexico. If a person doesn't see graphically the numbers of dollars that have flowed because of the NAFTA agreement – albeit there can be times when there have been things that people question. The phenomenal growth in processed meat alone, just on the agricultural side, between Canada and Mexico, between Mexico and the U.S., is remarkable, and there's strong growth there.

The other thing that had to make you feel very proud was when the governor of the state of Jalisco – and granted, this was through an interpreter – stood up and said that Canada had a testing system that was, in his words, the model that should have been used by everyone. I think that in itself should have made not just producers but consumers feel not just proud but actually reassured that we do have a good system. The Mexican governor of the state of Jalisco wished that everyone would use that same model across North America, and if we could accomplish some of these uniform tests and regimes that we follow, not just in Canada and the U.S. but also, they meant, including themselves, it would be a huge step in making sure that our trade, our testings are all contiguous and following the same regime.

Lastly, Mr. Chairman, the open borders that had been talked about I think finally came to fruition. We heard the news this past week. It is a slow, anguishing type of situation that everyone has been through.

I would like to close on the note that we still haven't talked about the Canadian Wheat Board, and I'm surprised that we haven't talked about the prospects for this year. Who knows what those could or couldn't be? To some degree we've not had an opportunity to discuss some of the changes, especially in crop insurance. In the

overall scheme of things everything has seemed relatively minor compared to the BSE, but life goes on, and I do thank you for the opportunity.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Chairman, I'll be very brief. I know that there is another hon. member that wants to get a couple of questions on the record, and there's very little time left.

I want to thank the Member for Little Bow for his comments. I want to thank him for his work as chair of the standing policy committee and for the attendance at the majority of our meetings. I appreciate the commitment of all of our colleagues that have invested a huge amount of time and energy into solving this.

I was reminded by his comments that all of the programs we have were designed by industry and government together. So maybe I get a little sensitive when I hear criticism of the program design because it's a criticism of our industry, who in uncharted waters were doing the very best they could. I can tell you that the people that attended those meetings and spent hours and hours on that design gave up time from their own operations that they probably should have spent there trying to keep their stuff together.

The last thing that I do want to say, because this may be the last time that the Member for Lethbridge-East debates estimates of the department of agriculture, is that I have appreciated him being the critic for my department for the last three years. We have not always agreed on everything, but we have always had an opportunity to have what I believe was a very informed debate, at least informed on his side and I tried to learn.

5:10

Hon. member, you have always treated me in the best way when it came to the issues around agriculture because, I believe, you have a strong interest in the health of this industry. I think the thing I appreciated the very most was my ability to call you prior to an announcement, discuss the detail and the design of the announcement, and know that you would hold that in confidence. I appreciated that integrity, and you never let me down in that area, so I wanted to say that here.

It's a great thing for a minister to be able to talk to their critic, to discuss issues, and to know that that member will treat the information in the manner that it was shared with them. I wish you well, and I probably will miss your debate. You've challenged me a good number of times and held me accountable at others. I do wish you well, and I thank you for your participation.

The Chair: In the two minutes remaining, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In the time left I have many questions. The first one centres around crop insurance. Earlier today we heard from the hon. Premier that it was socialistic – I think that was the word he used – to have public insurance. I would like to know in regard to crop insurance precisely how much money the taxpayer is putting into those programs and if the minister considers that to be socialistic.

Also, in regard to the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation we're going to certainly see the CAIS program developed, but there are many other programs.

In the time permitting, Mr. Chairman, the Premier during question period makes reference to the selected payments to Members of the Legislative Assembly, mine in particular for \$10,000, which I use. I would probably use a lot less with no electricity deregulation.

There are other members here who get significant money from many different government support programs in relation to agriculture. If I could have an explanation. How much money are we

going to spend? How does one collect it; for instance, for the crop preharvest payments made by the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation, the hay postharvest payments made by the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation, the lack of moisture payments made by the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation, the Canada/Alberta farm income assistance program payment made by Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and the farm income assistance program? I think that's going to be changed over into the CAIS program.

So we have a lot of programs here, and I would just be interested to know: how do you apply? What is each one of these individual programs based on? What is the budget for these income support programs this year? I see a lot of . . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoon, I now must put the question after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$431,816,000
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The Chair: Shall the estimates be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$431,816,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 8 this evening, at which time we'll return in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:16 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, April 21, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 04/04/21

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

For those in the gallery this is the informal part of the Assembly. People are allowed to move around and that kind of thing. They're not allowed to talk loudly, but they can converse softly with one another, and we have the agreement that only one person stands and talks at a time.

Before we commence tonight, I wonder if we might have the consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to rise tonight and introduce a group of people from Edmonton-Ellerslie. I'm introducing them on behalf of the MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie, Debby Carlson. They are from LDS Knottwood Blazers Scout troop, and there are 30 of them in the public gallery, up here as you can see. I'll ask them to rise in a moment, but let me first introduce the people who are with them: Shannon Gilson, Raschel Mighton, Fay Paterson, Darcy Holthe, Jamie Gilson, Laura McGill, Marcela Mowser, Tod Thorne, and Lawrence Woodruff. Would all of them please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Chair: For the benefit of the group that was just introduced, the moans were not because of you but because the hon. leader forgot that we don't refer to each other by our first or our last names. We refer to each other by the position, so a minister of something or other, or by the seat which we occupy, which is our constituency. That's honoured sometimes as much in the breach as in the keeping, but anyway . . .

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

The Chair: The chair would like to clear it up at the outset so that we all know we're on the same line. It has been agreed that for the first hour the estimates of the Ministry of Finance will be considered. The procedure that has been agreed to by the House leaders is that the minister will take approximately a five-minute statement. The next 45 minutes will be allocated to questions from the opposition. The remaining 10 minutes will be allocated to questions from government private members should they wish to ask those questions. Otherwise, the members of the opposition may continue to question the minister. At the end of one hour we'll go to the next, and then we'll vote for both these issues at the end of the two hours. Is that basically what has been agreed? This is not a dictation by me but a question.

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: That's agreed. Okay. We may proceed then.

Finance

The Chair: For opening comments the hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a great pleasure to be here to present the Ministry of Finance's estimates for 2004-2005.

Before I start, I would like to introduce some very important people who are members of the staff of the Department of Finance. They've worked very hard in putting together our budget and our business plan. They are seated in the members' gallery. We have Bonnie Lovelace, our senior financial officer; Richard Shelast, our senior manager of budgets, who puts our budget together; Juliette Blair, who is the manager of business planning and reporting; and Barry Meilleur, our business analyst from the office of budget management; and I can't really see, but Tim Wade, my executive assistant, is around somewhere. So I'd ask the members to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

I'd like to say, Mr. Chairman, that the staff from the Department of Finance are very much involved in every ministry throughout government. They have special postings, and each of them has a number of departments that they work with to put together their business plans and budgets so that we can bring them together in the budget presentation. So I would like to thank all the other members of Finance who work very, very hard. Starting in about October they very rarely have a Saturday or Sunday off. So it's kind of nice when the budget does come in and is filed with the Assembly. They then only have to go through copious hours of being here as we debate the estimates of that budget. So I do welcome them, and I thank them very much again.

As Minister of Finance, Mr. Chairman, I am very proud again to say that we have filed our 11th consecutive balanced budget in the province. It's a budget that puts us on course to achieving the strategic vision that was outlined in the province's 20-year strategic plan. Budget 2004 also keeps us on route to achieving Albertans' priorities for fiscal responsibility while at the same time investing in programs and services that meet the needs of our citizens.

Albertans have so much that they can be proud of. Our province still maintains the lowest overall tax load in Canada, and there is no general sales tax, no capital tax, and no payroll tax. In fact, a typical one-income family with two children earning \$30,000 pays approximately 85 per cent less in taxes and health care premiums in Alberta than the average family earning that same amount of money in any other province in this country. So to put this in perspective, Mr. Chairman, Albertans and Alberta businesses would pay over \$6.2 billion more in taxes if they had to pay under the system in British Columbia and over \$10.8 billion more if they had to pay under the system in the province of Quebec.

Tax cuts this year will save Alberta businesses roughly \$142 million. On the personal side we see a saving of \$1.5 billion less in personal income taxes. Mr. Chairman, Albertans have enjoyed the benefit of the single-rate tax system. That left Albertans paying \$1.5 billion less than they would have otherwise.

The other thing that I can report, Mr. Chairman, is that we are in striking distance of eliminating our accumulated debt. I'm very pleased with the work that Albertans have done to help this government reduce the accumulated debt of over \$20 billion by nearly 90 per cent. By the year 2005-2006 the debt forecast is at \$2.7 billion. Lower debt means lower debt-servicing costs, and as a result of our debt reduction efforts \$1.4 billion in annual debt-servicing costs have been freed up for Albertans' program priorities and to lower taxes. Alberta has by far the lowest debt load per person of any province in Canada.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to provide a few of the highlights from our

budget as well as our business plan, and I'd like to provide you with a quick overview of our ministry's key roles. The department itself has four main areas, including office of budget management; pensions, insurance, and financial institutions; treasury management; and corporate support. The Ministry of Finance also includes the Alberta Capital Finance Authority, Alberta Pensions Administration Corporation, ATB Financial, Alberta Insurance Council, Credit Union Deposit Guarantee Corporation and their subsidiaries.

Alberta Finance's vision is "A province that is innovative and globally competitive with a fiscally sustainable and accountable government." Our business plan identifies five high-level strategic priorities. These include maintaining Alberta's fiscal framework, public/private partnerships, enterprise-wide risk management, automobile insurance, and public pension plan governance. In addition to these high priorities Finance will continue to do our day-to-day job of managing the province's finances.

Mr. Chairman, there are core businesses of this department, but I gather I don't have the time to go over them in this process that we're dealing with tonight. [interjection] Oh, the opposition says it's okay, Mr. Chairman.

8:10

Dr. Taft: We always like to be helpful.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much.

Core business 1 is fiscal planning and financial management. Our goals are to have a financially strong, sustainable, and accountable government, to have a fair and competitive provincial tax system, and to manage financial assets, liabilities, and risks effectively.

The second core business is the regulation of the provincial financial institutions. Alberta Finance regulates the credit union, insurance, loan, and trust industries in Alberta. Our goal is to ensure that Albertans receive reliable and competitive financial and insurance products. Alberta Finance continues to work with the insurance industry to implement reforms based on the government's review of automobile insurance.

The third core business is pension policy, regulations, and administration. Our goal is to ensure that pension benefits for pension plan members are secure, and Finance will work in consultation with public pension boards and stakeholders to facilitate the improvement of pension governance frameworks.

Core business 4, financial services. Our goal is to have quality and competitive financial services accessible to Albertans and local authorities. ATB Financial and the Alberta Capital Finance Authority are key components of the financing servicing sector. ATB Financial will continue to develop their commercial banking capacity and wealth management services. Our targets include specific measures to reflect our position as the owner of ATB Financial, and we have targets for the Capital Finance Authority to maintain the lowest borrowing costs for Alberta municipalities and local authorities' satisfaction with ACFA policies and efficiency.

Mr. Chairman, that is a very quick overview of what we're going into in 2004-05. Now I'd like to give you a few highlights of our budget and our estimates.

Ministry revenue is projected at just over \$797 million, a decrease from the \$869 million forecast in 2003-2004. Our investment income for 2004-05 is \$35.3 million lower than the 2003-04 forecast, primarily due to the lower interest rates on new loans issued by the Alberta Capital Finance Authority, lower balances in the capital account and GRF, and reduced interest received under the credit union stabilization agreement as a result of better than anticipated credit union deposit growth in 2003-2004.

We'll also see a decrease of more than \$31 million for internal

government transfers that represent contributions from the lottery fund to my department for the contingency reserve.

The net income from our commercial operations is projected to be \$9.7 million lower than the 2003-2004 forecast. This is due to nonrecurring revenue of \$19.8 million in 2003-04 by the AGT commission, partially offset by a \$9.8 million increase in the net income of Alberta Treasury Branches.

In terms of program expense we're estimating it to be almost \$438 million. This is a decrease of \$6 million from the 2003-04 forecast. The decline is due to a drop in interest costs on money borrowed by the Alberta Capital Finance Authority to lend to local authorities.

I'd like to take just a couple of minutes to highlight a few other areas within our estimates that I think you will find of interest. Our total capital investment for 2004-05 is estimated at \$2.3 billion. The Alberta Pensions Administration Corporation accounts for most of the capital spending with a budget of \$2.1 million for computer system upgrades and facility upgrades.

Another area that we've always been interested in looking at is the full-time equivalents. Overall, the ministry has increased its staffing by five FTEs, to 384. The department's staffing levels will be 181, six more than last year. The increase is primarily for managing proposed changes to the regulation of automobile insurance. Alberta Pensions Administration has been provided with 183 FTEs, one less than last year. Alberta Insurance Council staffing levels remain unchanged from last year, at 20 FTEs.

So, in conclusion, Mr. Chairman, this is really a very quick overview of Alberta Finance's business plan and budget estimates for the year 2004-05. I look forward to hearing the comments and questions, and any that we don't get answered tonight, we will undertake to answer in writing at a subsequent time.

Thank you.

The Chair: Before I call on the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, I wonder if we might have consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests, which will not count against the time that's allocated.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

(reversion)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly this evening the following guests that are present for this evening's second reading of Bill 30, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004. They are seated in the members' gallery, and as I call off their names, I'd ask if they could please stand. With us this evening are Mr. Harry Supernault, the president of the Metis Settlements General Council; Mr. Randy Hardy, council member from Kikino Metis settlement; Gladys Anderson, chair from Gift Lake Metis settlement; Dale Anderson, council member from Gift Lake Metis settlement; Gary Youngman; Horace Patenaude, chair from Buffalo Lake Metis settlement; and Peter Patenaude, chair of East Prairie Metis settlement. I'd ask that you all join me in giving them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Chairman, it's also my pleasure to introduce to you three guests that we have here from Paris, France, that have come to visit the province of Alberta and have decided to come to the Legislative Assembly this evening. They are Helen Czarniecki, Marguerite Daire, and Gabriel Daire. J'aimerais bien vous féliciter et vous donner la bienvenue ici en Alberta. I'd ask all of you to join me in giving them the traditional warm welcome.

head: **Main Estimates** 2004-05

Finance (continued)

The Chair: The hon. Leader of her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciated the comments of the minister, and I assume I'll be able to follow a process of other years and do a sort of question and response back and forth. That would be more interesting for both of us; I'm sure.

The Department of Finance and the Department of Revenue combined are in many ways the backbone of the provincial government. They are the departments that collect the money, that ultimately control how resources are distributed in the government, and are crucial in planning the long-term health of Alberta's economy. In fact, that of course comes up in the first core business goal of maintaining "a financially strong, sustainable and accountable government."

I'd like to just ask the minister a general kind of question in terms of the managing of Alberta's nonrenewable resource wealth, which is really what separates Alberta in so many ways from the other provinces and from other parts of the world. Billions and billions of dollars of nonrenewable resource revenues flow through Alberta Finance and, I guess, through Alberta Revenue through the hands of the treasury, as it were, of the provincial government every year and have for decades. Yet I'm concerned that when I look at the position of the government, almost all of that money is gone. We do have the heritage fund, but that really accounts for a very, very small percentage of the total nonrenewable resource revenue.

Philosophically, as an Albertan I can't help feeling like we're living off the capital of our land. We are taking the resource revenue, and we are either spending it or we're paying down debt that was incurred by earlier governments. But what is the plan? What is the philosophy? What is the vision, if I dare use that word, what is the philosophy of Alberta Finance and, I guess less so, Alberta Revenue for managing the unbelievable wealth that the people of Alberta have inherited?

I know that's a very general question, but it underlies the decisions we make here. Ought we to be saving for the long term? Ought we to be trying to convert that nonrenewable wealth into something permanent? Should we be investing it and spending it on things that we think will generate wealth immediately? What's the view from your side of the Assembly here, Madam Minister, on those kinds of general issues? How do we manage our wealth in this province?

8:20

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Chairman, I think that's an excellent question, actually, and one that's very key when you start doing budgets and business plans. This year we introduced a strategic plan, and that didn't come without a lot of thought as to where we're going. We know where we've been, and in the past we were fortunate to have the resource revenues come through, and they were healthy and strong. It enabled us to get our fiscal house in order: to get rid of our deficit, to pay off our debt quicker than had been planned, to take almost \$20 billion of operating debt out of the equation and get rid of that. If we hadn't had those resource revenues, that would in all likelihood not have been possible.

So then we got into a new structure and said: now that we're getting close to the end of that goal and accomplishing that goal, where do we go from here? As you know, we introduced last year a new structure that was recommended by the Financial Management Commission. A lot of people focused on a lot of the recommendations, but to me probably the most important recommendation was recommendation 12, which said that governments have to start to

think strategically. They have to think beyond the political mandate of four, four-plus years, that parties go through elections every four to four and a half years, and think beyond the five years, the 10 years, and the 20 years and try and visualize what Alberta will look like 20 years out. You have to be open-minded enough to think of what that's going to look like, because we don't really know. But if we're going to enjoy the growth, security, the dynamic of this province as we do today, then we have to do some planning.

Part of that recommendation that came forward from the Financial Management Commission was to not overspend, to not get caught in the flavour of the day, in the highs and the lows of the oil and gas pricing mechanism but to put in place a scheme that says: let's have some predictability, some sustainability, and some discipline in what we do with those resource revenues. That's why we allocate \$4 billion on an annual basis to support programs that the Crown offers back to the people. The balance of the money goes over into a sustainability fund that helps us prepare for that long-term vision, helps us secure that long-term future.

Now, we still have some debt to clear off, which should be a priority because you want to get rid of the debt servicing cost. That's a dead cost that doesn't help anybody, particularly when it's as a result of operating overages in previous years. So as we prepare to move forward, we have to be cognizant of those resource revenues and protect them and make sure that they go into areas that count in the long term.

Your question of how do we save, how do we prepare is very, very apt. Our sustainability fund is substantially different from funds that have been put in place in other jurisdictions. We have some tight requirements on the use of that sustainability fund. Basically, what it says is that we can use the fund once it exceeds \$2.5 billion to continue to pay off our debt or to invest in capital or other assets, on the asset side of the equation, so that we're developing long-term legacies or institutions or endowments that will be there for the next generation. It's a kind of saving, but it's a saving on the capital asset side of the equation.

So I think that your question is very appropriate right now and one that I welcome, quite frankly. It's one of the better questions we've had in a very long time. I'm glad you're thinking in the same direction that we are, that we have to be very cautious and safeguard those resources for the longer term. The Minister of Justice and Attorney General has been working very hard as the lead on that strategic plan. I think we're the only jurisdiction in Canada that has a proper strategic plan to date, and it's a start.

I can tell you that other provinces have asked us about it and said that we should all be forward-thinking. The difference is they're not in a position to do that. They're going through survival for the day. Our planning has got us to the point where we are now, and if we stay the course, then we should be able to have success not only today and tomorrow but 10 years out, 15 years out, 20 years out if we do the proper planning and if we think strategically now as opposed to at the last minute.

So that's the essence of what we're doing. Again, I welcome that question. I think it was very well done.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. I guess my question comes down to when you say that if we stay the course, we can add prosperity 10, 15 years in the future and beyond. My problem is that it's not really very clear what the course is. Anyway, I've gone through the 20-year strategic plan, and it's too vague, too general, I find.

The minister spoke about tax levels. I was a little surprised at some of her statements. I've certainly seen analysis done by I think

it was PricewaterhouseCoopers suggesting clearly that the tax rates at the lower and middle levels in Alberta are actually higher than in B.C. and Ontario. I don't have that material with me right now, but I've seen those calculations. I think I've got them back in my office.

I have a particular concern and a particular question with taxes. This will not come as a surprise to the minister, but the way the taxes add up in Alberta, if you include the health care premiums, which are a tax by any other name, in fact a family with a couple of kids at, say, a \$36,000 income is paying a higher percentage of their income to the province in taxes than a family at a \$100,000 income. Between the combined effect of the flat tax and the health care premiums it's actually a regressive tax hitting the working poor, say people at the \$35,000, \$38,000, \$40,000, \$45,000 a year income, if that's a family income, the hardest.

Let's see. How can I put this? Is there any chance, is there any hope that the people of Alberta will see a different tax system in which, for example, at the very least health care premiums are abolished or in which the tax system is reworked so that families at a \$38,000 a year income aren't paying a higher percentage to the provincial government in taxes than families at \$100,000? Can we not at least make some progress on bringing that kind of fairness to the tax system of Alberta?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Chairman, we've done a number of reviews on the tax policy that we have in the province of Alberta. Quite clearly, if you take all of the taxes and all of the fees that are there, the normal ones, including the health care premiums, and you compare Alberta to the other jurisdictions across Canada – and it's a good exercise to go through – if you actually take any other province and take their structure and transplant it on top of the demographics in the province of Alberta, it's quite a shocking equation to look at how fortunate we are overall in Alberta.

In fact, I think the lowest one I looked at was Newfoundland. If we took their structure, Albertans would pay something like an extra \$4.9 billion on an annual basis in taxes. Now, albeit a good part of that is their provincial sales tax, but even if you take that out and you just focus on the more normal taxes – and I suppose in most provinces a sales tax is a normal tax – Albertans would be far worse off with any other structure in Canada.

8:30

Can taxes continue to go down? I sure hope so. I'd like to see them continue to go down, and we're on that track. However, when we are charged with offering core programs in health and education and social programs, et cetera, et cetera, we have to have dollars come through to fund those programs. It wouldn't be realistic to say that those programs could be offered without some form of taxing entity.

I've been asked several times if I would get rid of the health care premium. Well, I could go out and do that and become a hero on the front page of the newspaper, but I'd have to tell people that we're going to have to add it somewhere else, because it's still \$8 billion. It cost \$8 billion this year to run the health system, and it has to be paid for. You can always go, "Well, that guy over there" – and we can do that, make that guy over there pay for it, but the system still has to be paid for.

You know, I could do the hero thing, and I'd be the big hero of the province, but I would be fooling people. At least, when you have a premium, people know that the systems costs. When you go to other jurisdictions, they think their health system is free, and that's just not true. Their finance people hide it in their system.

Now, I have no problem with creative ways of collecting the money, and, you know, we've talked about different ways of doing

it. Instead of a health care premium bill maybe you have a health fee that goes out and is attached to whatever. The bottom line is that you still have to collect the money. You have to collect the money. I'm always open to fairness on how you do that. I'm open to that.

I know that the minister of health will be going through some recommendations on reform over this next 18 months, and I'm sure he's going to come forward with some recommendations to me. I'm open. But to say that we're not going to charge for health is just not real. We're going to have to do that because it's still \$8 billion. I can dance it, but I can't get away from having to collect the money to pay for the system. Now, how it comes in – I'm sure there'll be lots of recommendations come forward, so we'll have to wait and see, but I'm open to looking at all of them. I can tell you that.

Dr. Taft: Still on the tax system and actually combining my first two questions, at least in theme, how do we convert the nonrenewable wealth we're living on into something permanent, and how do we manage our tax system more fairly and effectively? How much of our tax revenues – I'm not talking about royalties or land lease sales and things like that. How much income tax revenues and thus direct sources such as, well, corporate taxes can be traced back to the activities of the petroleum industry in Alberta? In other words, if the petroleum industry weren't there, it's not just that we wouldn't have the royalties, but we also wouldn't have a lot of other taxes as well. [interjection] Should I repeat the question?

You may not have that right now, but if your officials could provide that information. Do you understand the question I'm getting at? That would be helpful.

Mrs. Nelson: It's a good question. You can all read the budget and pick up the resource royalty number. Then the question is: how much of the investment that's come into the province is picked up in corporate tax; how much is picked up on the personal tax side; how much is paid regularly through that? That's a good question.

Dr. Taft: How much is driven by the petroleum industry? How much is it worth to us beyond just the royalties?

Mrs. Nelson: Oh, a huge amount.

Because I don't have that with me, I will go back, and in the next while I'll get that back to you as a written question, because it's a very good question. What it will demonstrate, Mr. Chairman, which I think is really important, is how critical this industry is to the well-being of this province and how it should not be taken for granted. Not only is there a direct royalty, but when you look at the spin-out through the people who have come here through migration to work in that industry, how they have now started contributing on the personal side, and the support companies that have come in to support the capital investment, it's a huge impact to our province. So I will undertake to get that for you.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. I appreciate that. It will be interesting to see where that comes from.

Now, I guess I'll switch gears, although I could continue on that. Actually, I'm going to ask one more question on that general theme. I'm not sure which minister it goes to, but it is basically this. There were some indications by the Premier a few weeks ago over a period of two or three days that perhaps some of the oil sands companies, because of higher oil prices, are actually moving through the generic royalty regime quite quickly. They're capitalizing their projects and will hit the 25 per cent royalty payout this year. I'm wondering, although that's not in the budget, if there is a chance that that will happen with any of the plants that have been built under the generic royalty regime.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, let's keep in mind that part of the generic scheme was that all companies were brought under one structure. As the capital was invested, they were required to pay 1 per cent of the gross revenue. So revenues have been coming in all along. Now, as the capitalization of that project goes through, it then starts to step up and transfer up to 25 per cent, which is a net. The transition from the 1 per cent gross to the 25 per cent net is on a project-by-project basis.

Naturally, with higher prices the recovery is quicker than was anticipated at the time. So there is a potential that some of those projects could transition over sooner as opposed to later because – let's be very candid – we've had higher than normal or anticipated oil and gas prices, oil in particular, which has a positive impact on the recapturing on those facilities.

Dr. Taft: Will that happen this year?

Mrs. Nelson: I don't know if it will happen this year, but you may see it in the next couple of years, which would be a number of years ahead of schedule, quite frankly. That'll depend on if the price stays firm.

The forecasts from industry, quite frankly, are not that way. They're expecting that there would be a correction in the market and that the end prices will come off. However, we're not seeing that at this stage. So we're going to have to monitor that. That's one of the hard parts, to look at that on the long term when you have so much volatility and uncertainty in where that price is going to end up and, really, no control over what the price is going to look like. So we'll monitor it, but it may be ahead of time.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, let's switch gears completely and go to public/private partnerships, which are one of the business areas of this particular department. Certainly, on this side of the House we have serious questions about P3s involving for-profit partners and especially private-finance initiatives, as they're called in other jurisdictions. Today we've had information that the Calgary courthouse, for example, is really going through the roof in terms of costing.

So the frustration here for the opposition and I think the concern by the public is that the process seems very murky. Let's just pick the courthouse for an example. If the province had simply gone to tender in the traditional way for the courthouse and all the bids had come in and the envelopes were opened and instead of \$150 million they were \$300 million, the process is very clear: then it's back to the drawing board.

8:40

What we have here, it seems, is a much murkier process where we don't know and it's not immediately clear what's driving up the costs. Is it the cost of the money? Is it the borrowing costs of the private investor? What are their borrowing costs expected to be? Or is it changes in their rates of return? The lead investor in the Calgary courthouse is a big insurance company. Well, the insurance company's gone through some turmoil. Are they looking for higher rates of return? So there's all this turmoil and turbidity around the whole process of P3s, and that's being played out in the Calgary courthouse.

What is this government going to be doing to ensure that the process of selecting and improving P3s is as open and transparent as the traditional method of getting bids, publicly opening the enve-

lopes, and going with the lowest bidder? What can we expect here? How are we going to know anything?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Chairman, when we entered into our new fiscal framework, we said that where appropriate we would consider using alternative financing mechanisms, which would be different from our normal pay-as-you-go cash purchasing or cash outlay. One of those alternatives was what's called P3s. Others were things such as REITs, such as bonds, or going to the market itself.

Part of my other role in chairing the Treasury Board table is to work with the proposals that come in. In fact, we actually have an outside body that helps with an assessment of what projects might qualify for a P3, and then we go through a cost-benefit analysis. We said that we would use the vehicle called P3 if in fact it made sense for Albertans to do that, if in fact the criteria that were there were laid out, and if they weren't, you heard our Premier in question period say that then we wouldn't do it.

Our job when the proposal comes forward is to do an assessment on it, and we go through quite a lengthy process. I can tell you that Treasury Board members sometimes get a little tired because we spend copious hours with officials going over this process and trying to make sure that we cover all of the issues that might be there so that we can assure Albertans that we have made the best selection for the use of their money. It's a very long, long set of deliberations. If they make sense, we'll go forward. If they don't, we'll ask for a redrafting or we'll go to an alternative.

I am not afraid to say to you that part of the evaluation is that I have to look at the strength of our balance sheet and the market of the day and the investment community at that point and say: is this a better investment based on the strength of the balance sheet of the province, or am I better off to go and see the benefits of the risk transfer that can occur with a P3 and move that over and do an investment analysis based on a lot of criteria? So it's not quite as easy as standing up when the bids come in and opening an envelope and saying: rah, rah, here we go.

Some of the most successful P3s that we have had in this province are very clearly our extended health care facilities that are built by the private sector that enter into an operating agreement and contract with our Minister of Seniors and our minister of health to deliver a service, and they're very successful. They're very successful and have demonstrated that not this year or last year but for a number of years and continue to be that way. Are there other potentials for P3s? Yes, and we will evaluate them, and if they make sense, we'll proceed.

We may very well proceed in this situation, but we're in a process of evaluation, and therefore we have to have that option to do that. We made a commitment to Albertans right from the very beginning that that's exactly what we would do, and that's where we are right now.

Dr. Taft: Well, the problem is that this very long and involved process is not at all open to public view or public comprehension. In fact, it gets so complex that there are going to be areas where the public doesn't have confidence in the process. So I think you're opening a can of worms with some of these P3s. I really do. I'm concerned that we're building into the very structure of government unnecessary long-term costs. So you can be sure that we will be watching these very closely indeed.

My last question – and then I'll allow the member from the third party to jump into the debate – is around auto insurance. I'm looking at page 209 of the business plan, for example. I guess my question really is very simple. I don't see anywhere in the material a clear statement that a performance measure for the government

under auto insurance would be to ensure that less expensive auto insurance is available for Albertans; in other words, a performance measure that says: this year auto insurance premiums on average will be lower than they were last year. It's not in here. Can you tell me why not?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, our job is to make sure that the law of the province is upheld, and that is that Albertans must have a certain minimum amount of public liability and property damage for automobile insurance. In fact, it's against the law to drive a vehicle in Alberta without automobile insurance. Our job is to make sure that automobile insurance is available, that it's affordable, and that it's accessible to Albertans.

Also, as hon. members will know, there is an office called the superintendent of insurance, and his job is to make sure that insurance is being delivered in accordance with the criteria that we've laid out within the province. This last year he's had an added job trying to implement a new structure into the province. We'll be moving into a new dynamic once this implementation is in place, and we'll have a more hands-on approach to automobile insurance within the province, far more so than we've had before. The regulations for that are being developed right now as we speak.

Is it easy? No, it's not. Has it been a long road? You better believe it has. Our goal has been to make us comparable to the other jurisdictions in Canada, and we weren't. We haven't been. Particularly in certain categories, Mr. Chairman, we haven't been. So we are committed to doing that, and we believe that the structure we're bringing forward will put Albertans at an advantage compared to what they have been in the past.

Now, some categories of drivers will see a substantial change and lowering of their rates. Others will see a more minor change and lowering of their rates.

I think that by the time we get through the summer, you'll start to see the direct impact of this new structure. Now, everybody will get into it as their insurance policy renews. Someone asked me earlier today: why a year? Well, it's only fair that they get to get into it as quickly as possible, but it will take a year for everybody to be fully implemented into the system. In that time frame, Mr. Chairman, we will keep the freeze on so no one will be creeping up until the new implementation hits them on their renewal date. That was, I think, the most appropriate way to go through the implementation.

But our objective is to bring rates down. There's no question on that. They were out of line and out of reach for particularly most young or new drivers. In fact, quite frankly, they were outrageous. They hadn't done anything wrong. Now if you're a bad driver, you're going to pay. You're going to pay big time. So you need to take some personal responsibility and drive wisely and well because if you don't, you will pay. There's no question on that.

So we'll be there this summer, Mr. Chairman.

8:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few questions for the minister in connection with the government policy regarding reductions in the corporate income tax rate. This was announced as part of a package some years ago, when Dr. West was finishing his term as the Finance minister, with an objective of moving the corporate tax rate down from 15 per cent to 8 per cent, I believe. The government has not stayed completely on track with its four-year plan for this reduction, but it is continuing to move in that direction, and there's a further reduction in this year's budget.

Now, the Auditor General in previous years has raised the

question of how the government justifies this as a program. In other words, he treats it very much like any other program of government. It's a decision which costs the Treasury money, so it's deemed almost as an expenditure, and there has to be some sort of objective which is to be reached by the expenditure. Furthermore, those objectives, or those goals, need to have some way of being measured.

So my question is, first of all, to the minister: is there a really clear and specific objective other than sort of the general philosophical answer from the government that we often get that, you know, if we can reduce taxes for corporations, it means more investment, more jobs, that sort of thing? But is there something very specific, and is there a way of measuring the loss of tax revenue for the province?

The government also in the past had talked about the need to stay competitive with jurisdictions like Ontario and so on, which also had a fairly aggressive plan under the former Conservative government to reduce corporate income taxes. Now, my understanding is that that's no longer the case with the new Liberal government in Ontario. So is there still a race to the bottom in terms of corporate tax rates with other provinces, particularly Ontario, that Alberta needs to participate in?

I guess that the last point on the corporate income tax is: how does the government assess this in terms of a priority relative to other forms of tax reductions? The Leader of the Official Opposition has raised the question which we've been raising for years, the question of the health care premiums tax and why a tax cut such as that, an elimination of health care premiums, wouldn't be more beneficial in that it would put money directly in the pockets of families in this province rather than in corporations. Presumably, Mr. Chairman, those families would then spend their money in Alberta, and it would have a strong economic impact. I just would like to get the minister's comments on that and why that wasn't chosen as an alternative form of tax cut.

Thank you.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Chairman, when we review our tax policy, we do a number of things. The first thing is to look at the competitiveness of the tax policy and make sure that we are not disadvantaging Albertans and Alberta businesses. The goal to reach 8 per cent on the corporate tax is still there. We believe that we can reach that goal, but we've always said that we have to do it if it's affordable. When we look at the balancing between other program demands, as you've alluded to, it hasn't gone as quickly as some of us would like to see it go, but it's on a steady decline.

Most people think we focus on being competitive east to west, and while that's important, our biggest competitor, really, is stateside. We have to look at the competition from the United States as to what it does to our industries and our competitive advantage of being in that integrated market system. We're an exporter, so we have to be alert and aware of what we're faced with down south of the border as well.

Now, we've got a number of jurisdictions in the States that have a far better competitive tax advantage than we have, so we have some goals to reach. We have surpassed all jurisdictions in Canada and continue to excel as a result of it.

Now, the trade-off is what happens when we lower taxes here on the corporate side. Well, you see clearly the reinvestment, those dollars being re-employed back into the economy, and actually we've seen that your city of Edmonton here, the capital, the last couple of years – I don't know what it will be this year – has been either the number one or number two economic growth success story in Canada. That's a result of industry re-employing those dollars – and some of them would be the tax-cut dollars – back into the

economy and having development take place. I mean, the growth here is phenomenal, and I don't think that would've happened if we hadn't had a competitive regime and a structure that was conducive to investment coming into this province.

That structure has been the thing that has attracted the investment in the north and, consequently, has brought it into the service area, particularly in the financial services, in the city of Edmonton, the capital of our province.

So the benefit is there, and it keeps coming in, and as long as we maintain the best competitive advantage that we can afford while at the same time servicing other core programs such as health and education, et cetera, then I think we have struck the right balance in the priorities that we set within the budget. That's always the tough one to do because some would like more on the tax cut; some would like more on the program spending. Striking that balance is difficult when it gets down to budget time.

Quite frankly, Mr. Chairman, that's where I applaud our standing policy committees. Our standing policy committee chairmen have a tough job because everybody has a great idea, and they have to cut through the endless list of priorities and bring forward a recommendation. I meet with our standing policy chairs after the business planning and sit down with them, and they have to then, even though they're representing different ministries, give me an idea of the priorities that they believe are there so that I can go to Treasury Board and say: this is what we have heard. It's quite a culmination through the process, starting in about September following through to the budget presentation.

So I applaud our standing policy chairs because there's never any end to requests that come through for them to look at, and every one of them is a top priority. So I thank all our SPC chairs and the committees that work so darn hard to bring forward recommendations to Treasury Board.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to flag the piece that didn't get responded to, and that is the measures and objectives that the Auditor General has talked about.

But let me move on to the question of royalties. There are a number of royalty give-away programs that this province has had for some time. Now, there is mention made that some of these programs may be reviewed, but no specific change is announced in this budget, Mr. Chairman.

For years the Auditor General has raised the alarm about the fact that many of the government's royalty give-away programs, including the Alberta royalty tax credit, do not have objectives that allow Albertans to assess whether they represent value for money, but unfortunately we haven't seen any move to resolve those issues, address those questions. We've just seen a number of additional delays in addressing the \$400 million plus that are given away in royalties each year. So I'd like to ask the minister about that.

9:00

I'd also like to go to the question of property taxes. Now, at the same announcement, which I attended as a brand-new MLA, by the previous Minister of Finance, Dr. West, he talked about an objective of gradually eliminating the provincial government's role in collecting property tax for education. What he was going to do was freeze the total amount that the government took and not freeze the rate but let the mill rate decline because the total revenue from that source was going to be frozen.

Now, this has been changed since the current minister has been in office. I guess that I wonder how much higher the provincial government is prepared to allow property taxes on the provincial side to rise. The revenue from school property taxes will rise 5.7 per

cent in 2004-05, so homeowners and businesses will be paying \$77 million more in school property taxes when they get their tax notices later this spring. I'm wondering if the minister can explain the reasons for this change in policy as well.

Thank you.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Chairman, on the situation with the collection of school property taxes it has been the vehicle and the tradition to collect them on an annual basis. This year we in fact reduced the rate by 2.3 per cent. It wasn't frozen; it was actually reduced.

Again, when you have growth within a province, people come to our province, and we want them to come here. We want the migration, but we've often said – and I'm sure the hon. member opposite recognizes – that they don't bring the schools and the hospitals and the roads with them. So you have to accommodate these people, and you can't accommodate them if you don't collect the revenue and there's only one taxpayer. Now, you can do it this way or that way or the other way, but the bottom line is that you have to have everyone participate in providing programs within the province. The method that's in place today is the one that we use. I can't get it any simpler than that.

The Chair: Members of the committee are reminded that we now go to the next 10 minutes in which members who have not yet participated have an opportunity, and should they not, then we'll go back to the opposition, and the minister answers either way. So we're now going to start the final 10 minutes.

The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Sure. Thank you. It may be now most appropriate to jump from the generalities we've had to some specifics, and perhaps I should just read some questions into the record, and the minister could have her staff respond in the fullness of time, as they say.

In looking at the detailed line-by-line information in the budget, a number of issues come up that we're compelled to ask in the opposition as part of the process of accountability. This is on page 142. I understand that Alberta Finance is only requesting \$3.9 million for pensions, insurance, and financial institutions. Last year it spent \$4.9 million, so we're looking at a million dollars less this year, and percentage-wise that's quite significant. Why?

On page 143 the budget for the minister's office is being increased, and this is a dangerous example to set. The minister's office is increasing its budget by close to 20 per cent. I am shocked and appalled, Mr. Chairman, and I would like an explanation. Well, she can respond in writing.

Mr. Mason: That's your first use of that phrase as the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: There I am.

An Hon. Member: It'll roll off your tongue after a while.

Dr. Taft: I'll keep working on it.

Equally, on page 143 the minister's communications budget jumps significantly, hitting \$422,000 as compared to \$352,000 the previous year, about a 20 per cent increase. Again, why? What extra communications are going on there?

My supplemental to that question on communications would be: how much money is being contributed to the communications budget by the Public Affairs Bureau? So this is, I assume, part of it. What's the other part of communications activities worth, that portion being from the Public Affairs Bureau? I'm wondering if this increase in

communications might in fact be related to the need to promote the new auto insurance program being implemented.

The budget on page 145 for the corporate management services to the Alberta Capital Finance Authority is increasing by 21 per cent, from \$298,000 to \$362,000. Why would that be happening? Why is the government expecting a drop in internal government transfers this year as outlined on page 149? It's, I think, a pretty significant drop. The forecast amount for 2003-04 is almost \$116 million. The estimate for the year in question is only \$84 million. That's quite a drop. Why?

On page 149 if we look at forecast as opposed to budget for the last fiscal year in several of these categories, most of them, the expenditures are over the budget.

An Hon. Member: What page?

Dr. Taft: Page 149.

What is the minister going to be doing this year to ensure rigorous conformity to the budget standards? Is she going to crack the whip, or is she going to allow things to just kind of flow along?

On page 153 it indicates that the Alberta Insurance Council is expecting a 33 per cent increase in revenue from premiums, fees, and licences. Could you provide some details, please, on those fees, premiums, and licences? What's the explanation for that, and what are some of the details?

I think, Mr. Chairman, in light of the need to move on to the Department of Revenue, I will take my seat. Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. Minister of Finance, we have a little more than four minutes.

Mrs. Nelson: Four minutes? You just want to vote? Then we'll call for the vote, and we'll undertake to write back.

9:10

The Chair: Are you ready for the vote after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Finance for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005?

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$75,340,000
Nonbudgetary Disbursements	\$75,059,000

The Chair: Shall the estimates for the Department of Finance be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Revenue

The Chair: Just to quickly review then. The minister will take approximately five minutes, and if the opposition so agrees, longer. The next 45 minutes will be allocated to questions from the opposition. The remaining 10 minutes will be allocated to questions from government members or, failing that, members of the opposition. That's our understanding.

We're ready, then, for the next department. The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's an honour to be here and present the Ministry of Revenue's estimates for the year 2004-05.

Before I start, I'd like to introduce a number of individuals from the Department of Revenue that are here with us this evening. The first is Robert Bhatia, the deputy minister. Bonnie Lovelace is our senior financial officer, who works in multiple roles for both Finance and Revenue. Christine Oness is with financial services; Juliette Blair, manager of business planning and reporting; and Glenn Shepherd, my executive assistant. I'll have them all stand, and we could maybe give them a . . . So we thank them for the excellent work. We are fortunate to have very strong professionals in the Department of Revenue.

The Ministry of Revenue's business focus is on a number of aspects. One of the key ingredients is its focus with respect to the province's revenues. You'll notice in the estimates and in the business plan that the revenues of the government continue to grow: over \$9 billion in our estimates, \$9.275 billion, growing to about \$10.3 billion over the next three years in the business plan. As such, the resources of the department will grow as we ensure that we have the right levels of personnel and people to manage and collect and ensure that the revenues of the department of the government are secure.

I thought I'd just clarify that, first off, the department is responsible, as you see, for the income taxes – personal, corporate, hotel, insurance, and tobacco taxes – and not directly responsible for any policies with respect to education property taxes, which reside in Municipal Affairs.

Other revenue sources such as royalties would be with the Ministry of Energy. Gaming would be in the Gaming ministry, though we work on one of our strategic priorities, five of which I thought I'd outline, one being the revenue management framework. In addition to the collection and policy with respect to the taxation we work with all of the departments and, clearly, closely with Finance with respect to what we refer to as a revenue management framework, making sure we have the right planning for revenue streams for now and into the future to see that we will have sufficient revenues to meet the needs of the services and programs that the government will need to deliver in the future.

Another strategic area is the endowment funds. The department is responsible for the investment policies, risks, and management of the endowment funds: the heritage fund, the foundation for medical research endowment fund, the Alberta heritage scholarship fund, the Alberta heritage science and engineering research endowment fund. So we are working hard at strengthening these funds and their policy aspects to ensure that they're affordable. We look to inflation-proof even the heritage fund as we go forward.

We are working hard with respect to our investment organization and management division. There are a number of things we're working with. This organization manages a portfolio of about \$40 billion.

I thought I might mention that one of the areas of growth in resources is in this division. Last year alone on this \$40 billion we added over a hundred million dollars over and above our benchmarks that we set for trying to assess performance. So we have added substantial value to all of these funds in earnings performance over the past year in record. That continues to be very critical to us, to ensure that we have the right resources for electronic service delivery, developing techniques to implement tactical market decisions quickly, keeping pace with evolving industry standards, enhancing data integration, risk management, straight-through processing, just a number of the things that face this division continuously.

Also, the fourth area I thought I might highlight quickly: securities regulation. Alberta is strongly committed to improving the efficiency of our capital markets, Alberta's capital market in particular. We are leading and actively promoting the development of an

efficient, cost-effective provincial and pan-Canadian system of securities regulation. We chair a committee of provincial ministers with respect to securities regulation and are actively working toward ensuring that we have the best regulatory structures for capital markets in this country.

Fifthly, I thought I'd touch on our tax administration. As I'd mentioned, with the scope and size of revenues as they continue to increase in the province, the growth in the economy, and the growth in the revenue streams, it becomes even that much more important that we ensure that we have the right personnel, auditors, compliance to ensure that the full amount of revenues as would be due by the individuals are collected and it's fairly applied and to ensure that the compliance is met. We have addressed that by ensuring that additional resources are going into our department in this respect for hiring of systems personnel, and we will continue to over the next three years.

Certainly, in response to some of the Auditor General's comments we have actively been working towards a few things such as: we've updated our assessment of risk in each of the tax programs; we've determined the auditor coverage required to refine the assessment and assess the risk, and our budget contains a three-year plan to improve audit coverage; and the recruitment and facilities plan has been developed, and the first stage of recruitment is underway. So we're very pleased with the organization we have and the maturity of that and the resources that are allowed to ensure that the revenues are there for the future to provide for the needs of Albertans.

I'll conclude my remarks there and be happy to entertain any questions as they arise.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have some questions for the minister with respect to the heritage trust fund. I noticed in the February 25 news release from Alberta Revenue that the trust fund saw a total return of \$2 billion, with \$703 million being transferred to the general revenue fund. I guess my first question to the minister is: with the huge surpluses that the government and the province experience, why does the fund continued to be tapped for programs? Is this not the time when the . . .

An Hon. Member: We didn't hear that.

Dr. Massey: I said: why is money being taken from the fund to support programs? It seems to me that this would be an ideal time to inflation-proof the fund and to build it up. In all the door-knocking that I've done and every time the heritage trust fund comes up, many Albertans consider it, whether the government does or not, a rainy day fund. They look at it as something fairly sacred that shouldn't be touched unless absolutely necessary. I think some of that came through in the two surveys that the government did on the fund. There's a very protective attitude towards the fund. So I guess my first question would be: why is the fund still being drawn down?

9:20

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. With respect to your question about the Alberta heritage savings trust fund, the income has been, as you know, for years taken and put towards general revenues. In fact, it has been the policy for some number of years that that be the case. By legislation we are required once the debt is repaid to actually inflation-proof the Alberta heritage savings trust

fund, to retain sufficient dollars to do that. So it is actually policy that we will, and we have a commitment and obligation even by legislation to do that. It then becomes a matter of timing and priority of use of the funds.

The heritage fund actually has been structured as an endowment fund so that the proceeds of the income would have a purpose, and that purpose has been to support the priorities of the government; therefore, that's why the income goes to general revenues.

As you've mentioned, Albertans do want us to see that this fund is retained for the future. They do want to see that we work towards retaining the real value of this fund, and therefore we do have the commitment to doing that. I would say that the priority when you come down to a choice of do you pay off your mortgage or do you invest in your savings for the future for your retirement are almost equivalent values. They're both good choices. It would be a very good choice to actually retain money in the heritage fund and build it up and have more income, but it's equally advantageous to get rid of the risk of the debt, pay off the debt and, therefore, not have any more interest expense. So you actually improve your financial position by an equivalent amount, and then it's subject to which one performs better.

Obviously, last year we made more income. The two years before we actually had losses and were better by paying off debt. But you do get rid of obligations to other third parties by paying off debt and not being bound to those, and it's a very wise and a prudent strategy, just as you would suggest: why not pay off your own mortgage. That improves your own net worth as an individual and your own financial stability to have that. So they're both good choices. It has been a priority selection of Albertans to tell us also to pay off debt, and that's why we take that approach first.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. To the minister again with respect to the fund. He mentioned that once the debt was paid off, the fund would be inflation-proof. Is that all that's going to be done?

Mr. Melchin: It's an obligation to do that as a minimum. Whether or not there could be more in future surpluses to add to the growth of the fund are still other options. Clearly, I can't foresee or predict or forecast what those future decisions might be, but certainly once the debt is paid, those are options. In fact, even in our requirements right now surpluses have to go towards either paying off debt, which in this case would be gone, or building up other assets, capital fund or endowment funds like the heritage fund. So surpluses could very much in addition to inflation-proofing be added to the heritage fund if that was deemed to be the priority.

Dr. Massey: Could I ask: is that same investment strategy applied to the other funds that are managed?

Mr. Melchin: As you mentioned, there is the scholarship fund, the medical research fund, and the science and engineering in addition to the heritage fund. Do they employ the same strategy? We have an endowment policy committee. It actually has a number of private-sector individuals and two MLAs specifically charged with looking at the investment decisions of those four funds. They are not yet identical though their policy benchmarks for asset classes are moving towards the same. The reason is that they all have some long-term attributes. They are all expected to be here for well into the future and therefore can take a longer term investment strategy. So we do look at all of them having similar attributes for being able

to invest in equities, not just public but private equities, and other asset classes other than just fixed income. So, yes, they have not quite identical but very similar, very close to the same, asset class mix.

Dr. Massey: Thanks for those answers.

I guess one last question about the heritage fund. The heritage fund's key performance measure used to be a four-year annualized market value rate of return measured against benchmarks established by the clients. This performance measure has been changed. Can we have the reason why?

Mr. Melchin: I wonder if you could quote the page you're referring to so I can get to that page.

Dr. Massey: I'll get it.
Do you want to go ahead?

The Chair: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I could have the same general discussion with this minister as I had with the last one in terms of securing the long-term revenues of the government of Alberta in the days in the future when our royalty revenues inevitably diminish. Or perhaps the minister actually has a different view on the situation and feels that with the scale of the oil sands reserves we don't face any time in the foreseeable future a decline in our revenues from petroleum resources. So I'll start with that question. In looking down the road 10 years, 15 years, 20 years in the future, which I hope he's doing, does the minister see a time when the provincial government's revenue from petroleum resources of any kind starts to diminish, or will we be in a situation throughout the next 15 or 20 years where while conventional oil diminishes, nonconventional resources will cover off the downfall? Will we have a continuous flow of wealth in all?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. One of the main focuses in the department is a revenue management framework, and that is looking much more long term at all of the revenue sources so that we ensure that we have the right mix of revenues that could be sustainable well into the future. So in answer to that question: yes, we work very closely with Energy on their longer term outlook.

There's no way of guaranteeing, but when you look at the various scenarios, what reliability is there in revenue from energy sources? For the foreseeable future, certainly in the next 10 years – it's hard to ever predict oil and gas revenues in the sense that price is such a significant factor in the quantity of revenue. One of the greatest factors, we all know, is the volatility of price in commodities. So we know that we are subject to that volatility continuously as we rely upon it. Therefore, that's why the introduction of the sustainability fund, to try to take some of that volatility out. Though when you look over the long term, you should be able to predictably expect certain averages.

It is true that conventional sources of oil are already on a decline. You can go through this a little more with the Energy department when they come forward for their estimates. But gas, certainly, when you look at the next 10 years – it gets harder to forecast with any certainty when you look at 20 years. But when you look at the total oil sands, conventional and gas, certainly Alberta for the next foreseeable future has a good sustainable source of revenue from energy. Very subject to the volatility of price, but production volumes and the like are going to look fairly strong.

9:30

When you look at the oil sands, those are long-term projects, even beyond 10-year projects. They are really the 20-years-plus projects. We know that the reserves are there for substantially longer, and we know that as the billions of dollars are being invested, even our own revenue streams start transferring from 1 per cent of gross to 25 per cent after they've recovered their payout. So we start then increasing our revenue streams on the oil sands almost to offset declines in the other conventional oils.

So we have a very good source of energy from the oil and energy sector for years yet to come, but our forecast and planning is still trying to look and plan for beyond those dates because we all know that this is a declining resource. It's not renewable.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Would it be possible for the minister to share the framework or share the documents underpinning that framework with us in the Legislature?

Mr. Melchin: I'm not certain what it is that I can get published. We're dealing with estimates. I'll certainly take that under advisement and see what it is that we can share.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Now, in that same framework we talked about what I imagine is the line for nonrenewable resource revenues or some line like that. I assume that there's another line going out years and years for gambling. Maybe there isn't. So my first question is: is there?

Secondly, then, given the foreseen expansion in casinos over the next three to five years, what is the projected revenue expected to be from those casinos? Are we expecting a dramatic growth or more casinos with less take per casino? Certainly gambling is a major source of revenue. I assume that you've looked at that. What's down the road over the next few years in those revenues?

Mr. Melchin: In some respects when you get into a lot of these, they're policy choices. Those would be better answered more directly by the specific departments because the revenue sources from them are very significantly impacted by what policy choices you make. Just for example, tax rates. As we make those, that impacts revenue amounts. Our main revenue sources, as we plan forward, are items – the major items are not those items, though we do acknowledge the gaming revenues in our three-year business plan. You see it already in front of you. Rather than trying to speculate in estimates on all of those – it isn't the purview, really, of my own estimates to actually speculate on the revenue streams of all of those well into the future.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I should just confirm right now, just a really quick question, if I heard the minister properly that he's – what was I hearing? I don't want to put words in his mouth on inflation-proofing the heritage trust fund. I heard some phrase in there, but I didn't catch it. What was he saying?

Mr. Melchin: We do acknowledge even by our own recent survey a little over a year ago that Albertans do value the heritage fund and want it kept there well into the future, and as such I would fully

support and agree that that means that you need to inflation-proof that fund. If you don't, then you're actually eliminating it over time. What I did say is that it is required legislatively that that heritage fund be inflation-proofed once the debt is repaid. Right now we have the option to retain some funds to repay it, but once the debt is paid, it is actually a requirement to retain sufficient funds to inflation-proof it.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Do the same provisions apply to the other endowment funds like the heritage medical fund and the science and engineering fund?

Mr. Melchin: Those funds actually have different thresholds or requirements legislatively. The medical fund, for example, was started at \$300 million, and it cannot go below \$300 million, but by policy that's long since been changed. The ingenuity fund: we're trying to retain that value of \$500 million.

But we're putting in further parameters. We've been working hard on the scholarship fund, on the medical fund, and on the science and engineering fund to ensure that they have policies, spending decisions like you would have in a pension fund, that ensure that the value of the fund is there. So, yes, inflation-proof.

We are actually implementing policies which we call a spending rule; i.e., that the funds should spend no more than a certain percentage of that fund each year. We set a target, actually, of 4 and a half per cent. So if they can spend no more than the last three years' average of the value of that fund, 4 and a half per cent – the fund is expected to earn closer to 7 per cent – over the long term that will ensure that those funds retain an inflation-proof value. That's how we're controlling it. That will give a predictable level of cash flow that you can spend for scholarships and for medical and science and engineering research. They get a predictable level of cash flow without worrying about the volatility of the fund from year to year, but over the long term it will ensure that the fund is also inflation-proofed. So by policy we are specifically implementing that.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. I think that this question relates to the discussion we're having. On page 368 of the business plan there's a term used. Actually, I think it may be used in several locations, but it's used there. The term is "superior investment returns." I am wondering: how is that defined? How would we know if you were having or not having a superior investment return?

Mr. Melchin: It's a hard question to answer. That's why we set benchmarks. For example, when we invest in – and I'll take the Canadian exchange – the TSX, we might invest in the top hundred companies on the TSX. If we took that specific index for those top hundred companies, our objective is to add value over and above what that performed. So when you employ fund managers, they are expected to perform better than the index of that fund. That would be true for bonds and for equities, and they will all be benchmarked so that we do have an ability to assess our fund managers as well as our overall performance.

Now, to give you an example of recent performance. I only have it for the nine months of last year since the year-end has not yet been reported. I did say that on these four endowment funds we have actually added over a hundred million dollars over and above our benchmarks in the last nine months of last year. That's the excessive performance in dollars on these four endowment funds being

managed. So that's what should be the requirement, that we add value over and above what the index is. Otherwise, you would just passably invest it in some index.

That is the expectation. That is the performance measure, and it is something to which we ought to hold everyone accountable.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Okay. Thank you. Obviously, in taxes there's a constant concern of compliance. You know, are we actually getting the taxes that we hope to get through the laws and regulations we put into effect? How much are we losing? Which program areas does the minister feel have a high risk of noncompliance with tax laws? Where are we at the most risk here?

Mr. Melchin: When we look at the taxes that we collect, I don't know that you could say one is the most. On the personal income tax side, for example, we actually have an agreement with the federal government, that collects our personal income tax. That whole area of responsibility has actually been transferred to the Canada revenue agency, and we work with them. So the risk component to us actually is there, and we work with the federal government in this regard, but it is their direct responsibility by the agreements which we have. In that regard, we would say that we are still satisfied with the level of the compliance work that they are doing.

9:40

On the corporate income tax, for example, even in some of those areas we have an overlap with the federal government. We agreed that we will use the same calculation on taxable income. Our corporate income tax: we collect the tax, but we rely upon the federal government, also, in their audits of corporations, in the verification of the calculation of taxable income. So we have a dual role actually. The federal government does quite a bit of audit on the corporations, and then we do very much specific audits on things like the Alberta royalty tax credit. Those are some of the more difficult areas.

Now, as we're moving on the federal government's transitioning out of resource allowance into royalty deductibilities, that's going to be more problematic in that it will shift more burden to our department. That's why we have actually added more in our budget this year to add more compliance and audit staff to specifically manage that program. We've identified that as an area that has some complexity to it and, therefore, have addressed it by adding more people and resources.

Dr. Taft: What's the future of the royalty tax credit program in Alberta?

Mr. Melchin: The Alberta royalty tax credit program is still in place. There's no policy decision yet anywhere on the table to remove it, so by policy, even in the business plan going forward, that still is there.

It's a very small component, really, of the royalty structures. You know, the royalty income the last year has been \$7 billion, \$6 billion in the previous years. It's price and volume driven. The lower the price, the higher the royalty tax credit. So when prices have been high like this, the credit is smaller. So it's \$120 million, \$130 million. It certainly can grow beyond that to \$200 million, but in relative terms to the billions of dollars that are collected, it is a very minor component of the program. It has helped spawn development by the smaller companies to invest and has played a very integral part of the overall royalty structure inside it.

So there's no plan at this stage. The policy decision for that still

resides in Energy, so you'd specifically have to question Energy on the policy of that. We administer the collection of it through the Alberta corporate income tax. That's how it's actually administered.

Dr. Taft: Is there a serious discussion occurring in this department on separating federal and provincial income tax processes so that we end up with what I think is in place in Quebec, a two-tax system? There has been talk of that kind of thing from time to time. Is that under active consideration?

Mr. Melchin: We have actively worked, actually, with the federal government. The Canada Customs and Revenue Agency is now its new name. They've approached us about even collecting our corporate income taxes, for that matter, and our other taxes. So we have specifically questioned back: well, let's make sure that we first understand the arrangement and the value that we receive on the personal income tax. So we've done quite a bit of work to understand that.

We've come back to the assessment that we are going to stay with the federal government in collecting personal income taxes. It would be too expensive for us. They actually subsidize it; that concerns me a little bit. With their organizational structure it costs them more – our arrangement for the personal income tax is that they keep the interest and penalties assessed on personal income tax to offset their costs of collection, administration, and compliance. We get the full amount of the personal income tax. They remit the full amount of the personal income taxes owing to us, and they keep the interest and penalties for the work. It actually costs them more than the interest and penalties that they collect. We are not about to set up an organization. That would be very difficult given that the numbers of filers personally is substantially more than the numbers of corporations, you know, the millions of Albertans. So the scope and size and magnitude to do that would be very complex, and we are not entertaining that.

With respect to corporate income tax we actually provide that service for substantially less than the cost of the interest and penalties, so quite likely we'll retain collecting our corporate income tax rather than having the federal government doing that for us. There are smaller numbers. Some of the programs are very particular to Alberta, like the Alberta royalty tax for example, so we still have by objective decided to retain collection of the others.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. About two weeks ago I asked the Premier during question period about the federal government program to eliminate income tax for armed forces personnel who are serving in particularly dangerous overseas theatres, and the Premier undertook to produce an answer at some time in the future and to consider the matter. Now, yesterday the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, whose riding contains a fairly significant proportion of people in the armed services, jumped on the bandwagon of that issue and put a similar question to the Premier, and the Premier this time provided something of an answer. But I wonder, Mr. Chairman, if I could ask the Minister of Revenue to explain exactly what is going to take place, what the provincial role in this is, if anything, and what he expects the cost of the program to be to the Alberta treasury.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you. Actually, that question was addressed to me yesterday, which I did answer. When we were first asked it, it is

correct that we weren't certain of how the federal government immediately after their budget was going to implement this. Depending on how they chose to implement exempting military personnel when they're on dangerous missions overseas or otherwise, it could impact whether it applied as a direct flow through for Alberta taxes or not.

What we did find out and discover is that there will be clearly an exemption from the calculation of taxable income. Therefore, if it's not included in taxable income for federal purposes, we follow the same calculation of taxable income for provincial purposes. As a result, the military personnel will not pay federal or provincial income taxes. We do agree on our systems, that the only way to keep any ability for the federal government to collect our personal income taxes would be to keep some semblance of the same calculation of taxable income. It would get too complex for us to start developing our own rules for everything, and as such that's part of our tax collection agreement.

That will cost us approximately a million and a half dollars. Certainly, we're pleased to support our armed forces and see that that policy would follow through. They do outstanding work, and we're proud of the great work they do. We'll see that that will flow through to them.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. I much appreciate that answer from the minister, and we were certainly pleased as well to support that direction and glad that the government is onside with it, even though it apparently would happen whether the government wanted it to or not. What I take from the minister's answer is that it's a federal decision. Nevertheless, I think the result is very positive.

I want to ask a sort of general question. It has to do with what the government sees its core finances as being. I ask this question in light of the longer term reduction in revenues as a result of oil and gas. Particularly a high proportion of our royalty revenue comes from natural gas, and it is a declining resource, notwithstanding the prospect of coal bed methane coming on stream.

9:50

We've also seen a dramatic increase over the past few years of government revenue that is sourced from gambling activities, and at the same time we're seeing a reduction, which I asked the Minister of Finance about, in our corporate income tax. I guess my question is: are we at risk of becoming too dependent on more volatile sources of revenue or nontraditional sources of revenue such as gambling revenue, and does the minister feel that our core income tax revenue is sufficiently strong that we can base government programs on those revenues with a view to maintaining stability? I'll just recall for the minister the decision a couple of years ago to cut some programs, including some programs for native children at risk and so on, because of a sudden drop in oil and gas prices. Does the government feel that the core revenues of this government will be vigorous enough that they will be able to sustain all of the necessary programs without those kinds of hiccups which result in disruption of program delivery to people who need them?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Yes. We do view that income taxes, the tax structures are core revenue sources, clearly. So when you're planning going forward long term, acknowledging that nonrenewable resources such as oil and gas – they are going to be there for some foreseeable future, but they sooner or later are a nonrenewable resource.

Therefore, you have to plan that income taxes or some form of taxes, whether it's the exact ones we have today or not, will always form a strong basis of any government. That's true of all governments, to form one kind of a tax or another for its core revenue.

Now, with respect to policies putting more dependence on volatile sources, I'd say that actually the converse has been the case. The example I'm going to give you already is the personal income tax policy of two or three years ago, when we reduced personal income taxes by about a billion and a half dollars by the policy to go to the single rate 10 per cent. We actually collect more today in absolute dollars than we did then, and the personal income tax stream has been continuously strong growing. Estimates, for example, this year are going to be \$5 billion. Going forward, a forecast of \$5.4 billion, growing to almost \$5.8 billion in personal income tax. Very strong growth.

What has happened – and this is true also of tax planning – is that if you make taxes too punitive, especially on income kinds of questions, you drive a lot of the income sources either out of the jurisdictions, underground, and a whole bunch of ways to avoid tax. So making sure you have the right macroenvironment does a lot in attracting people, which is what has to happen. We broadened the base. We're actually collecting more in absolute dollars to provide it and actually have a more stable base for personal income tax than we had previously despite a lower rate.

Now let's take a look at the corporate income tax rates that we've been reducing. This year's forecast has an anomaly from some past years' adjustments which dropped it down to about \$1.8 billion, but it's still in the \$2 billion threshold. So despite that we've been reducing corporate income tax rates, our absolute dollars we're collecting aren't dropping. Even by reducing the corporate tax rate from 12 and a half down to 11 and a half per cent, we say that we're saving businesses, by that calculation, \$142 million, yet in our forecast we're going to collect still an equivalent \$2 billion going forward, because what's happening is that we are providing an economic macroframework that is attractive to people for investing.

These are not so anecdotal. They're very real about people choosing to invest money here, which creates the jobs for people, creates the jobs for Albertans, which creates the tax base. We need the companies to come here. We need the individuals to want to locate here. So you need good personal structures and you need good business structures in rates.

I have yet to find without exception – and I don't mean to say that we follow what New York fund managers are going to have to tell us, but we do have a \$40 billion fund that we invest on behalf of the heritage fund and pension funds, and some of that we deploy to fund managers throughout the world. I've asked this invariably of all of the fund managers that we've ever used, and these are very large institutional people out of New York: tell me about Canada. I don't solicit their response or the direction they ought to take. They all say some wonderful things about Canada, and we do have a lot to be pleased about with this country. We have a great country. In rank to the world we have much to be pleased with.

What they all come back with is this "but," which I find very annoying, and it's not my personal bias. They actually feel a little: I don't want to offend you. I say: well, tell me what you're going to say. They say: in Canada you tax too much, and we actually get better returns by leaving our money right here in the United States versus investing our money in Canada.

Whether you call it real or not, it is true our tax rates are higher here than in the United States. The largest financial centre of the world views Canada as a small market and not a better place to invest than the United States. It's that type of thing that actually makes our climate destructive to growth and opportunity. So we

can't ignore the world competitive market forces of attracting capital. You need the capital to finance the oil sands of the future. We need the capital intensive industries here in Alberta to grow. We need the marketplaces of not just New York, London, Tokyo but anywhere else in the world to want to come to Alberta and say: this is a great place to come and invest.

So tax rates are critical. It is some of the fundamental analysis they look at with respect to the return on their investments

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, you know I appreciate the minister's comments in that respect, but I would just caution him that when any investor gets a revenue minister in their office, they are going to tell that revenue minister that they'd really like to pay less taxes.

Notwithstanding what he said, there is a high rate of investment in Canada and Alberta, which in my view has a lot more to do with the opportunities that are presented by the people of this country and their education. Even their health care system has been cited as a significant advantage for employers locating here compared to the United States and certainly the continuing high prices for petrochemicals in the world. There's a world shortage, and Alberta has some conventional petrochemical reserves left and significant resources in the Athabasca oil sands as well.

I guess I would disagree with the minister. It's not the low corporate taxes particularly that are attracting the investment into this country, but it is the many other advantages we have, not the least of which is the fact we've got the oil and gas, and that's what's driving the boom in Alberta, in my view, not the government's tax policy. I would submit that if our corporate income taxes were not reduced from 15 per cent, we would still see a high level of investment in this province simply given the high price of oil and natural gas at the present time.

Mr. Melchin: Obviously, we'll agree to disagree on the point. If you think you can independently put taxes up and also have the same level of growth rates – when Canada actually went on a divergent path, which we did, our tax rates compared vis-à-vis United States in the '50s and '60s were comparable. Canada chose to go a path of substantially higher tax rates through the '70s, '80s, and '90s, and our growth rates through those periods of time and our actual wealth, GDP per person substantially lagged and got wider and wider.

Now, we've been improving in Canada over the last number of years, so we are starting to narrow the gap. We are starting to reduce the productivity gaps, and they are measured and quantified and known by investment managers throughout the world. We can say that, yes, it's a revenue minister, but I'll tell you that a guy out of Goldman Sachs, a chairman who used to work for the Federal Reserve Board, a very senior official, could certainly give you a whole different perspective on the world economy and marketplaces and the impact of not leaving sufficient dollars in the hands of those that make the high-risk investments to see that they can and will take the risk.

10:00

They can go anywhere in the world to do a lot of these kinds of projects. The oil sands in Alberta is not the only place in the world where there are even tar sands. There are other places where they have alternative choices for energy. It's true that we have a lot of good things like highly educated labour, and those add to the great attractiveness of Canada. We have some great things like that. That's true. But the economic questions, the real cost questions of tax rates have a major impact.

The attraction of other companies to Alberta. If you ask a lot of the companies that have come to Alberta, individuals as well, it's not just for taxes. Many of them add that it is part of the contributing factors to the decisions to locate right here, because of the fiscal environment that is attractive in Canada, not just even to the world but right in Canada as to the major reason for the prosperity, even beyond just the oil and gas sector. Tax rates: very significant in that equation.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Going back to a previous question, the performance measure that I was asking about is one that's on page 368 of the business plan. I don't have my last year's budget. If the minister doesn't have it right now, maybe we can get it later. The performance measure was changed.

Mr. Melchin: I've just got to make sure that I'm clear on which one we're talking about. The measure is the "five-year weighted average market value rate of return for endowment funds compared against the weighted average policy asset mix rate of return." Is that it?

Dr. Massey: Yes.

Mr. Melchin: Okay. We actually have been continually revising a number of our benchmarks to make sure that we've got the right indices. None of them come with: you've got the perfect benchmark. They come with pluses and minuses. So this one in that respect we felt was better. It's not that the other one was bad; it's just that we felt that this was better. The issue was that it was more reflective to move to this one.

We've always had some benchmarks that measured some long-term rates; a four-year average, for example. We just wanted to move to a five-year partially because we hadn't also had on all of these funds a five-year historical record to do it. On the heritage fund, for example, we'd just barely gone from a transition, which was solely fixed income, to a blended fund now, an endowment policy which has got equities and real estate. We haven't had a long enough period with that to actually move to a five-year, and that's why we're now going to the five-year.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. I wonder if the minister could comment upon the Auditor General's . . .

The Chair: Now, hon. member, we go to the 10 minutes. Do we have anyone?

Then you're on. Please continue.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. I wonder if the minister could comment on the Auditor General's observation and his recommendation that "the Ministry of Revenue decide how much more audit work it should do to minimize the risk of revenue loss from taxpayers and claimants not complying with tax legislation." He goes on for a couple of pages about some of the audits that they did and the money that was claimed and seems to raise the issue of there not being enough audit work done for us to really be assured that the money that the government is owed is actually being collected.

Mr. Melchin: We're actually very supportive of the Auditor General's recommendation. His recommendation was such that he didn't know if we had or had not. He asked: "Let's make sure that

we're clear. Do we have the right amount of resources to do the work to ensure that the risk is sufficient in measuring compliance?" He said that he would want to over this next period of time work at that and get better answers to it. So that's what's he tasked our department to resolve.

In that respect we have come back saying that we needed more resources to appropriately manage the growing revenue streams that we have, and they are growing numbers of people, growing numbers of companies, individuals, and tax filers. So from that, we have increased this year's budget to add additional compliance, audit, and systems work in our department. The department has actively worked, as I'd mentioned previously, to assess the risk in each program. We've determined audit coverage requirements, what would be the right level of coverage of audit, and we refined those in the estimates to address those risks. We have a three-year plan to actually improve audit coverage.

We've already started on recruitment. We've been doing this through last year as well. Actually, this isn't new; this has been ongoing. As the province continues to grow, so do we need to have a sufficient number of people to administer and collect those revenue streams, a very important, a very vital part of all of the tax programs. They are voluntary compliance in most cases. You expect people by law to file a tax return, and you have to have means to know if they have or have not or if they've reported the right amount of income.

Those are all parts of sometimes voluntary compliance, and therefore you need sufficient levels of audit and compliance techniques to ensure that you've reduced the risk. In that respect, I'm pleased to report that we have been doing a good job. We assessed that we need to add more, and this budget also responds by adding more resources, individuals as well.

Dr. Massey: Just one more question, and it was again a recommendation from the Auditor General that the objectives of the tax-exempt fuel users program be evaluated and be made explicit.

Mr. Melchin: We have spent quite a bit of time examining the tax-exempt fuel use program, worked with the industries that are specifically involved. There is expansion of scope in that that has probably gone beyond its original purpose. Its purpose was to ensure that a lot of these industries are working off-road and are not necessarily using the infrastructure of roads, but we wanted to encourage economic development in the rural areas, be it in areas like forestry, oil and gas, and so forth, and encourage the investment. So the policy was to ensure that in those areas they wouldn't pay the fuel tax for that area that's directly associated with incurring the work and the investment activity for providing the work in that area.

So it meets a very viable policy objective that was established back in the '80s for that program. It still is ensuring that there's a good, strong industry of trucking and you name it, all of the people that are associated with off-road vehicles that are partially on and off and those that are entirely off. We've reviewed the program. We're satisfied that the program is still meeting objectives. We are looking at simplification aspects of that program right now to make it easier for compliance both for the reporters and for ourselves in monitoring compliance.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Given that we're down to the last four minutes or so, what I would like to do is just read some questions into the record, and perhaps the minister could respond in writing.

I'll try to give the page references here. Page 308 indicates that the department is expecting a lower rate of return, substantially lower

actually, on the heritage savings trust fund compared to last year. Last year was a good year. But the basic question is: why are we expecting it to perform less well than we did last year?

Page 309 lists various tax streams coming into the department. How much loss of revenue did the department predict for this year because of the cigar tax cut? Likewise, what loss of revenue is predicted because of the elimination of the aviation fuel tax on international flights? Some numbers there would be helpful.

10:10

On the same page, page 309, the Revenue department is expecting to receive exactly \$60 million in hotel room tax, not \$60 million and 1 cent but exactly \$60 million. Has there been any examination given to the possibility of dedicating that to tourism marketing, or would that be done perhaps under other departments?

On the next few pages, pages 310 to 313, there are reports on the various funds managed by the Revenue department. Some of these funds, like the Heritage Foundation for Medical Research and the heritage scholarship fund, see I believe some significant increases in management fees, and an explanation of that would be valuable. What's happening there?

Page 314 indicates that spending on insurance claims, premiums, and services will actually be very considerably less than last year. Assuming that that's realistic, that's a great thing. But what was the basis of that calculation? Why are we seeing that drop there?

On page 315 under Alberta Securities Commission we are seeing operating costs rise fairly significantly. It's about a 14 per cent rise, something like that. In any case it's fairly significant: a million and a half dollars. Why would that be? So on page 315 that's the operating costs of the Alberta Securities Commission. Why is that increase so considerable there?

Finally, on page 317 we're seeing the number of full-time equivalent employees of the ministry increase, especially in the department, significantly I think, at 31. Why? Maybe that can be explained as well.

With those questions, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat, and I think we can wrap up this discussion. Thank you.

The Chair: Are you ready for the vote on the estimates after considering the business plan and the proposed estimates of the Department of Revenue for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005?

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and

Equipment/Inventory Purchases \$50,660,000

The Chair: Shall the estimates be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Finance and the estimates of the Department of Revenue and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had

under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following departments.

Finance: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$75,340,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$75,059,000.

Revenue: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$50,660,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**

head: Second Reading

Bill 30

Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure at this time to move second reading of Bill 30, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004.

Prior to discussing in more detail the contents of Bill 30, I would like to provide some background to the Metis Settlements Act. The Metis Settlements Act was passed in 1990 along with three other pieces of legislation: the Metis Settlements Accord Implementation Act, the Metis Settlements Land Protection Act, and the Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act, 1990. Together these acts established the first and still only recognized form of Métis governments and land base in Canada.

The Metis Settlements Act established settlement governing structures and responsibilities and the authorities of the province. The legislation passed in 1990 recognized the Métis settlements as a form of local government in Alberta. Although the legislation provides powers of self-governance for the Métis settlements in many areas, it is important to remember that neither the settlements nor the Legislative Assembly intended that the legislation should be viewed as creating a form of self-government based on concepts of aboriginal rights.

The Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act, 1990, underscores the continuing jurisdiction of the Legislative Assembly and specifically indicates that the legislation was not intended to effect any aboriginal rights.

When the Métis settlements legislation was passed in 1990, it was recognized that many of the structures and processes that were being established were new to both the settlements and the province. Both the settlements and the province took the view that proceeding with the legislation at that time would provide the experience necessary to evaluate its effectiveness and that eventually changes would likely be required. It has now been nearly 14 years since the legislation came into force in November 1990. While some minor changes were made to the Metis Settlements Act in 1998, it was apparent then and even more obvious now that significant changes are required to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of settlement governments.

A significant effort was made in 1999 to bring forward legislative amendments. That effort was not successful as critical issues could not be resolved. Since then, the problems that were identified in the legislation have continued to have a significant impact on the ability of the settlement governments to make decisions and to provide accountable and transparent governance for the communities.

Most importantly, the requirement that general council policies which use laws that govern the action of the eight settlements in the most significant areas receive the unanimous approval of all settlements has proven to be a barrier to good governance. Policies use laws that govern the actions of the eight settlements. The requirement for unanimity led to a situation in the spring of last year where the settlements were forced to ask the minister to pass a regulation to establish the budget of the general council and the allocation of funds to the individual settlements. The unanimity requirement has also been a barrier to the settlements arriving at compromise solutions to other critical issues such as how to allocate revenues associated with resource development.

Bill 30 would remove the unanimity requirement and provide that general council policies can be approved by six of the eight settlements. The elimination of the unanimity requirement will mean that one settlement cannot defeat the policy-making process by simply not showing up to a meeting. The settlements will now have to seek approaches that are based on the reconciliation of their individual views and interests. At the same time, it recognized that it is possible that future general council policies could unfairly disadvantage a particular settlement. As a result, Bill 30 provides that the general council can establish criteria for appeals on the basis that a policy unfairly discriminates against a settlement. The Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal would deal with those appeals.

Another area that has been identified as creating instability at the local settlement level is the current system of annual staggered elections. Currently every year in May elections are held for two of the five council positions. This system hinders long-term planning and the ability of settlement members to hold their elected representatives accountable for the implementation of longer term strategies. Holding the elections in May was also identified as a problem since the settlement budgets went from April to March. With the potential turnover of two-fifths of the settlement council a month after the beginning of the fiscal year, there have been concerns regarding the effectiveness of the budgeting process.

10:20

As a result of these problems, it is proposed to amend the current election system to provide that settlement elections will be held every three years in October for all five council positions. These changes will provide for greater stability at the local political level and enhance the settlements' capacity for long-term operational and fiscal planning.

While there has been significant progress in improving the effectiveness of the settlement governments, settlement members continue to express concerns regarding the accountability of their governments. Mr. Speaker, while not all of these concerns are justified, the lack of effective mechanisms to deal with allegations made by settlement members contributes to an atmosphere of mistrust.

As a result, Bill 30 contains a regulation-making power to enable the minister to establish a Métis settlements ombudsman to review and investigate complaints regarding the management of the affairs of the settlements. Since April 2003 a Métis settlements ombudsman has been in place operating under powers delegated to him by the minister. The proposed amendment will provide an improved legislative foundation for this important function.

One of the important components of the governing structure for the settlements is the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal. This tribunal was the first one established in Canada to deal with issues arising out of the governance of aboriginal communities. Dealing primarily with issues arising out of land allocation and membership decisions by settlement councils, the Métis Settlements Appeal

Tribunal has made a significant contribution to the good governance of the settlements.

Bill 30 contains amendments to adjust the process of appointing members to the appeal tribunal, seeking to further depoliticize the process and to provide additional opportunities for settlements to have input into the selection process.

In addition, Bill 30 provides significant new authorities to the tribunal. Currently the Metis Settlements Act provides that the minister responsible for the act has the power, if the affairs of a settlement are being managed in an irregular, improper, or improvident manner, to issue directives to settlement councillors or staff to dismiss them. This authority would be transferred to the appeal tribunal. As most of the tribunal members are from the settlements, this means that settlement members would be responsible for determining whether a settlement's affairs are being properly managed and to determine the consequences if they are not.

There are a number of other minor amendments that are being made that relate to the appeal tribunal. These amendments address matters pertaining to the Land Access Panel, which deals with surface rights matters; the establishment of an executive committee; and the responsibilities of the chair. In addition, as I mentioned before, the appeal tribunal would be empowered to deal with appeals by settlements that allege that a policy discriminates against them.

The majority of the amendments pertaining to the appeal tribunal will not be proclaimed immediately to allow time to prepare for their implementation.

There are a number of amendments regarding the making of general council policies. One of the most difficult questions facing the settlements is the issue of how to deal with individuals who have been members but have reacquired their status as Indians under the Indian Act. Currently the Metis Settlements Act provides that if a settlement member regains Indian status after November 1, 1990, settlement membership is lost. This provision was included in an attempt to preserve the Métis-ness of the settlements. This provision has led to serious divisions within some communities.

Bill 30 would enable the Métis Settlements General Council to make a policy that would have the effect of altering the current provisions of the act. This approach is based on the belief that the settlements themselves are best positioned to arrive at a new approach that can lead to reconciliation.

Additional policy-making powers to enhance the operations and accountability of the general council are included in Bill 30. These additional policy-making powers focus on such areas as the election and roles of general council officers, internal rules and procedures, conflict of interest, financial management, and human resource policies.

Bill 30 would also change the relationship of the minister to the process of making general council policies. Currently the general council can ask the minister to make a regulation about anything on which the general council can make a policy. This is what happened last year, when the general council was unable to pass the policy to establish a general council budget and to allocate funds between the settlements.

Bill 30 would enable the minister to address future situations where the general council was unable to pass policies necessary for the proper operation of the general council or individual settlements. The minister would have the authority to make regulations in areas subject to general council policies without the request of the general council. Such regulations would be in force for a maximum of two years and would be repealed if the general council were to make a policy to deal with the matter. Such an amendment is necessary to ensure that the basic components of good governance are in place if the general council cannot do so itself.

There are a number of other amendments that are included in Bill 30. The bill provides that every five years the general council can submit to the minister proposals to change the Metis Settlements Act directed at the creation of a more culturally appropriate and effective self-governance structure. The minister responsible for the administration of the act would be required to consider and respond to the proposals from the general council. This amendment was requested by the general council to ensure that the further evolution of settlement governing structures will be reviewed at least once every five years.

There was also an amendment to include a section outlining the purpose of the Metis Settlements Act. This amendment is being included to provide those who are working with the legislation a better understanding of the background and the purpose of the act. Another amendment ensures that subdivision approvals made by settlements since the dissolution of the Métis Settlements Transition Commission in 2002 are valid.

In conclusion, the amendments in Bill 30 are intended to provide for more effective decision-making, greater political stability, and enhanced accountability. Settlements have made significant progress since 1990. The amendments contained in Bill 30 will enhance the capability of the settlement governing institutions to meet the needs of their communities.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I urge all members to support Bill 30 in second reading. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened to the comments from the member opposite carefully. I appreciated them. I appreciated his consultation with me a couple of months ago.

These are difficult issues. We're dealing here with issues of the very nature and manner in which parts of our society govern themselves, and we're looking at changing those procedures and those processes through this bill. We in the opposition have received various concerns about how the bill was developed and the processes it's proposing and have had correspondence and phone calls and conversations from people who are indicating that they are seriously opposed to this bill.

It seems to me – and I will claim no expertise in this area at all – that the most important aspect of this bill is rearranging the requirement for unanimous agreement on the general council to vote and make decisions and move forward. I find myself wondering what the discussions were at the time that the decision was made to have unanimous agreement for the votes on the Métis general council, for it does seem to me to be an awfully tight way to tie a group's hands. It basically, as I understand it, makes an all-or-nothing kind of situation for every vote on the council. It does seem like it will inevitably deadlock the work of the general council.

So I can see the common sense, if that's the word to use, in rearranging the voting structure and decision structure of the Métis general council and shifting from the unanimous requirement to a requirement for 6 out of 8 with the provision of an appeal, as I read the legislation.

This is a tough spot, because with the number of portfolios we each carry in the opposition, we haven't had the opportunity to consult extensively on this. My inclination right now, however, is to say that despite the correspondence that we've received, which appears to raise legitimate concerns about the process, there is simply an element of compelling good sense in the proposals put forward in this legislation.

While I feel torn, I guess I have to ultimately fall back on my own

understanding and my own sense of what's going to work in the long run and what isn't. I am inclined to support the arguments presented by the government and the sponsoring member here, and I'm inclined, perhaps with some reluctance, ultimately to support the government's position on Bill 30.

So those are my comments for now. I know this will come back for further debate. As our opening position it's a judgment call given our limited knowledge and limited time, but this seems ultimately to make sense. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

10:30

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'm pleased to rise to speak to Bill 30 as well, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004, and I must confess that I, as well, am rather torn in connection with this bill. I think the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake has made a good case about the requirement for unanimity in the council being a potential source of deadlock.

I want to indicate, however, that we've had conversations with and consulted with people from the Métis Settlements General Council and that there have been concerns, which I'd like to place on the record, about the limited nature of the consultations which were done in the preparation of this bill. I think that that is a concern.

There are a number of other concerns that have been raised. I think the only one that I want to talk about a little bit is the move to increase ministerial powers relative to a Métis settlement and the general council; for example, the ability of the minister to as they say force the hand of the general council on matters that the general council may have already considered and decided not to pass as policy. There are aspects of ministerial vetoes and so on.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that the province has always maintained tight control over the settlements and the councils. Even when they moved away from appointing representatives to having elected representatives, the legislative and financial control is really all the government needs to keep the system working the way they wish. I want to give an example of the increased control of the minister. For example, one amendment removes the appeals of election results to the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal, whose chair is appointed by the minister, so there are elements here, I think, that bear investigation.

This information is based on consultations that we have conducted. If they are not correct, then I hope that the hon. member who's sponsoring the bill will stand up and say so.

In general, Mr. Speaker, I believe that the government should go further in reducing government control and influence over Métis settlements; in fact, move towards eliminating it altogether.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, I will take my chair. I hope that the hon. member will have an opportunity either here or in committee to respond to some of these concerns.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake to close debate.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you. I'd like to ask for the question, but I would like to offer to the members that had posed some questions that I will respond fully to them when we go to Committee of the Whole.

Thank you.

[Motion carried unanimously; Bill 30 read a second time]

The Clerk Assistant: For second reading, Bill 27, Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004, hon. Mr. Melchin.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Question.

Mr. Mason: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Point of Order

Unanimous Decision of the Assembly

Mr. Mason: I would ask if the chair could maybe enlighten me with respect to the question of a unanimous vote on a voice vote. If he doesn't hear any voices raised in opposition, is it considered in the record to be a unanimous vote?

The Deputy Speaker: If there are no votes to the contrary, that's the assumption, yes. On an important bill like this, then if anyone is opposed to it, they should speak up, or in support of it they should speak up, and no one did, unless somebody corrects me and they heard and I was unable to hear.

Some Hon. Members: Question.

The Deputy Speaker: No. We have a point of order, and I've replied to the point of order. Is there further comment from the hon. Government House Leader on the point of order?

If not, then maybe we could continue with the introduction and movement of Bill 27.

An Hon. Member: Question.

The Deputy Speaker: No. He hasn't moved anything yet.

Bill 27

Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Melchin: I'd like to move second reading of the Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004, Bill 27.

This bill, just briefly, is a business tax reduction strategy of the government to reduce corporate income tax rates, presently at 12 and a half per cent, to 11 and a half per cent and the small business rate from 4 to 3 per cent effective April 1 of 2004. This means reductions of the general corporate income tax to the second lowest, and the small business tax rate is now currently tied with New Brunswick for the lowest among the provinces. This will save Alberta businesses about \$142 million in this fiscal year.

Further amendments introduced in this bill are in response to some of the federal resource taxation legislation changes so that we can accommodate their changes. It does get into allowing corporations to continue to deduct the resource allowance or Crown charges, whichever is greater, until December 31, 2006. It sets an expiry date of December 31, 2013, on the royalty tax deduction program. It allows the Alberta royalty tax credit and royalty credits for individual trusts to remain nontaxable for Alberta purposes. It maintains a level playing field between corporate and individual and trust claimants by ensuring that Alberta's policy framework on resource taxation for corporations is similar to that for individuals and trusts.

It has some administrative concerns such as maintaining Alberta's small business threshold of \$400,000. It ensures that corporations moving into Alberta from provinces which collect their own corporate taxes cannot claim excessive discretionary deductions due to different federal and provincial balances and requires corporations to file additional information concerning assessments from other jurisdictions only when there are changes in tax balances assessed by the other jurisdictions.

Mr. Speaker, those are the main elements of the bill. I'd urge all members to support Bill 27.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, the Alberta New Democrat opposition will not be supporting this bill to cut taxes for corporations. Now, I could say that I was shocked and appalled. I am not shocked, but I am appalled that this government is proceeding with what we consider a reckless course of action.

We had an opportunity to have a little bit of dialogue with the Minister of Revenue previous to this in his estimates. I remain completely unconvinced that cutting corporate taxes is necessary for the economic growth of this province, and I'm very, very concerned that this has been made a priority by the government and at the expense of other priorities.

It may surprise some members opposite to know that we in the New Democrat opposition are not necessarily opposed to tax cuts. The question is: which taxes and which people pay those taxes? So we think that it's time to assess some of the other opportunities that the government could have taken advantage of in order to reduce taxes.

10:40

Now, in the area of postsecondary education, Mr. Speaker, of course tuition has tripled in the past decade. You know, in a way, in a very real way, the tuition fees are a tax – they're a fee for education – and, in fact, participation in postsecondary education in Alberta is amongst the lowest in the country.

When we were dealing with the Minister of Learning's estimates in the Public Accounts Committee yesterday morning, it was very interesting that a significantly increased number of people in this province, according to their own measures, now consider postsecondary education to be too expensive. It's moved from the range of – well, I won't try and go from memory, but it's been a 15 or 20 per cent increase over two or three years, Mr. Speaker, who think that postsecondary education is out of reach for them. So the question that I have to ask is: why are we continuing to increase tuition fees for postsecondary institutions, those very institutions that people's taxes pay for, and at the same time cut corporate taxes?

The second one, of course, that has been raised a number of times is the question of health care premiums. Now, we know that these are a tax because the revenue doesn't go to pay directly for the health care system. This money flows directly into general revenues, and it's a substantial source of revenue for this provincial government.

Every family, unless they're at a very low income, pays exactly the same, so there's no flexibility or no variability in what is paid according to income. A poor family pays as much as a wealthy family. It is a very, very regressive tax and an unfair tax and, Mr. Speaker, one that we think the government should get rid of. We urge them to at least get rid of it for seniors, and we're going to try and apply as much pressure as we can as the New Democrat opposition on this government to eliminate health care premiums for seniors before the next election. So I hope that the government is willing to listen to the opposition on this matter.

Nevertheless, health care premiums would put money directly in the pockets of Alberta families. The problem with a corporate tax cut is that many of these corporations don't necessarily have their base in this province, but they operate in this province. They'll receive the tax cut, and they'll spend the money in Texas or in Toronto or somewhere else. So there's no guarantee that there's going to be an increase in spending in this province as a result of a corporate tax cut, but if you cut health care premiums, there would

be a direct and immediate increase in spending in the economy by families right here in this province. So we think families should come ahead of corporations, particularly foreign corporations, in terms of the government's priorities for tax cuts. Yet here we go: health care premiums stay, and corporate taxes go down.

You know, Mr. Speaker, there is a whole raft of increases in various user fees contained in this budget, and there was in the last budget as well. I think that, you know, the government should consider why it wants to increase a whole raft of user fees when it is cutting taxes for corporations.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'm tempted to go on and on about this, but I'm not going to, given the hour. I just want to place on the record once again the very clear and strong and principled opposition of the Alberta New Democrats to this corporate tax cut and would point out that we have been very consistent in this opposition all the way through and will continue to do so.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this evening we spoke about the revenue framework that the Minister of Revenue apparently has somewhere in his office and may share little bits and pieces with us. But we don't know the big picture here from the government's side, and based on their work and the expertise they consult with on preparing that, we're at a disadvantage here.

I must confess to a real concern that we are not putting ourselves in a fiscal position that in the long term is sustainable. I am concerned – and I've had economists talk to me about this – that we are in fact cutting taxes so far in Alberta that if the petroleum industry hits the skids, as it does from time to time, we're in a crisis. We return to the kinds of problems that we faced in the later '80s. In fact, the tax cuts that have been brought in during this flush of prosperity, this boom that we're having right now, will have to be reversed when the boom ends, and end it will. Every boom at some point goes on long enough that people begin to think this is going to go on forever. I've been there. We've probably all been there. They don't go on forever.

While there are some parts of this bill that I like, I just wish I had confidence that there was a solid framework behind it. I am generally concerned that while taxes are undoubtedly an important consideration in stimulating economic activity and in generating prosperity and wealth, they're not the only consideration.

We do need in place a strong education system, for example. There are dramatic cases – Ireland comes to mind – of a country that turned around its entire economy by investing heavily in education. So education is important to our prosperity.

A good health care system is. Our health care system in Canada is an enormous competitive advantage over our biggest competitor in the global marketplace, and that's the U.S.

Quality of life issues are important: spending money and having sufficient money for police, for parks, or for all kinds of things that make for a quality of life. More and more evidence is showing, good solid evidence on economic development and prosperity, that quality of life is the key to attracting and holding the people who create a strong economy.

Another factor that is crucial to a successful economy is something as basic as roads. If members of this Assembly will turn to the business plan of the Department of Transportation, they will see that year after year the plan is for worse and worse roads in Alberta. This government is planning for the roads of this province to steadily and markedly deteriorate. It's as deliberate as can be. It's in the plan. The reason for that is that there's apparently not enough money available to maintain our roads.

So when those components of the government's responsibility are not getting proper attention, then I do worry that tax cuts may not be in order. On the other hand, in this province, because we have unbelievable natural wealth, the government continues to run surpluses. So there is enough money to meet many competing needs at once, and we're in a luxurious, perhaps too luxurious, position.

The tax cuts proposed in Bill 27 will cost the province about, I believe, \$142 million a year. Certainly, given the size of the surpluses the last several years, that's an affordable amount, it seems, the way things are at the moment. But who is that \$142 million going to go to? Well, in some cases it's going to go to small business owners, and you know what? I like that. That's part of this bill that I like, and it may be on the basis of that alone that we may end up supporting this bill.

Perhaps the minister could fill us in during committee: how much of that \$142 million is going to small business owners, and how much will go to corporations? I am concerned that the portion going to the larger corporations isn't going to stay in Alberta. In fact, this is a tax cut for people outside of Alberta and, indeed, people outside of Canada, and I'm not at all convinced that we need to do that. I'd love to see everything possible done to grow the local small business community and grow small businesses into medium-sized and large businesses so that we end up with a huge corporate sector based right here in Alberta.

10:50

I think of countries like Korea. Forty years ago Korea was the poorest of the poor countries, a war-torn Third World country. Today you buy Korean cellphones; you buy Korean cars; you buy Korean television sets. A magnificent job of developing their economy. The same thing done in Taiwan; the same thing done in Japan; the same thing done in Singapore. They built those up through cultivating their own economies. I'm concerned that instead of us doing that, we're giving tax breaks to people outside of this province. So the long-term wisdom of this I really have to question.

I would very much prefer and I know that all of us in the opposition caucus would very much prefer a tax cut that went to everybody. We've hammered away on this for years, and that is eliminating health care premiums, a larger tax cut which raises questions of affordability, I fully acknowledge, but it's a tax cut that would benefit virtually every Albertan one way or another. So that would be an exciting tax cut to see.

In the end, I think because of the support here to small business we will support this bill, but I think we'll wait and see how the debate goes during committee and how some of the details work out before we – well, in fact I don't expect myself to wholeheartedly support this because I can't see where it fits into the larger framework of sustainability. If through the debate in committee I'm convinced that this is part of a big plan that's credible and makes sense, then more power to the government. As it is right now, I have concerns about the general corporate tax cut here.

So with those comments, Mr. Speaker, I'll take my seat and look forward to debate in committee. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue to close debate.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just two quick comments. We have actually acted first for individuals before businesses got tax cuts. That was the plan all along. We gave a billion and a half dollar tax cut to individuals. That happened a few years ago. Personal income tax was a substantial cut.

We'll be happy to respond to the remaining issues in committee. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 27 read a second time]

House are clamouring for the next bill to come forward, but I have to resist that and move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know members of the

[Motion carried; at 10:53 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, April 22, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/04/22

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Let us keep ever mindful of the special and unique opportunity we have to work for our constituents and our province, and in that work let us find strength and wisdom. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today we're very privileged to have guests from the Pacific Northwest Economic Region visiting legislators and ministers in our Legislature Building. Just prior to coming into the House, we had a number of members who met with them over lunch, and they will be meeting with a number of ministers throughout the afternoon. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly two of the three guests who are with us today. Unfortunately, Representative Jeff Morris of the Washington State Legislature is not able to join us for question period. He will however be returning very shortly.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to introduce to you Mr. Matt Morrison, who is the executive director of PNWER, Pacific Northwest Economic Region. Jeff hails from Seattle. Joining him in your gallery is Mr. Marvin Schneider, who is with our own International and Intergovernmental Relations. He is the director for U.S./Mexico relations and has been working diligently with Mr. Morrison and Mr. Morris in facilitating their meetings throughout the day. I ask that they rise and receive the normal warm welcome of all members in the House.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly Catherine Ripley of my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. Catherine is here this afternoon to observe the estimates of the Department of Learning, which come before the House this afternoon. In addition to being a great parent of two teenage children, one of whom attends Harry Ainlay high school and the other attending Strathcona composite high school, she has for the past number of years been the chair of the Whitemud Coalition of Schools, an organization for which I have a great deal of respect and which I've had the opportunity to work with over the past number of years. Catherine and the coalition do invaluable surveys of the schools in our area and provide me with a great deal of information with which I can harass the Minister of Learning from time to time, and I take the opportunity to do, and it's great background and help to an MLA to have that kind of support. If that doesn't take up enough of her time, she's the author of children's books. I'd ask Catherine to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly eight very special guests from the Bruderheim seniors' centre seated in the members' gallery, all very strong volunteers in the community of Bruderheim. They are Helen Romanchuk, Iris Penonzek, Ron Martineau, Mona Bovell, Des Bovell, Eileen Loeffelmann, and Alfred Loeffelmann. I would ask all to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, it's a unique occasion and a pleasure to introduce to you and through you a Polish television camera crew that is visiting us in the members' gallery, led by Mrs. Agata Konarska, and assisting her is Mrs. Madej, a member of our Edmonton Polish community. I'd like them to rise and receive the warm welcome of our Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce 11 people that work in my department. These people work in an area that is really a hidden jewel in my bureaucracy and in my department, and it's a hidden jewel that the hon. Leader of the Opposition and I have had discussions about before. They're from the Learning Resources Centre. I would ask Ruth Juliebo, Whitney Masson, Renice Richel, David Chowne, Lois Rogers, Bill Vandermeer, Edd Semeniuk, Donna Vincent, Cathy Daoust, Susan Graham, Tim Tornberg – I do apologize for my pronunciation of those names – to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to the Assembly and to you somebody who has driven many, many miles to come here today to watch the proceedings of the Assembly. He's seated in the public gallery. He's the principal of not one but two schools in Bow Island, Alberta. His name is Stuart Angle, and I would ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of all MLAs.

Thank you.

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and to members assembled 44 students from Win Ferguson community school in Fort Saskatchewan. They're accompanied by their teachers Mr. Jeff Spady and Mrs. Joanne Simpson as well as parent helpers Mrs. Bonnie Bowes, Mr. Paul Kristensen, Mr. Ernie Hansen, Mrs. Deb Parent, and Mrs. Vicki Kippen. I would ask that they please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the honour and the pleasure of introducing to you and through you to members of this Assembly 56 bright and energetic students from the Red Deer Christian school. They are accompanied by their teachers Mrs. Carolyn Stolte and Mr. Jim Driedger and by their parent helpers Mrs. Marilyn Pleadwell, Mrs. Elaine Campbell, Mr. Alan Ten Hove, Ms Chris Thiessen, Mr. Gordon Smith, and Mrs. Sheila Van Alstyne. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a number of members of the International Order of Odd Fellows and Rebekahs. I had the opportunity recently to be a judge at a public speaking contest for young people that is organized by the local chapter of the Odd Fellows and Rebekahs, and what a wonderful group of young people they were. They are going to be a credit to this House some day. Their speeches were tremendous. I'd like to extend my appreciation to the Odd Fellows and Rebekahs. The winner, I believe, gets a trip to the United Nations, and I think it was a wonderful part of the work that this group does. So I'd like Florence Ponto, Arlene Coates, Bob Whalen, and Marilyn Nichols to please rise. Also, the gracious hostess accompanying them is my new constituency assistant, Mary MacKinnon, and I'd like her to rise as well and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Legislature Mr. Albert Mastromartino. He's the president of the Nissan Canada Foundation. Mr. Mastromartino joins us today following a very special event celebrating the donation of three brand new vans provided by the Nissan Canada Foundation, Ericksen Nissan, and Mills Nissan for use by the Meals on Wheels program. I'd like to commend both the Nissan Canada Foundation and Meals on Wheels for making a very real difference in the lives of seniors in terms of their health and independence. I'd ask Mr. Mastromartino, who is seated in your gallery, to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a constituent of mine who is here to observe the proceedings this afternoon. Lynn Odynski is an Edmonton public school board trustee. I would ask her to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Government Travel Expenses

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's cabinet, unlike those in other provinces, exempts itself from freedom of information legislation and is strangely reluctant to release detailed information on the travel and entertainment expenses of the Premier and his ministers. There is no reason the Premier can't make public photocopies of cabinet expenses. My questions are to the Premier. Given that a photocopier can copy a thousand pages in 18 minutes for \$10, why doesn't the Premier just photocopy Executive Council's receipts and make them public?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we are evaluating the way we handle expenses. But I would remind the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition that it's not so much the revelation of expenses – and that's not a problem for us; it's not a problem – but it's how much government spends.

If they were really concerned, they would look at their Liberal cousins in Ottawa and see the opulence, the extravagance, and the use of taxpayers' dollars to fund the swimming pool and all the trappings of 24 Sussex, to accommodate the huge living room that occupies the A320 Air bus that the Prime Minister flies around in, to accommodate the four or five Challenger jets that were bought at taxpayers' expense to cart ministers and MPs back and forth and to and fro, to accommodate the multitude of security people around the Prime Minister, to accommodate his stretch limousines, to accommodate the lavish dinners that he holds. They should be talking about that instead.

Dr. Taft: Given that other governments are able to post their cabinet ministers' expense receipts on the web for everybody in Canada to see within three months, why doesn't this government do the same?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, we are evaluating the way that we report our expenses, and that will be reported. We are not going to take the advice of this Liberal opposition, which, by the way, wasn't elected to be the government. We will do what is right, what is open, and what is transparent. The simple fact is that a \$27.50 jug of orange juice comes nowhere near the opulence and the extravagance of their Liberal cousins in Ottawa.

Dr. Taft: How does the Premier explain to Albertans that they aren't allowed to see these receipts when they pay the tab?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the expenses are reported yearly to Public Accounts.

The \$10,000 that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar spent to travel across the bridge, the \$10,000 he spent last year to travel to and fro and wherever, is reported to Public Accounts. The only difference is that they do not post their expenses or details of those expenses on the web site. Instead, he just says, "I spent \$10,000 to travel within the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar," which you can spit across.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question.

Health Care Reforms

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Liberals are committed to a strong public health care system, a commitment shared by most Albertans. What Albertans do not want are taxes on the sick and health care based on what one can afford instead of what one needs. The best way to meet legitimate health care needs is through a public health care system, yet this government has said that everything is on the table when it comes to health care reform. To the Premier: will the Premier reassure Albertans here and now that this government will not introduce health care user fees?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition pointed out, everything is on the table. While it's not our intention to go out of our way to contravene the Canada Health Act, there may be some things in the reforms that could. As he pointed out, everything is indeed on the table.

Relative to the caucus discussion today our caucus was adamant that we need to take bold steps now to make sure that we have a health system that is there for us in the future. All the premiers, all the ministers of health fully agree that the system we know now is simply not sustainable, and it will bankrupt a number of provinces. Although it might not bankrupt Alberta, the costs of providing funding for health care are very severe indeed.

At caucus today the Health and Wellness minister laid out what he called a road map for reform. He spoke in very, very broad, general principles about cost pressures in areas such as drugs and new technologies. He talked about finding new and innovative ways to fund the system.

An Hon. Member: User fees.

Mr. Klein: Well, they're saying user fees. That's about a three-second sound bite, but it's good enough, and that's what they like to play on. They have no notion, no idea, nor do they have any responsibility for developing policy.

He talked about making better use of privately delivered services within the publicly funded system to reduce pressure and waiting times at hospitals. Already we have evidence that some of these procedures are very useful in relieving pressure at publicly funded hospitals. A number of procedures now are contracted by regional health authorities, and for years and years, of course, the RHAs and the government generally have been contracting services to private operators for seniors in long-term care.

Caucus members raised many questions, including questions about access and labour costs and whether the Canada Health Act needs updating and the impact of an aging population. Mr. Speaker, all of this will be brought together in a package. It will be released to the public – I assume that the Liberals will go out of their way to get it; I hope that they do, anyway – and then we'll bring that package to caucus and have a good discussion.

The Speaker: Hon. members, caucus meetings and the subject therein are not normally the subjects of question period, but if the leader of the government chooses to discuss it, that's certainly his prerogative as the leader of the government.

The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Will the Premier rule out health care insurance deductibles, which require patients to pay the first portion of their treatment costs before public payment kicks in?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you're absolutely right. Normally we don't talk about what takes place in caucus, but I had the courtesy today to explain exactly to the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition what we discussed generally in caucus. I would point out that this is far more than the Liberals would ever do. They never share anything that comes out of their caucus. Nothing.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This question comes out of our caucus meeting this morning. Given that Albertans already pay taxes and they pay health care premiums, will the Premier rule out reforms that would force patients to pay even more money out of pocket based on their income?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, he's looking for an answer that will provide the good 15-second sound bite so that they can take that out and tout it as government policy. I'm not going to fall into that trap other than to say that we had a good discussion in caucus today.

1:50

We agreed with the minister's road map leading to reform. We agreed that a package will be brought together, that it will be released to the public, that it will be discussed by caucus. Then, following that, there will be a public consultation process. At that

time the Liberals can make all the political noise they want and spew out all the rhetoric they want. I fully expect it.

Automobile Insurance Reforms

Mr. MacDonald: This government's insurance reform has become both a tragedy and a farce for Alberta motorists and a foreign language film without subtitles for Conservatives at their private, behind-closed-door standing policy committee meeting on Tuesday. It is reported that the government's leading actor, the hon. Member for Medicine Hat, hadn't even seen the latest version of the script before last Tuesday's meeting. Albertans demand to know who was in charge of the insurance file. My first question is to the Premier. How open and transparent can Albertans expect this government to be with them when it doesn't even let the person in charge of the insurance reforms see the advance copy of the proposed changes?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can't speak for the hon. Member for Medicine Hat and what he knew and what he did not know, but obviously the Liberals know a lot. So something must be open and transparent.

Mr. Speaker, the reason there are only seven of those people over there, or six now and soon to be five, is that they don't understand the essence of politics. They don't understand the essence of people.

People, at the end of the day, are not concerned so much about process or what happened at an SPC meeting or what didn't happen at an SPC meeting. What they are concerned about at the end of the day is their pocketbook and whether or not young good drivers will see a reduction, albeit phased in, of their premiums, whether older male drivers, who are now penalized, will see a reduction overall in their premiums, and whether those in the middle range will see their rates being comparable to other rates, that they're being treated fairly.

That is what the people are concerned about at the end of the day. These people are concerned about the nitty-gritty, picayune kinds of things that don't mean a tinker's damn to the public.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. People in this province are concerned about what the insurance policies are doing to what's left in their pocketbook.

Now, if the government's own MLAs will not endorse the insurance reforms that are proposed, how does this government expect Albertans to be satisfied with this latest attempt to reform the insurance file?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, the reason there are 73 of us and only five of them is that we listen to people. Do you think that this caucus is going to do something that is going to hurt consumers when we set out, relative to our insurance reforms, to protect consumers? Get real. He doesn't get it. That's why there are only five of them, and after the next election there will be even fewer.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier. Did the proposed reforms stall at the closed-door private meeting because the insurance industry wasn't there to direct the action?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I wasn't at the SPC.

The Speaker: The leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Health Care Reforms (continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today the Conservative caucus met behind closed doors to discuss this government's radical plan to charge the sick and injured for health care. Rather than release their plans to the public and allow Albertans the benefit of a full and vigorous debate on these issues, the government prefers to engage in a campaign of cover-up and misrepresentation. Not only has this government invoked the name of Tommy Douglas to defend charging the sick for health care; they incorrectly point to a number of European examples to justify their plan to turn health care over to insurance companies. My questions are to the Premier. Given that Tommy Douglas actually envisioned a health care system that covered all health services, including drugs, dental care, and other services not presently covered, isn't the Premier completely misrepresenting the Douglas vision for medicare when he uses Tommy Douglas's name to dismantle health care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm not using Tommy Douglas's name . . .

The Speaker: I really have no idea how that leads to government policy. That's a personal interpretation. If the Premier wishes to proceed with this related to government policy, please do, but we're not going to get into a debate on the historical merits of Mr. Douglas.

Mr. Klein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are some ways that the words of Tommy Douglas fit into health care. Now, I'm reading from a document, albeit coffee-stained, that is entitled *Man's Destiny Cannot Be Settled in the Marketplace*. This is a speech given by Tommy Douglas. I'd be glad to share it with you. I will quote so as to not be misquoted or so as to not have any of my comments misinterpreted by the hon. member. I will quote verbatim.

In his speech on page 142 he says, "I want to say that I think there is a value in having every family and every individual make some individual contribution." Do you believe that? [interjection] Right. Do you believe that?

I think it has psychological value. I think it keeps the public aware of the cost and gives the people a sense of personal responsibility. I would say to the members of this House that even if we could finance the plan without a per capita tax, I personally would strongly advise against it. I would like to see the per capita tax so low that it is merely a nominal tax, but I think there is a psychological value in people paying something for their cards. It is something which they have bought; it entitles them to certain services. We should have the constant realization that if those services are abused and costs get out of hand, then of course the cost of the medical care is bound to go up.

Well, Mr. Speaker, that's what Tommy Douglas said, and that coincides somewhat with the policy that we're now developing. We're saying that there is a cost to health care. We're saying that, as a matter of fact, it's getting close to \$8 billion in this province. It consumes up to 50 per cent of some provincial budgets. We're saying also that unless something is done and people realize that there is a cost to health care, then the health care system as we know it will collapse. It will collapse completely, and it won't be there for these young people in the future. It won't be there for the hon. leader of the third party or his seatmate. It won't be there for any of us. It will collapse. It will either collapse or it will bankrupt the provinces and the country.

Mr. Speaker, those costs are going out of control. You cannot sustain a system with costs that rise by 7 or 8 per cent each year when the annual increase in revenues is about 3 or 4 per cent. It simply is out of whack, and it needs to be brought back into line.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we've now spent four minutes on a discussion of a philosophy of a person. It has nothing to do with this Assembly and the question period. Now, let's move on. I've got 14 members.

The hon. member. Second question.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Tommy Douglas's daughter has come forward and accused the Premier of being dishonest and twisting Douglas's words, will the Premier apologize to the Douglas family for using the Douglas memory for . . .

The Speaker: Okay. Hon. leader, that is not a question within the purview of the question period in this Assembly. Now, this has nothing to do with government policy, so go on to your third one, please.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that according to the *British Medical Journal* Sweden is actually reducing the private-sector presence in health care, isn't the Premier's use of this country to justify his agenda just more false and misleading spin?

2:00

Mr. Klein: No. It's not a false and misleading spin to say that we want to look at what works in Sweden. If they are reducing their dependency on the private sector, fine. We will look at that, and we will ask the question: why are you doing this? What didn't work? What did work? I'm sure the hon. member would like to take out of that system and other systems in other jurisdictions those things that work and work well.

Mr. Speaker, I have to comment because the hon. member alluded to Mr. Douglas's daughter, but he didn't allude to his grandson, Keifer Sutherland, who spoke in Calgary but thought he was in Manitoba. So if he's going to give credence and credibility to the Sutherlands, then I think that we should mention the whole family.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Traffic Safety in Calgary

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During the Easter break a tragic traffic collision in our Calgary-Fort constituency took the lives of a young man and his son and severely injured his daughter. This deadly collision involved a heavy semi truck and a compact car and took place at the intersection of the Barlow and Peigan trails just at the end of the Deerfoot Trail exit ramp. My question is to the Minister of Transportation. Given that our provincial government is responsible for the Deerfoot Trail and traffic safety in general, could the hon. minister ask the department to undertake improvements at this intersection such as putting in speed bumps?

Thank you.

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the department is currently in the process of commissioning a consultant to review this particular intersection. The consultant will have to work with the city of Calgary to ensure that whatever improvements we do make at that particular intersection and interchange will also phase in with the city of Calgary's road plans as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Could the minister ask his department to review the accident exit situation from the Peigan Trail into the Deerfoot Trail interchange and recommend improvements?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, yes; we are. Safety, of course, is a top priority in terms of building our roads and road improvement. Here again on this particular section we're also in the process of hiring a consultant as well. There will be considerable activity on the Deerfoot Trail over the next three years. In fact, it'll be one construction zone from one end to the other. Unfortunately, for the people in Calgary it will be interrupted traffic, but it all is going to lead to a much safer freeway through that city.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you. My last supplemental question is to the same minister. Given that the tragedy occurred in that specific intersection, could the minister tell the Assembly if anything else is being done to improve the safety conditions?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, it's a good question, but there's only so much that can be done in terms of improvements to a roadway. We know that adding an interchange where the traffic warrants it will reduce incidents by 47 per cent. We know that widening a highway when the traffic warrants it will reduce accidents by about 50 per cent. But at the end of the day, when we look at all collisions and all accidents in this province, 90 per cent of them are driver error.

So, yes, we can decrease a number of these incidents with improved roads and road design, but we also need the co-operation of all Albertans to ensure that they handle themselves appropriately when they're at the steering wheel and pay attention and try and reduce the significant percentage, 90 per cent driver error, to something that perhaps is a little more acceptable. But at the end of the day it's still the driver behind the wheel.

Automobile Insurance Reforms (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: The Official Opposition has learned that the regulation regarding caps on minor injuries reads like this: the \$4,000 cap will cover all sprains and strains or whiplash-associated disorders that do not result in serious impairment; serious impairment is defined as substantial impairment to physical or cognitive functions that result in substantial inability to perform employment, training or educational or daily living activities; further, the impairment must be continuous with no reasonable expectation of substantial improvement. My first question is to the Premier. Why is this government forcing an unwanted \$4,000 cap on pain and suffering on Albertans who are involved in traffic accidents when the government's own poll recently indicated that only 5 per cent of Albertans support the cap?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I wasn't at the SPC meeting, and this will have to work its way through. Policy is discussed. The way it works – and you will never know because you will never be in government – here in our system is thus. An item goes usually from the Agenda and Priorities Committee, or it can be initiated through any other committee or any source, to a standing policy committee, where the policy merits of a proposal are discussed. If there is a recommendation, either negative or positive, or no recommendation, the matter is then brought to cabinet, and cabinet either approves it or amends it or rejects it. If the matter is something that is . . . [interjection] Well, it's very important because he has to understand the process.

Then if the matter is of broad, general importance – first of all, all matters are reported to caucus. Some matters are brought to caucus without a recommendation or even with a recommendation to seek

caucus approval. [interjection] No. I'm explaining the process. I know that you don't have a process because you can't. You're not the government. Therefore, you can't have a process, but we do. We are charged by the people of this province to make government policy, to make policy on behalf of the people.

So where we are right now is at the standing policy committee stage. Whatever was decided at that committee has not come to cabinet, has not gone to caucus, so we are not there yet. We are not there yet. Now, if the hon. member has something constructive, other than nationalizing or socializing our car insurance system, as the Liberals would like done, other than that, if he has any bright suggestions, any constructive criticism, we'd be glad to hear it.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: given that this cap is a huge financial break for the insurance industry, which has recently posted record windfall profits, how much money will the \$4,000 cap save the insurance industry at the expense of innocent accident victims in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, could I pose a question to the hon. member? Is he deaf or just stupid? I explained the process. He's talking as if policy had already been developed.

Now, I don't know what was discussed. I will see the reports, obviously, before they come to cabinet. [interjection] Well, he doesn't want to understand. He doesn't want to understand. He doesn't want to think and contemplate what government procedures are, and that is frustrating because what he is doing is talking about something that presumably was in a report, and he's talking in the context of that being government policy. Well, nothing is policy yet. Nothing.

The Speaker: Actually, to answer the question from the Premier, the Premier cannot ask a question in the question period. That's only reserved for private members.

Speaker's Ruling **Parliamentary Language**

The Speaker: The question "Is the member deaf or is the member stupid?" is probably a most inappropriate question. One might suggest that the member might be handicapped, and the other one might suggest something else. So I would really ask the Premier to withdraw that statement.

Mr. Klein: I'm sorry, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry for calling the member stupid and deaf.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:10 Automobile Insurance Reforms (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: because we know that the voters of this province aren't stupid and they're not deaf either, how many innocent motor vehicle accident victims in Alberta will have their legal rights limited by this government's \$4,000 cap?

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Speaker, on the point that was raised by the hon. member in his preamble, I agree with him a hundred per cent. That's why there are 73 of us and only five of them.

Mr. Speaker, again, I don't want to conduct a clinic in politics, but all we're doing relative to car insurance reform is responding to the people and trying to create a system that is fair for young male

drivers between 16 and 25, who are now penalized; to make sure that those in the mid-range are treated fairly and pay comparable rates to those in socialist provinces; that those who are penalized because of older age are treated fairly; and that victims, people who are injured in accidents, are fairly compensated, not overcompensated, not undercompensated but fairly compensated. There can't be anything wrong with that.

Now, if the hon. member disagrees with that policy and that direction, then stand up and tell Albertans that he disagrees with a policy that wants to achieve fairness for young male drivers, good drivers, that creates fairness for those in the mid-range, that creates fairness for older good male drivers, that fairly compensates those injured in accidents. If he is opposed to those policies, please stand up and say so. Say so, so that all the media and all the public of this province can hear this hon. member, because we want to know where he stands on this issue.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

4-H Club Beef Sales

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In May and June hundreds of cattle will be sold by 4-H club members across this province. Many of these animals need to be slaughtered shortly after they are purchased, but the current regulations state that the cattle must be owned for 30 days before mobile butchers can slaughter them. This requirement may deter some businesses and individuals from purchasing 4-H steers because they won't be able to slaughter them right away. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What is the minister doing to address these concerns for 4-H members?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, a number of members, particularly rural members, have raised this issue, as have some of our 4-H beef clubs that are looking at their upcoming sales.

The regulation that the hon. member is referring to is the meat inspection regulation. It is designed to ensure that meat is produced, slaughtered, and sold in a very safe manner. When we initially consulted on these regulations, we found that individuals that were purchasing animals might not necessarily know the history or the health of the animals and hence the condition that you had to hold it for 30 days. However, understanding that there are people who may want to purchase an animal from a neighbour for their own use, that we have many clubs that are looking at their sales in June, we've asked our department to review this regulation and try to accommodate these special circumstances while still addressing the food safety concerns.

There are a variety of ways that we could do that, and we're in the process right now, and I think we are going to be able to make this work.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: will the proposed regulatory amendments address the concerns that the mobile butchers have, I guess, in their desire to provide a competitive choice for 4-H animal purchasers?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are 52 provincial abattoirs in the province that are inspected and, I must say, operate at a very high standard. We also have a mobile slaughter industry in this province that operates very well. The change to this regulation

would allow, particularly in communities where there isn't an abattoir, the opportunity for the mobile slaughterer to accommodate those animals.

Now, any one of us might purchase a 4-H animal. My colleague the minister of health might purchase one and would not have any place to accommodate that animal for 30 days save on the deck at his office, I suppose. It might be a little large. So, Mr. Speaker, common sense has to prevail in this, and that is the approach we're taking. It is my expectation that we will conclude this review and have this amended, dealt with in a way that accommodates those special circumstances and also preserves food safety.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the minister for acknowledging the concerns that are out there with 4-H members.

My second supplemental is again to the minister of agriculture. Can she give us any indication when the regulations will be changed, and will they be changed in time for the June 4-H sales?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the very simplest and probably the best way to address this would be to remove the 30-day requirement. That would not be difficult to change in the regulation.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is a reminder of how far reaching the BSE crisis has been in this province. We have a number of young 4-H people who have worked very hard raising their animals and are about to sell them and, of course, some limited market. I want to commend the community organizations that have addressed this, such as the Medicine Hat chamber of commerce, who have done fundraisers by selling promotional beef T-shirts, and those dollars are going to assist in the purchase of 4-H calves. That is one example of what is happening across this province. The people in this province recognize the fine work of the 4-H movement and also recognize that we have the strongest 4-H program in Canada, and we want to maintain it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Grade 12 Diploma Exams

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last November the Minister of Learning supported students writing parts A and B of the grade 12 diploma exams a week apart in the face of criticism from parents, students, and teachers. Now the diploma exam schedule for 2005 on the Alberta Learning web site shows a return to holding parts A and B on the same day. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Is the web site correct?

Dr. Oberg: Yes.

Dr. Massey: Okay. Again, then, Mr. Speaker, to this same minister: given that Alberta Learning's web site states that students' marks were higher when the exams were staggered, what is the rationale for reverting to the old schedule?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, it is not exactly the old schedule. We still have the exams split in two parts. What we found is the concentration of the students first of all on multiple choice so that the students will specifically go on multiple choice. The second part of the exam will be the written part of the exam, where the students concentrate specifically on the written part.

What we postulate happened and in talking to students after we did split apart the exams about how they actually wrote the exams was that the majority of students went through and wrote all the multiple choice answers. Then if there was time and if there was the ability to do it, they concentrated on the written answers. What we found is that those students who were doing extremely well had the capability to go through and do all of it. Those students that were borderline did the multiple choice and then, realistically, did not pay full attention to the written. When we went and split the exams, what we found was that by concentrating specifically on the multiple choice and then concentrating specifically on the written component, the students' exam marks went up.

2:20

One of the criticisms of the past schedule was that there was too far a split between social and social, for example. I will say that we have always said that we will compress it as much as we can. What we have now done is put social A and social B on the same day. The next day we will have science A and science B. Biology A and biology B. Those types of things. We're confident that we can get it marked by the end of the year. We're confident that students will do better, and, Mr. Speaker, this is just another example of government going out and talking to the people involved and coming out with a solution that's going to give answers to everyone.

Dr. Massey: Again, then, to the same minister: if that's the case, why didn't you talk to people in the first place?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, first of all, there were several issues that were out there. We did not know that we could get the exams marked. One of the issues was, as the hon. member knows, that following the strikes, all the markers of the exams were pulled off, and we had an extremely difficult time marking the exams. We signed an agreement with the Alberta Teachers' Association that guaranteed that the teachers would mark the exams for one year only, so we did not have the assurance that we have today that teachers would actually mark the exams. What we found out – and I will say to the hon. member that this was purely by chance – is that the students did considerably better by splitting the exams, as I already stated. So we are now working on refining the schedule as much as we can to compress it as tightly as we can.

The only very interesting component about this is that one of our concerns was actually getting the written tests back to us. What we did – and I think the Legislative Assembly might find this interesting – is that we put a \$5 fine out there if they didn't get the exams back to us in time. Mr. Speaker, with the last set of exams every exam in Alberta was returned on time, which allowed us to continue to mark them on time. So with all these refinements we've been able to refine the exam schedule, and I think we have something here now that's going to prove to be excellent for all students in Alberta.

Workplace Fatalities

Mr. McClelland: Mr. Speaker, Albertans don't leave home thinking they may be killed on the job. Regrettably, 127 Albertans lost their lives at the workplace last year. Next Wednesday, April 28, is the National Day of Mourning for those killed in the workplace. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. How will the government honour those men and women who died on the job?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the hon.

member for the question. Yes, in fact, Wednesday, April 28, will mark the day of mourning for people that were killed on the job site, and we do have plans to commemorate these poor, unfortunate folks. Probably the most visible commemoration will be the fact that all flags at provincial buildings will fly at half-mast on that day in remembrance of those workers that didn't make it home.

We'll also be making requests of you, Mr. Speaker, for a couple of things. Right now I would hope to plan a ministerial statement, but also we would like to ask you if on that particular day you would see fit to lead us in 127 seconds of silence.

We want to say, Mr. Speaker, that these were needless deaths. This is something that we're working hard to try to overcome, but the fact that they have fallen, we must remember them.

Mr. McClelland: My supplementary is to the same minister. What is the government doing to ensure that workplace fatalities are not just seen as a cost of doing business?

Mr. Dunford: Well, to pick up on the question if I can, they are a tremendous cost to business, and we are trying as best we can to educate employers about the actual trauma and stress that family and friends and fellow employees must go through when there is such a fatality, you know, all of the people that surround that employee. This is a very serious situation when we talk about 127 deaths. We of course will recognize the following week National Occupational Safety and Health Week and try to do our best in that situation. Again, this is something that calls for constant enforcement and reinforcement on the tragedy that takes place inside our province much too often.

If you have been following the types of advertising that we've been trying to do around this situation, we lose a worker about every third day, and every three and a half minutes there's an incident that causes injury that prevents a worker from reporting at their next shift. I empathize with what the Minister of Transportation talked about earlier, the fact that of these 127 deaths the overwhelming majority are happening on the roadways and the highways within this province. Mr. Speaker, as a government we are going to have to do something sooner or later about this epidemic.

Highway 3

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, Coleman area residents are still in shock over this government's decision to suddenly conduct another functional planning study on the highway 3 route when this government has already approved a southern route. To the Minister of Transportation: given that considerable development has taken place to the north of Coleman and that the citizens paid high prices for acreages with the knowledge that the highway was going south, what liability is this government prepared to accept if the north route is approved?

Mr. Stelmach: A couple of things, Mr. Speaker. First of all, these questions came up in the House before, and I mentioned at that time that the department is conducting through the work of a consultant various open houses. No decisions have been made, and as a result I'm not going to speculate on what is tied up in some sort of liability in terms of ownership of property.

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: how much is this new study costing Alberta taxpayers?

Mr. Stelmach: I don't know, but I'll present that to the House.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister: when does the minister expect that a final decision on the route will be made?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I believe that when I get the exact amount of this particular contract, the cost of the consultant, I'll be able to advise the member of a date as well, when I get that information, in terms of what the expected completion is of this particular review and open house.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Calgary Courthouse

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last October the Conservative government selected a private consortium to finance and build a new court centre in Calgary based on a design that the company itself had come up with. Six months later the cost of this flagship P3 project has ballooned to half a billion dollars, an overrun of 67 per cent, causing the project to be put on hold. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. What exactly caused this increase in cost for the Calgary courthouse project?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, once again, as our Premier has been mentioning, the opposition loves to try to find a 15-second bite that is going to be great in the media. The fact is that the number that the leader of the Liberal opposition came out with yesterday, the \$170 million, was for the Provincial Court, not anything like the project that we embarked on in the city of Calgary with the consolidation of all three courts. So to start comparing bananas and apples and oranges is the typical thing that they're up to.

2:30

The fact is that the number that they're now working with was not the construction cost alone, but it was all of the cost. Unfortunately, when we build something with our own money, we don't include the cost of the money. There's a cost to money, and we don't include it. But the number that they've been throwing around is a number that is in the ballpark if you take the whole cost and you bring it back to present-day value. Now, I know they wouldn't understand that, but that's what it is. It's unfortunate that they keep bandying around numbers that are not true capital costs.

Mr. Mason: I know what net present value is, Mr. Speaker. I want to indicate that I gave the minister a chance just to answer the question and he chose not to do it, so I'm going to ask him whether or not the P3 developer lowballed the costs to win the bid only to reveal the true costs once it had been selected to build the project.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, that's terribly unfortunate that the member would call into question the integrity of these great people that put all of the time and effort and money into coming forward with a proposal.

The fact is that we estimated internally the cost of a project with over a million square feet. This is a huge project. Actually, there were three replies to the requests for proposals. Two of them came in below our estimated cost. Then we negotiated with the final one, and we brought the cost down even more, Mr. Speaker. To make sure that we were being accurate, we put out a dummy bid, and the dummy bid came in higher than our estimate. So you got the dummy bid high, we got ours above, and then we've got the actual one down below.

So, Mr. Speaker, it's terribly unfortunate that they would make those kinds of comments about people that are in business and that are very, very conscious of what they're doing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's too bad the dummy bid didn't win.

Why are Calgarians being forced to accept a scaled-back court facility not adequate to meet future needs just because the government is stubbornly refusing to accept that P3s have been proven almost everywhere they've been tried to cost more and deliver less?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, he said, "Too bad the dummy bid didn't win." Well, the fact that it didn't win is because it was the highest of the three. That's why it didn't win.

It's very interesting that just yesterday the member was standing up and saying: cancel it; don't build it; just don't build anything. Now today he's saying that we should be concerned about the fact that there isn't one being built.

Mr. Speaker, I think that there are actually two departments that are involved in this, and as it relates to the necessity to build in Calgary, I'll have the Attorney General supplement my answer.

The Speaker: The Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is on record as indicating that we need in Calgary to build a facility which will adequately house the Provincial Court, the Court of Queen's Bench, and the Court of Appeal. We have succeeded; we have a facility which adequately houses the Court of Appeal. Unfortunately, the Provincial Court is scattered around the downtown in inadequate facilities, and we need to deal with that. So we've moved ahead with an appropriate facility to accommodate both the Court of Queen's Bench and the Provincial Court.

We're still moving ahead on that project, but as the Minister of Infrastructure has indicated, we are looking at the most appropriate way to build it and a cost-effective way to build an appropriate facility. We will build an appropriate facility. We will house the courts in an appropriate manner with a good, long-term view with respect to the type of accommodation that they need in order to serve the citizens of Calgary and region. We're committed to doing that; nothing has changed on that. But the government does look, as a government prudently should, at all the different aspects and all the different ways of building and financing and choose the best way in the interests of the people of Alberta.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on this day in the first part of the 20th century the hon. Member for Little Bow entered the world, so we wish him a happy birthday today.

Before I call on the first member to participate in Members' Statements, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head:

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce some guests to you. I'm not sure whether they are still in the House or not. They are from the constituency of Wainwright. It's a group called the Alliance Fun for All social club. It's a seniors' club. There are 10 of them. There are three names that I have from them: Norman Johnston, Emma Bullee, and Mary Wold. So if they are in the House, could they please stand to receive our greetings.

head:

Members' Statements

Cochrane Branches and Banks Environmental Foundation

Mrs. Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, today I would like to recognize the community of Cochrane's Branches and Banks foundation. In 1996 when the federal and provincial governments asked municipalities to begin working towards sustainability, the town of Cochrane gladly took on the challenge. As a result, among other programs the town developed Cochrane Branches and Banks foundation, which hosts a signature event that promotes environmental stewardship and community spirit.

The foundation, which has evolved into a registered nonprofit society supported by the town of Cochrane, organizes an annual tree plant and waterway cleanup in Cochrane every spring. Since the event's inception over 2,400 volunteers have planted approximately 20,000 trees. This family event grows in popularity every year and teaches young Albertans the benefits of volunteering and protecting the environment.

In addition, the Cochrane Branches and Banks foundation was selected as the 2003 community group emerald award winner. This is a very prestigious award recognizing environmental excellence in the province of Alberta and an important recognition of the outstanding efforts of this community, its volunteers, and sponsors.

Mr. Speaker, a core group of volunteers has dedicated their time and energy to organizing this event over the years. I would like to honour those volunteers as well as the town of Cochrane for exemplary community spirit and dedication to environmental initiatives.

I ask all members of the Legislature and the people of this great province to recognize the following community and environmental advocates: Tim Giese of the Cochrane Environmental Action Committee; volunteer co-ordinators Keith and Evelyn Milne, Brent Schmidt, Andy Degraw, and Terry Robertson; Garry Murdoch of Aquila Networks Canada; Rob Olenick of Spray Lakes Sawmills; volunteer residents Alice Laine and Joan Mansfield; Rebecca McElhoes of NOVA/TransCanada Pipelines; and Jill Knaus and Al Weidman from the Bow Meadows Community Association.

Please join me in congratulating the town of Cochrane, the Cochrane Branches and Banks foundation, and the many volunteers involved with this program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Funding

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Imagine a world where only thoughts and ideas that will result in a tangible outcome are pursued because they are the only ones viewed to have any merit. This is a frightening prospect that is sadly becoming more and more a reality in our country, where the federal government funded 2,000 research chairs in the year 2000 but only 20 per cent of those were allocated to the humanities. This year's federal budget also seems to emphasize hard results over ideas.

While humanities and social sciences, which include disciplines like psychology, history, education, law, economics, and literature, continue to attract more than half of Canada's university students, a rising percentage of government money is focused on hard sciences that show results in practical terms. This erosion of the value placed on the exploration of humanities and social sciences is causing concern on university campuses and is a major reason for the proposed revamp of the federal research granting agency, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Unfortunately, the council's recent consultation framework on its transformation caused alarm when it suggested that the council's core values must expand to include interactive engagement and maximum knowledge impact. This would not promote the development of ideas but, rather, force people involved in the humanities and social sciences to continually justify the practical application of their work.

A university should be a place where ideas can be explored without always looking at the bottom line. Measuring the impact of a project before it has been undertaken could discourage people from completing projects that prove to be valuable to our society.

A decade ago a humanist book on the history of gay marriage was criticized and labelled as a waste of research money, but now it seems only to be ahead of its time. The value of research into the humanities and social sciences is everywhere, shaping thoughts and policy, challenging opinions, and informing casual conversation. We err badly when the only view we foster is an economic view of humans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

2:40

Year of the Coal Miner

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the Year of the Coal Miner and the contribution that this industry and its people make to our province.

Since the last decades of the 1800s coal has been the foundation of many communities and individual lives throughout Alberta, including in the West Yellowhead constituency. Coal mining was first developed in southern Alberta, where it was often quarried by pick and shovel and hauled out in wooden crates on skids or by horses. During that time two miners, of course, worked together and produced on average five or six tons of coal a day.

Today coal is a high-tech industry that extracts resources in a more environmentally friendly manner. When someone mentions coal mining, the image of an underground miner, that would normally come to mind, no longer holds true. Open-pit or strip mines now dot the landscape where electric shovels, trucks, and excavators work to mine the coal. All told, between 30 million and 35 million tonnes of coal is produced in Alberta every year by highly skilled workers.

The resource goes on to help provide electricity for homes as well as other uses. For instance, gases, oils, and tar extracted from coal can be used in the manufacture of products ranging from gasoline and perfumes to mothballs and baking powder. From Bankhead and the Crowsnest Pass to Hinton and Grande Cache coal has been instrumental in the development of Alberta, providing jobs to our citizens.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate and thank all Albertans involved in coal mining this Year of the Coal Miner.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Small Business

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government often claims to be a friend to business in Alberta. This is only partly true. The government policies favour its friends and large corporations and the highly profitable oil companies and other operators in the energy sector. Small businesses, on the other hand, have been abandoned.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, I've heard complaints from small-business owners across the province and throughout my constituency. Problems began when electricity deregulation gave business owners

sky-high electricity bills. Many business owners have been forced to choose between hiring staff and turning on the lights. Some had no choice but to close their doors altogether.

Further, this government has allowed rising insurance premiums to increase the squeeze on small business. While big insurance companies announce record profits, many small-business owners struggle with massive increases to property, business, and auto insurance costs. In fact, a recent study by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which was tabled by my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands, shows that over half of Alberta businesses had experienced a 20 per cent increase in property insurance and nearly 70 per cent felt that high insurance costs are a serious problem.

Of course, there are the ever-present health care premiums. This regressive health tax gives nothing to small businesses except administrative headaches. Premiums also make it harder to compete with larger corporations who can offer to pay premiums as part of employee remuneration. Many small-business owners cannot afford to provide those benefits for their employees and are therefore at risk of losing them. For years average Alberta families have struggled with user fees, health premiums, and hidden costs, and small businesses now face a similar battle.

Mr. Speaker, small-business owners must overcome enough challenges just to stay afloat. It's time the government stopped burdening small businesses with unnecessary and entirely unavoidable additional costs. It's time small businesses got a better deal.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Visiting us today in the members' gallery is a group of 60 Vietnamese seniors who have decided to build a seniors' home in my riding of Edmonton-Castle Downs, and for that I would like to thank them. They're today led by Reverend Thich Thien Tam, four Buddhist nuns, and also Vinh Hang, who is showing them the Legislature and the precincts.

I'm particularly excited, Mr. Speaker, because chances are that the Member for Calgary-Fort will be my constituent one day. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to present a petition signed by 161 emergency medical service workers in the city of Calgary who petition the Legislative Assembly to "support Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act, which will provide more security and peace of mind for people working in occupations who have a higher risk of exchanging bodily fluids with a potential carrier of a blood borne disease."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Notices of Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 48, 66, 68, 69, 71, 75, 76, 77, 78, and 79.

I'm also giving notice that on Monday I'll move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 24 through 31, 34 through 42, 44 through 49, 52, 53, 55 through 62, 64, 66, 69 through 73, 75, 78 through 83, 88 through 105, 108 through 123, 128, 134 through 143, 146 through 160, 162, 164 through 168, 174 through 180, 183 through 189, 197, 200 through 205.

Thank you.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got three documents to table today. The first one is an article from the *British Medical Journal* from February 28, 2004. This article indicates that the government of Sweden has decided to ban the development of private, for-profit hospitals and take other additional steps to stop the development of a two-tier health care system in their country.

The second document, Mr. Speaker, is a report from the CBC headlined "Douglas accuses Klein of twisting her father's words." This report cites Shirley Douglas's claim that the Premier is being dishonest about the origins of medicare and that her father "stressed that medicare should be available for all, regardless of income."

The third document, Mr. Speaker, is a backgrounder entitled *Myth Buster: P3 Hospitals – A Closer Look*. The backgrounder was published by the Ontario Health Coalition and demonstrates the consistent failure of P3s in building hospitals.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first one is the Canadian property and casualty premiums and profits key financial data for 123 insurers provided by A.M. Best. It's a comprehensive look, and it is from Thompson's World Insurance News. It's for the benefit of all members of this Assembly.

The second is a completion of a tabling that I did yesterday. I apologize to the Speaker, to the table officers, and to members. I inadvertently did not table all the relevant documents.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a letter from myself to the Minister of Transportation. With the onset of the summer construction season I'm urging the minister to offer immediate protection for emergency workers and construction workers on the highway with a change to the regulations under the Traffic Safety Act.

Thank you.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Mar, Minister of Health and Wellness, pursuant to the Health Professions Act: the College of Physical Therapists of Alberta 2002-2003 annual report.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to ask the Deputy Government House Leader under Standing Order 7(5) to please share the projected government business for the week of April 26 to April 29, 2004.

Thank you.

2:50

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response I'm pleased to advise the member and all members here that on Monday afternoon we'll be dealing with private members' business, written questions and motions for returns, followed by public bills and orders other than government bills and orders. In the evening we'll deal with motions other than government motions, and at 9 p.m. or thereabouts we'll be going to Committee of Supply for the Department of Innovation and Science.

On Tuesday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders and under Committee of Supply we will deal with the Department of the Solicitor General, followed by second reading of Bill 28, the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 29, the Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004, and otherwise as per the Order Paper. In the evening under Government Bills and Orders and under Committee of Supply we will be dealing with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and, if required, second reading of bills 28 and 29 and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders and under Committee of Supply we will deal with the Ministry of Health and Wellness and third reading of Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, and otherwise as per the Order Paper. In the evening under Government Bills and Orders we'll deal with the Committee of Supply for the Department of Justice and Attorney General and Committee of the Whole for Bill 25, the School Amendment Act, 2004, and Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004, and third reading if necessary of the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders and under Committee of Supply we will deal with the Department of Energy and if necessary third reading of Bill 22 and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Just a point of clarification, hon. members, before we go on. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, there was an exchange during the question period today. Your colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre moved. I think we dealt with the matter. There's no point of order arising. Is that correct?

Mr. MacDonald: No. There's no point of order. No. Certainly not.

The Speaker: Okay.

head: **Government Motions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Select Special Health Information Act Review Committee

16. Mr. Zwozdesky moved on behalf of Mr. Mar:

Be it resolved that

- (1) A Select Special Health Information Act Review Committee of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta be appointed to review the Health Information Act as provided in section 109(1) of that act consisting of the following members, namely Mr. Jacobs, chair; Ms Kryczka, deputy chair; Ms Blakeman; Mr. Broda; Mr. Goudreau; Mr. Loughheed; Mr. Lukaszuk; Mr. MacDonald; Dr. Pannu; and Mr. Snelgrove.
- (2) The chair and members of the committee shall be paid in accordance with the schedule of category A committees provided in the most recent Members' Services Committee allowances order.
- (3) Reasonable disbursements by the committee for advertising, staff assistance, equipment and supplies, rent, travel, and other expenditures necessary for the effective conduct of its responsibilities shall be paid subject to the approval of the chair.
- (4) In carrying out its duties, the committee may travel throughout Alberta and undertake a process of consultation with all interested Albertans.
- (5) In carrying out its responsibilities, the committee may with the concurrence of the head of the department utilize the services of the public service employed in that department or the staff employed by the Assembly or the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner.
- (6) The committee may without leave of the Assembly sit during a period when the Assembly is adjourned.
- (7) The committee must submit its report, including any proposed amendments to the act, within one year after commencing its review.
- (8) When its work has been completed, the committee must report to the Assembly if it is then sitting. During a period when the Assembly is adjourned, the committee may release its report by depositing a copy with the Clerk and forwarding a copy to each member of the Assembly.

Mr. Zwozdesky: This is of course the legislation that safeguards the health information of individual Albertans yet allows health professionals the access they need to make the most effective care decisions. The act was proclaimed on April 25, 2001. Section 109 of the legislation requires a special committee of this Legislative Assembly to conduct a comprehensive review of this act within three years of its coming into force.

Also, as required in the act, this committee has one year to submit its report including any recommended amendments.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: It's a debatable motion.
The question should be called then?

[Motion carried]

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good afternoon. I'd like to now call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Learning

The Chair: I'll call on the hon. minister for his opening comments.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I would like to thank the House for supporting my ministry's budget in the past years. We've made excellence in learning a priority, and quite frankly the world is taking notice. Countries around the world seek our advice in improving their own educational systems as they strive to attain the kinds of results achieved by Alberta students. Thank you very much to everyone in the Assembly for helping to make this happen.

Learning's business plan starts on page 333 of the Alberta 2004 budget document *On Route, On Course*. The business plan highlights several strategic priorities for Alberta Learning over the next three years. I would like to draw your attention to a few of these priorities.

Alberta Learning is developing implementation plans for government-approved recommendations made by Alberta's Commission on Learning. The commission provided some excellent recommendations that will help enhance Alberta's learning system well into the future. Government is supporting 86 of the 95 recommendations, including class size guidelines, greater emphasis on physical activity and wellness, fine arts and second-language learning, and increased focus on supporting aboriginal students and students with special needs. There still are some recommendations that are yet to be implemented, Mr. Speaker.

The recommendations to provide an additional \$60 million to fund an identified shortfall in the system and to implement the renewed funding framework have already been acted on. Work with stakeholders to develop and execute implementation plans to address other recommendations has already begun, and more will be done over the next five years.

Three recommendations remain under review: establishing full-time and junior kindergarten programs and implementing a new collective bargaining process for teachers.

Another key priority this year is to increase access to adult learning opportunities. The '04-07 business plan incorporates strategies to ensure that Albertans are ready to be successful in the lifelong learning system. We want to ensure that transition points into, within, and out of the system are appropriately bridged for all learners.

Other key priorities for Learning include improving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learner successes, working effectively with partners and stakeholders, and strengthening intergovernmental relations as well as enhancing Alberta learner and stakeholder opportunities beyond the province's borders. These priorities are aligned with and support Learning's three goals: number one, "high quality learning opportunities for all;" number two, "excellence in learner outcomes;" and number three, a "highly responsive and responsible ministry."

As we continue, you will see how Learning's identified priorities are reflected in our 2004 estimates. The estimates for Learning begin on page 273 of the '04-05 government and lottery fund estimates. These estimates reinforce government's commitment to leading in learning and ensure that Alberta's learning system is flexible and responsive to the changing needs of Albertans.

Government has said that education is a top priority, and Budget 2004 confirms it. Once again, this year my ministry received the second largest dollar allocation of all departments. In this coming fiscal year total investment in our learning system will exceed \$5.4 billion.

An Hon. Member: How much is that?

Dr. Oberg: Five point four billion dollars, which includes \$171 million in support to opted out separate school boards. This planned spending represents an increase to base program spending of \$284

million plus \$10 million more in support to the opted out boards. This increase is over and above the \$76 million injected during the course of the '03-04 budget year, which brings the total increase to well over \$350 million, Mr. Chair.

3:00

Our focus on increasing access to postsecondary programs, including apprenticeship, and responding to the commission's recommendations will continue in '04-05 and beyond. Spending on the learning system will grow to \$5.9 billion by '06-07, a three-year increase of \$763 million, or roughly 15 per cent.

This year will be the year of building and adapting to the growing needs of Albertans. We will continue to strengthen our already excellent learning system to ensure that students of tomorrow have every opportunity for success and that Alberta has the skilled and knowledgeable workforce needed to be competitive for the future. This year will see some strategic enhancements made to our K to 12 learning system to ensure that our system is sustainable and responsive to Alberta's changing society.

Beginning September 2004, the renewed funding framework will be fully implemented. Through collaboration with stakeholders we have established clear goals and strategic priorities for enhancing our basic learning system. This framework will provide funding to school boards based on their unique circumstances, with additional support provided for students with special needs, aboriginal students, and English as a Second Language students as well as for school boards with higher cost pressures, smaller schools, and declining enrolments.

Boards will have the flexibility to use their funds to address their local needs. These include issues such as class size or supporting other recommendations made by the Learning Commission. Boards will also be accountable to their constituents for outcomes as well as how their dollars are spent.

Government has shown support for many of the recommendations of the Learning Commission. As I mentioned, work is already underway to implement a number of recommended initiatives which will continue in the coming year. Some of these initiatives include implementing new second-language and physical activity/wellness programs. Mr. Chair, I will say that the second-language initiative was officially launched today at the Telus centre at the University of Alberta and was met with extreme accolades from both parents and educators alike.

We are also undertaking a number of technology initiatives, including video conferencing, and setting up a new practice review process for teacher competency. Mr. Chairman, I really must commend the Alberta Teachers' Association on the teacher competency practice review process. This will be initiated in our present bills 25 and 26, which are before the Legislature right now. This is truly revolutionary and sets a standard for what is going to come in the rest of the world.

We will continue to work with stakeholder groups to look at options and implement the remaining supported recommendations. Ongoing support to the K to 12 system will increase by roughly \$250 million budget over budget this year. It will increase by \$260 million, or an increase of 5.8 per cent, forecast over budget. If you take into account the funding injected, as I said, this will be \$250 million, and it's going to grow to \$4.3 billion by '06-07.

On page 277 of your estimates book operating support to public and separate schools has increased by \$189 million, or 5.9 per cent, to almost \$3.4 billion. This budget gives school jurisdictions increased funding to operate their schools and provide a quality education to their students with the flexibility to choose how they will use funding to address their local needs and priorities.

We have also renewed our commitment to identify provincial priorities. The Alberta initiative for school improvement will receive over \$68 million this year, and, Mr. Chairman, as you fully know, this has been one of the most successful initiatives that Alberta Learning has ever put forward.

Funding for student health services will increase \$4.4 million, or 13.3 per cent, to \$37 million this year. As well, the funding for the high-speed networking will be maintained at \$11 million.

Other increases include an additional \$1.5 million for curriculum supports through our Learning Resources Centre, the people that were here this afternoon, Mr. Chairman, who do just an absolutely superb job in purchasing textbooks and resources for the schools, as well as an increase of \$16 million for teachers' pensions, raising government's contribution to \$274.7 million for teachers' pensions.

There's also an increase of \$4.4 million, or 3.7 per cent, to private schools, for a total of about \$121 million in '04-05.

On the postsecondary side, Mr. Chair, the postsecondary system plays an absolutely critical role in the preparation of a highly skilled workforce as well as in the creation and application of new knowledge and technology. Our government is committed to ensuring that this system can continue to fulfill this role. New legislation is in place, Bill 43, that's going to guide the adult learning system well into the future. The Post-secondary Learning Act, as Bill 43 is called, along with significant investments in adult learning will make our adult learning system even more adaptable and responsive to the needs of our students.

Funding to support the adult learning system will increase by \$93 million forecast over budget, Mr. Chairman. I will say again that budget over budget this is going up \$125 million, which is a much more accurate figure than the \$93 million that's in the budget.

I would also like to direct your attention to page 279, in which support to postsecondary institutions will increase by \$85 million, or 7.5 per cent, to more than \$1.2 billion. Again, I keep reminding you that this is forecast over budget. This is not the number that I use, because I don't believe that it's a true number. The increase will provide a 4 per cent increase to base operation grants for publicly funded universities, colleges, and technical institutes and provide additional funding to create new spaces in high-priority programs and enhance our world-leading apprenticeship programs.

Government will also provide \$7 million in ongoing operating supports to accommodate the merger of the University of Alberta and Augustana University College in Camrose. Mr. Chairman, this merger alone will support more than 1,200 degree completion opportunities to meet the increasing demand in rural Alberta. We are going to see Camrose become an absolute gem of the province due to the merger between Augustana and the University of Alberta.

In our continuous drive to create and maintain a well-educated workforce in Alberta, we strive to ensure that financial need is not a barrier to further education. While we recognize that the cost of postsecondary education is a shared responsibility between students, their families, and government, government does its share to maximize opportunity for students and keep debt levels down.

The support to postsecondary learners this year will rise by 7.3 per cent. This provides for an increase in funding for scholarships, for bursaries, and for grants in '04-05. Through Alberta's scholarship program about 27,700 students will receive almost \$42 million in scholarships this year alone.

We also expect to disburse some 97 million dollars in student loans in '04-05. Yearly loan limits for all students will also increase by roughly \$400. The Alberta student loan relief benefit and the loan relief completion payment will reduce students' debt in their first and final years of study.

This year \$4.3 million has been allocated to implement the new

Alberta centennial education savings plan, that has recently been debated in this Legislature. It begins January 1, 2005. This significant new investment will grow to about \$20 million a year beginning in '05-06, will encourage parents to save for their children's education, and help pay the future costs of postsecondary education.

Budget 2004 will also help alleviate some of the province's infrastructure pressures due to the rapid economic and population growth in recent years. Alberta Infrastructure's '04-07 capital plan provides \$1.1 billion for new and improved school and postsecondary facilities, \$636 million to support school capital projects throughout Alberta, and \$416 million to support postsecondary projects.

Mr. Chairman, the '04-05 budget and business plan continue to maintain government's commitment to lifelong learning and ensure that all Albertans will have access to an affordable, high-quality education system.

Mr. Chair, I now would invite any questions, and I will say to the opposition that if there are any questions that I either cannot answer or inadvertently do not answer, I will give them to the opposition members in writing.

So, Mr. Chairman, with that, I'd be more than happy to take questions from any Member of the Legislative Assembly.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to the minister for that overview of the budget.

I have questions in two categories, Mr. Chairman, that I'd like to pursue this afternoon. The first are sort of broad questions about the implications of the budget and the possibilities in the budget, and then the others are some of the more mundane, specific-information questions.

3:10

I wanted to start with the first question, about special education and special education funding. One of the problems that is constantly brought to the attention of, I know, the minister and certainly the opposition is the problem of the parents of special-needs youngsters being bounced around from school boards to the department of health to the Department of Learning to Children's Services and really having a very, very difficult time in many cases trying to get the services that they need for their youngsters.

One of the initiatives that are included in this year's budget is the cross-ministry initiatives that are outlined on page 342. My question to the minister is: has there been consideration of a one-stop window for parents? For many of them it involves trying to learn a lot of political skills, who's who, and they end up frustrated at one level or another. It just seems to me that it's so hard on them because they have difficult children to try to get services for in the first place. Do these cross-ministry initiatives include that kind of involvement?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I do believe that I owe the hon. member one, so I will say that that's an excellent, excellent question that the hon. member has asked.

That is what we're striving towards: to have a cross-ministry initiative that would in essence be one-stop shopping. Included in my budget this time is the student health initiative, and we have increased the dollars to the student health initiative quite substantially at this particular time. One of the issues that we had with the student health initiative, quite literally, was that the health care

workers were actually going up at a higher rate than what the educational workers were doing. So we had to put more money into the student health initiative to do that.

We are working on this, hon. member. We're working as hard as we can because the issues that you have brought up are extremely laudable. When we have a parent that has a special-needs student, he doesn't care who supplies the services, who gives the services, where the services come from as long as the services are there. We attempt to do this as best we can on the one-stop shopping system. Are we perfect in that? No, we're not. Are we working towards that? Absolutely. Yes, we are.

One of the issues that we have, quite frankly, is the transition between the PUF funding and the severe disabilities funding. This is something that we're working out to make the transition as easy as possible. One of the things that we have done, for example, is that a PUF student does not have to be reassessed for severe disabilities funding in the school system. This is an issue that occurred probably in the last three years, and we have taken that out so that they don't need that. We have attempted to make it as easy as possible. I would love to be able to stand here and say that we have one-stop shopping and that the world is great. The only thing I can answer to the hon. member is that we're working on that. What he stated is absolutely the direction we're going in and absolutely what we need.

The Chair: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thanks, Mr. Chairman, and thanks, Mr. Minister. It is a long-overdue initiative and one that would really, I think, be appreciated by a lot of parents who have a lot of difficulties in trying to get those services.

I have some questions about the language initiative that was announced today. I applaud the government. I've been an advocate of second-language instruction. I find it a personal embarrassment that I don't speak both of the official languages of my own country, and I'm delighted that we have this initiative by the government. But my concern is the kind of advanced preparation and the kind of resources that such an initiative is going to require. To insert that first one in the program across the grades is going to mean that something has to give, and what's that going to be?

The second question I have is with respect to teacher preparation. It's going to be, it seems to me, a huge demand for teachers that can handle that, and I would really hate language instruction in this province to go back to what I had: the old French programs that leave people not even able to read labels on a cereal box let alone speak the language. So the need for really high-quality teachers who not only speak the language but know something about the children that they're trying to teach is going to be requisite for this being a success, and I'd like to know how that's going to be addressed.

Curriculum development. It talks in the news release – and that's all I have to go by, but it seems to me that before that's in place or that's being asked of boards, the curriculum development and the resources needed to support those programs have to be well along the way.

So I'd appreciate some comment from the minister.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much. I find myself in a little bit of an awkward position here, agreeing with the hon. member on the things that he has said. I, too, am embarrassingly unilingual, and it's something that I'm not really that proud of.

Mr. Chairman, we announced the second-language initiative today amidst quite a considerable amount of fanfare from both parents and

educators alike. Is this an easy initiative? No. Let's put it on the table. It is not an easy initiative. Is it a necessary initiative? Absolutely. Personally I find it embarrassing that our education system has not done a better job in languages. What we have seen right now is we're sitting at about 23, 24 per cent of students that take a second-language course, and keep it in mind that that could be something as simple as French 10 or French 20 or something like that. To me as Minister of Learning that's an embarrassing figure, and it's my job and it's my initiative to do something about this, and subsequently we have launched the second-language initiative.

This initiative will start off in 2006. It will start in grade 4. Mr. Chairman, the first year will be grade 4. The second year will be grades 4 and 5; the third year, 4, 5, and 6; and so on. So if you're in grade 9 in 2006, you do not need to expect that you will be expected to have fluency in a language. That's not going to occur. It will follow the students up through the system. At the end of grade 9 you will have what is called a beginner level of competency in the second language. If you continue on in second languages in grades 10, 11, and 12 – at which time the courses are going to be optional at this moment; I would at some point in time like to make them mandatory as well, but the logistics of that are a little more complicated than what we can realistically do right now – you will have an intermediate level of competency in a foreign language. If you choose to go on to university, you will be able to have the full level of language competencies.

When it comes to curriculum development, what we have done is we have taken seven different languages and have looked at curriculum in all seven languages. The important thing to remember here, Mr. Chair, is that we have not developed these curriculums ourselves. We have gone out to other jurisdictions and we have gone out to other countries and actually taken their curriculums, ones that we find satisfactory for Albertans, and we'll utilize their curriculums.

One of the things that we have done, for example, is worked very closely with Spain to develop a Spanish curriculum, and indeed we are in the process of purchasing the Spanish curriculum from the Cervantes Institute in Madrid, which is one of the world-renowned institutes when it comes to Spanish language. We have also borrowed a lot of other curriculums. A lot of them, though, we have developed ourselves. We have a very extensive Cree curriculum in the city of Edmonton and some of the northern units, so what we're doing, quite simply, is taking those curriculums and making them available to all Albertans. So from a curriculum point of view I'm confident that we will have the curriculums in place for this initiative. My people tell me that we are well on the way and do have these curriculums available.

3:20

The teacher preparation is probably the question that I get asked the most. When I talk about this undertaking, is it an ambitious undertaking? That's putting it mildly. It's a very ambitious undertaking, not necessarily in Edmonton and Calgary. In Edmonton and Calgary we have a lot of teachers that speak a lot of different languages. The ability to teach language is there. Where we're going to run into some issues is in rural Alberta. In the hamlet of Gem, Alberta, for example, with a student population of somewhere around 25 to 30, is it going to be a problem? Yeah, it is.

What we're going to be relying on is the SuperNet with video conferencing capabilities. We're doing some experiments right now in the Prairie Rose school division on the ability for the SuperNet and for the video conferencing to be able to teach these languages. It's looking very, very good, and I truly believe that we will be able to do that.

I have taken the approach, Mr. Chair, in this initiative that we simply cannot afford not to have a second language. Therefore, we are putting in a lot of resources and we're doing a lot of things to ensure that this occurs.

Another couple of things, if I may have time to say this, is we announced today as well some bursaries, \$2,500 bursaries, some grants of up to \$5,000 for teachers to go back, for example, and learn the second languages, more so learn how to teach second languages. We have a considerable amount of teachers that already have a second language, but having a second language and teaching a second language are two completely different things. So we're doing that.

About five months ago I opened up the language institute at the University of Calgary. Quite simply, what this is is a research institute within the University of Calgary to look at how to teach language, to look at different types of languages, to find out how children learn from languages, and, Mr. Chair, through to all the Members of the Legislative Assembly, I would certainly encourage the hon. members to tour that institute. It's very, very impressive. There is cutting-edge research that is being done there, and what they have told me – and realistically I'm only as good as what they tell me – is that it is absolutely a one hundred per cent world-class structure and institution. So we look forward to getting that.

The hon. member has asked some excellent questions about an initiative that I personally have taken a lot of stake in. It's something that Albertans want. It's something that I wish I had when I went to school. The hon. member wished he had it when he went to school, and I think that's what I hear all over Alberta when I talk about this.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again just a couple of questions on the same topic, Mr. Chairman. The resources in the budget for technology – the minister mentions video conferencing, and video conferencing requires some fairly sophisticated technological hardware and software. The minister is aware that there have been questions in the House the last couple of weeks about the costs of SuperNet, schools getting hooked up to it, being able to maintain it, having money to pay the monthly hookup fees. Is there money in the budget? Will there be money that will allow schools to gain that equipment and to be hooked to the system? Right now we hear from a lot of people that evergreening of their equipment is just not possible. So is the minister happy that there's money in the budget that will make that possible?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. The hon. member has asked a couple of questions. First of all, the costs of SuperNet are included in my budget. There's \$11 million that is specifically set aside to pay for the cost of the broadband access. Also, I will add that included in the funding formula the line costs for SuperNet are enveloped. Quite simply, the reason that they are enveloped is that I did not want the cost of hooking up to SuperNet to be a detriment to school jurisdictions doing it or not doing it.

The SuperNet will be there. The SuperNet will be in every school, and a significant portion of the costs are going to be borne by the government. I will say that there have been questions in the House about the cost of SuperNet, and it's my understanding that for many jurisdictions you're actually going to see a decrease in what their line costs are as to what they're paying today.

Another interesting point is something that we've been working

on, Mr. Chair, which is evergreening. The whole idea behind SuperNet is not just to provide broadband wavelength. SuperNet gives us opportunities that are actually going to be quite incredible. What we're looking at doing is setting up a server-based system so that what we will do is put all the programs, basically the programs that we need, all the resources that we need, on the server.

There are two advantages to that. First of all, we have the ability to review all of the resources and all of the programs that go on the server, so we can be assured that when our students in the school access the SuperNet server – and in just a second I'll get to how they access it – all of these resources have been prescreened by my staff, by Alberta Learning staff, so that it is good, high-quality resources. What we are in effect doing is setting up an Intranet as opposed to the Internet.

The other advantage, Mr. Chair, directly to the server-based system is that we can utilize the economy of scale of all the students in the province to get a better price. We have about 580,000 K to 12 students. We have about another 110,000, 120,000 postsecondary students. We can use those 700,000 students to get a better economy of scale on programs. If you were to go out and had 10,000 users, you are not going to get as good a deal as if you had 700,000 users in order to purchase programs. So we're looking at that.

Lastly, Mr. Chair, the most exciting part about a server-based system is what the hon. member has raised, which is the evergreening. We will have the ability to sign contracts that would include – and what I'm setting down as a minimum is 10 years of evergreening. So when it comes to programs, when it comes to resources, it will be 10 years, but more importantly what we will be doing is at the actual school site they will not need a computer per se. What they will need is a screen, a monitor, and a card-reading type of system or some variation of a system that will take them into their server. The other advantage of this is that the evergreening cost to the school district should be almost nil because all you're going to have to replace are the monitors and the keyboards.

So that's what we're looking at, Mr. Chair, and albeit we do not have anything firm yet, we are looking at putting out an RFP this month or next month to actually attempt to do a pilot project on this exact concept. We have a concept like this in the Chinook's Edge school division, but the problem has actually been that we are ahead of the technology companies. The technology to use the broadband capability on the server-based system is just coming out now. We feel that the technology is out there. We obviously are going to test it in a geographic pilot project, and hopefully there will be more to that as the RFP is put out. We have not finished the RFP. It will however be put out within the next month to six weeks.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Oh, I should have mentioned that on the IOUs I don't consider us wiped out and even. He's not getting off that easy.

I'd like to ask if we will be seeing as a result of the Learning Commission a performance measure with respect to class size. It's one that I've seen elsewhere, where states have had not a performance measure but a reporting, for instance, of the number of kindergarten students that were in classes, the percentage of kindergarten classes that were over 17, the percentage of grade 1 classes that were over 17. It seems to me, as I've talked to parents and heard from parents across the province, that that is something that really is of high interest to them and a major concern. I think that next September there are going to be a lot of parents who are going to be watching very carefully, expecting that their children will be in smaller classes, and somewhere down the road getting into the

area that was recommended by the Learning Commission. It seems to me that the kind of reporting that we've had of averages doesn't do that. There has to be something that really gives a better picture because of what happens with averages.

3:30

The second with respect to that was the reports that this budget is not going to be adequate for progress to be made with reduction to class size and the chair of the Learning Commission indicating that the monies that they were recommending are above and beyond volume and rate increases that would normally be a part of the budget. Is the minister confident that we are going to see, in September at least, movement in the direction of the commission? Given the multiyear projections that the commission made, is the minister confident that in three or four years we will actually have reached the standards that they have put out?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chair. First of all, when it comes to the performance measures, starting in November of this upcoming year there will be a requirement for all school jurisdictions to have an accountability profile that would be given out to the constituents, that will be made public, which will include class size. It will include absolutely how they spend all of their money, administrative costs. All of these things will be required to be made public and, indeed, not just made public but given to all the constituents. The key – the key – to accountability is transparency, and we have attempted to make the whole funding system as transparent as possible.

There are two excellent, excellent things in the Learning Commission, but the unfortunate part is that these two are a little bit at odds with each other. The first one is the whole idea about class size, about the reporting of class size and how we should try and get down in the province to the averages that were iterated in the Learning Commission. The second is the funding formula. What we're attempting to do is reconcile those two differences.

First of all, Mr. Chair, the funding formula gives ultimate – ultimate – flexibility to the school boards. In the new funding formula effective September 1, there are only three things that are enveloped. As I mentioned previously, there is the SuperNet hookup line charges, which are enveloped. There's a student health initiative, and there's the Alberta initiative for school improvement. Everything else, or roughly 95 per cent of the dollars, is going to be flexible to the school jurisdictions.

So, Mr. Chair, a type of answer to the question is: if the school boards chose to use that money in a flexible way in a fashion other than class sizes, could they do it? Yes, they can. Under the new formula they do have the ability to utilize that. However, what we're doing is forcing the school boards to be transparent in how they spend the dollars. They have to be transparent in what the dollars are used for, such as number of teachers, administration, class sizes. All of these things have to be given out to the public.

So there is a little bit of difference in the Learning Commission recommendations and how these are going to work. The key thing that I talked to the school boards about is that, realistically, this funding formula entails a great amount of trust. With that flexibility comes a great amount of trust that the school boards are going to put the money where it's needed.

I believe in local autonomy. I believe in school boards. I believe that they have the ability, that they know better what is happening in the classrooms, in many cases, than my department and, certainly, than I do, and that they will go ahead and do it. But there's a huge

amount of trust there, and, Mr. Chairman, if politics enters into this, we're going to be in a severe amount of trouble. Therefore, the accountability piece of the funding formula is going to have to force the school boards to report to the general constituents about what they are doing, about where they're spending dollars, where their dollars are actually, 100 per cent, being spent.

This is going to cause a specific problem, and I don't mean to pick out any specific school boards, but one of the great attributes of the Edmonton public school system is that they give all the money out in a very decentralized fashion. One of the problems that is going to occur with the flexibility of the funding formula is exactly reconciling the accountability behind those dollars, and we are attempting to do this in a reporting mechanism.

I will say to the hon. member that this is a work in progress, and this funding formula is something that we're very, very concerned about on the accountability side. The Alberta School Boards Association has assured us that they are up to the task, and we will be working closely with the School Boards Association to ensure that that accountability and that transparency are there so that everyone knows how the dollars are being spent, the amount of dollars, all of these other issues. Mr. Chair, as you fully well know, to me transparency is the best political tool that is out there.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I also have questions, obviously, at this time for the hon. minister. It's a pleasure to participate in the debates this afternoon on the budget for Alberta Learning.

When I talk to parents about the Learning Commission – and I talked to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods – they compare it to a Sears or Eaton's catalogue at Christmastime. It's a wish list. Unfortunately, there doesn't appear to be money to back up so many of the recommendations that are needed, and I would certainly hope that the department and the government can make the financial commitments that are necessary to fund adequately the recommendations of the Learning Commission report.

Are we going to see class sizes go down next fall, Mr. Chairman? Unfortunately, I don't think so. I routinely visit classes, particularly in elementary schools, where there are in excess of 30 children, sometimes 34, 35 children, and they're split between grades 5 and 6. The teacher literally has to have a whistle around his or her neck like a hockey referee, and the whistle has to be blown if there's a stop in the action. I know that there have been strides made to improve this situation, but those strides, in my opinion, are not long enough.

Now, I have a question, and I would really appreciate a clarification from the minister. I believe that is all that's required in this regard. In regard to students with special needs or special-needs funding, I was talking to a constituent who has a child in a junior high, in grade 7, and this constituent is particularly concerned that there will be no special-needs funding for her child once that child leaves grade 9. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has wisely advised me that, well, there are programs at L.Y. Cairns for special-needs students. What other alternatives or avenues does that parent have, once that child graduates from junior high, to further that child's education? If you could explain that, I would be very grateful.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. The hon. member has two sets of questions there. First of all, the money for the Learning

Commission. Included in the Learning Commission's recommendations was roughly an increase of about \$600 million over the next five years. What was not included, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods pointed out, was the cost for increases in salaries, things like that. So it's \$600 million over five years.

What you see in this budget to the K to 12 system is an increase budget over budget, recognizing that we did put in an extra \$90 million, that we did put in an extra \$30 million for operations and maintenance. Budget over budget is a \$250 million increase. In three years I believe it's something like \$730 million. I don't think I need to look; it's pretty close to that. So the monies are there.

3:40

Are we committed? Absolutely. There are some excellent recommendations, Mr. Chair. When I set up the Learning Commission, I did not set up the Learning Commission to give us recommendations that we could not fulfill. I did not set up the Learning Commission to be able to put the Learning Commission's recommendations on the shelf never to be opened again. That is the deal that I made with those people on the Learning Commission, and I believe that that is the deal that we have followed through on.

Is there going to be that \$600 million in the first year? No, there isn't. It is not going to be in the first year. Is it going to be in the five years? Yes. Are we going to implement the recommendations over five years? Yes. Are some going to be implemented today? Absolutely. Some already have been implemented today. Are there others that are going to be implemented tomorrow and the day after? You bet. Mr. Chair, we're working hard, but more importantly I really feel that we're working smartly, and that's something that's absolutely important to do.

With regard to the member's direct question about special-needs funding, the way special-needs funding is given out to the school boards is on a pro-rated number of students. For example, I'll give a little bit of history if the hon. member will tolerate this.

Initially, we were putting in money for assessments, so every student, before they received the severe disability funding, would have to have a thousand-dollar assessment. In essence, you would have a thousand-dollar assessment so that they could get \$13,000 extra in funding. Obviously, for the principals and the school boards it was their best effort to put through that these kids would be assessed as severe special needs.

First of all, I don't like the label of severe special needs. I think there are people that have children that have to be individualized when it comes to their educational plans.

Secondly, I just absolutely cannot tolerate the waste of a thousand dollars on an assessment when you don't need it. We were having situations, through to the hon. member, where a child was blind, and every three years they were having to have a thousand-dollar assessment to determine if the child was still blind or deaf.

So we cancelled the need for the assessment, and we've pro-rated it. We've taken the last five to seven years of a school jurisdiction's growth in special needs and simply pro-rated it. If the school board feels that their pro-rate number is wrong, they have the ability to appeal to us, and actually, Mr. Chair, in the first year that this occurred, there were only about two or three school boards that actually put in an appeal. Unfortunately for the Member for Strathmore-Brooks, two of those appeals came from, you got it, Strathmore and Brooks. But we attempt to do as accurate as we can an approach for that.

So, to the member, the parent's child will still receive special-needs funding. How the school board chooses to put that out into their school programs is up to the individual school board. In many cases, for example, they have specialized programs in specialized

locations. In other cases – and I don't want to get into the actual disability that the child has – the attempt is there to tailor the program to the individual child, to the individual child's disability and then put the child in the best location for that child.

The parent does have the ability and, in fact, the necessity to sign off the individual program plan on each and every child with disabilities. So the parent will have to sign and say that this is the best place for the child to be; this is the program that's going to occur. I expect and I hope that these parents will hold the school boards and the teachers and the school system accountable to ensure that that individual program plan is followed through as written out, as they've signed on the dotted line.

Those dollars are still there. They follow right through. I can't get into specifically what program would be best for this child because I don't know the child, I don't know the disability, but Edmonton public does an exceptional job when it comes to disabilities, and I would give it to you that they're probably the best people to answer that question.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. To the hon. minister, I appreciate that answer.

Now, does that set of rules also apply to mild special-needs students as well which are included in the per pupil grant? Yes?

Dr. Oberg: Yes, it does. The individual program plan needs to be in place for the mild to moderate special-needs students as well.

Again, I'll reiterate a little bit. Mild and moderate: I don't like using that definition. The problem is that – and I'll use the terminology – many mildly disabled students can improve and come out of that category. The unfortunate part about our school system is that once they're labelled "mild" or labelled "moderate," that label tends to stick with these children right through the school system. I don't agree with that.

I don't agree with the labelling of students. I don't agree with how that is done. That's one of the reasons why we changed the way the funding was put in. It drove me crazy, Mr. Chair, when I would go to a school and they would point out the code 43 students. They wouldn't use the child's name. They would say, "Here's a code 43," as opposed to "Here's Johnny" or "Here's Sarah" or something. "He's code 43; he's code 44," and so on. Drove me nuts.

So, Mr. Chair, that's one of the reasons why we did that. Again, it takes a little while to move through the system, but it is something that we're attempting to do. The individual program plan is in place for mild and moderately disabled students through to grade 12.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now, I'm concerned about the high cost of tuition fees at universities. Last year in your annual report 2002-2003 – and I'm going to look forward to checking this a little later in the summer when your next annual report comes out – under the primary reasons listed on page 21 "for not taking education or training (percentages and rank) is a category simply stating that it "costs too much." In 1998-99 5.9 per cent indicated that that was the reason for not taking education or training: it costs too much. This went up in steady steps to 2001-2002 when 11.3 per cent of individuals stated that it costs too much to take any further education or training. It went down significantly in 2002-03, actually, to 8 per cent. So in 2002-03, the last time we had access to this information, 8 per cent of students could not afford to take further education or training.

In light of the fact that we have since put tuition fees up again, what number does the minister expect to see? Hopefully, it's not going to be anywhere like 1 in 10 students has financial reasons as a barrier to furthering their education. What steps are we going to take to reduce this significantly in light of the fact that we've increased tuition fees?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chair. First of all, it's nice to see a drop in that number from 11 per cent to 8 per cent. The one comment that I will make on that is that the way the question is worded, this is the perception of being able to go to school. So it's perceived that they don't have enough money, and that's why they're not going to school.

I will take this opportunity to talk a little bit about the student loan program. Since I've been minister, the student loan program has increased by anywhere between 50 and 60 per cent in the last five years. It's gone up quite significantly. We're now at a time when we have \$97 million that is spent each and every year to go out to Alberta students. That's just from Alberta; that isn't from the federal component of student loans.

So one of the criticisms that I have of my department is actually not in how it runs the student loan program, because if you talk to students anywhere in Canada – and our students say that as well – they will tell you that our student loan program is by far the best of anywhere in Canada. Just by way of advertisement, we are the only jurisdiction that has increased loan limits in I believe the last 10 years. The rest of the student loans, the rest of the provinces are actually tied to the federal government, and the federal government has not increased its loan rates, although thankfully it is talking about increasing them this year.

3:50

The other key component, Mr. Chair, is our remission program. I think everyone here who has gone through – and at least I have – university with a student loan is well aware of the remission program. We've taken the remission program one step further. We have increased the amount of loans available to a student, but we have kept the amount that you have to pay back constant. We've kept that amount that you have to pay back at \$5,000.

Since I've been minister, the amount of student loans that a student would be eligible for if he was at the maximum amount has increased from around a little over \$10,000 to this year where we increased it another \$400 to around 11 and a half thousand, \$11,400. Mr. Chair, the amount that you pay back, though, during that time has remained constant. It's constant at \$5,000. So for a four-year program, if you have full student loans, you can expect to have realized about \$45,000 in loans from the government. You can expect to pay back about \$20,000.

Put that in perspective, Mr. Chair. Those of us in here who pay taxes, those of us who drive taxis, those of us who drive trucks have contributed to your student loan, contributed to your education, \$25,000 in one degree, a four-year degree. This truly, I believe, is an accomplishment.

The other point that the hon. member was alluding to was the whole point on tuition. I get a little perturbed at times when we talk about tuition and talk about the expense of tuition. First of all, I believe that tuition and postsecondary education is absolutely, 100 per cent the best investment that any citizen in Alberta can make for themselves. It's absolutely fabulous. We have high-quality institutions. We have institutions that can essentially teach anything anywhere any time to anyone. It's a true credit to our province to have the institutions that we do.

When it comes to the tuition fees, one of the issues that we have – and again this is an issue that I have with my department – is that people overestimate the costs of postsecondary education. When you do the polls, the average cost for a university education is seen anywhere between \$6,000 and \$8,000, while in reality the actual cost is right around \$4,500 for tuition at a university. At a college it is sitting around \$3,300, \$3,400 on average, and at a technical school you're sitting in the \$2,500 to \$2,700 range.

To put that in context – and I really do believe that when it comes to tuition, we have to put some of these things in context – a pack-a-day smoker will spend \$3,650 each and every year, which is more than tuition, to smoke. To go to a technical school is about a quarter of the cost of purchasing a skidoo. To go to a technical school is about an eighth of the cost of purchasing new the lowest priced car that you can.

Mr. Chairman, again, I'll just reiterate. I have a responsibility. I will have three students in the postsecondary education system next year. Is it expensive for me to do? Yeah, it is. Is it worth it? Absolutely. My kids going to postsecondary education is absolutely the best thing that I as a parent could do for my kids. Do I want the education system, the Alberta government, to pay exclusively for my kids to go through? No, I don't, because I have a responsibility as a parent, and it's something that I feel very strongly about.

In Alberta with our tuition policy we have stated that the individual will pay up to 30 per cent of the actual cost of the degree. With Bill 43 we have actually changed that, so once the 30 per cent rate is hit, then it moves up to cost of living plus 2 per cent. To put that in perspective, Mr. Chair, there are about three institutions in Alberta that actually hit the 30 per cent rate, and the reason they hit it is not because they were raising tuition. The reason they hit it is because their expenses went down. I don't think anyone anywhere would want us to penalize these institutions when their expenses go down when their tuitions have not gone up. So that is why we put in the cost of living plus 2.

Again, to put it into perspective, our universities are sitting at about 24 or 25 per cent of the actual cost of your education. So, Mr. Chair, when you're paying \$4,500, the government, the university, investors into the university are paying that other 75 per cent. When you pay \$4,500 for your child's university education, you can rest assured that there is another group of people out there, being the government, being the university, that are paying another \$18,000 to educate your child.

Mr. Chair, I do think that I have a responsibility to educate my children.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Continuing along that line, to the hon. minister: are you tracking the private debt that is accumulated by students attending technical or university courses? Also, since we were talking about technical schools, and everyone is talking about the labour shortage in this province – and we all know that there's not a labour shortage; there's a shortage of cheap labour – whenever we consider that between 10 and 11 per cent consistently of the age group between 15 and 24, Mr. Chairman, are unemployed in this province, I think that is a good pool of workers for the government to target apprenticeship programs to. Before we look at introducing other measures in training foreign workers and bringing them here, let's reduce that group of young Albertans between 15 and 24 to the provincial average, which is around 4 and a half, 5 per cent unemployment, and get them into the skilled trades.

Also the First Nations people – there is chronic unemployment there. If we could work at that, I think it would be a benefit to all.

Because there is certainly not a shortage of labour; there's a shortage of cheap labour in this province.

Also to the hon. minister: what percentage of Albertans who enter into a registered apprenticeship program, whether it's an optional or a compulsory trade, actually finish that trade four or five years later? There are registered apprentices; there are new apprentices. How many graduate? How many attend technical school? Is there a large percentage that go into the system and then come out the other end, I assume, four years later? Or is there a significant number that, for whatever reason, just drop out? If you have statistics on that, I would appreciate hearing from you.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. First of all, when it comes to private debt, the figures that we use are actually StatsCan figures. We don't have the ability to go in and actually assess a private debt. Because of the implications of freedom of information and privacy, we cannot go in and actually do it. So the numbers that we use are Stats Canada data. Obviously, StatsCan tends to be two or three years later than what the actual year is, but that's the only way that we can get the issues on private debt as well.

The hon. member has raised some other really interesting questions. First of all, I'll disagree with the hon. member about the shortage of labour being the shortage of cheap labour. I'm in regular conversations with people in Fort McMurray, where there is a huge number of workers that are needed. Just in the four or five companies that I can name off the top, they're probably 10,000 to 12,000 workers short as of today and potentially over the next year.

Mr. Chair, these workers are getting paid prime, prime salaries. They're getting paid, I'm assuming, \$30 to \$40 an hour. Quite simply, they cannot get enough workers to go up to Fort McMurray. Fort McMurray, albeit a wonderful place, is not necessarily the vacation capital of the world, and there are some issues with getting people to actually work up there. People don't want to leave their families, et cetera, et cetera. So I disagree with that. I think that those are excellent, excellent wages and that there is an actual shortage of labour.

4:00

The hon. member raised some excellent points when it comes to apprenticeship. In the apprenticeship system, Mr. Chair – I'll reiterate some of the numbers that I love to use. We have 10 per cent of the country's population, and we train 20 per cent of the country's apprentices. We presently have 40,000 apprentices in our system at any one time, and that just absolutely makes every other province pale in comparison when it comes to those numbers.

Our apprenticeship system is something we take very, very seriously, and I believe that when you take a look at our budget, you have seen inordinate increases in the apprenticeship. We have increased the number of apprentices going out in a year from 1997-98, I believe, by 50 per cent, so we have really ramped up the apprenticeship system.

Obviously, contingent on the apprenticeship system is the red seal program. We will not – we will not, we will not, we will not – decrease our standards just to get workers in here. The red seal program is the gold standard for any apprenticeship anywhere in the world, and that's what we continue toward, although I will say that we have had a lot of people who have asked us to decrease the standard just a little bit, just cut them down a little bit. But we have steadfastly refused to do that and continue to refuse to do that.

The First Nations people. Again, Mr. Chairman, it's an excellent

question the hon. member asked. There certainly is a pool of talented people out there that we can get into the apprenticeship system. We've done extensive work with the aboriginal population through our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit policy. We've actually gone in and asked these students: "Why are you dropping out of school? Why are you leaving school? Look at what you can have the advantage of doing."

Consequently, they said to us, different from the rest of the population, that the decision to drop out of school is often made in grade 8 or 9. So what we have done is put in an aboriginal youth apprenticeship program to target these kids as early as grade 8. So in grade 8 we will start these kids along their apprenticeship pathways, and that has proven to be very successful in keeping some of these kids in school.

Since I talked about Fort McMurray, I will put a plug in for Fort McMurray and the employers in Fort McMurray when it comes to apprenticeship. Almost to a T the employers in Fort McMurray have 20 per cent apprentices on their staff, and that is something that they feel strongly about and it's something that they're pushing towards.

The other thing that's equally as important is that they are pushing and pushing and pushing their workers to have a grade 12 education. In many construction jobs it would be much nicer to be able to take the, you know, six foot five, grade 11 student, but the employers in Fort McMurray – and I give them full credit – have said that they want high school educated students.

So in many aboriginal communities these people when they quit school cannot go into the workforce in Fort McMurray, and in talking to the aboriginal people in northern Alberta, they are fully cognizant and fully aware that they must finish grade 12. What we've seen actually, albeit it is not as good as the rest of our province when it comes to the grade 12 completion rate, is an increase in aboriginal completion rates of grade 12, an inordinate increase. It's still nowhere close to what we would like and nowhere close to what the rest of the system is, but we are seeing that increase.

The other pride that I have to stand here before you today and speak about is something that we have developed: the registered apprenticeship program. That was developed by my predecessors and instituted in about '98-99. This program has worked absolutely excellent. It has captured students that, in effect, would have dropped out.

For the information of the Legislative Assembly you're able to retain 40 credits towards graduation by taking the registered apprenticeship course, and it has helped many, many students who, in effect, would drop out. I don't have the exact number that the hon. member was asking for. I certainly will strive to get that number. Again, it's a very tough number for us to get in order to correlate the number of students in the RAP program. I can tell you anecdotally and purely anecdotally that I would expect that number to be around 75 to 80 per cent completion. So it has been a truly successful program.

One of the other things that we have done, which is unique to Alberta – and I believe it shows the importance that we have for apprenticeship – is we have given the RAP scholarships. Each and every year there are 50 students in the RAP program that receive \$1,000 scholarships. This is assessed by their employers; it's assessed on their school studies and the marks that they get.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Chair, last year of the 50 apprentices that received the scholarships, I believe there were around 20 of them that also received the Rutherford scholarships. This is not a lower class people; it is not a lower class occupation. It is something that's extremely important to this province, and it's something that is going to continue to be important in this province.

Mr. Chair, as I said in this Assembly on Wednesday, I had excellent conversations with the minister in British Columbia about the mobility of workers across our borders, between British Columbia and Alberta, and again I did not opt to decrease the quality of what our workers have. B.C. is going to be going through to the red seal program. They will however probably be laddering some of the steps to the red seal program, and we're presently working on exactly how that can be done.

But quality, quality, quality when it comes to our apprenticeship. If you ask any person in the apprenticeship industry, any person in business they will tell you – and it's something I strongly believe – that we have the number one apprenticeship system in the world, bar none.

The Chair: Before I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, I would just like to draw to the attention of the members of the Committee of Supply that the first hour is well past, so that opens up the opportunities for questions.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There are other members who want to ask questions of the hon. minister, so I will be quite brief here.

Following up on the minister's comments, certainly in the – I call it the brag book of the government. Under Low Operating Costs the annual labour costs here in Edmonton are certainly lower than other places listed on page 119 of the fiscal plan, and when we look at the general satisfaction rates of employers with Alberta workers, the employers' satisfaction rate is excellent, and also the productivity of the workers is excellent.

There are those that malign our labour force and say that it is unproductive and that that is the reason for these cost overruns in Fort McMurray. That argument holds no merit. There are many electricians, unionized electricians, over 2,000 of them as a matter of fact, who are on their union's out-of-work board, and if they can make \$30 or \$40 an hour in Fort McMurray, I'm certain that they would go there. They're well trained, they're skilled, and they're very anxious to work. I would urge the hon. minister and his colleagues just to contact some of those respective unions, and they will see for themselves that these workers are well trained, and they're anxious to participate in the growth of this province.

Now, I would like to thank the hon. minister. Certainly, there have been some individual files which he has shown a great deal of time and attention to – hopefully they can be resolved – in regard to compulsory trades in this province. I am looking forward, after this discussion we had regarding apprenticeship dropout rates, to working with the minister and his department because I, too, am working on a series of statistics, and I really hope that the dropout rate in the apprenticeship programs is as low as the minister has indicated today, because that's good news.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I neglected to add a couple of things for the hon. member's last questions, and it's something, as well, on the apprenticeship side that we're extremely proud of. In talking to the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology – obviously, we have just put a very huge investment into the apprenticeship side with them – what we've seen is that the median age of our apprentices is now down around 21 or 22, which is extremely positive. Our mean age, our average age, is still up around 26, 27, but that quite simply means that we have more 45 and 50 year olds coming in. But

our median age, which I think is extremely important for apprentices, is now down in the 21, 22 range.

4:10

Would I like it lower? Yeah, I would like it a little bit lower, but it's still a huge, huge step forward on this, I think. I don't have any facts to back this up, but I think it's really shown the acceptance of the trades and the acceptance of apprenticeship as a very valuable occupation. Certainly, in my department and every place that I speak, I speak about the trades often as a very valuable occupation.

Just in closing, Mr. Chair, I will say that one of the best decisions that this government has ever taken was to put the apprentices in the same system as the postsecondary system. What it's done is shown that the apprentices are truly equally as valuable as any student in the postsecondary system. Whether they're in medicine or teaching or an electrician, they're equally as valuable to the society of Alberta.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm impressed with the minister's stamina, so I'll take advantage of this and ask him a few questions.

I was listening to the minister with rapt attention when he was talking about the investment in postsecondary education as being the best investment that any individual or family can make. I don't think there's any dispute over that. What we need to do is to find ways of encouraging more and more Albertans to in fact seek that opportunity and take advantage of it and develop policies that from this side, from the government side, will not only encourage but help students in fact fulfill their dreams and their aspirations.

There is some evidence around which says that while Albertans aspire to postsecondary education, they're unable to pursue those aspirations and turn them into solid expectations and plans. So we need to ask the question: where is there a place in this picture for public policies to come in and help students do that? Obviously, the current policies leave a gap there that needs to be filled. The point is: what additional policies are needed there? I'd like the minister to respond to that.

Related to that is the question of: it's the best investment because, you know, the returns on it are the highest of many other forms of investment. Being a former university professor, I used to spend quite a bit of time trying to get that message out and look at literature which, in fact, produced very sound and strong evidence done by economists all over the world, particularly from the University of Chicago, which is one school that neo-Liberals love to of course pay attention to. Economists of education did lots of studies and won Nobel prizes on investment in education and returns on it. What they did in this analysis was to look at it not just on the returns on investment that individuals make but the return to investment that societies make. So they distinguish between individual or personal returns and social or community returns to investment in education.

That data, that information, that research was used then to shape public education policies which led to a large investment by governments in postsecondary education. The point was that if you have more university- or college-educated students, if you have more apprentices with complete and practising trade papers in their hands they, first of all, have much higher levels of employment. They get salaries and wages and incomes which are much higher than their counterparts who don't have these papers, whether at the college level or the apprenticeship level, the trade level, or the university level.

What's so good about high incomes other than that it's advantageous to individuals? Well, from the government side it produces a

large number of people who have high incomes, therefore more taxes. So the government revenues benefit from it, which the government then can use to bolster other of its programs.

My question to the minister is this specifically. Has he commissioned some studies of his own or accessed some more recent studies on social returns to investment in postsecondary education which he can share with this House to either shed some light on the efficacy of decisions that are made with respect to this or in defence of his refusal to freeze tuition fees for our students, which would mean, obviously, increasing the social investment portion in the education of students who are in our postsecondary learning system, be they college, university, apprentices, or trades? That's my first question.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Sure. Thank you very much. To the hon. member, I am again in a little bit of an uncomfortable position in that I do agree with 75 per cent of what the hon. member has said. It would have been a hundred per cent except he added that last little phrase there.

Mr. Chairman, certainly, the hon. member is well versed in postsecondary education, is well versed in the university system. That certainly is evident.

There is no dispute between myself and the hon. member when it comes to the importance of postsecondary education or the value of postsecondary education or, I will say, the value of the investment in postsecondary education. From a government point of view – and this is purely biased, purely my own, from society's point of view as well but purely from myself – I think that it's absolutely the best place to put money in a government's budget. Some of my colleagues who have very important ministries as well tend to argue a little bit with me about that, but that's just my personal view on postsecondary education.

The direct question that the hon. member has asked is a very good one, and that is: have I commissioned any studies to look at the social and societal returns for a postsecondary system? The answer is no. The reason that I haven't is because I believe strongly in a postsecondary education system, and quite frankly I don't care if \$1 brings back \$8 or \$1 brings back \$9 or \$1 brings back \$12. I feel strongly enough that I don't want to waste money to do that. However, I equally feel that whether it's \$9, \$10, or \$12, it doesn't make any difference because it's still extremely important. The postsecondary education system is still the most important area that we can spend money on, and that statement is something that I will argue with anyone about.

The hon. member has talked about freezing tuition fees, and I've already stated in this Assembly my belief that a parent has responsibilities for their children to pay tuition fees. One comment that I have not made is that our universities right now are sitting at about 25th, 26th, and I believe 29th in the country, although I think that has even grown lower in the past as British Columbia universities have come up quite significantly in their tuitions in the last year. So we're sitting at about the middle of the pack when it comes to the tuition rates.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Chair, the government in Ontario recently froze tuition fees and received a great amount of publicity, but equally it has created a huge, huge amount of angst amongst the postsecondary school system, because at the same time that they froze tuition fees, they did not increase the amount of dollars to the same rate. So, in essence, what we're seeing in Ontario is a decrease, a cut to the postsecondary education system, and I think that that's going to be extremely detrimental to Ontario in the future. That's keeping in mind that they have also had a \$9 billion deficit

this year. So how the postsecondary institutions are going to survive is going to be very difficult.

4:20

I recently came from a day and a half of discussions with the British Columbia ministry, and they're extremely proud because they will receive \$105 million over the next three years in their postsecondary system. I didn't have the heart to tell her, Mr. Chair, that we had put in \$125 million this year alone to a smaller system than British Columbia has.

So when it comes to postsecondary education, we're seeing a very large increase this year. There was a large increase last year, albeit much of it came during the year. But it is something that I believe strongly in, and I feel that certainly one of the best ways we can spend taxpayers' dollars is in the postsecondary education system, including – including – the apprenticeship system.

As I've been minister, I have attempted to give as large an increase as possible to the postsecondary education system, and I will say – and this really, really needs to be said today – that the postsecondary education system absolutely one hundred per cent has responded to that call.

One of the biggest issues that we have in the postsecondary system is access spaces. I apologize to the hon. member for going on so long, but one of the best examples that we have is that we put out money for an expected 500 spaces in postsecondary education through the access fund. The universities and colleges and technical schools came back and told us: no, we don't need that much money for 400 to 500 spaces. Instead, we received 700 spaces. So the postsecondary system is just an absolute delight to work with, and they certainly have the interests of students in mind when they make their decisions.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was pleasantly surprised that the minister agreed with 70 per cent of what I had to say. I encourage him to undertake that study. If he had the facts at hand, real, solid, evidentiary facts at hand with respect to the kind of study that I'm urging him to do, I'm sure he'll come around to the other 25 per cent on my side as well, so long as he's willing to be led by facts and evidence, you know, rather than by something else.

His reference to Ontario is a very, very interesting one. Alberta and Ontario are in very different situations. Mr. Harris's Conservative government left the present government holding the bag with the \$5 billion of hidden deficit, which now you say has moved up to \$9 billion, so a very different situation. Comparisons there are I think somewhat out of place.

You also visited Ireland, I understand, over the last two months or so, just before the session started, and I haven't seen you make any reference to the experience of Ireland with respect to how they have dealt with funding postsecondary education and with the tuition policies in particular and how enormously – how enormously – that country has benefited from that smart commitment that they made to make sure that every citizen of school-going age at the postsecondary level had the opportunity, and the results are quite clear. There's something to be learned from that as a different kind of example.

Now, Mr. Chairman, the minister did talk about \$125 million more this year. When you create more spaces – and there are growing numbers of students who are in our colleges and universities and other places – more money is needed even to stay still; that is, in terms of the facilities that we provide. But I understand that in terms of federal transfers, most of which I believe are in support of postsecondary education, Alberta has received close to \$55 billion

or \$54 billion. Those are my numbers. I'm seeking confirmation of these numbers if you have that information with you.

Freezing tuition fees would cost \$40 million, no more than that. So there is for Alberta in particular an opportunity to consider taking the Ontario route. We often see ourselves as competing with Ontario as another economy, another jurisdiction in many ways, and here is one where I think we could perhaps try and do that. The study that was quoted in the House today and again last year, done by TD Bank, I think, Calgary-Edmonton Corridor, clearly indicated two things: that our high school completion rate needs to be improved – we are behind the national average – and, secondly, that our postsecondary participation rates are below other jurisdictions within the country that we compete with and perhaps outside.

When we're looking at the business plan and under Performance Measures, there are two things that I noticed here. One is under outcome 2.2, "High school completion rate of students within 5 years of entering grade 10." We don't have a Canada-wide figure to compare our numbers with. I wonder why. Is that information inaccessible? What's the reason for us not being able to compare our rates with that? The TD study certainly had some information. Why is there no information on Canada? In some other categories, you know, the (b), (c), (d) following that, there is some sort of Canadian benchmark.

The second thing that I was curious about is the high school to postsecondary transition rate, again under Performance Measures. I've been drawing attention to the absence of this performance measure in our business plans for some time, and I've been around now for seven years. Yet I still see that there's no start made on this. We say: new. I wonder why the minister didn't think it appropriate to perhaps use the numbers – I don't know how totally firm they are – from the TD study, which uses some of those numbers to draw attention to it. It is page 341 I'm talking about, the very last part of that page. It says, "High school to post-secondary transition rate" with no information on it, yet to be determined, under 2005-2006.

I find this quite curious, this absence of information, any commitment to measure ourselves in terms of performance on this very, very critically important aspect of the system performance of the learning system at that very important juncture where the transition takes place from high school to university.

Would you like to perhaps respond to those? I have two other important questions that I would like to ask.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'll start with the last one. The answer is actually quite simple. The hon. member did raise a point several other times when we have had estimates. At those times we had said that the necessity for this measure is actually the one student number, and we are just in the process of implementing the one student number. We started last September. Once that one student number is there, what we'll be able to do is follow through right from high school into postsecondary. So we will be able to track them.

What we haven't had the ability to do is actually track the students. We will be able to track the individual students. We will know now if student 53781 has gone into the postsecondary education system, and we will know accurately whether or not they have gone into the education system. So that is the rationale as to why that number is not there. We can track them through. What we had to do was go through the Privacy Commissioner. We had to do all of these other things in order to ensure how we could do it.

What I will guarantee to the hon. member is that the number that comes forward in '05-06 will be accurate, and it's going to be

something that's incredibly important. The hon. member has raised this on numerous other occasions, and again I find myself in a very difficult position saying that we actually took his advice on some of this. [interjection] Ah, God, say that it isn't so. But believe it or not, we actually listen on this side to some of the very important things. So that's what we're doing. That's the reason we don't have the number at the moment, and as soon as the number is there, it will be a very important number, but again it will also be a highly accurate number.

4:30

The other thing on the high school completion rates. I answered a question about this from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods in question period, and at that time I suggested that we should have 100 per cent as the goal that we attempt to move towards. Unfortunately, each and every year I do have a fight with my department as they want to put an achievable number, but through to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods I will say that I'm gradually, gradually winning the battle on that one.

The Canadian standard on completion rates. I can't answer right now as to why it isn't in here. I can't answer what the difference is. I will certainly look at that. I do believe that the information is being collected in other provinces, but it may be collected in a different way. I just can't answer that right now, so I will put that as an undertaking to give that answer to you, especially as to where exactly we sit.

A couple of other points, just starting from the top. Ireland was an interesting country when I was over there. I attended as the leader of Canada's delegation to the OECD. Although I didn't get much chance to actually talk to the Irish minister, as there were some 45 or 50 countries present, it is a country, in talking to some of the people around, that has been very interesting. It used to be called the Celtic Tiger. The issue is, though, that apparently the unemployment rate is starting to come back up.

The other interesting point is that Ireland had a great deal of European Economic Community money, EU money being put into Ireland when it joined the European Union. That being said, I think they did invest very wisely, and they saw a huge increase in their economy, a huge increase in what was happening in Ireland. It's my understanding that that has levelled off and, indeed, may be stagnating. So they're going to have to take a very serious look at what they're doing as other countries increase their education rates as well.

One of the interesting comments that I will make to the hon. member is that when you look at what we have done – and there's an interesting study that just came out about two weeks ago. It showed according to socioeconomic status the number of students that attend university. What has happened in Alberta over the last 20 years is that the number of high economic status students has gone down quite dramatically. The number of lower socioeconomic students has increased by around 25 per cent from 20 to 24 per cent of the total, and the number of middle socioeconomic status students that are going to university has increased equally as well. We have seen the shift from the lower socioeconomic class, the middle socioeconomic class, and the other classes improve. So that's the direction that we want to go.

I think you're probably in the ballpark with the \$55 million. I can't say for sure if that's exactly what we've received. Put that in perspective though: \$55 million out of \$1.3 billion. We spend \$1.3 billion on postsecondary education in Alberta, so \$55 million, albeit very important, is a pittance compared to what we actually ultimately spend on postsecondary education.

The \$40 million for a tuition freeze. Again, Mr. Chair, I feel that

I need to increase the amount of money that goes to universities and postsecondary institutions, and this budget shows that we have indeed done that. Equally, I feel that there is an obligation on behalf of students, on behalf of parents to pay for some of their own education, and that's something that we followed through. We are attempting to limit it to a reasonable increase this year, and I may be a dollar or two out, but I believe that the maximum amount of increase was \$274. Again, to put that into context that we can all understand – and maybe I don't understand it – 27 packages of cigarettes was the increase to tuition this year in Alberta, the maximum allowable amount.

Postsecondary participation rates. Yeah, that's an interesting one; right. What we've seen in Alberta is a very hot economy over the past eight or nine years. What we're finding out is that a lot of students have elected to go into the oil patch, for example, where there are jobs. Rather than going into the postsecondary system immediately, they've jumped into the oil patch. Unfortunately, many of these students are not returning to the postsecondary system.

I think that when you take a look across Canada – and I may be wrong on this – I believe that one of the highest percentages of participation rates is actually in Nova Scotia. One of the rationales for that is that their economy has not been that hot, and indeed students who have come out are faced with two situations: either, one, no job or, two, going to university. [interjection] Ontario? Okay. Those are certainly some of the situations.

The point that I will bring up, though, is that Alberta has the highest number of university graduates of any province in Canada. I believe the number is around 55 per cent of the working community has a postsecondary diploma or degree.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have two more questions for the minister that I must ask. We'll see what happens then.

I was looking at the budget estimates here. This is again the business plan book, page 347. At the bottom of that table there's a star after Total Program Expense. Did you get that line? Then there's a footnote underneath which explains that the "total program expense includes the province's cash payments towards the unfunded pension liability" – I don't know what the amount is for this year – "(which will be eliminated under a separate legislated plan)." When is that plan forthcoming? I understand that some sort of negotiations are underway with the ATA, but there's no provision in this particular budget in anticipation of an agreement being struck with the ATA on this issue. So if the minister would shed some light on that first, and then I have a second question.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chair. This is in reference to the agreement that has been in place for about 12 or 14 years where we have assumed two-thirds of the existing unfunded pension liability of the teachers.

Dr. Pannu: On the actual fund; right?

Dr. Oberg: Right. We're now putting in about \$130 million dollars. So this is apart from the teachers' portion of this, which is running in the \$60 million to \$65 million range. The agreement that was struck proposes that the unfunded pension liability will be paid off in I believe the year 2060.

The other issue – and this is a very important issue when it comes to the unfunded pension liability – is that the liability is predicted to

increase over that time frame to \$18 billion before it starts to go down. So there certainly are some issues.

With regard to the unfunded liability for teachers the ATA and the Alberta School Boards Association are in talks about this exact issue as we speak. There has been nothing forthcoming, but I will say, Mr. Chair, that I will be one of the happiest learning ministers in Canada if I can come forward at some point in time and make some announcements about that.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Chair. My next question to the minister has to do with the allocations to boards from this budget. I'm glad to hear from boards – and the minister has been hearing this too – that the new funding formula is being received well across the province by all kinds of jurisdictions which are very different from each other in many ways, which is good news. The use of this formula, of course, translates into the number of dollars each school board gets and the funding profile that develops from it.

4:40

Will the minister share this information with us, and how soon can he do this so that we don't hear competing claims on how much money a school board is getting, how much more money this year a school board is getting than last year, and whether or not that money is enough for them to retain a few teachers that were hired back last January or whether or not they are going to be doing anything at all by way of taking steps to increase the number of teachers within the school system in order to move towards reducing the class size towards targets which the minister himself must meet over the next four or five years? The chair of the Learning Commission, Pat Mackenzie, herself has publicly expressed both frustration and disappointment at the allocations and the confusion around the additional dollars that school boards are getting.

So to come to the point, can we get that information for each school board with respect to the additional total money? We'll figure out how much more money is there this year as compared to last year. Secondly, some sort of funding profile for each school division.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I certainly have the funding profiles. One of the issues that is out there quite simply is there are negotiations with the teachers and with other unions that are ongoing, and there has been a request that we not share the profiles. Each individual jurisdiction has their own funding profile, so they all have their own funding profile.

To give an example, the amount of funding – and I'll use Edmonton public as the example – for Edmonton public prior to our November announcement where we added in the dollars was \$454,376,760. After the November announcement where we saw the annualized \$90 million put in, it went up to 461 and a half million dollars. Under the new framework, without any other increases at all, Edmonton public will receive between \$3 million and \$4 million extra.

There are a couple of assumptions that I want to point out here. If we assume in Edmonton that there is no enrolment change – so it's the same number of students this year as last year – what you see in Edmonton is a 5 per cent increase, which is very close to a little over a \$22 million increase that has been given to Edmonton public. Again, these are not the figures that they have given us. This is the

assumption that the enrolment is flat. If we use their numbers that they have given us, what we see is a 4.9 per cent increase that has been given to Edmonton public. So around I believe – my math isn't that good right now – a little over a 21 and a half million dollar increase is what has been given there.

I do have some problems with some of the media items that have been out there lately regarding the number of dollars that they have received. Indeed, I have been in touch with the people at Edmonton public, and they say that absolutely they will be hiring more teachers.

To put that in perspective, Mr. Chair, Calgary public, which is another major board, obviously, in the province, is going to see an increase budget over budget of around \$36 million, a huge amount of money. Their budget is going to be going up around 6 per cent. One of the reasons for this is that they have seen an enrolment increase. The other reason is that the new funding formula recognizes some of the issues that Calgary public had and subsequently has rewarded them.

Those are the numbers. There is \$192 million directly that goes to school boards in this budget.

Is there some misunderstanding out there? I think there is. I've had a very long conversation with the president of the ATA about this as well, and both of us want to get out the actual exact numbers. We're still looking at whether or not we publish the total funding reviews that are out there for all the school jurisdictions, but that's up in the air at the moment. A decision hasn't been made on that.

Dr. Pannu: Further to the same question, Mr. Chairman, it's not the media numbers that I'm talking about. I'm talking about school boards' own releases here. So I hope you correct yourself in attributing any disputed numbers only to the media reporting. You talk about \$21 million for Edmonton public; they're talking about \$13.4 million at most. In that, they include the \$9 million that they received in January to hire back some teachers, and their claim is that they won't be able to retain, much less hire, many new ones given their numbers.

The reason why it is, I think, appropriate for this House, too, to have those numbers is so that we don't have to go back and forth between the media, the minister, the school board, and the ATA. As legislators I think we need to have the information that the government has at least so that we can make up our own minds and not be led by five different people talking about five different things about the same numbers. What's the problem with that, I'm asking, and why won't you release that?

Dr. Oberg: Again I'm in the uncomfortable position of agreeing with the hon. member. I agree with you. As I mentioned earlier, I'm a strong believer that transparency is the most powerful political tool that there is, and I will endeavour to have all the funding profiles tabled in this Assembly before the Assembly closes down. I'm presently in some discussions with some of the school boards about this exact issue, but I will endeavour to table all of the profiles in this Assembly before it closes down this year.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to follow on with that if I may. One of the pieces of information that I asked for last year and haven't received was the assumptions on which the budget is built. Rather than going to the school boards, I wonder if the minister could share with us the assumptions that are built into the budget about teachers' salaries – what numbers do you build in? – about the different categories, the assumptions about principals and

phys ed teachers and substitute teachers, the numbers of students in classes, what schools should need for resources.

It seems to me that the impression that's left is that the budget-building process hinges on people saying that it should be 3 per cent, that it should be 5 per cent, that it should be 10 per cent. I mean, we get these differing views of what it should be, and then the government tries to play this game of trying to come down someplace that won't cause too much grief. But it is never really related to the costs that schools and school boards are going to be faced with paying. I wonder if the minister might comment upon that.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Certainly, Mr. Chair. One of the issues that we had when we brought in the new funding formula, which took us about two to two and a half years to actually do, one of the huge discussion points was the actual price and cost of teachers. We debated and debated and debated how exactly to do that, whether we put the exact price of what it costs a particular jurisdiction, remembering and recognizing that that changes year to year, or do we not build in any costs for those jurisdictions that have higher priced teachers than the other ones?

With representation of everyone around the table – we had probably 25 to 30 people in the room from all the educational partners – it was decided that we not put in the formula anything to do with teachers' salaries because the school boards felt that they did have some ability to move that and that it should not be put in the formula, recognizing that it doesn't necessarily mean that the money has not been put in. In essence, it goes into the basic per student grant.

The other issue that I believe the hon. member has asked is: do we just simply take it from 3 per cent and say that the system needs 3 per cent or 2 per cent or 4 per cent this year? The answer is no. We have gone away from that, and indeed five or six years ago that is the way it used to be done. What we're looking at now – obviously, volume is something that's a very real number. It's a very concrete number that is built into this formula.

4:50

On the disabled side we look specifically at volume, and we also look at the amount of increase that is needed in the severe disabilities. One of the things we've been concentrating on, for example, which I'm very proud of, is bringing the severe behavioural disabilities up to the same level as the severe physical disabilities, and this will be the first year that the two have actually balanced out and are exactly the same.

We've also taken a look at English as a Second Language in the funding formula. Again, these are needs that are out there for the school system. We've dramatically increased those dollars up to a little over \$1,600 per ESL student. To put that in perspective, hon. member, about two years ago or three years ago it was down at around \$550. So we've seen it almost triple, and again this is recognition that the costs of an English as a Second Language student are considerably higher.

I'll give you another example: the outreach schools. It used to be that these outreach schools were funded purely on the per student basis, and simply by having an outreach school, bringing more students in, they actually received more funding. Well, what we've done this year, as well, is we've added an extra \$52,000 for each and every outreach location. We've recognized that the cost of an outreach school is more expensive. It cannot necessarily be a straight extrapolation from a high school that has 1,500 students to an outreach school which has 50 students, but the importance of the

outreach school cannot be overstated. So we have added in a \$52,000 per location grant for that.

We've added in small board administration costs. We've added in jurisdictional declines or increases in enrolment. So if your jurisdiction experiences an unwarranted decline, a sudden decline in enrolment after September 30, then that is now recognized. The same thing occurs for an unexpected growth in number of students, and we've added in extra dollars for that.

We've looked at northern allowance. We've looked at aboriginal students. We've built in socioeconomic status. So I think it's overly simplistic to say that we quite simply took the number and went from 2 per cent to 3 per cent to 4 per cent, et cetera. There are a lot of wide variations in this new funding formula that we have put in, and again it is an attempt to rationalize what we do with the system and rationalize how the dollars are distributed out to the school boards.

Do we have it perfect? Probably not. I'd love to be able to say that we have the perfect formula, but it's taken us three years to get to this point. Are we going to have to change it again? We may well, but I think that this is as close to a perfect formula as there exists in Canada today. I would love to be able to say that I sat down and worked it out all by myself and came up with this formula, but I can't. This was truly a collaborative effort by all departments in education in order to put this funding formula out. I really must stress that it is not simply taking a base number, adding in 3 per cent or adding in 4 per cent and saying: that's enough. It's showing where these dollars are going. It's distributing it on an equitable basis as opposed to an equal basis, and I think we've hit it about as well as we can.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to go at that again. I agree with the minister, and the government has I think done a good job with equity. I think they took the money in and decided to redistribute it on a per pupil basis. They eliminated the huge differences that we had with respect to geography.

If you look at the literature on school finance on the continent, 10 years ago everyone was trying to address equity. But it seems to me that the whole field of school finance has moved past equity and is now really addressing the question of adequacy. That's, I think, a whole new area. I guess that my question to the minister is: how do you assure that the per pupil grant, whatever it is, is adequate to pay the costs that school boards face in trying to deliver programs?

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Yeah. Thank you. That's a very difficult question the hon. member has just asked. One of the things that we rely on to a very large degree is the expertise of the school jurisdictions on how they allocate the resources that are available. I'm just attempting to do a little bit of math here, and if you would bear with me for about two seconds, I'll have something for him. No, I won't because my calculator isn't big enough. It only goes to eight digits.

Dr. Massey: Don't rely on technology.

Dr. Oberg: That's right.

The point that I'm making is that when it comes to funding a class, if you take a class of 25, that class of 25 is getting now, probably, around \$7,400, \$7,500 per student. So you're looking at a huge amount of money that is being put in per class.

I in no way – I in no way – would say that every class is a class is a class. That absolutely is not true, and I don't think anyone has said

that for years. The issue comes down to: when we allocate that money, we depend on the school jurisdictions to put that money in the place that they see fit. There are some classes that may have five or six; there are other classes that may have 35 or 40. It is up to the school jurisdiction on how that is given out.

With regard to the adequacy there have been a lot of attempts made to see exactly what adequacy is. I think you've got to recognize that there are a huge number of wild cards in this. For example, do you use the average teacher's salary in Canada, in which case there would be much more than adequacy here? Our teachers are paid considerably higher than anyplace else in Canada on average. So there are a huge number of issues when it comes to the actual adequacy.

When it comes to equity and how it is distributed, we do that in what I believe is as fair a manner as possible. When it comes to an actual number to put down and say that each student must have \$7,363.27 in order to have the best possible education system, I won't buy that, because it's impossible to do. A student is not a student is not a student. Every student is different. Every student has different needs. Every student has different resources that should be put towards that student. That is why we have school boards. That is why we have professionals out in the school jurisdictions to decide how those resources are spent.

My job as the Minister of Learning is twofold, and I think that this warrants speaking about. First of all, I'm an MLA, and I have to be responsible and accountable to my taxpayers as to how their tax dollars are being spent.

Second of all, I am the Minister of Learning, and I attempt to get as many dollars as possible within that context for the learning system and to ensure that the learning system dollars are spent – are spent – in the best possible fashion. When I see 5 per cent increases to school jurisdictions, when I see across Canada that British Columbia, for example, is at zero per cent for three years, when I see the amount of dollars that I've put into the education system, it astounds me.

The point that I will make: can I actually, scientifically sit down and say that this is the adequate number, that this is the scientifically proven number that should go in? I can't, and I don't think anyone in budgeting can. I don't think that number has ever been arrived at. Even if there were a number that was arrived at, I would have severe difficulty in agreeing with it, because I'm a firm believer that you have to individualize school programs, that the individual has different resources that are needed for each one.

Mr. Chair, the question is a good question, but the reality of it is that it's simple to say: look for the adequacy. What is the magic number? In reality, it's almost impossible to come up with the magic number.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, just to pursue it a little further, Mr. Minister, in a number of American states the literature is filled with adequacy. There have been three or four, at least, different schemes of trying to arrive at adequacy. You know, they've used expert panels going in and saying: here are the programs that the government wants delivered; if you have an average elementary school, this is what you might expect. Others have gone to very successful school districts and said: what kind of resources did they put in to achieve those kinds of results? They've really, I think, focused on the outcomes and said: this is what we want.

5:00

If you look at Wyoming, for instance, one of their outcomes is that every graduate of the high school system will be eligible for a

postsecondary program. It may just mean, you know, a program at some sort of a skills college; it could be a vocational program; it could be a university program. But when they leave those school districts, they must be eligible for further education. So they've approached it that way.

If you look at places like Maryland, they've gone to 28 measures of what they want those youngsters to be able to do when they leave school. So the adequacy has gone sort of backwards. They've started at what we want youngsters to be able to do, what the graduates will look like, and then what kind of programs do we need in place to make that happen, and then what will it cost us.

And it is hard. I mean, I agree with the minister: there's no easy answer. I don't pretend to be any expert in educational finance, but I suspect that the impetus was court action, that parents went to the courts in a number of states, 20 at least, and said, "My youngster is not being provided an adequate program," and that's opened up the whole can of worms in terms of adequacy.

I think that at some point all the arguments about whether it's enough or whether it's not enough would be dissipated when there is something the government could point to saying: "Look. These are the programs we want delivered, this is what we want youngsters to be able to do when they leave this system, and this is what we are going to fund. You have a school; you need a librarian for every 300 youngsters; you need a counsellor for every 200." I mean, they've gone at it in a variety of ways, and I think that it may not be now, but I would predict that somewhere down the road in Alberta we'll be addressing adequacy because it does seem to be a growing movement.

Dr. Oberg: You guys are going to get sick of hearing me today. I'm going to start losing my voice.

Mr. Chair, the point that I will add: when it comes to enough or not enough, the single biggest wild card in that is salaries. Quite simply, if we were to say enough or not enough, what we would have to do is we would have to be able to say: "Here is what the salary increase is this year. Here's what the salary increase is next year."

I'll use specifically the 14 per cent salary settlement that we saw as an increase to teachers' salaries. What we did not anticipate and we would never have anticipated even if we had an adequacy formula that said enough or not enough – we would never have anticipated a 14 per cent teachers' settlement. That teachers' settlement was retroactive for a year and a half, which was the single biggest expense in the education system.

The other point that the hon. member has brought up is outcomes, and I'm not saying that just because someone has 20 outcomes – well, we actually have 52 outcomes, which is something that we'll be reporting on in the November report card back to the constituents. We've been working on this for about three and a half years.

I do not believe that the system should be measured on input costs. I do not believe that the system should solely be measured on how much you spend, and if you spend more than another system, you have a better system. That's absolutely not true.

However, I do believe that we need to watch outcomes, that we need to focus on outcomes, and that's one of the situations that we've addressed over the last three and a half years. We are getting to the end of it, and hopefully it will be out here in November. You saw part of this outcome indicator in the February questionnaire that went out to parents, teachers, and students.

The other issue, though, that I really take offence with – I don't take offence with the hon. member, but I take offence to the assertion that you can actually say that you have an average elementary school. You know, I have yet to go to a school and say: okay, well, this is an average school. Do you know what answer I get back?

"No, no, we're not average, because we've got this, this, this; we've got this, this, and that." I challenge the hon. member to actually find an average school.

I'm a firm believer in individualized lesson plans and individualized education, and the average component just realistically is not there. From my department's point of view I do not want to spend a lot of time and resources to determine a number such as the average school. To me that's just money that's very, very poorly spent.

Dr. Massey: Well, you know, that's fine, Mr. Minister, but you do put out a per pupil grant, and I'm sure that that per pupil grant doesn't fit every youngster in a particular school. I don't think you can have it both ways. You can't base the system on a per pupil grant and then – you know, the experience elsewhere was that they looked at what they would like for an ideal as a basis for distributing money, and that's what you do with the per pupil grant. You use it as the basis for distributing money across the province or at least in part.

If I could just change because the time is running out. I have a couple of questions about postsecondary education, Mr. Chairman, if I might. One of the pleas that the students have been making is that there be an increase in the living allowances for the student loans program and also that the parental contribution be looked at and the role that that plays in students getting or not getting or only getting partial financing through the students finance program.

The other was their proposal with respect to the remission program. I'm sure the minister is aware of it. "The program would better serve Alberta students" – and I'm quoting from one of their publications – "by allowing those who have less than \$5,000 in debt per year to have a portion of their debt remitted as well."

Of those three proposals that the students have made, it seems to me that the most urgent one is that cost of living one. If you come to this city or Calgary and try to live on those allowances, it's really difficult.

Dr. Oberg: Yeah, certainly. Actually, there are two ways I want to answer this. First of all, when we look at the cost-of-living adjustments that are in the student loans, we attempt to look at what is called, I believe, the agricultural market basket or something along those lines. It's what is actually used. So there is a scientific basis to it. We are, however – and we're just getting the data to do this. I've asked my department to start giving out student loans, and we will be adjusting it. It won't be this year but probably next year.

In conjunction with Economic Development we have actually looked at the cost of living and the cost of expenses in the various communities around the province to address the issue that you just brought up. Realistically, a student in Brooks, Alberta, has different basic living costs than someone in Calgary going to the University of Calgary or someone in Fort McMurray. It's been an element of attempting to get these numbers, getting good comparative numbers. We do have these. We're in the midst of getting those now, and that will be brought out when it comes to the living expenses. I think that that's only fair.

The interesting point that we've looked at is that there is a significant difference. You know, there can be up to a 15 to 20 per cent difference just in the cost of living, the cost of eating in some of these communities. So we will be incorporating that into our student loan program, and again that will be the first in the country.

The other issue on the remission side and why we picked \$5,000 is quite simply because often that's the federal government's component of it. We're not going to remit on behalf of the federal government. The federal government has no remission program.

Quite simply, the dollars that are borrowed from the province the majority of times by far the majority of the dollars are given back to the students. We're not going to remit dollars back to the student that the federal government has given them and demanded to have back. I encourage the federal government to go to a remission-type program. It has served us very well in the province and will continue to serve us well. Unfortunately, they haven't done it.

I'll just add one other plug, Mr. Speaker, and I answered that in a question today. Prime Minister Martin has talked about raising the student loan limit. It will be the first time in 10 years that the student loan limit has been raised on the federal side. We in Alberta have been the only province in Canada that has raised it each and every year and will continue to raise it.

5:10

Dr. Massey: I guess it was the third question that I had about parental contributions, if that had been addressed.

Dr. Oberg: Yes, that was one question. Parental contributions is something that I get a lot, and I get it from two different sources. I get it from the source where parents just absolutely won't give any money to their students, where they have said: listen; you as my daughter or my son are completely on your own. What we've done is that through the appeals committee they can appeal that. If the parents actually sign these affidavits that they bring into the appeal committee, the majority of the appeal committees are won on that behalf, where the parent shows that they absolutely categorically refuse to put in any money towards their child's education. Personally I think that's deplorable; I think it's horrible. But some parents do that, and we have taken that to appeal and the student has overthrown that.

The other side that I get it from is those parents that are in the \$50,000 to \$60,000 range with more than one child. Again, the appeal committee looks at each individual circumstance if they want to appeal. If you have specific students with student loans and they want to appeal the amount, it's a very good way to do it. If the facts are at all legitimate, the appeal committee on the student loan program tends to be very lenient on some of these appeals. So that's what I certainly would encourage.

Those are the two extremes that we get on parental contributions. On the one I have empathy for the student, but absolutely no sympathy for the parent. On the other one I think I do have empathy and sympathy for the parents, and we attempt to accommodate that as best we can.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt hon. members and the flow back and forth, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for

the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoon, I must now put the question after consideration of the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Learning.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$3,799,734,000
Nonbudgetary Disbursements	\$142,500,000

The Chair: Shall the estimates be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's been an exciting afternoon of debate, and I would now move that the committee rise and report the estimates of the Ministry of Learning.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Learning: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$3,799,734,000; nonbudgetary disbursements, \$142,500,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That having been said and given the proximity to 5:30, I would move that we would call it 5:30 and adjourn until Monday at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; at 5:15 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, April 26, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/04/26

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon, and welcome back. Hon. members, at the conclusion of the prayer please remain standing for the singing of our national anthem. It will be led today by Mr. Paul Lorieau.

Let us pray. We give thanks for the bounty of our province: our land, our resources, and our people. We pledge ourselves to act as good stewards on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Increasing awareness and education about the law is important to helping Albertans better understand how the justice system works. Over the past 35 years the legal studies program at the University of Alberta has remained a leader across Canada in public legal education.

An hour ago Alberta Justice and the legal studies program released A-Link, Alberta's law-related information network. A-Link is the first of its kind in Canada as an on-line directory that increases Albertans' access to information.

It's my pleasure and privilege to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly three key individuals from the University of Alberta's legal studies program. Dr. Cheryl McWatters is the dean of the Faculty of Extension. Dr. McWatters is a dedicated continuous learner and a member of Canada's academic community for more than 10 years. Professor Lois Gander is the associate dean of the Faculty of Extension and director of the legal studies program. Dr. Gander is recognized as a Canadian leader in promoting public access to law and justice information. Dr. Diane Rhyason is the associate director of the legal studies program. Dr. Rhyason was the project director for the A-Link directory.

I'd also like to introduce Karen Machura, the legal education coordinator for Alberta Justice. Karen has done a phenomenal job for the department in this role, and once again it was shown today with the successful launch of the A-Link initiative.

They are standing in the public gallery, and I'd ask the House to give them their warm and traditional welcome. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the great honour of introducing to you and through you to the

Members of the Legislative Assembly some incredible young people, who are accompanied by teacher Ms Tracey Crain – I'd ask that they stand as I name them – and parent helpers Ms Wanda Amor, Mrs. Michelle Lukan, Ms Joanne Perry, Ms Inga Lanctot, Mrs. Barb MacIntyre, Mrs. Nancy Skrynyk. Of course, they are students from the Roland Michener secondary school in Slave Lake. I'd ask that they all rise and receive the warm welcome. I believe they're sitting in the members' gallery.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 43 students from the St. John Bosco Catholic school. I had the pleasure of attending their grand opening. They are spending their first year in this beautiful school, and I want to commend them on that. They are accompanied by their teachers Mr. Zydek and Mrs. Adolf and their parent helpers Mrs. Donna Ballantyne, Mrs. Lina Brietkreutz, and Mrs. Val Obrigewitch. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one of those strange introductions. My group will not be in until 2 o'clock, but I did want to put on record that they are coming in. It's a school from the city of Airdrie called George McDougall high school. It's a great school. Both of my sons graduated from there, so a lot of time and energy by everybody was spent at that awesome place. This is a group of 35 people coming in, five adult supervisors and 30 students from the French side of the George McDougall high school. The grade 10 students will be in between 2 and 2:30, and I wanted to mention that they would be in.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure, but I hope that this group of special guests are here. They are 40 students from Greenfield school. They're led by their teacher, a wonderful, dedicated Stacy Morgan, a very loving teacher, and parent helpers Sarah Henderson and Kim Aime. If they are here, we would ask them to now stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As you may know, today members of the ALS Society of Alberta are meeting with MLAs throughout the building to discuss issues related to ALS and the treatment and programs that are available through the Alberta government. This morning the Member for Redwater and I had the pleasure of meeting with a delegation from the ALS Society of Alberta, one of whom was a constituent of mine. I'm very pleased to see that he has joined us in the members' gallery today, and I would like to ask Mr. Rod Helfrich, who is an ALS victim himself, to rise and receive the recognition of all Members of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 33 students from Mill Woods Christian school in Edmonton-Mill Woods.

They're accompanied by their teacher Mrs. Judy Krahn and parent helpers Mrs. Kathleen Landsman and Mrs. Christine Silva. They're in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask them to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 16 representatives of the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Society, ALS for short. These guests represent individuals living with ALS, volunteers, and staff of the ALS Society. They include representatives from the ALS Society of Alberta, ALS Society of Canada, as well as the ALS societies of Manitoba and British Columbia. Today is ALS Awareness Day at the Legislature, and that's why I'm wearing these cornflowers.

These guests are meeting with various caucuses to share information on the effects of ALS on people living with the disease, the services the ALS Society provides, and to identify ways to collaborate strategies to better meet the needs of those living with ALS. These guests are seated in the public gallery. I would now request them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. At this time I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the rest of the Assembly one of the members of the ALS Society of Alberta, Mr. Victor Beland from Grande Cache, who has really worked hard on this, so at this time I'd like him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The first Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On February 11 the Premier said he would release the controversial Graydon report on health care in six weeks, but last Thursday, when asked about that promise, the Premier said, quote, well, I fibbed, end quote. It's time for the Premier to start telling the truth and admit to Albertans that rather than strengthening health care, as the Alberta Liberals would do, this government plans to undermine public health care and leave Albertans paying more out of their pockets for fewer services. My questions are to the Premier. Why are Albertans hearing fibs about health care from this government instead of the truth?

Mr. Klein: Well, I'm not a 'Fiberal.' Mr. Speaker, quite simply, it was our original intention to release the Graydon report, but having second thoughts, which those in politics are allowed – and anyone is allowed to have a second thought, a second thought about any issue – it was decided that we would release the Graydon report in conjunction with a multitude of other reports.

The reason for that, Mr. Speaker, is that I have seen the actions of the Liberals in this Legislative Assembly, and basically what they want to do is take that report and pick out of that report those things that make for a good 15-second sound bite, and they will try to sensationalize elements of that report. They won't consider it in its total context. So it was decided that that report would be released

along with numerous other reports as well as best practices in other jurisdictions.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Will the Premier confirm that under a plan circulating in his government and in his department of health, user fees for health services will escalate with each additional usage of the system, penalizing those that need health care the most?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the question alludes exactly to what I was speaking about, and that is user fees and those things that make for a good 15-second sound bite. The Graydon report, along with all other reports, will be released prior to caucus meeting, and caucus will consider an overall plan of action. That plan will be taken out to the public for consultation and everyone, including the Liberals, will have an opportunity to comment.

Dr. Taft: Why is this government embarking on its fifth attempt at health reform in 12 years instead of doing what Albertans want them to do, which is provide more beds, reduce waiting lists, and reduce emergency room overcrowding?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we want to achieve all of those things, but we want to do it at a cost that is affordable and sustainable so that we will have health care for all of us, our children, and our grandchildren in the future. That's what reform leading to sustainability is all about.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Government Aircraft

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While everyone else drives to get around Alberta, cabinet ministers last year alone took over 1,100 flights on the government's fleet of passenger aircraft. My questions are to the Premier. How does the Premier justify employing 12 pilots, a flight attendant, and four aircraft on standby 24 hours seven days a week at taxpayer expense when the great majority of flights are simply for cabinet ministers?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is not entirely true. I've been on many government flights that involve public service employees, and of course public service employees and firefighters use the planes as well.

It's impossible to put a price tag on the time required to do government business by all of those in government, including cabinet ministers, MLAs, and the 22,000 people that we have working in the government. Use of government aircraft allows MLAs and government staff to quickly attend to issues in all parts of the province. It allows ministers, especially, to get more done in one day, which would not be possible with commercial aircraft.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I would like to mention the cost. Government fleet flights can save taxpayers' dollars. For instance, not including fixed costs such as salaries and insurance, a full flight on a King Air 200 costs \$76.71 per seat round trip to Calgary. What we try to do is make sure that the plane is loaded.

Mr. Speaker, the plane is available to opposition members as well, those who want to fly to Calgary. There was one member who lived outside the city of Edmonton. I don't know why the others would require it, but certainly on Thursday afternoons and Monday morning or Sunday night there is a shuttle from Calgary to Edmon-

ton. We load up that small aircraft, and we land, conveniently, at the City Centre Airport.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to point out that on many occasions, especially in North America, including Mexico, we use the King Air rather than commercial aircraft at a cost of about \$400 an hour as opposed to the \$3,000 or \$4,000 per round trip it would cost to take commercial airlines. Unlike the federal Liberal cousins that they so want to emulate, we do not fly around in A320s or Challenger jets. These are turboprop aircraft. We do have the inconvenience from time to time of having the toilet seat loaded with pizzas or sandwiches as opposed to a full galley, so sometimes we are denied the use of the toilet as well.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, since the purpose of these flights is most of the time unknown and undisclosed, will the Premier publish for the public to see the flights taken by cabinet ministers and the purpose they serve?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, all flight manifests are kept, and any member of the public is welcome to view them. The hon. member knows that, and to stand up and say that he doesn't have access to the information is at least, at very, very least, misleading the public.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Mr. Lund: The reason for the flight is included on every manifest.

Dr. Taft: Since the vast majority of these flights, over 1,100 last year alone, were approved for use by cabinet or Executive Council, not firefighting, and since a one-way flight on the King Air to Ottawa is over \$11,000 according to the government's own figures, can the Premier estimate the cost to taxpayers for flights taken by his Executive Council alone?

1:50

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'd be glad to. Again, he's using figures. If we load the King Air 350 and have someone sit on the toilet, that would make nine people. If we were to book economy class or even business class, the cost to Ottawa would be approximately \$4,000 per person round trip. Multiply that by eight or nine. That is \$36,000. So at \$11,000 it's a bargain.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is almost no public accountability on the 1,600 flights taken on government aircraft in 2003. Contrary to previous procedure government is now telling opposition that they may look at the records but cannot copy them or bring any computer equipment into the room. To get a copy of the records, we have now been told by the minister's office that we must FOIP for them, so once again less transparency, less accountability. My questions are to the Premier. In order to inform the public, can the Premier explain why in February 2003 a government aircraft was used by the minister of health to fly to Camrose and back?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea. I would assume it was government business.

Relative to the procedures with respect to viewing the manifests, I'll have the hon. Minister of Infrastructure respond.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, those manifests are all available to the public, and they can be viewed at any time. The opposition is asking for us to copy all those manifests, and there's a cost to all of that. Through the FOIP they would know what those costs are. But certainly they're open. They can come in and view them, but we are not going to copy them for free. That's a cost to government; it's a cost to the taxpayers. If they want those manifests copied, we'll do it, but there will be a fee.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. You wouldn't even allow us to take electronic copies.

My next question is to the Premier. Can the Premier inform Albertans what the purpose was of an October 2003 series of flights taken by the Premier and others from Edmonton to Calgary to San Jose, Albuquerque, Houston, Cheyenne, and back to Calgary? Please tell us.

Mr. Klein: Probably can, Mr. Speaker. It was government business. I would remind the opposition that the opposition is certainly part of PNWER and takes government aircraft. I've been on the plane with members of the opposition.

I would assume that that was a mission perhaps in conjunction with Team Canada – maybe not; I don't know – or in conjunction with Premier Campbell or the western governors' conference. It could have been any one of those things. I'm not sure. I don't have that information in front of me. Had they had the courtesy of submitting the questions long before question period, I could give them specific answers, but they are not courteous people.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: will the Premier lift the gag order, recommit to openness and transparency, and ensure that anyone who wishes to copy or make electronic records of the Infrastructure flight logs can do so again? Will you commit to that, Mr. Premier?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there is no gag order. When the opposition talks about three King Airls, one 350, two 200s, and a Dash 8 that are in the air most of the time, allowing people – staff members and MLAs and ministers – to conduct government business, they conveniently forget the extravagance, the absolute extravagance of their federal cousins who flip around in Challenger jets and A320s.

By the way, when they report expenses, while we're on it – I gleaned from the Internet how the federal government posts their expenses. This is the travel and hospitality expenses detailed report from the Prime Minister for all of 2004 thus far. Now, four months have almost expired, and he has one expense. Where? The Challenger jet broke down. Poor dear soul had to take commercial to Montreal at a cost of \$420.39. That's all I've been able to get off the web relative to federal government expenditures. These people are trying to tell the public that the Prime Minister of this country has only spent \$420.39 on expenses and travel. That is balderdash, to say the least.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That wouldn't even pay for the Premier's orange juice.

Beef Recovery Strategy

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, both the federal Liberal and the provincial Tory governments are experts in designing BSE compensation programs where the money seems to end up where it's needed the least. Moreover, while we all hope that the U.S. border opens to live cattle exports soon, it continues to be abundantly clear that there is still no strategy to deal with the situation should the border remain closed. My question is to the Premier. Given that it's been almost two months since the Premier first committed the province to developing a plan B scenario should the border not open to live cattle exports, can the Premier explain just where the heck plan B is?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it is in front of the minister as we speak. As a matter of fact, we had the opportunity to discuss it briefly at Agenda and Priorities this morning. It'll be coming to cabinet tomorrow.

I'll have the hon. Deputy Premier speak more on this matter.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the beef recovery plan strategy or contingency plan, if you wish to call it that, has been worked on by the industry. We have a round-table that numbers up to 60 persons periodically, sometimes a few less, sometimes a few more, as well as some very diligent government MLAs, who try to attend as many meetings as they can. Last Friday we had our final meeting, and the final report was drafted. I received a copy of it about 9:30 this morning. I've had an opportunity to very quickly peruse it. As the Premier indicated, our cabinet will be reviewing this document tomorrow.

We've had a conversation with the industry as to when we would make that public. I think the hon. member would understand that it would be only courteous to share that report with the 60-odd industry people who had input into it. Because we had a drafting team of about a half a dozen people from the industry, designated by the industry, they would like the balance of their members to see the report. The Premier has said over and over again: by the end of April. I don't know where this member is going with this. By my reading it's the 26th today, so we're actually a little ahead of schedule on this issue. As soon as the industry indicates how they would like to release this with us, we'll commence with the release.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that six weeks ago the government promised to table in this Assembly an itemized list of every recipient of BSE compensation and the amount that they received and at that time the minister indicated that it was 97 per cent complete, what's the holdup with this one?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're at about 98.7 per cent now. When you consider that in this House some weeks ago I indicated that we had issued cheques to some 1,564 feedlots and owners of cattle at that time, I think the hon. member would understand that with the moving of 1.2 million head of cattle through the system, through almost 1,600 owners, there might be just the odd chance that you would have one, two, or three of these claims or maybe four or five or six that you would have to do some further work on.

I have made a commitment to release that. I have not backed off from that commitment. But, Mr. Speaker, I will not release it until it's complete. We anticipate that happening very, very shortly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:00

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that meat packer margins are once again on the rise, as evidenced by the most recent Boxed Beef Report, which shows that they're running 300 per cent higher than at the same time last year, why is the government not supporting the House of Commons agriculture committee in demanding that meat packers open their books?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, this is purely in the hands of the federal government. They have two avenues: of course, the agriculture committee, who is doing this, and also the Competition Bureau. I know that maybe not a lot of concern is there for duplication and waste, but frankly I have a concern for it, and I don't see any benefit in our replicating the work that's already going on.

Mr. Speaker, we did a review of this to satisfy our own information needs and released that some weeks ago. He will have to contact the federal agriculture committee and ask them why they're not getting this done faster.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Direct Energy

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After months of speculation I understand it is now confirmed that Direct Energy has come to terms with ATCO's retail sector and is now officially setting up shop here in Alberta. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. What does this transaction mean to my constituents who currently receive natural gas or electricity from ATCO?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, what it means is that for the first time in Alberta there will be one provider who can sell both electricity contracts and natural gas contracts throughout Alberta. In other words, there'll be one provider, one bill. I understand that this company can also offer other services as well. So it puts a completely different perspective on the marketing of electricity and natural gas utilities across Alberta. What it means is that there is a new provider.

What it also means, what does not change, Mr. Speaker, is that the entry of Direct Energy does not affect payments that will be made under our natural gas rebate program. Those will continue for the five important months of the year, and even if you sign a contract with Direct Energy, you will still be entitled to save the money as the rebates are applied.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Direct Energy will be the retailer of electricity and natural gas services. ATCO will continue to remain in the marketplace as the distributor, as it were.

Mr. Klapstein: My second question is again to the Minister of Energy. Is this deal a good deal for the 180,000 electricity customers and 840,000 natural gas customers affected by this private-sector transaction?

The Speaker: There's a lot of opinion here, so let's be careful.

Mr. Smith: Well, that is calling for an opinion, but I think, Mr. Speaker, that the circumstances are appropriate. The government has in an open and transparent manner through regulation, through passage of a bill from the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and last year through the passage of Bill 3 from the Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky — there is a playing field now that is level. The EUB is observant and examinative of rates that are put forward to them by

all providers of electricity, all providers of natural gas, which includes city-owned utilities.

What we do know is that Albertans will continue to have the absolute lowest natural gas rates in the country. We also know, Mr. Speaker, as the competitive market model has worked – we don't have the hundreds of billions of dollars of debt against the Crown, and we do have some of the lowest wholesale prices of electricity in Canada – that we have the right model for the right companies at the right time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the Minister of Government Services. Given that some of the marketing practices of Direct Energy's international parent company have come under question in other jurisdictions, what is the government doing to protect Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and it is a good question. We like to let Albertans know what their rights are. The rights of the consumer are protected in a code of conduct and regulations under the Fair Trading Act. Direct Energy as well as all other electricity and natural gas marketers in this province are well aware of the provisions in the Fair Trading Act, and if anyone is caught violating those conditions and those regulations, we can and do prosecute. If anyone has any questions, they can call our consumer toll-free line at 1-877-427-4088. If they're curious about what their rights are, we will advise them.

Marketers have to provide identification when they come to your door. They must provide you with a written contract, and they must give you the opportunity to sign that written contract and leave you with a copy of that written contract. If they do not, then there is no contract. They also must have a provision in the contract that there is a 10-day cancellation clause so that after you've signed it and you wish to cancel after a 10-day cooling off period, you can do so.

So Albertans have lots of rights, and they can call our toll-free line to get more information.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Classroom Conditions

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Teachers in 42 of Alberta's 62 school authorities do not have contract settlements in place. Twelve of those districts are currently in mediation, and two have conducted strike authorization votes. My first question is to the Minister of Learning. Given that classroom conditions have changed little from two years ago when most Alberta teachers went on strike, what plans does the minister have to ensure that the issue is not again mismanaged and results in similar actions by teachers?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, two years ago there was a very substantial strike in Alberta. The arbitrator's settlement came back at 14 per cent, which resulted in the teachers being paid the highest in Canada. This year we put \$250 million in budget over budget. There's a considerable amount of money that has been put into the education system, and I will hope that the school boards and the ATA find ways to resolve this, find ways to sign contracts, as it is in the local jurisdictions' purview to utilize that debate.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: has the minister done any board surveys to determine what additional teaching staff reductions are being considered for next September?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I would be extremely, extremely surprised and disappointed if after putting \$250 million into the school system, into the K to 12 education system, there was a decrease in teachers that was being contemplated by any board. The only circumstance that could allow that is where you have the enrolment decrease, and I think everyone in this Assembly certainly would understand that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. My third question is to the Premier, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister is the only one living with the fiction that classroom conditions in the province are actually going to improve, will the Premier take charge of the situation now before we drift into another strike?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the education system is in good hands with the Minister of Learning, so I see no need to interfere with negotiations that are all part of the collective bargaining process, nor do I see any need at this particular time to interfere with the workings of the Minister of Learning.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Dr. Oberg: Thanks. I'd just like to add, Mr. Speaker, that in the two school jurisdictions that are looking at potential strike votes, it's my understanding that the issues are not salaries. Quite simply, it's conditions, it's classroom size, and it's things like that, that are fully negotiable between the school board and the local ATA. The local ATAs want it to remain that way, I want it to remain that way, and it's part of the negotiation process.

2:10

I think that if the hon. member were to look back over the last 20 years, there have been a significant number of negotiations that have been done in exactly this way. We look forward to the conclusion of negotiations. We look forward to that. I believe and I certainly would hope that this would not lead to a teachers' strike after a considerable, huge amount of resources, \$250 million of taxpayer dollars, Mr. Speaker, have been put into the K to 12 system this year alone.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Clean Coal Strategy

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of the West Yellowhead constituents are aware that coal is an important resource for energy in this province, not to mention that Alberta has an abundant source of coal. What many Albertans may not know are the positive steps that Canada and the United States and especially Alberta are taking to address this issue of clean coal technology. My question is, then, to the Minister of Energy. What are Canada and the United States doing regarding clean coal strategies?

Speaker's Ruling

Questions outside Ministerial Responsibility

The Speaker: Hon. member, with due respect, this is the Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta, and it's really not within the competence or the purview of a minister of the Crown of Alberta to

be concerned about nor be responsible for what happens in other jurisdictions. If you want to deal with the question about Alberta, that's fine, but America and some other country do not fall within the administrative competence of a minister of this Crown.

Clean Coal Strategy
(continued)

Mr. Strang: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is again to the Minister of Energy. How are Canada and Alberta working together to accomplish this goal?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the Member for West Yellowhead sees himself as an Albertan first and as a Canadian and, as such, would be looking at Alberta as a leader in clean coal technology and one that does work on a bilateral basis with the United States and with certain states inside the United States as well as across Canada.

I think that, firstly, Mr. Speaker, the need for clean coal technology is one that's very evident. Alberta has well over 700 to 800 years' supply of low-ash, low-sulphur coal. This is the best thermal coal in the world and, in fact, is only surpassed by the low-ash, low-sulphur coal deposits that exist in Wyoming. It is to Wyoming that we've actually looked for a co-operative program. In fact, when I heard earlier of a trip to Cheyenne, I can remember speaking in Cheyenne, Wyoming, on Heritage Days with the governor of Wyoming on the subject of sharing clean coal technology.

An Hon. Member: You mean by plane?

Mr. Smith: We were fortunate enough to be able to use the government of Alberta aircraft and travel at less than commercial expense.

So through those efficiencies, Mr. Speaker, we have found that there are, one, commonalities that exist between Wyoming and Alberta with respect to burning coal with reduced emissions. If we can reduce the emissions rather than take the head-in-the-sand approach that the Ontario Liberal government has done about banning coal producing generators by 2007, why not take advantage of this good fuel source and find a way to burn it cleaner, better, more completely to allow us to use that low-cost generation? The low-cost coal generation has delivered today the lowest wholesale prices of electricity in Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question is to the Minister of Energy. How is the minister going to ensure that the integrated clean coal strategy is carried out?

Mr. Smith: Very simply, Mr. Speaker, I'm going depend on the hard work and the good reports coming forward from the Member for West Yellowhead and the work that he's doing under the review of the Alberta royalty structure on coal and his recommendations that will be forthcoming for a new Alberta coal policy that positions coal as an important and reliable option for energy generation and value-added products while continually addressing environmental requirements for clean air, clean water, nondisturbed land. I know that this committee can put together an appropriate strategy that combines the work of the Clean Power Coalition, that works across Canada, as well as the bilateral efforts that we have with the great state of Wyoming and the ability to work with the private sector and with nongovernmental organizations as well.

Mr. Speaker, the Alberta government through the Alberta Energy

Research Institute is also spending money to push the limit for reduction in emissions. We know that the supply of this low-cost fuel is important to low-cost electrical generation, and we know that good environmental practices are the norm in Alberta.

Direct Energy
(continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Deregulation has been an economic disaster for the consumers of this province. The transfer of assets from ATCO to Direct Energy, which is going to be finalized later this week, is yet another example of that. Direct Energy has already been given the green light to increase billing charges on utility bills by \$40 to \$45 per year. My first question is to the Premier. In light of this increase in utility costs on our bills, how is the entrance of Direct Energy to the Alberta market going to enhance consumers?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the sale of ATCO's retail activities to Direct Energy has absolutely nothing to do with deregulation. I would point out that the sale of ATCO's retail services to Direct Energy has been approved. Power and gas prices won't be affected, but I understand that an administrative charge between \$3 and \$4 a month will be added to consumers' bills.

Mr. Speaker, I would point out that this is a transaction between two private-sector companies. The Alberta government's role through the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board is to review the sale to ensure that ATCO customers are treated fairly and equitably, and that's exactly what the AEUB did.

There was a thorough review, extensive hearings, Mr. Speaker, and I don't know nor do I believe the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar attended those hearings or made any attempt to intervene, and that's a shame.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: given that the big promise of deregulation was an increase in competition and that now that we have this transfer of assets, Direct Energy will have an 89 per cent market share of the gas retail market, how is this an increase in competition? This is not deregulation as you promised.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, deregulation, I would remind the hon member, relates to the generation of power, and with respect to gas that deregulation took place close to 20 years ago. But, quite generally, consumers will benefit by having a wider range of options available through Direct Energy than they did under ATCO; for example, the option to purchase energy packages that include both gas and electricity.

If he wishes to know more about the sale, perhaps the hon. Minister of Energy can shed some light on the situation.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, thank you. Let me say that this additional entrant into the marketplace, combined with the appropriate legislation, allows more companies to provide more products across Alberta. This stimulates competition; this stimulates choice. In discussions that I had with Direct Energy this morning, when they informed me of this sale, they said that they have well in excess of 40,000 inquiries wanting to switch right now, wanting to move towards the Direct Energy offerings.

2:20

So, Mr. Speaker, we're going to see what this market does. We've already seen how Albertans have benefited from the supply of gas in this province. We've seen how Albertans have benefited from the supply of generation, and contrary to this member's idle meanderings about the transfer of wealth and all that other hocus-pocus that

he comes up with, there has not been a blackout in this province. The only blackout is in his mind.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: when will this government force rural electrification associations and rural gas co-ops to allow Direct Energy access to their customers? When are we going to see that?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will defer to the hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me say at the outset that rural electrification associations have done a good job – a good job – of delivering power far and wide across 660,000 square kilometres, a vast area, of this great Alberta. They will continue to do a great job.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, rural gas co-ops are the model for gasification of rural areas. Alaska has talked to me about it. Other jurisdictions have talked to us about the success of rural gas co-ops. Rural gas co-ops, the strong management that they have, and the strong management units of rural electrification associations will deal with this new entrant in the marketplace, and they will find appropriate ways to do business together. Let's encourage them to be what they want to be, and let's find out where the market will lead us.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Minimum Wage Rate

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minimum wage issue is an important issue to many Albertans. Many of my constituents are earning minimum wage and would strongly agree that it should be raised. My question is to the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment. What is the minister going to do regarding minimum wage in the province, which is now at \$5.90, the lowest in the country?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, first of all, we have to understand that minimum wage is not a horse race, so whether you're first or last or whatever is a matter of conjecture. The other thing is that there seems to be confusion amongst many people here within the province as to whether or not a minimum wage is a tool of economic policy or a tool of social policy. It's my view and the way that I've administered this portfolio that minimum wage is a tool of economic policy, and when you deal in terms of economic policy, then what becomes of paramount importance is the levels of unemployment.

One of the curious things we discover when we look at a comparison of minimum wage rates and, of course, then levels of unemployment, especially levels of youth unemployment, is that it's not a correlation of 1.00, but we find that there's a very high correlation between the minimum wage and the level of youth employment. The higher the minimum wage the higher youth unemployment. So I am very reluctant to announce at this point any increase in the minimum wage.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the minister give us an idea about – he said he was reluctant – the timing of an increase and how much the increase would be, since I have so many small businesses in my constituency?

Mr. Dunford: Well, the small-business sector is likely to be the one that would be most impacted. I'm not sure how many small businesses we have in this province, but there are 12,300 workers in this province that are at the minimum wage, so there's going to be obviously some impact if this were increased.

Once again, I think we have to understand that we're talking about economic policy here and we are not talking about government money. If there's an increase in the minimum wage, we're talking about employers that will have to pay a higher price for labour versus the fact that we do have a situation where this government as an employer has 19,000 or 22,000, whatever the number is, employed. Of course, they are paid much higher than the minimum wage. Yes, businesses would be impacted and unemployment would be impacted, so I'm taking a very cautious and a very conservative view on this matter.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that 1.1 per cent of our workforce, representing over 12,300 people, earn minimum wage, what is the government doing to help these working poor people make ends meet?

Mr. Dunford: Well, that's the thing that's missing in most of the criticism about Alberta and its minimum wage rate. People simply refuse to acknowledge the other kinds of benefits that are accruing to people who would be considered low-income Albertans. Certainly, anybody working at a minimum wage would be in that category.

Let's talk about it. Let's start with the tax, first of all. With the exemption that this government provides for each and every working Albertan, whether they're married or not, these folks can earn up to \$15,200 before paying any tax. It's so hypocritical in some of the provinces where they talk about this high minimum wage area and then, of course, they claw it back through income tax. Well, this doesn't happen in Alberta.

If, in fact, there are children involved with a worker that is working at minimum wage, we have, first of all, medical cards. We have children's health benefits. We have top-up of income. If we take all of these benefits and these supports that are put in place and if we find what kind of salary you would actually need in order to combine this, well, you know, in Alberta you're looking at somewhere north of \$7 an hour.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ambulance Services

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Transferring ambulance services from municipalities to regional health authorities is going to have a major impact on a number of communities, particularly those like Lethbridge where fire and ambulance services have been integrated for over 90 years. Emergency workers, municipalities, and the public at large have been kept in the dark about how the transfer of ambulance services will impact the integrated services in these communities. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What plan does the province have for dealing with communities that have integrated fire and ambulance services?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we've said all along is that right now, as best as we can estimate, approximately \$55 million a year is spent by municipalities to support ambulance services throughout the

province. We've recognized, through the report led by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, that ambulance services in their substance really are an extension of health services. So as a result of that, we feel that it is a provincial responsibility to cover that \$55 million, and we'll do that.

The budget is set aside, \$55 million, for the next fiscal year to cover that cost, and the money will flow from regional health authorities to providers of ambulance services. In the current year, Mr. Speaker, we have \$13 million set aside to prepare the transition plan. We've said all along that if the services are already good, there is no compelling reason why we'd want to change it. So it will depend upon the regional health authorities working with the municipalities. Where there are integrated services now, if they're working well and they're co-ordinated well, perhaps they'll continue in exactly the same manner. I don't see any reason why you'd change it if it's already a good service.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. To the same minister: given that some regional health authorities are already running deficits, how can the minister guarantee that ambulance services will be given the priority they deserve and receive the funding necessary to meet the emergency standards of Albertans?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, I want to say this as a follow-up to the minister of health. What I'm hearing from both rural and urban municipal associations is simply this: we welcome the provincial government's recognition of the service, we provide an excellent service to Albertans, and through municipalities the additional \$13 million this year, the additional \$55 million next year, which is totally new money, is going to give Alberta municipalities even greater breathing room.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I apologize. I think the hon. member was asking specifically about regional health authorities. As it relates to regional health authorities, the money has been estimated as best as is possible in terms of how much it will cost to run these ambulance services, and that amount is being transferred to regional health authorities, who will then be able to flow that money through to whoever happens to be providing the service, whether it's an integrated service in a municipality or whether it's a private operator.

However the service is now, we want to improve it. We want to establish a standard for delivery of ambulance services in this province, so, Mr. Speaker, this money will be dedicated for ambulances. It will not be used for other purposes.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Health and Wellness: how will the government ensure that emergency workers who work with integrated fire and ambulance services will continue to be fully utilized once the control is transferred to the RHAs?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I wish to correct the Minister of Municipal Affairs. It's not \$30 million for the current year; it's \$13 million for the current year. The purpose of it is for exactly that: to ensure that there is a smooth transition so that, again, good services that are already in place will not change.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we get to the next item, we had only 10 hon. members able to participate today, so my apologies to the seven who are on the list. We'll try and do better tomorrow.

Before we go to Recognitions, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to do this because my students are in now, and I just wanted to make sure that I had their names on the record properly. This is my group from George McDougall high school in Airdrie, which, of course, as I mentioned earlier, is my favourite school in my whole riding. The teacher is Mr. Tyler Leavitt, and the parent helpers are Geoff Martyn, Al Black, Patti Rice, and Nicole Opel. There are 35 visitors in the group. I would ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Recognitions**

The Speaker: In 30 seconds, hon. members, I'll call on the first of seven.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

ALS Awareness Day

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise and recognize ALS Awareness Day at the Alberta Legislature. ALS is often called Lou Gehrig's disease, and it means amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. It is also known as motor neuron disease.

ALS is a rapidly progressive neuromuscular disease. It attacks the motor neurons, resulting in muscle weakness and wasting. Eventually the ALS patient is left completely paralyzed with loss of speech, swallowing, and breathing. However, the mind remains completely alert and lucid. Sadly, a lively unimpaired mind is trapped in an immobilized body. The average life expectancy of an ALS patient at diagnosis is less than three years.

Mr. Speaker, ALS is not rare. Between 6 and 7 people out of every 100,000 in our population will be diagnosed with ALS. Almost 3,000 Canadians currently live with ALS. More than 90 per cent of the people with ALS have no family history of the disease. It is almost always fatal. A person living with ALS relies on access to \$40,000 worth of equipment, and nursing care can cost many times that amount. There is no known cause; there is no known cure or life-prolonging treatment yet.

Mr. Speaker, all members have been provided with a cornflower. The cornflower is the symbol of ALS because despite its fragile appearance, it shows remarkable strength. This is symbolic of the strength of the ALS patient.

I would ask all hon. members to rise with me and salute ALS Awareness Day at the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association for their ongoing support for Alberta's film, television, and new media industry.

On Saturday AMPIA hosted its 30th annual Alberta film and television awards, or Rosies, which celebrate excellence and outstanding achievement. This year's awards drew a record 510 submissions.

It's thanks to organizations like AMPIA that Alberta has become a hub for this creative arts industry. The financial support provided by the Ministry of Community Development through its Alberta film development program is an integral part of this success story. The arts certainly help make Alberta an exciting and vibrant place to live.

On behalf of the ministers of Community Development and Economic Development, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View, myself, and all members of this Assembly, congratulations AMPIA and thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Alice Lewis

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In Alberta we are blessed with a great number of outstanding community volunteers in every community. I frankly don't know where we would be without them. That's why it's such a pleasure for me to be able to do a recognition statement for some of these unsung heroes, specifically today one from my own constituency of Calgary-Currie.

Alice Lewis was born in the very first Red Cross hospital built in the United Nations, which made her a special person right from the beginning. That was at Taddoekwood, Saskatchewan, but for 33 years now she has made her home in Calgary, where she raised four wonderful kids and where she first joined the board of the Richmond community association in 1972.

Her goal then was to build a new community hall, but it wasn't happening fast. So 15 years ago she took over the fundraising committee, which now has 72 people on the slate, and they raised in excess of half a million dollars over that time. The new hall just recently opened, and everyone knows that without Alice and her 72 other volunteers it just wouldn't have happened.

Congratulations, everyone, especially Alice, and keep up the great work.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Excel Resource Society

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to recognize the outstanding work being done in our community by Excel Resource Society, an organization that celebrates their 40th anniversary this year.

Excel started in 1964 as a community project created by the Alberta Hospital. The organizers recognized that if the hospital's clients were to reintegrate into the community, they would need help in developing personal and employment skills. Excel's programs have always focused first on the needs of the clients, whether it's learning to plan and cook their first meal or preparing for their first job. Excel continues to develop plans for their clients of the future. Excel has successfully operated a private vocational school, the Excel Academy, to train community support workers.

From their humble beginnings with 15 clients in the basement of the Robertson-Wesley United Church Excel today supports some 150 clients in residential programs, about a hundred in the employment placement program, and 120 in the day program at Gerry Raymond Centre. I salute their efforts.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

British Commonwealth Air Training Memorial

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Sunday, April 25, 2004, I

had the honour of attending a special ceremony at Memorial Park in Calgary, where a monument was unveiled. It is in memory of the young men and women of Australia and New Zealand who came to Alberta, received aviation training, and died on duty during the Second World War.

These young individuals, like many Canadians of their time, stood up and fought against tyranny. They made the ultimate sacrifice to uphold democracy and freedom. Their sacrifices have provided us with a strong foundation for the just, civilized society that we all value and enjoy in the world today. To them I am always in deep gratitude.

The ceremony was on the ANZAC Day of Australia and New Zealand. Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity in my younger days to live down under in the land of kiwis and kangaroos. To Australians and New Zealanders the ANZAC commemoration is equivalent to our Canadian Vimy Ridge event. The Gallipoli battle was a landmark of the nationhood of Australia and New Zealand. I ask the Assembly to applaud the organizing committee of the ceremony.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

2:40 Red Deer Rebels and Medicine Hat Tigers Hockey Teams

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today to recognize the outstanding play of the Red Deer Rebels and the Medicine Hat Tigers in the WHL eastern conference final. As you can probably tell by this beautiful sweater that I'm wearing, Medicine Hat won.

The Red Deer Rebels had a very successful season and were able to surprise fans and opponents alike during the playoffs when they beat the Calgary Hitmen and the first-place Moose Jaw Warriors. Due to the outstanding work of players like Cam Ward, an incredible goaltender, Derek Meech and Dion Phaneuf, both members of Team Canada who won silver in world junior hockey this year, and our three retiring 20 year olds, Justin Taylor, Shay Stephenson, and Ladislav Kouba, and the very effective coaching of Brent Sutter, Dallas Gaume, and Cam Ondrik, the Rebels gave their fans an exciting season.

Congratulations and best wishes to the Medicine Hat Tigers, who will compete in their first WHL final in 16 years. The torch is passed to Medicine Hat, who will have a good chance of bringing back the Memorial Cup trophy to the WHL. After all, if you're good enough to beat Red Deer, you're good enough to win the cup.

The Speaker: I am not sure if the hon. member has an exhibit, but it has not gone unnoticed by other hon. members, the envy that they would have. I suspect that if I were to ask the question, it would be unanimous that the hon. Member for Red Deer-North provide to each and every other member of the Assembly a similar exhibit to the one that she's wearing. It would probably be passed very, very quickly. The hon. member might want to consider this. There are 83 members. Minus herself, that's 82 jerseys.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

International Day of Mourning

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the International Day of Mourning. In Canada April 28 became officially recognized as the International Day of Mourning with the passage of Bill C-223, the Workers' Mourning Day Act, which was introduced by New Democrat Member of Parliament Rod Murphy and which received royal assent on February 1, 1991.

In Canada more than 900 workers die each year, which works out

to more than two workers every single day. In Alberta there have already been more than a dozen workplace deaths this year, which is twice the amount recorded at this time last year.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to take this opportunity to recognize and thank the labour movement in Alberta, including the Worker's Health Centre for their contributions to workplace safety. Joint health and safety committees are a key element in the fight for a safer workplace. Unionized sites, as a result, tend to be the safer ones.

So on the International Day of Mourning I encourage all members to renew our commitment to mourn for the dead and fight for the living.

Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As per protocol I rise today to present a petition signed by 292 Albertans from across the province, including firefighters, police officers, and emergency health workers, petitioning this Assembly to support the passage of Bill 204.

Thank you.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table copies of a letter that I've sent to Connie Edwards, president of the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association, congratulating AMPIA and all the nominees and award winners on the resounding success of the Alberta film and television awards, which I was privileged to attend this weekend.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure this afternoon to table for the benefit of the Assembly a folder entitled Meet, Think, Learn and Explore. It's a folder put together by the University of Alberta Faculty of Extension. Today at noon I had the honour and privilege of participating with the Faculty of Extension on the unveiling of A-Link, Alberta's law-related information network, as a resource for Albertans to find information about law programs and legal resources. The folder includes a postcard with respect to A-Link and how people can attend it, a bookmark with respect to A-Link and how they can find it, and a pamphlet, Alberta's Justice System and You, a compendium of useful information for Albertans about how to have and get access to legal information, legal programs, and information about how the legal system affects them. I'd like to table five copies for the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, on behalf of my colleague the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona I'd like to table a letter from Mr. Gordon Steele addressed to him and me. The letter, dated March 26 of this year, provides an excellent analysis of why health care premiums should be eliminated.

I would like to table a copy of the Canadian Boxed Beef Report dated April 19, 2004. This report indicates that beef packers' margins are nearly four times higher than at this time last year.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the benefit of all Albertans the Alberta government aircraft passenger manifest from April 1, 2002, through to June 30, 2002. This is a comprehensive list, and I'm disappointed that further lists like this are denied the Official Opposition.

Thank you.

Mr. Lund: Point of order.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure on a point of order.

Point of Order

Factual Accuracy

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is absolutely wrong. We made it very clear in question period that these are available to them. Yes, there is a cost of doing it, but there's a cost to the taxpayer through Infrastructure for providing those. To say that they're not available is absolutely false, and he should apologize for having said it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on the point of order.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, I'm trying to answer the point of order. There was no citation so . . .

Mrs. McClellan: Twenty-three (h), (i), (j).

Ms Blakeman: Well, that's not the citation that was given.

The information that the staff the opposition sent over was given I repeated very succinctly in my preamble, and that was that the opposition could look but could not take notes. They could not take an electronic version on computers – they were not allowed to bring computers in – and they were not allowed to copy. Those were the instructions that were given. When we asked how we were expected to get the information aside from looking at it, we were told by an assistant to the minister that we would have to access it through freedom of information.

The minister seems to be indicating that somehow the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has misled the House. That is not our understanding of it. We are repeating the information that was given to us and to our staff by the minister's assistant, and that is that we can look at it but we cannot copy it, that we cannot make an electronic record of it, that to get an actual physical copy that we could walk away with or examine at some other time for detail, we would have to access it through freedom of information. Therefore, the member's statement that he's disappointed that we can no longer access information as he has tabled is correct. We cannot access that information in hard copy form any longer.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on this point.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's quite obvious that there's a little bit of misrepresentation emanating from the opposition benches on this issue. Both the Premier and the hon. Minister of Infrastructure clearly indicated that there is a process in place, and I find this to be a violation of the normal rules of this House, particularly under 23(h), (i), and (j). [interjection] Will you stop for a second and shut up and listen, please. Okay. Excuse me. I said

earlier 23(h), (i), and (j) four minutes ago. Okay. Just pay attention once in a while.

Now, Mr. Speaker, notwithstanding the rude interruptions that just occurred from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, let me make it very clear that that information has been and will continue to be available under the policies, rules, and guidelines that exist and under the conditions and circumstances that were just enunciated very clearly in this House by the Minister of Infrastructure.

So let's ask all hon. members on the opposition benches to please stop misleading in this way. It's dangerous, it's harmful, it's hurtful, and it sure as heck is not helpful to them or their purposes.

2:50

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I would say in my consideration that the point of order raised by the Minister of Infrastructure is not a point of order, the response from the Official Opposition was not a point of order, and what the Deputy Government House Leader has cited doesn't even apply. So I would submit that there's no point of order.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, in regard to this tabling that has caused such concern on the opposite benches, in the past these passenger manifests were available to Liberal Party research staff. They could go to the Infrastructure department; they could make photocopies. There were no limitations, there were no restrictions put on their activities there. This has changed. Members of the general public, where we got this information from, were free to look at the lists and to photocopy them, and that no longer applies. The big question here should be: why? Why can't we just go in and have a look at this? It is our job, it is our duty to hold this government accountable. There's no point of order here in my view.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Well, there obviously is a difference of opinion. That is very, very clear. It's very difficult for the chair to stand up here and get the nuance about somebody having told somebody else third-hand or second-hand and this being part of the whole scenario with respect to this.

As best as I understand, there's great umbrage being taken with respect to certain words that were used in here which only belies the most important point: when it comes to Tablings, tablings should just be tabled without comment, which wouldn't give rise to this sort of thing.

Now, having been a former minister of such a department that would release this information, I'm not sure what the current policy is with respect to this now, existing today, but it seems to me that if certain individuals have a copy of the document, it must be made available. That seems to be part of what is true in all of this, that the information is available.

Number two, it need not be tabled if it already is available. Nevertheless, that seems to be the situation that does transpire in here from time to time.

So then we come right down to a difference of opinion as to how someone certainly accesses information. Now, if I understand this correctly, it is available on a computer?

Ms Blakeman: No.

The Speaker: It's not available on a computer, but it's available in hard form?

Ms Blakeman: No.

Mr. Lund: Exactly.

The Speaker: I can't deal with this. We've got two different opinions here. One says, yes, it's available on hard copy; the other one says no. The point of the matter is that I'm sure that by tomorrow you'll sort this out. We won't deal with this as a point of order. We'll recognize that we'll probably have another question, probably have another answer tomorrow, and maybe by the end of the week it'll all become very, very clear to everyone just what is available, and we'll get it first-hand from individuals in this House, not second-hand from anyone else. Okay? Thank you.

Any more tablings?

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, April 22, it's my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 48, 66, 68, 69, 71, 75, 76, 77, 78, and 79.

[Motion carried]

Government Hotel Expenses

Q48. Ms Blakeman moved that the following question be accepted. Who stayed at the Sheraton Suites hotel in Calgary on February 5, 2002, that was charged to the government through the Premier's deputy chief of staff, James Davis?

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, this is one of those instances where we get a little bit of information but not enough to clear up any misunderstandings, and I'd like to offer the opportunity to the government to provide all of the details so that there are no misunderstandings. Thus, we'd like to get some additional detail as outlined in the written question.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to indicate on behalf of government that we're prepared to accept this question. I don't know if the date referred to is exactly right; nonetheless, we'll do our best to provide the information being sought.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much.

[Written Question 48 carried]

Natural Gas and Bitumen Development

Q66. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

When was the government made aware of the dispute between companies surrounding natural gas and bitumen development in the Athabasca-Wabasca-McMurray region?

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, I would really appreciate some detailed background information in regard to this matter. When you

consider the whole issue of natural gas over bitumen and some of the implications of further development in the Fort McMurray region, the number of leases that are going to be affected by this dispute, the number of companies that are affected by this dispute, it would be very important to learn when the government was made aware of this dispute.

Certainly, this hon. member is aware of discussions in the past between government officials and the industry in regard to gas over bitumen, but when we're looking at possibly enhanced compensation programs for those companies that are going to be adversely affected by this, this is a very important question, and I hope that the Department of Energy through the government provides us with that information.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Written Question 66 I'm pleased to indicate on behalf of the hon. Minister of Energy that we are prepared to accept Written Question 66.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I must say at this time that I would like to publicly express my gratitude for that information, and I look forward to receiving it and reading it.

Thank you.

[Written Question 66 carried]

Utilities Consumer Advocate

Q68. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What is the procedure followed by the Utilities Consumer Advocate in order to track and resolve utilities consumers' complaints and/or problems?

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, again, anything that we can do to shed light on the office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate would be in the best interests of consumers. Certainly, in light of the transfer of the retail assets of ATCO to Direct Energy and the finalization of that sale – the final date, I believe, is the 4th of May of this year – it's important that we know what procedure is followed.

There have been many complaints to date to the department. I would have to say that there have to be close to 900 at the moment. Is there a different procedure for a complaint in regard to a gas billing issue than there is for a complaint about electricity billing issues?

Now, hopefully, the transfer of assets is not going to mean an increase in the workload of the Utilities Consumer Advocate, but we will have to wait and we will have to see. I would really be interested and I would be grateful if we could get a detailed written explanation as to: what is the procedure followed by the Utilities Consumer Advocate to track and to resolve utilities consumer complaints and problems?

Thank you.

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only comment will be to respond and indicate that the government is willing to accept Written Question 68.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to close the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I will be brief. I will again look forward to receiving that information and reading it and, hopefully, sharing it with anyone that is interested. I would express my gratitude to the Department of Government Services for providing it.

[Written Question 68 carried]

Royalty Reduction Programs

Q69. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the Ministry of Energy taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report to assess whether royalty reduction programs are achieving their intended objectives?

Mr. MacDonald: Now, again, this is very, very important. We know that there have been concerns expressed in many quarters regarding our royalty reduction programs. Certainly, there are many people from across the province who have expressed concern to this hon. member that perhaps we're not getting as much as we should in royalties in this province.

We look at the last time we had a good look at royalty programs. It was back, I believe, as the Conservatives say, in a different administration, the former government of Premier Getty, when Mr. Orman, I believe, was Minister of Energy. There was an extensive discussion paper, and there was significant change to how the royalties were to be calculated in this province. A lot has happened in the global energy market since, the most significant, of course, being the dramatic increase in the price globally for crude oil and here in North America for natural gas.

The price is what our whole royalty structure is based on. Specifically with natural gas, we have three different tiers and many other little agreements in regard to conventional oil, and then we have the stages of royalty – I don't want to use the word "take" because the citizens own the resource – share and how that is calculated. There are many, many issues surrounding royalty calculations and royalty reduction programs. Are these royalty reduction programs achieving their intended objectives?

The Auditor General had some questions. With many of these royalty reduction programs citizens and members of this Assembly have no idea what exactly is being reduced. What are the amounts being reduced? The only amount we see in the budget is the net amount of royalty. What's been taken off that? We have no idea. These royalty reductions are net. No one seems to know how much and to whom?

I think this is very important, specifically in light of what the Auditor General has said. Hopefully, we can receive this information as well. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: On Written Question 69 I need to indicate on behalf of the hon. Minister of Energy that this question is being recommended for rejection.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude the debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, I am disap-

pointed to hear the news that Written Question 69 has been rejected. For all the same reasons that I expressed in my opening remarks in regard to Written Question 69, I think this is very, very important. If we are going to have an open and transparent and accountable government, we should be able to receive this information. We need to know if it's \$1,000, if it's \$10,000, if it's \$100,000, or if it's \$2 million that one can receive in royalty reduction programs. If there's a cap on how much one can receive, tell us what the cap is.

I can't for the life of me understand why we can't have this information, when you consider that we rely in this province so much on the collection of resource royalty for our prosperity and our government spending. We need to know the structure of our royalty calculations and our royalty reduction programs if we are to plan to set aside a lot of money now that we have the debt under control thanks to the Alberta Liberals. Now that we have the debt under control and almost completely eliminated . . .

Mr. Magnus: Thanks to the Alberta Liberals?

Mr. MacDonald: You bet. It was our policy in '93, hon. member, and imitation is a fine form of flattery.

When we have the need to set aside billions of dollars, because at some point in the future a government is not going to have the luxury of this large amount of resource royalty, we should consider putting substantial amounts of the current money that's generated from resource royalty away for future generations, not for our own election purposes but for future generations. That's why I'm very, very disappointed that this written question has been rejected.

Thank you.

[Written Question 69 lost]

Natural Gas Rebate Program

Q71. Mr. MacDonald moved that the following question be accepted.

How much money in total was distributed to utility customers in February 2004 through the government's natural gas rebate program?

Mr. MacDonald: It would be good information for consumers and certainly members of the Official Opposition to have. These natural gas rebate programs can't be centred or focused around one specific party's re-election campaign. That has been the case, in the view of some Albertans, with past natural gas rebate programs. Surely, someone on that side of the House knows down to the penny – I would be surprised if they didn't – how much money in total was distributed to utility customers in February 2004, because we have to plan for the future.

Now, there are two different types of gas rebate programs. There's one for the residential customers, and there's also one for people in the rural parts of the province, which may have different needs. They may demand large amounts of natural gas at different times of the year, whether it's for grain drying or whatever purpose, Mr. Speaker.

Specifically for February, let's see how much money was spent. February being one of the coldest months of the year, residential users are certainly going to be looking at a natural gas rebate next February, which probably will be just before the provincial election. I'm not to say – the hon. Minister of Infrastructure would certainly know a lot better than I – when the next provincial election is going to be, but we have to be prepared. This information would not only help the consumers but help the Official Opposition and certainly would help the budgeting process so that we'll know how much

precisely is being spent in one of the coldest months of the winter.

Thank you.

3:10

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thank you Mr. Speaker. If the member had been listening and looking, he would have known that this is a three-year program, so if he can tie that in with some kind of an election, hop to it.

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with this government's openness and accountability, we will be only too happy to provide this information to the member at no cost because it doesn't cost the taxpayers a lot of money to compile and copy and produce it. So we will accept this one.

[Written Question 71 carried]

Casino Construction

Q75. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

Which groups, companies, and stakeholders recommended to the government that final approval authority for casino construction is best left with a centralized bureaucracy rather than with local communities?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. minister I would be pleased to respond to this written question. The government's role with regard to horse racing and Horse Racing Alberta is to ensure accountability in relation to the funds that are received by Horse Racing Alberta through the racing industry renewal initiative. It's up to Horse Racing Alberta to determine how best to spend those monies that they have earned through the racing industry renewal initiative.

The objectives, of course, are the revitalization of the horse racing industry in the province and the continued employment . . .

The Speaker: Hon. Deputy Premier, if I understand, we're dealing with Written Question 75.

Mrs. McClellan: Yes, and I'm getting to it.

The Speaker: Okay. It just says, "Casino construction." I don't know where horse racing comes into this. Sorry, but we're on Written Question 75.

Mrs. McClellan: Sorry about that.

Anyway, racing entertainment centres are a part of this, Mr. Speaker. I should have been more explicit, because I realize that the nomenclature isn't known to everyone, but that's a review. Local communities do make those decisions.

At any rate, Mr. Speaker, the government is rejecting Written Question 75 with regret.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to close the debate.

Dr. Massey: Yes. Thank you. Well, I too regret, as the minister does, that the government won't make the information available.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 75 lost]

Premier's Deputy Chief of Staff Dinner

Q76. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

Who attended the dinner with the Premier's deputy chief of staff, James Davis, on January 12, 2002, at Il Pasticcio Trattoria restaurant in Edmonton that cost \$395.53?

Ms Carlson: I would urge the government to accept this in the spirit of openness and accountability.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Written Question 76 on the Order Paper I need to respond that the government of Alberta needs to reject this question, and I want to indicate briefly a few reasons why. To begin with, I think all members here would know, because it has been said in this House on numerous occasions, that there are circumstances and occasions when the names of individuals attending various functions with elected members and/or with senior staff members are not something that become open and able to be given out publicly, and there are reasons for that.

In this particular instance we have the deputy chief of staff at the time who likely met with a number of individuals for a business-related dinner. In respecting the confidence of what may or may not have been discussed at that dinner, I think it's important to draw present individuals' attention to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. It's a very excellent read, and I would encourage all members to in fact read it, learn it, and become better acquainted with it. In particular, division 3, which talks about third-party intervention, is an interesting read, obviously. So, too, is another section which I will refer to as section 17(4), specifically (e.1) and g(i) and (ii), wherein it reads:

A disclosure of personal information is presumed to be an unreasonable invasion of a third party's personal privacy if . . .

- (e.1) the personal information consists of an individual's bank account information or credit card information . . .
- (g) the personal information consists of the third party's name when
 - (i) it appears with other personal information about the third party, or
 - (ii) the disclosure of the name itself would reveal personal information about the third party,

and it goes on.

There are occasions, Mr. Speaker, when meetings – dinner meetings, business meetings, whatever have you – are necessary to perform on behalf of the government, and that applies right across the board. I should also indicate that these meetings – business or dinner meetings or luncheons or breakfasts or whatever they might be – don't just occur Monday through Friday. They frequently occur on Saturdays and Sundays. In other words, the business of the government of Alberta goes on literally seven days a week, virtually 365 days a year, and that's important to keep in mind.

The final point I just want to mention, going back to my references to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, is that I know there was an all-party committee that addressed this matter prior to this particular act being ushered in and through the Legislative Assembly. As I recall, there were members from all parties in the House who sat on that who helped design the report, and my information and my recollection going back a year or so ago – I think it was 2003 – is that, in fact, the FOIP Act was largely predicated on that all-party committee's report. So on that basis – I'm sorry, hon. members – this question will have to be rejected as worded.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Well, Mr. Speaker, with all due respect to the minister we didn't ask for minutes of the meeting or topics under discussion. We simply asked for who was in attendance. In the absence of a lobbyist registration act in this province, which is very unfortunate, this government does not like to disclose who is lobbying them and who isn't, and this is the only venue in which we can find out this information or could at least attempt to find out this information on behalf of Albertans.

The minister spent a great deal of time talking about the all-party FOIP review committee, which I happened to sit on and in which case I voted against very many of the recommendations that the government ended up passing because of their large majority. Some of those included pieces that he was speaking to specifically here. I would suggest that anyone who is prepared to meet with and lobby the government should not be opposed to having their name disclosed as such a person. We're not asking for the specifics of exactly what it is that they're talking about in those meetings, simply that if taxpayer dollars are being paid out for meals, then the taxpayer has a right to know who in fact was in attendance.

[Written Question 76 lost]

3:20

Private Vocational Schools

Q77. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted. For the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, and for the period beginning April 1, 2003, and ended March 15, 2004, what was the total amount of funding that each private vocational school received from any program administered by the Ministry of Learning either paid to a private vocational school directly or paid to individual students for the purpose of attending a private vocational school?

Dr. Pannu: Brief comments, Mr. Speaker. As a way of rationale and background there are under 40 private institutions licensed by Alberta Learning to offer vocational training to adult Albertans. While, for the most part, these schools receive no direct government assistance, indirectly they receive both student loan programs administered by the Minister of Learning as well as large amounts of indirect funding through various programs administered by the Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

The New Democrat opposition frequently receives complaints about the quality of instruction offered at these government-licensed private vocational schools. We also receive frequent complaints about how these schools treat students attending them. The information being sought through Written Question 77 is intended to ensure that Albertans are aware of exactly how much direct and indirect funding is received by each of the more than 140 licensed vocational schools. I urge the acceptance of Written Question 77.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We are willing to accept this written question with the following amendments, and I will say that it has been shared with the mover of the motion prior to 11 o'clock today. I would like to make the following amendments by striking out "and for the period between April 1, 2003, and ended March 15, 2004" and substituting "2003-04" and by adding "on a full-time basis" after "attending a private vocational school."

Quite simply, Mr. Speaker, the reason for substituting '03-04 is

that that is our fiscal year. It doesn't make much sense to do everything in the fiscal year except two weeks. It would put my department through a considerable amount of work, and realistically I don't believe it would give them any extra information. So what we would suggest is that it was for '03-04, which would be the fiscal year '03-04, as well. We are also adding "on a full-time basis" following "attending a private vocational school," as those are the students that we fund.

So the amended written question would now read:

For the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04 what was the total amount of funding that each private vocational school received from any program administered by the Ministry of Learning either paid to a private vocational school directly or paid to individual students for the purpose of attending a private vocational school on a full-time basis?

I would therefore move the amended written question.

Speaker's Ruling Amendment to Written Question

The Speaker: Just for clarification. The hon. minister added one additional word to the document that was circulated to hon. members. Hon. members, if you take a look at the amendment to Written Question 77 that has been circulated, what was added by the minister in terms of the oral overview just given was the word "individual" that would have to be added after the word "to" at the end of the third line. That's the way it reads on the Order Paper, so I believe there's probably just a typing difficulty. It's important, however, because sometimes if one says, "It will not be released," and you forget the word "not," it changes the intent entirely.

In this case we have an amendment, and there's debate on the amendment now.

Debate Continued

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the minister for sharing the proposed amendment with me in advance. I certainly appreciate the part of the amendment that will make available information for the entire 2003-2004 fiscal year.

I just want to seek some clarification on the second part of the amendment. Is it the case that the Ministry of Learning funds at these institutions only full-time students? If that is the case, that only full-time students are funded, then clearly the amendment is in order and I have no objection to it. However, if part-time students are also funded, then I'd be disappointed because the information provided would be incomplete, and Albertans would certainly appreciate having complete information.

The Speaker: Okay. We have a debate on the amendment. If I recognize the hon. Minister of Learning on the amendment, that will close this section on the amendment. Nobody else?

The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, what the hon. member has asked me – there are part-time students that are enrolled in our private vocational schools. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for us to find that. Full-time students are much easier for us to do in that we can identify them purely on a full-time basis. By doing it on a part-time basis, the part-time students could be at other institutions as well, so the information would not be accurate. Therefore, I have added in "full-time" students to clarify what information we have available and will make available to the hon. member.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to close the debate.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said, I appreciate very much the minister's readiness to share full information, full in the sense of including part of fiscal 2003-2004 which wasn't part of the original written question request, but I am disappointed with respect to the minister suggesting that the department has difficulty maintaining or collecting or putting together information with respect to the funding of students who take their program on a part-time basis, although they are funded by the minister. So I express my disappointment with respect to the incompleteness of the information that I'll be receiving. Nevertheless, having half a loaf I guess is better than having none. With those remarks I will sit down.

[Written Question 77 as amended carried]

Private Vocational Schools

Q78. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted. For the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, and for the period beginning April 1, 2003, and ended March 15, 2004, what was the job placement rate six months after program completion for students attending each private vocational school licensed to operate in Alberta?

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, brief comments on the reason for the written question. It is important that Albertans know whether value for money is being achieved for the investment of public dollars to support learners attending provincially licensed private vocational schools. One of the best indicators of the effectiveness of these schools, which operate as profit-making commercial businesses, is their job placement rates after students attending those schools complete their programs. This written question is specifically to question job placement rates for each of the private vocational schools from both the Ministry of Learning and the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment.

3:30

I'm aware that both of these ministries use slightly different methodologies for tracking job placement rates from these schools, and I emphasize that this written question seeks information on job placement rates from both ministries. I understand that job placement rate information collected by the Ministry of Learning is based on information reported by the private vocational schools themselves whereas the information collected by Human Resources and Employment is based on interviews with students six months after program completion. Again, that is why it's important that responses be received from both ministries.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We will accept this question with the following amendments. Again, I will state that it was circulated to my opposition colleague prior to 11 o'clock this morning as per Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, I'll seek your advice on this. I do want to alter the typed amendment that is before us – and I would seek your advice on how to do this – by striking out the "2002-03, and for the period beginning April 1, 2003, and ended March 14, 2004" and substituting "02-03, and '03-04."

Mr. Speaker, I would ask your indulgence on specifically how to do that. I feel that that's more in line with what the hon. member has

asked me. The same arguments hold for what I said on the last question about March 14 and keeping it as the fiscal '03-04 year and, actually, what the hon. member just stated about the six months after.

And striking out "what was the job placement rate six months after program completion for students attending each private vocational school licensed to operate in Alberta" and substituting "what were the job placement rates attributable to each institution currently offering programs licensed under the Private Vocational Schools Act." As the hon. member has stated, we do not collect that information in the type of format that the hon. member has asked for.

The Speaker: Hon. minister, before we get that explanation, just please read, then, to this Assembly exactly what the amended written question would now read. All hon. members have a text. If I understand the minister correctly, then what the minister is saying – let me just try this. The minister says: that for the fiscal years 2001-2002, 2002-2003, and 2003-2004, what were the job . . . and going on. So what the minister is basically saying is the document in text that we'd be dealing with now that would become the official one would have added "2003-2004."

Okay. That's the clarification that's important. All hon. members have that.

Dr. Oberg: That's absolutely correct, Mr. Speaker, and if I can, I will read the complete amended written question as follows:

For the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, and '03-04 what were the job placement rates attributable to each institution currently offering programs licensed under the Private Vocational Schools Act?

I would move the amended Written Question 78.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Is it clear to the hon. member what has just transpired?

Dr. Pannu: Yes.

The Speaker: Okay.

Dr. Pannu: I think it is, Mr. Speaker. I stand to be corrected if my understanding is somewhat incomplete.

As I understand now, the minister in fact has included the full fiscal 2003-2004 information. Right? I thank the minister for doing just that, and I look forward to receiving the information from his ministry.

I had also of course requested in my comments to receive information for the same period to the same question from the Minister of Human Resources and Employment as to whether the job placement data based on student interviews six months after program completion collected by the ministry would be provided in response to Written Question 78, and I'm still awaiting some sort of response from the hon. minister in this regard.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to close the debate.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly want to thank the Minister of Learning for his co-operation in getting to the House the requested information. I would certainly urge the Minister of Human Resources and Employment to respond in a similar way to

the request that I made, because information from his office is just as important as the information that I now have been promised I would be receiving from the Minister of Learning.

Thank you.

[Written Question 78 as amended carried]

The Speaker: Now, just a clarification for everybody, hon. members. Please note that what we just did in here did not have the initials of Parliamentary Counsel. Our rules suggest that this is a requirement, but I will exercise and use my authority under Standing Order 2 to override that, but this will not come back as a precedent in the future. Okay?

Thank you.

Private Vocational Schools

Q79. Dr. Pannu moved that the following question be accepted.

For the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, and for the period beginning April 1, 2003, and ended March 15, 2004, what was the total amount of funding that each private vocational school received from any program administered by the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment either paid to a school directly or paid to individual students for the purpose of attending a private vocational school?

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, the reason for this question, the background to it, is that the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment provides hundreds of millions of dollars per year to support adult vocational training and upgrading. Much of this funding supports students attending private vocational schools. In fact, funding criteria for many of the ministry's programs – for example, in most cases the ministry only supports training programs of one year or less in duration – seem designed to direct adult learners to private vocational schools rather than public institutions like NAIT, SAIT, or NorQuest College. As a basic measure of accountability Albertans have the right to know what amounts of funding went from the public purse to these schools.

I urge the acceptance of Written Question 79.

Mr. Dunford: We'll accept.

Dr. Pannu: I want to thank the minister for his readiness to provide the information to the House. I look forward to receiving it at the appropriate time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Written Question 79 carried]

head:

Motions for Returns

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been served on Thursday, April 22, it is my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 24 through 31, 34 through 42, 44 through 49, 52, 53, 55 through 62, 64, 66, 69 through 73, 75, 78 through 83, 88 through 105, 108 through 123, 128, 134 through 143, 146 through 160, 162, 164 through 168, 174 through 180, 183 through 189, 197, 200 through 205.

[Motion carried]

**3:40 Business Credit Card Statements for
Government Services Department**

M24. Mr. MacDonald moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Government Services.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

Mr. MacDonald: Certainly, in the interest of being open, transparent, and accountable to the taxpayers, I can't see why we would not accept this motion for a return. In light of some of the questions surrounding government expenditures, I think that this is reasonable. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to indicate to the hon. member and to all members of the House that we're recommending that Motion for a Return 24 be accepted with amendments, and I would like to inform the House that the amendments were shared with our opposition colleague prior to 11 a.m. today as per normal procedure. I hope the amendment has been circulated and all members have a copy of it. I understand that is the case.

I would like to just outline and move what the amendment would be should it succeed. We are simply making similar amendments to what we've discussed in this House before by way of grouping and categorizing, which will enormously speed things up and at the same time will also allow the provision of whatever information is able to be provided under the policies and procedures established and also with respect to upholding the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, as I enunciated earlier this afternoon.

In the spirit of that particular gesture, Mr. Speaker, the newly amended Motion 24 would read as follows:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a statement of all credit card expenses for the fiscal year 2002-2003 incurred by all deputy ministers, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders in aggregate for each government department categorized by accommodation, travel, hosting, and miscellaneous expenses.

Mr. Speaker, that should sum up the gist of our acceptance as outlined and for the purposes indicated earlier.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the proposed amendment.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is in regard to the amendment, and for the record I would like to express my gratitude to the hon. minister for providing this information this morning, at 9:47 a.m. to be precise. I appreciate it.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on the amendment.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wonder if the minister would take a question in connection with this amendment.

The Deputy Speaker: If he takes a question, that ends the debate.

Mr. Mason: Oh. All right.

The Deputy Speaker: You can offer the question, and when the minister speaks, then you might get an answer.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Maybe he would be so gracious as to respond to this question when he concludes.

The concern that I have with respect to this amendment is that if there were a few expenses which were out of order – that is, one or two by someone in a very senior position that was far too extravagant – would the effect of this be to blend it all in so that you couldn't tell what individual expenses were there? Of course, by spreading it over all of the administration, including branch heads, managers, unit leaders, and so on, you greatly increase the number of people who are aggregated in this number. It could look very reasonable because you would spread these expenses over a lot of people, so if you averaged the expenses per person, they would be very small.

I am reminded, Mr. Speaker, of the story of the man who drowned crossing a lake that was only on average one foot deep. I think this is the problem with the aggregation. I guess my question is: if there were particular expenses that were very expensive which accrued to just one or two individuals, would this amendment allow those expenses to be reported, or would they just be averaged in with the entire department?

The Deputy Speaker: There being no further debate, then, to close debate on the amendment.

Mr. Zwodsky: Thank you. I'm pleased to rise to close debate on the amendment and, in doing so, perhaps to comment briefly on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands' question. He's asking whether this particular amendment would somehow obfuscate or otherwise, perhaps, not present accurately or in some way cover up extravagant expenses. The short answer, Mr. Speaker, and the honest answer is no. In no way would this occur.

I think it needs to be mentioned for everyone's pleasure, Mr. Speaker, that all of these expense accounts are carefully and thoroughly reviewed not only by the internal processes but are also subject to the very thorough scrutinous eye of the Auditor General. They would certainly have been identified if any of those kinds of extravagant expenditures might have occurred. This amendment is in no way an attempt to do anything that might be of concern to the hon. member, but I do thank him for having raised it.

That having been said, I would seek the support of all members for the amendment to this Motion for a Return 24 as presented.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to conclude debate.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have reservations about this, but I will have to wait and see. Hopefully, I will be proven wrong.

A thank you is I guess in order, and we'll wait and see what information we do get. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 24 as amended carried]

**3:50 Business Credit Card Statements for
Human Resources and Employment Department**

M25. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all

monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Human Resources and Employment.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Reject.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Just briefly following up on the hon. Minister for Human Resources and Employment. I will support his recommendation, obviously, to reject Motion for a Return 25 based on the discussion we just had on Motion for a Return 24, where this particular issue was dealt with.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I respectfully ask that he give us more of an explanation than that.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Are we into debate at this point?

The Deputy Speaker: No, we're not. We're actually closing the debate. It can't come back.

Anyway, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has moved Motion for a Return 25. All those in support of this motion, please say aye.

Some Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Those opposed, please say no.

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: The motion is defeated.

Ms Carlson: He didn't close debate.

The Deputy Speaker: He didn't close debate.

Okay. We'll disregard that vote, and wax eloquent, hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. That's what I thought I was signalling to you before, but anyway, let us close debate.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was a little confused when both the minister rejected it and the Deputy Government House Leader also stood up and did the same thing, so there was a little confusion.

I think it's unfortunate, to say the least, Mr. Speaker. The kind of information that we're seeking is information that should be readily available to taxpayers in this province. No matter how it's construed, it is an attempt to keep that information from the public, so I think it's unfortunate that this is not being accepted.

[Motion for a Return 25 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Community Development Minister's Office

M26. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order

of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Community Development and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to clarify briefly before I talk to Motion for a Return 26, which we intend to accept with amendments, that the reason for rejecting 25 was only because it's already covered in 24. That's why I rose at the end of the hon. Minister of Human Resource and Employment's comments. We may see a similar pattern develop here shortly if the amendments before us on 26 are accepted. I think there was just a little bit of chatter going on at the time, and some members may have been misdirected in their listening temporarily.

With respect to Motion for a Return 26, Mr. Speaker, I'm recommending acceptance with amendments. I'm pleased to inform the hon. member and the other colleagues that our opposition were informed of this particular amendment prior to 11 this morning as per procedures. I understand that the amendment has been circulated to all members present.

I just want to outline briefly that anyone looking at the Order Paper would notice that there are a number of rather identically worded motions for returns similar to 26 where the only difference might be the name of the particular ministry in respect to the information being sought. If we're successful in approving the amendment – and I hope we will be – to 26, that will certainly speed things up a great deal in this House by being able to refer to 26 and say: well, this has already been opened up now, and all Executive Council members and their assistants will provide the information that's being requested.

In the final analysis, Mr. Speaker, I'm recommending that we accept Motion for a Return 26 with the following amendment so that the amended motion would read as follows:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a statement of all credit card expenses for the fiscal year 2002-2003 incurred by members of Executive Council and their executive assistants broken down by department and categorized by accommodation, travel, hosting, and miscellaneous expenses.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: On the amendment. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My colleague who put this motion on the Order Paper has some concerns. Those concerns are particularly about the monthly breakdown being lost now. Specifically, what else may have shown up on a government card that will not in this particular breakdown that we're going to get? If those questions could be answered, then we'll be in support of this amendment.

[Motion on amendment carried]

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, I'm unclear as to why my questions can't be answered on this particular amendment and the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. I don't know if the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has had a chance to have as in-depth a briefing perhaps as she might have liked from her House leader, but we did have about an hour and 40-minute discussion on how this

particular business would be approached. I think it was generally speaking agreed to, albeit with reluctance, I have to add, on the part of the Opposition House Leader, that we would try and provide whatever information we could under the groupings that we have available. Then if there was additional information that might be needed, that might be pursued on a one-off basis or it might be pursued through FOIP or whatever. But we have the information that can be readied in the fashion as outlined here and as organized here, so that's the reason for the grouping.

The second part of the issue is with respect to grouping together all members of Executive Council who will report individually on this. For purposes of speeding up the process in the House, rather than dealing with each ministry one by one by one by one for the identical question, we would simply amend the first one in the series, and it would in the spirit of co-operation apply equally to all the others that are on the Order Paper. So there is no change with respect to this particular point, from that point of view at least. I hope that clarifies something for now.

[Motion for a Return 26 as amended carried]

**4:00 Business Credit Card Statements for
Justice and Attorney General Minister's Office**

M27. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Precisely now we have the amended Motion for a Return 26, which will include all members of Executive Council for the question being put or as near to it as you can read. In this case, the Minister of Justice and Attorney General and that particular minister's executive assistant would be covered under the amended Motion for a Return 26, so on that basis I would recommend that Motion for a Return 27 be now rejected.

[Motion for a Return 27 lost]

**Business Credit Card Statements for
Seniors Minister's Office**

M28. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Seniors and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. Motion for a Return 28 again comes under the same spirit of co-operation that we saw with the amended Motion for a Return 26 a few minutes ago. In the case of Motion for a Return 28 it's the same information being requested, but in this instance it's from the Ministry of Seniors and from the minister's executive assistant in that department. That having been said, with the amended Motion for a Return 26 all members of Executive Council and all their executive assistants are now covered, so there is a recommendation that I would like to put forward on that basis: reject Motion for a Return 28 before us now.

[Motion for a Return 28 lost]

**Business Credit Card Statements for
Solicitor General Minister's Office**

M29. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Solicitor General and the Solicitor General's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie on behalf of the other hon. member for raising Motion for a Return 29. The same basic explanation applies here, the only difference being that under Motion for a Return 29 the department from whom the information is being sought is the Solicitor General and the Solicitor General's executive assistant. As I indicated earlier, Motion for a Return 26 will serve the purpose because all members of Executive Council and their executive assistants will be reporting the information under the amended motion. On that basis, I would recommend that we are able to reject Motion for a Return 29, which is before us now.

[Motion for a Return 29 lost]

**Business Credit Card Statements for
Seniors Department Staff**

M30. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Seniors.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks, hon. member, for the question. Motion for a Return 30. I would like to apply the same explanation here as I did to Motion for a Return 26. However, in this particular case the reference needs to go back to Motion for a Return 24, where, in fact, we already have approved a motion as amended, and that would include "all deputy ministers, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders."

So what we have in Motion for a Return 30, Mr. Speaker, is simply the citing of one particular department, which in this case happens to be the Department of Seniors. However, Motion for a Return 24 as amended simply states that all deputy ministers and so on working with government will be reporting the information as presented in the amendment, and therefore Motion for a Return 30 can be rejected since the information will be provided under the aforementioned Motion for a Return 24 as amended. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 30 lost]

Breakdown of Government Purchases

M31. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a breakdown by ministry of the total number and total cost of items that were purchased during the 2002-2003 fiscal year in the following categories: televisions, flatware, wineglasses, beer glasses, golf balls, golf tees, alcoholic beverages, jams, jellies, preserves, games, and toys.

Mrs. McClellan: We're going to try this one more time. We'll try and be on the same page.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to reject Motion for a Return 31 on this basis: from time to time government does buy promotional items. I can assure hon. members that we're not awash in them, nor do we just hand these out without thought or consideration as to the potential return on the investment.

4:10

Promotional items, Mr. Speaker, normally are of nominal value. They could be friendship pins, pens, key chains, postcards. They're used, generally, to promote positive awareness of our province with investors, tourists, potential immigrants. They're used to alert Albertans to programs and services that are of benefit to them, directing them to relevant sources such as web sites.

Mr. Speaker, it is our consideration that to track every one of these items and ensure that we've given a thorough accounting of every item that may or may not have been produced for the large number of valuable programs directed by this government to the people of Alberta would necessitate an enormous effort on behalf of everyone involved in all those programs. It is the government's consideration that this time and effort is far better spent in delivering the actual programs and services in question to the people of this province.

[Motion for a Return 31 lost]

Department of Energy Salary Bonuses

M34. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a breakdown of the amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the Ministry and Department of Energy over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by the position of and amount paid to each official.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to point out before I indicate the recommendation on this one that in fact this is another one of those types of motions which, in this particular case, is referring to one specific ministry. There could be a number of other ministries that might be asked to provide similar information under a separate written question.

Therefore, in order to speed up and move along the processes in the House, I'm going to suggest an amendment that would allow us to accept this particular motion for a return and at the same time would help us deal with future ones that may come up as written questions that simply deal with a department other than the Department of Energy, which in this case comes up under Motion for a Return 34. I should also indicate that the amendment I'm proposing, Mr. Speaker, was shared with my opposition colleague prior to 11 this morning in accordance with our procedure.

That having been said, it's my pleasure to move that Motion for a Return 34 be amended and that in the final analysis it read as follows:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a breakdown of the aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to employees within the government of Alberta listed by department over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by the range of bonus dollar amounts and the number of employees who received a bonus within that range.

I move that on behalf of the hon. Minister of Energy.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Yes. Speaking to the amendment, Mr. Speaker, I'm at a bit of a disadvantage in that the Deputy Government House Leader indicated that he'd been in contact with the House leader for the opposition, but he didn't indicate whether or not the House leader had actually agreed to this amendment.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Agreed with reluctance.

The Deputy Speaker: Apparently, under Motions for Returns there isn't a closing off of debate to the amendment. It's a one-off kind of thing, so that's why it's awkward. The only thing, I guess, is that when we get into the debate on the motion itself, then the Deputy Government House Leader or other persons who are going to speak to that particular matter that you're raising could address it. It seems a backwards way to go, but that's what I'm doing.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the impact, of course, of that amendment – and I can understand why the Opposition House Leader was reluctant – is to mask the kind of information that we'll receive with respect to this particular motion for a return, and I think that that, again, is unfortunate.

Mr. Speaker, the government has been very clear in making public the salaries of many public officials across this province. I can think of the superintendents of schools, who now have that information published and made quite public, and that was done at the instigation of the government. So I can't quite understand why they're reluctant to provide the same level of information about their staff.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Yeah. This is now on the main motion as amended. I will close debate if I speak to it.

The Deputy Speaker: I'm sorry. Apparently, once the hon. member concludes debate, you've had your chance. So it truly is an awkward procedure. Anyway, we have now closed debate and have to rely on alternate methods of communication.

[Motion for a Return 34 as amended carried]

Business Credit Card Statements for Finance Department Staff

M35. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Finance.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Motion for a Return 35 is an important motion, and it falls under the same explanation as Motion for a Return 24, which was accepted as amended earlier this afternoon. Under Motion for a Return 24 we are simply bringing all of the government deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, and so on under one particular amended motion. Therefore, Motion for a Return 35 can be rejected because it refers specifically to only one ministry, in this case the Department of

Finance, but Motion for a Return 24, which otherwise would be identical, does already include all ministries with respect to their top staff members.

So it's on that basis that I'm going to recommend that Motion for a Return 35 be rejected, since the essence of it is already covered under Motion for a Return 24 as amended.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 35 lost]

4:20 Business Credit Card Statements for Sustainable Resource Development Minister's Office

M36. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader on Motion for a Return 36.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I should just indicate to all members, who I know are interested, that we, myself and the Opposition House Leader, did meet for an hour and 40 minutes to try and ensure that we could speed this process along, because I have to put my arguments on the record each and every time, which the Opposition House Leader did understand and agree to, albeit with reluctance. Still, we will do that now, and I'll keep referring back to the relevant motion for a return as amended, which impacts the particular motion for a return that might be before us at the minute that we are speaking.

In this particular case, we have Motion for a Return 36, which refers specifically to one ministry, that being the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development, and to the minister in particular of that department and to the minister's executive assistant in that department. As was previously indicated, Motion for a Return 26 as amended already expands the question and the information being sought to all members of Executive Council and all executive assistants reporting to them, broken down by department and categorized by accommodation, travel, and so on.

Therefore, it's on that basis, Mr. Speaker, that Motion for a Return 36 can be rejected, because it only identifies one department, whereas Motion for a Return 26 as amended covers all departments and all EAs and all ministers.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 36 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Environment Minister's Office

M37. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Environment and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For the reasons just indicated by me regarding Motion for a Return 36, Motion for a Return 37 can also be rejected since in this case it's only the Ministry of Environment that is referenced, and in fact Motion for a Return 26 as amended and already approved earlier today will

already cover all departments including the Ministry of Environment.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 37 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Economic Development Minister's Office

M38. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Economic Development and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, with reference to Motion for a Return 38 it refers specifically to only one ministry, in this case Economic Development, and as enunciated earlier, just a few minutes ago by me, Motion for a Return 26 as amended will already accommodate the gist of this particular motion for a return because Motion for a Return 26 as amended covers all government ministries including the ministers and the ministers' executive assistants. So Motion for a Return 38 can be rejected on that basis at this time.

[Motion for a Return 38 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for International and Intergovernmental Relations Department

M39. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations I just want to indicate what he's indicated to me, and that is that his particular department is already subject to Motion for a Return 24 as amended since that particular motion as amended will cover the Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations, and the information being sought will be provided there pursuant to the amended Motion for a Return 24. Therefore we can recommend the rejection of Motion for a Return 39 on that basis.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 39 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I'm given to understand that we have an agreement that at approximately this time – is it after Motion for a Return 40 or before Motion for a Return 40? – we were going to have another motion. There's agreement.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for that opportunity. I would ask all members of this House for unanimous consent to revert to private members' bills at this point.

Thank you.

[Unanimous consent granted]

**head: 4:30 Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I now call the Committee of the Whole to order.

**Bill 203
Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes
Amendment Act, 2004**

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It gives me great pleasure to rise in the Assembly this afternoon and continue debate and discussion on Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. I would like to begin by thanking all members for their support and allowing this bill to proceed to Committee of the Whole. As expressed during the debate in second reading, Bill 203 would allow for ex-spouses or ex-partners to enter into agreements that ensure committing them to opt out of the Canada pension plan credit splitting program. Bill 203 amends both the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act. The amendments to the acts are identical and serve to obtain the same objective.

Amendments to section 27.2 of the Domestic Relations Act and section 82.2 of the Family Law Act state:

A written agreement between spouses or common-law partners entered into on or after June 4, 1986 may provide that, notwithstanding the Canada Pension Plan (Canada), there be no division between the parties of unadjusted pensionable earnings pursuant to that Act.

Mr. Chairman, as I stated at second reading, provinces have the authority to opt out of the program under section 55.2 of section 3 of the Canada Pension Plan Act. The CPP Act expresses that divorcing or separating partners can only opt out of credit splitting if they have entered into an agreement on or after June 4, 1986, and that that agreement specifically mentions the Canada pension plan and it is the intentions of the parties that there be no division of unadjusted pensionable earnings under the act. This is the same stipulation outlined before us in Bill 203.

It is also important to note that the provisions under the CPP Act also express that these agreements must not have been invalidated by a court order and, very importantly, that the spousal agreement must be permitted under provincial legislation. Again, as I stated in second reading, Bill 203 would provide the appropriate provincial law.

Since the Canada pension plan specifies the date of June 4, 1986, in its legislation to honour agreements entered into on or after that date, Bill 203 recognizes that same time frame and makes retroactive these agreements in its amendments to both the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act. Therefore, with the passage of Bill 203 any agreements entered into on or after that date which do express the CPP and the intention of no division will be upheld and validated in this province.

Mr. Chairman, the amendment to the Domestic Relations Act would only be a temporary measure to serve the purposes of the bill, while the amendment to the Family Law Act would take effect once the appropriate section of the act is proclaimed into force. The Family Law Act will then repeal the Domestic Relations Act. The Family Law Act is replacing the Domestic Relations Act, and therefore by amending both pieces of legislation, the intent of Bill

203 and the ability to provide immediate authority to previous waivers is accounted for until the Family Law Act is proclaimed into force.

Mr. Chairman, the option of entering into spousal agreements is afforded to both married spouses and common-law partners. The Canada pension plan credit-splitting program is applicable to both types of relationships, and therefore Bill 203, to keep consistent with the intentions of the program, has extended the opt-out to both. Section 27.1 of the Domestic Relations Act and section 82.1 of the Family Law Act provide the provision that defines common-law partner and states that this term applies as defined in the Canada pension plan.

Mr. Chairman, there is an important point which I would like to stress regarding the splitting of CPP benefits. The credit-split decision is never changed or returned to an ex-spouse even if the applying ex-spouse's financial situation improves drastically or if he or she should die. There exists a finality to the splitting of CPP benefits. Credit splitting permanently alters the record of employment. Therefore, it is important that these decisions are made mutually and with the full knowledge and understanding of both parties.

Also, there is an appeal process available to dispute resolutions. However, the process has limitations. It is really important to recognize that the appeal will not overturn the decision to split the credit but, rather, may affect how these credits are split.

Mr. Chairman, there have been a couple of concerns regarding the implications of Bill 203. This legislation will not refuse the right of individuals applying for credit splitting unless they have already signed an agreement which waives the right to any future division of CPP pension earnings. In this case Bill 203 will uphold or legitimize any of these previous agreements which must have been signed on or after June 4, 1986, so that ex-spouses or ex-partners cannot make future claims. Without the provincial legislation which Bill 203 provides, these agreements are invalid.

Bill 203 would now allow individuals to enter into spousal agreements during their divorce or separation proceedings and have them binding on the federal minister responsible for the CPP. If an individual discovers after the fact that he or she did not receive any portion of CPP pension benefits from a previous relationship regardless of this bill, they are still entitled to those benefits as long as he or she did not sign an agreement that stated no division of CPP credits. Then the agreement would be upheld, and they could not apply for a split. The terms that the parties signed to would be adhered to.

Mr. Chairman, I believe strongly in this bill. It will allow couples on the breakdown of their relationship to make important and informed decisions regarding their financial future. This is indeed a choice which should be afforded to all Albertans. I strongly encourage all members of this House to again support Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act.

Mr. Chairman, I am also happy to circulate an amendment to Bill 203 that covers a couple of changes. Bill 203 states that an agreement is binding "whether or not there is valuable consideration for the agreement." It also purports to invalidate any agreement that was "induced by fraud, duress or undue influence" or if "one of the parties lacked the mental capacity to understand the nature of the agreement."

Before the bill was introduced, Alberta Justice officials recommended that the above provisions be removed as they are unnecessary restatements of the common law. Further, since there are no similar provisions regarding other types of agreements governed by the Domestic Relations Act and Family Law Act, inclusion of such provisions solely with respect to credit-splitting agreements may

jeopardize the argument that the common law applies to these other types of agreements.

As well, the bill currently has a provision for one section to come into effect upon proclamation. The amendment as proposed will make the whole bill subject to proclamation.

Therefore, I move an amendment to Bill 203 as currently being circulated as follows. Would you like me to read the amendment, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: You're moving it; you read it.

Ms Kryczka: Okay. Bill 203, Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, is amended as follows. A. Section 1(2) is amended by striking out the proposed section 27.3. B. Section 2 is amended (a) in subsection (2) by striking out the proposed section 82.3 and (b) by striking out subsection (3). C. The following is added after section 2: "Coming into Force. 3. This Act comes into force on Proclamation."

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: This amendment will be called amendment A1. Does everyone have it already? They all have it. Okay.

Then if you wish to further explain it, or are you finished speaking on the amendment?

Ms Kryczka: I'm basically finished speaking on the amendment, sir.

The Chair: Okay. Further comment on the amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like to ask the hon. member who proposed this amendment to correct me if my understanding is incorrect, but the sections that are to be deleted include protection for people who have been induced to make such an agreement if "one of the parties was induced by fraud, duress or undue influence to enter into the agreement" or if "one of the parties lacked the mental capacity to understand the nature of the agreement."

This is part of the section that is going to be deleted, so is the intention to take away these protections, or does the amendment in some way provide similar protections in a way that I'm not clear on? I would ask the hon. member if she'd be prepared to stand and respond to that question.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

4:40

Ms Kryczka: Yes. I guess I would just briefly expand on what I've already stated, that agreements under these acts that I've referred to are already afforded this type of protection. Therefore, these sections may be viewed as redundant and unnecessary.

Since these precautions are already addressed and considered under both the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act, they really do not need to be included in Bill 203. As well, if these clauses are included under Bill 203, they may raise questions regarding all other agreements under the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Well, I apologize to the hon. member. She obviously did cover that in her

statements, but she was clipping along at a pretty good rate, and I didn't catch it.

I guess the concern I have, if the hon. member is willing to respond, is if there is a legal opinion that has been received to that effect, and is that the basis upon which these amendments have been made?

Ms Kryczka: Well, as I said in my initial statement, I was advised that it was not necessary initially, but I guess I would have to stand here and say that I am stubborn, and I felt personally at the time that from my point of view it was necessary. However, I am not trained or educated as a lawyer, and I do not know the law as it applies in many areas. I've worked in personnel for lawyers, but that is totally different from knowing the law. So I totally respect the advice that I was given by the Justice department.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is raising more questions for me than it's answering actually, so just let me be clear on what the bill was before and what I see it as being amended to now.

Prior to this amendment under the proposed section 27.3 and all the subsections, then, you wanted in this bill for it to be an absolutely binding agreement between two parties in terms of there being no splitting of the pension, but what I'm hearing you say now is that the legal department has told you that you can't have that happen, so you're taking that out of the bill. Would that be correct?

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to make some remarks about the amendments put forward this afternoon by the sponsoring member relative to her bill. She has very ably described why these amendments are being brought forward in that they are duplicating sections that already exist in the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act, which are two central pieces of our family law legislation in Alberta. So in the interests of having tidy legislation that is not repetitive and duplicative, I support her in these improvements to her bill.

I can certainly assure all members that the protections that we all want for the validity of these spousal agreements will be and is already provided for. I would urge all members to support the amendments that go to removing these sections from the Family Law Act and the Domestic Relations Act.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Carlson: Okay. If what I'm hearing is correct here then, once this bill is passed, in terms of the agreements for the pension, people will be referred to the Domestic Relations Act. So then, in fact, there still will be binding agreements between the parties for any written agreement given, whether or not there's been any valuable consideration given for giving up a pension right or whether or not these agreements have been signed under duress. Would that be accurate? To whomever would like to answer it.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes. Mr. Chairman, I'll try to address that. The provisions in the Family Law Act and the Domestic Relations Act that contemplate these types of written agreements, as I say, already exist, and they are for purposes beyond just Canada pension plan

credits. They address support generally and other matters that need to be determined between divorcing spouses, separating spouses, be they common-law or married people. So these agreements are not solely for CPP credits. CPP credits are one type of item that can be addressed by these written agreements.

The same is provided for in the Matrimonial Property Act. You might be familiar with those kinds of written agreements where parties agree on the division of their matrimonial assets. They seek independent legal advice and attach certificates of independent legal advice. Matrimonial Property Act certificates are signed by the attending lawyers to give assurances that the parties have had independent legal advice, that they know what their rights are, and that they know what they're signing. So that's basically what is provided for.

I don't have them in front of me, unfortunately, but those are the kinds of assurances that you find in the Family Law Act and the Domestic Relations Act. We could probably bring those in so that you could see them and be assured of that.

Ms DeLong: Perhaps I could be of a little bit of assistance. I've got a little detail here. These sections include protection measures which would guard against "fraud, duress, or undue influence," and, as well, if one party "lacked the mental capacity to understand the nature of the agreement."

So, essentially, there are protections in both of these acts already. If we were to add the same protections in Bill 203, it would actually weaken those sections in the original documents. Because they're already in the original documents, if we have to reinforce it in this one particular place, then that also brings into question whether or not they were strong enough in the originals. We're actually in a stronger position if we don't have them in there.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on amendment A1.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to be clear about the amendment. The principle of the bill, allowing people to essentially sign agreements to give up their rights to pension benefits from their partner, is another question. This amendment deals with whether or not it's necessary to have some specific protection when people do that to make sure that they don't do so under duress. So I just want to be clear.

I see that the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed is digging out probably what I wanted, which was to hear some specific language in the Domestic Relations Act and the other act that would give assurance that those protections in fact extended into the Canada pension plan credits statutes. That's really what I'm looking for. I'd like to hear some of the language there that could assure me that these bills do in fact provide this protection. If that's there, then I don't really have a problem with the amendment per se.

But the bill itself is certainly another matter, because the principle of allowing these things to be traded away in a prenuptial agreement or some other agreement is something that I have a lot more difficulty with. Perhaps the Member for Calgary-Lougheed has found the section and might help with that. She's still looking, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to indicate on this amendment that we have taken a look at the bill and have contacted people who are involved in these types of issues, and there's a lot of concern about it. Particularly if the amendment does even take away some more of that, I think it's a real concern. But I'll wait to hear from members opposite in terms of what the language is in the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act.

4:50

Ms Kryczka: Well, I guess I would just be repeating myself. As I said, I would welcome the legal expertise of the Member for Calgary-Lougheed, but the common-sense approach that I took to the drafting of the bill was more on this section that we are deleting, which, I have been assured by the Minister of Justice, is already included in the acts. We were mainly looking at if one of the parties was being "induced by fraud, duress or undue influence to enter into the agreement," which is separate from what the bill looks at as a whole – this was only a small part of the bill – or, for instance, if "one of the parties lacked the mental capacity to understand the nature of the agreement." Again, I think that is really the approach of this.

I would be repeating myself in terms of what I said to you earlier, that these precautions are already addressed and considered under both the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act and that they do not need to be included in Bill 203. It was a case of repetition and, therefore, redundancy that was simply the reason for bringing in this amendment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, not that you need more pressure, but how are you coming?

Ms Graham: Well, Mr. Chairman, maybe I'll take a moment to confer with the Member for Calgary-West. That might speed things up a little bit.

The Chair: Okay. We're just going to have a pause in the events unless there's someone else that wishes to speak on the amendment.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, I'm wondering if we couldn't defer the debate on this amendment and go back to debate on the bill in the best interests of time.

The Chair: That's a wonderful idea in the interests of time. Unfortunately, our rules don't cover that. I suppose we could try and get unanimous consent to do such.

I think that maybe time has worked in favour of resolving this Gordian knot. The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Chairman. I haven't really been, you know, on the inside track on this particular amendment, so I'd like to suggest that perhaps the sponsoring member undertake to provide the information sought by the opposition – I don't know that that's going to be possible at this moment – before this matter is dealt with at the final stage. That might be the most efficacious way of dealing with it today.

The Chair: If I understand your proposal, hon. member, there is an undertaking to be given, that would have to be accepted, that some time during third reading, presumably as soon as the member moves third reading, this matter would be dealt with ahead of time to the satisfaction of all of the members who raised the question. Is that agreeable, hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie?

Ms Carlson: Well, it isn't really, Mr. Chairman. I have to say that if that's the way we're to proceed, then I definitely have to vote against the amendment, because I don't think you can vote for an amendment that you don't have full disclosure on.

Mr. Mason: I agree with her.

The Chair: Well, there are two contrary propositions being put forward here, hon. member.

Mr. Mason: I agree with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The Chair: Okay. Fine. Good. All right.

Any further discussion on the amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's impossible to further discuss or debate an amendment when we don't have the full information in detail on what the impact of it is going to be not only on this piece of legislation but on other directly affected pieces of legislation. You know, what I heard were some nice platitudes, but I want to see something substantive. For the amount of time that this bill has been before this Assembly, I'm very surprised that we don't have any backup on it.

Mr. Mason: If we proceed to a vote on the amendment, Mr. Chairman, I just want to indicate that if it is as the hon. members have said – and I believe that they are saying that in good faith – then as far as I can see, it makes the amendment neutral with respect to the intent of the bill before us. If they are mistaken, however, it could have the effect – and this is my fear – of removing even the protections that were envisaged for what would otherwise be, in my view, a fairly bad bill.

So that's the difficulty that I have and why, unless we get this information, I would vote against the amendment. At best it's neutral, but at worst my fear is that it could be very retrograde. Thank you.

The Chair: The rules are such that I think we're going to have to go with the vote on the amendment. You decide which way you're going to go.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

5:00

The Chair: Now to continue the debate. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on the bill itself, on the clauses of the bill.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. On the bill. I just want to indicate that, in general, I don't agree with the thrust of the bill. Now, we've been assured that even with the amendment, protection exists for partners who have been induced by fraud, duress, or undue influence, and protection is afforded to people who lack the mental capacity to understand the nature of the agreement, and that's fine. That's fine. If those protections exist in other acts, that's very good and positive.

What other kinds of things, though, might intervene that aren't envisaged by this amendment? Well, Mr. Chairman, inequalities in power relationships are not accounted for. Inequalities in economic relationships are not recognized by this amending piece of legislation. What it does, quite simply, is allow an agreement to be reached that allows someone to give up the rights that they have to the pension of their spouse.

What about people who give it up without understanding what they're giving up? You know, they don't have to be put under duress. They don't have to be mentally incompetent. They may simply just not understand, or they may give it up because they believe in a romantic notion that their relationship will be, you know, forever and they don't accept that it might in fact come to an end. So what this does is that it basically makes the more vulnerable

partner in a relationship – and that is normally but not always the woman in a marriage – even more vulnerable because they can give all this up without understanding it, leaving them with potentially a very poor existence.

You know, in 1987 the government took a very progressive step in issuing an entitlement to a credit split in the course of a marriage. That was about the same time that the 50-50 property split came about. So women would be missing access to public pension before 1987. The problem, as I see it, is that the rights to this are often given away for nothing, and one spouse can be at a disadvantage by not being able to get that split. It's particularly difficult for older women, Mr. Chairman, so I don't think that we should support having the Canada Pension Plan split becoming a bargaining chip in a settlement.

As the law currently stands, Mr. Chairman, either ex-spouse can apply to have the CPP credits accumulated during the common-law or marriage relationship split upon the breakdown of that relationship. If such an application is made, then the split is automatic, and it's not open to negotiation. This legislation would eliminate the possibility in exchange for making a split of CPP credits part of the divorce settlement negotiation.

I think that the kind of thinking that assumes that everybody negotiates on the same basis of equality is maybe typical of some conservative thinking, but it's not how we view the world at all. We take into account the fact that people have different economic capacities and that people have different amounts of power within a relationship, and that is I guess the real difficulty. What happens, Mr. Chairman, if somebody offers to reduce their claim of child custody, for example, in exchange for an agreement not to split CPP credits? That would put ex-spouses and, likely, mothers in particular in the terrifying position of choosing between her children and her economic security. I think that other examples could be brought up as well. The government can't be satisfied with enforcing contracts especially when these contracts are negotiated in unfair circumstances and when these contracts could significantly reduce the quality of life of one of the parties.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the legislation opens a door that did not need to be opened and, indeed, would have been better left shut. So I will be opposing Bill 203 as I think it is a step backwards in marriage relationships in this province.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would just like to say that I believe that Bill 203 addresses a gap that has existed in our family law legislation in Alberta for nearly 20 years, which was when the federal government legislated the mandatory sharing of unadjusted pensionable earnings, or credits, under the Canada Pension Plan Act. Under section 55.2(5) of that act they did allow provinces the option of passing legislation to allow separating and/or divorcing couples, be they married or common law, by way of a written agreement to make their own decisions on how to divide their assets including their CPP credits.

So I would just like to speak from the perspective of a family law practitioner, which was something I did in my previous life, acting for clients that would find themselves in divorcing or separating circumstances. Typically, you would have people coming in who would want to deal with all of their outstanding issues: custody, support, and the division of matrimonial property.

Under the Matrimonial Property Act people can make these kinds of agreements with independent legal advice and full knowledge of what their rights are. Lawyers would go to great lengths to assist

people in evaluating their assets and coming to an equitable division of these assets as best as possible anyway. The point was to give certainty to divorcing spouses and the knowledge that they wouldn't be subject to subsequent claims from their spouse down the line.

We were able to do this with a great deal of certainty on all assets except for Canada pension plan credits, because you were always in the position of having to say: even though you people have made your own agreement that you don't want to divide them, we as lawyers cannot draft an agreement that is ironclad, that will protect you. We would have to say: as long as you both live up to it, great, but if one of you doesn't, we cannot really do anything that's practical to make this enforceable.

You could put in a provision that would say that you could sue the other party if they went and applied for their CPP when they said they wouldn't, and they could apply for damages, but that wasn't practical because it was costly. It was another court action. So there was really nothing that you could do. So from a lawyer's perspective this was not a good situation because you couldn't really provide the certainty that your clients wanted. Oftentimes they might not have heard you or they would forget that that was your advice and then be very shocked in the future when this happened to them, that their CPP cheque was cut in half potentially.

5:10

I would just say that this bill does serve the interests of Albertans that are divorcing and separating because you will get consistent treatment of CPP credits along with other kinds of pensions and other marital assets. You'll have certainty. There'll be finality in the division of property. Most of all it does allow for people to make their own agreements. They know what's best for them. Assuming they've had proper legal advice, they can make the decision on what's best for them. Maybe the case would be that one party has a pension from work and would want to retain that pension, and the parties would want to leave all of the CPP to the other party rather than potentially dividing that in half.

So for that reason, I do think that this is a good thing for Albertans. I support the member in her bill and ask all of you to support her in it as well.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I don't support this bill. I spent too many years prior to being in politics and in politics having to try to assist people who are in circumstances where they spent decades or years being a stay-at-home parent end up in a divorce situation and do not feel that they are equal partners in negotiating the divorce. Often they are not, and in spite of what my colleague here in the Legislature has said about the importance of independent legal advice, often because of the situation, the conditions under which the marriage breakup occurs, they are under duress at that time, irrespective of what kind of excellent legal advice they may or may not be getting. I would like to remind my colleague that not all lawyers are created equal, and that often he who can afford to pay the big bucks gets much more aggressive representation than the other party.

Time after time I have seen during this circumstance what is essentially an unequal agreement taking place, and often just in the interests of getting through the process, one party will agree to things that if they were in a saner frame of mind or a more comfortable setting would never in a lifetime agree to. Particularly, I have seen situations where the only opportunity for any kind of redress in this

situation is to take a look at the CPP credits down the road.

This is something that I believe for the most part will solve itself as time passes. These days most women have a work record, but that is not the case for certainly my mother's generation and for many people in my generation. They are left in an unequal bargaining position, and I don't care how good their lawyer is. I don't care how that argument can be made. They are not in an equal bargaining position, and often they get left out of the loop.

I am reminded by several women that I chatted with this morning, visiting a seniors' lodge that was for low-income people – one of the women there was 95 years old. She gets a pension. She gets one pension per month, \$560, and that's what she lives on. Why? Because at the time that her husband died, it was before the pension transfers even were available, and having never worked outside of the home, that's the only thing that she's been eligible for. She's been living on that for 35 years, on just that one piece of pension. Now, that's a travesty in my mind. That's completely unfair.

Several of the other women who were there were in circumstances where they were the sole caregiver in the home and didn't work outside the home for their whole lives. If they had negotiated away this, what would they be living on? It's incomprehensible to imagine that anybody in this day and age, even in subsidized lodging . . .

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, but under Standing Order 4(2) "if at 5:15 p.m. on Monday, the Assembly is in Committee of the Whole and the business of the committee is not concluded, the committee shall rise and report immediately." So, therefore, I'm directed.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. On the basis of what you've just indicated, I would move that the committee now rise and report progress on Bill 203.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports progress on Bill 203. I would like to table copies of the amendments considered by the committee on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That being the case and given the hour, I would move that we now call it 5:30 and that we adjourn to resume at 8 p.m. to consider private members' motions.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:18 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, April 26, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/04/25

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Game Conservation Fund

507. Mr. VanderBurg moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to add a fish and wildlife surcharge onto existing fines and penalties related to illegal hunting and fishing practices with the proceeds allocated directly to a conservation fund to support programs that restore and protect game species and species at risk in Alberta.

[Debate adjourned April 19: Mr. MacDonald speaking]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to stand and support Motion 507 in this evening's debate. I believe that this motion will add a significant change to the way we deal with poachers and other environmental criminals. I'd like to thank the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne for bringing this motion forward for debate.

The motion is built upon a solid principle. If someone or something is harmed, then that person or thing ought to be compensated for the injury or damage that is incurred. It is only right because while society at large suffers, the actual victim suffers a great deal more. While we cannot have laws tailored to the circumstances of individual suffering, we need to be mindful of the effects of suffering. Normally this sort of thinking surrounds issues of victims' rights, especially in cases where the victim is a human being.

This is the case with Alberta's victims of crime fund, which ensures that the emotional pain of a crime does not traumatize an individual for the rest of his or her life or that restitution is granted for crimes that are committed. However, it is just as appropriate in cases where the victim is not an individual person but is wildlife and the environment that the wildlife use as a habitat. It is appropriate because wildlife is important for maintaining a sacred balance in our environment. We need to remember that we are talking about animals and their homes, the damaging of which causes significant problems not just for the wilderness but for all parts of this planet.

Hunting levels are set for specific reasons: to balance the needs of hunting and the thrill of sport hunting with the needs of the environment and the surrounding environment. The problem, Mr. Speaker, is that poachers aren't just a problem for the animals that are killed and they don't just cause damage to individual animals and animal populations, but they ruin ecosystems.

Poachers are the lowest sort of hunters. They obviously have no regard for the animal, and they have even less regard for the environment. Pictures that have come from fish and wildlife officers show that poachers don't walk into the woods; instead, they take giant vehicles and do not care about where or why they cut a trail with their machines. When they hunt animals out of season, it shows that they have no regard for the population levels of animals, that they have no regard for the animals or the species itself, and finally it shows that they have no regard for the etiquette of hunting.

Hunters have a particular code. You hunt fairly, you leave the environment as you found it, and you respect the animal you hunted by using all of it and by respecting hunting seasons and off-seasons. Further, you respect the hunt limits placed upon you by those who are employed to ensure that the province and its hunters undertake sound environmental stewardship. Poachers do none of these, Mr. Speaker. They are there out of self-interest and thus are disrespecting of animals, the environment, other hunters, the government, and, finally, the law.

Just like other criminals who show no regard for the laws of the land, poachers should have to pay a certain amount of restitution, and it makes perfect sense that the restitution should in some way benefit that which is being harmed. The inherent suggestion of Motion 507 is that the surcharge collected under the motion will provide wardens and officers in sustainable resource development with more funds for catching other poachers.

Mr. Speaker, I like the irony of this. I like the sound of poachers catching poachers. It shows poachers that their actions won't be tolerated and, instead, takes steps to ensure that the payment they shell out in fines will in some way go towards protecting that which they have destroyed. By making the fund dedicated, we also spell out the importance of respecting the environment, especially to those who are destroying it through illegal activities related to poaching.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, there have been some questions raised in relation to Motion 507. It's been asked whether or not Motion 507 will generate enough revenue for it to be cost-effective. Will the terms of Motion 507, therefore, actually put more environmental officers into the woods protecting our animals and ecosystems? I'd like to hear more of the Assembly's thoughts on this issue, but I think that what the question shows is that there is a real concern regarding the need for a more stable source of funding for our Sustainable Resource Development wardens and officers. These provincial employees often just do not have the resources to do the first-rate job that we know they can do. That's a concern, for while they are strapped, a lot of poaching goes uncaught, and it's only afterwards that we see the effects and the damage that is done.

Mr. Speaker, I will support this motion based partially on the fact that it highlights this point and is one idea of how we can get more funding to our SRD officers. What is being asked for in Motion 507, however, should be supplemented by greater funding for our wardens so that they can put a stop to poaching once and for all.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, before I close, I want to address the argument that Motion 507 and the terms presented by it represent a type of penalty overkill. It's been noted by some critics that poachers are already paying into the victims of crime fund and that this fine already exists should be enough to get the point across. My response to that argument is that if you don't do anything wrong, you won't face any penalties whether they are onerous or not. It's the same argument I would give to those who drive recklessly or to those who do not respect other sorts of environmental laws such as spills from leaking underground gasoline tanks. The average, law-abiding Albertan will not be unduly affected by this law. Instead, they will be positively affected because of the fact that it will be a good deterrent and it will provide our SRD officials with more resources to undertake their duties.

So, Mr. Speaker, I will reiterate my support for this motion. It may have a few kinks in it, but I think we are on the right track, and I think that it shows an excellent way through which we can provide greater protection for fish, wildlife, and their habitats.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Good evening and thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and join the debate on Motion 507, sponsored by the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

When I look at Motion 507, I see an idea with some definite merit. The establishment of a conservation fund to support programs that restore and protect game species and species at risk within the province is an idea that I support, but I do feel that we can do more. I find it appropriate that the proposed fund be supported through a fish and wildlife surcharge placed on existing fines and penalties related to illegal hunting and fishing practices. In essence, we would be making conservation support programs stronger by penalizing those that put Alberta's game species at risk and push those species at risk closer to extinction.

Mr. Speaker, as Alberta moves into its second century and the government looks at ideas such as that brought forward by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, I think we should take a moment to look at the history of wildlife conservation. When Alberta became a province almost 100 years ago, it passed its first game laws to control hunting. In 1908 the Calgary Fish and Game Protective Association was formed to lobby governments and educate citizens about the importance of wildlife conservation. That organization grew into the present Alberta Fish and Game Association, which represents many local clubs of hunters and anglers throughout the province.

It is apparent that due to the actions that took place early, the province was able to protect some of Alberta's species that were at risk. That work has resulted in the survival of these species and the assurance that they will continue to survive in the future.

These early efforts at wildlife conservation concentrated on enforcing hunting regulations and paying bounties for killing predators. Trained wildlife biologists were hired to do scientific studies of populations and make informed decisions about how species should be managed. Trained enforcement officers were also hired to ensure that people obeyed wildlife laws. These laws were developed to protect wildlife and assist the public with problem wildlife concerns. Currently, wildlife biologist, technicians, and enforcement staff work with hunters, trappers, naturalists, farmers, ranchers, and industry to maintain our wildlife heritage.

8:10

Mr. Speaker, as Alberta grew as a province, it was able to move forward in its attempt to preserve wildlife species and ensure that their numbers were properly maintained through programs, laws, and legislation. As the province moves into its second century, I find it important that we continue to strive to ensure that Alberta's species remain preserved and viable for another hundred years at least.

Alberta's growth is important, and it is necessary to promote this growth to ensure that the province remains economically stable, but at the same time government must do what they can to protect and preserve Alberta's wildlife and fish. Motion 507 is a step in that direction. I would like to commend the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne for bringing forth this proposal as I believe it follows in the spirit of Alberta's past practices conserving the province's species.

In my opening remarks I mentioned that I felt that we could do more, go beyond what is called for in Motion 507. The establishment of a fish and wildlife surcharge on existing fines and penalties related to illegal hunting and fishing practices is a small step at a time when we should look at doing more.

In essence, the concept that I am referring to falls close to what is proposed in Motion 507. However, what I find perplexing is why all of the proceeds from fish and wildlife fines are not put towards the proposed conservation fund. Currently, there is discussion of

insufficient funding in this area, and I believe this is an excellent way to put money into programs that would alleviate these funding pressures. So although I agree with the proposed idea, I would also agree with not taking funds from fish and wildlife fines and putting them into the victims of crime fund but, instead, putting all the funds into the conservation fund.

Mr. Speaker, my concern is that the proposed surcharges may not generate the required additional resources to have the necessary effect on the conservation of Alberta species. These additional funds would support many activities important to the protection and management of Alberta's game species and species at risk. This could result in and enhance enforcement efforts and the ability of enforcement agencies to invest in improved equipment that would have a positive effect on their ability to protect and maintain the indicated species.

This type of initiative is practiced by the Alberta Conservation Association, which uses the funds acquired through the sale of licences, stamps, and tags to help finance conservation initiatives throughout the province. Mr. Speaker, I can't see why the fines and penalties related to illegal hunting and fishing practices can't be used in the same manner. In doing so, the individuals that disrespect Alberta's game species and species at risk would be providing funding to help the damage that they have inflicted.

In closing, I would again like to commend the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne for his proposal and encourage all members to vote in favour of Motion 507. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to join debate in support of Motion 507. The Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne has proposed an interesting concept to help conservation officers carry out their duties. Now, as an MLA from the city you might say: what are my interests in conservation out in rural Alberta? But I am the MLA that has three man-made lakes in her constituency that are stocked with fish, so I think there are some parallels here that we can draw.

Unlike oil or natural gas, Alberta's fish and wildlife are a renewable resource as long as the government equips conservation officers with the tools to keep this resource sustainable. Healthy fish and wildlife open many doors for tourism, and tourism, like any other business, is driven by supply and demand. There are a number of tourists who come to Alberta to fish and to hunt. However, according to many conservation officers, poaching is becoming a big problem.

Mr. Speaker, the people who visit Alberta want to come to a beautiful place – and we need to preserve that – to visit Alberta, to hunt and fish until they're satisfied and not simply go to another province. The conservation fund will play a small role in keeping tourism dollars here in Alberta.

Obviously, protecting Alberta's fish and wildlife resource is an important goal. This Assembly has to decide whether or not a conservation fund would make a significant improvement to current conservation efforts. The tourism industry in my area benefits a great deal when lakes are healthy and well stocked with fish. There are only a small number of people who break the law listed in the Fisheries (Alberta) Act. As we know, Mr. Speaker, it only takes one offender to cause serious, long-term damage to a lake. Once a lake is poached, it can take years for the fish population and the lake's ecosystem to recover.

There is a significant financial benefit to a conservation fund. Giving people the resources to sustain and improve Alberta's fish and wildlife populations will also sustain and improve Alberta's

tourism industry. I realize that a large number of tourists visit Edmonton and, of course, Calgary for the Calgary Stampede, shopping, and various festivals. On the other hand, there are more who visit Alberta for its ecotourism opportunities. We shouldn't underestimate the potential of ecotourism. People may travel to B.C. for salmon fishing, but hundreds of people come to Alberta for trout and grayling fishing. Alberta is a unique tourist destination because it combines outdoor activities in rural Alberta with popular attractions in the city.

Mr. Speaker, imagine if someone opened a successful music store on Whyte Avenue here in Edmonton. People visit this store from around the city because they like the location of the store and the variety of the music. But then for unknown reasons the owner removes the most popular item from the shelf. The customers, frustrated that they cannot find the music they want, take their business to another store. Tourism in rural Alberta is the same way. As long as there are outdoor activities for people to enjoy, then there are opportunities for tourism. Right now we are removing the product without making every effort to keep up with demand.

Tourism in rural Alberta is directly linked to healthy fish and wildlife populations, and Albertans have a right to expect a healthy fish and wildlife resource. Poaching and illegal hunting practices are largely to blame for the depleting levels of species. Enforcement is an integral part of sustaining and improving the health of species and species at risk.

The sponsor of this motion mentioned the fine increase passed by this Assembly in December 2003. These increases will help deter some hunters from breaking the law. However, the officers in the field must have the resources to enforce these laws. I don't believe that this fine increase will have a significant effect on illegal hunting and poaching practices. I'm sure most people will see these changes as a significant deterrent for potential poachers. However, most Albertans know that fines by themselves do little to prevent illegal hunting and overfishing. The money collected from fines goes to general revenue, and most of the money collected in general revenue is dedicated to health and education. This leaves very little for other provincial priorities. In a perfect world we could cut the fines in half because we know they do not provide a meaningful deterrent for offenders and do not fund conservation efforts directly.

Critics may say that the idea of the conservation fund is an example of the Alberta government's neglect of wildlife issues. It's believed that ministries such as Sustainable Resource Development have been underfunded, perhaps, by the provincial government, creating more opportunities for criminals, but there are many areas for improvement. More enforcement is a costly and reactive response to illegal hunting. If the government relies solely on enforcement, it would need conservation officers at every lake and on a regular basis to catch every poacher. The majority of people who do nothing wrong but will still be closely monitored by conservation officers would feel very uneasy.

A conservation fund that supports programs to restore and protect fish and wildlife species could help conservation officers in a number of ways. A few examples include educational displays that could be used in malls, museums, and schools. A fund could provide one-time funding for specialized equipment such as cameras, night-vision glasses, and tracking equipment. Funds could also be used for additional youth and hunter education programs.

Management and protection of wildlife relies heavily on public awareness and support. One of the best ways to use a conservation fund would be to develop and deliver education programs that enhance the public's understanding of wildlife management and promote behaviour that supports the government's objective of sustaining wildlife populations. I believe that many fish and wildlife

offences are committed by people who are ignorant of the law rather than by those who intentionally break the law.

Illegal hunting may not be the most pressing issue on the minds of Albertans. That being said, fish and wildlife species are a very delicate resource. I believe that this Assembly has an opportunity to dedicate monies collected from criminals to help Alberta's conservation efforts. I support the concept of a conservation fund, and I urge all members to vote in favour of Motion 507.

I'd like to say in particular that I know that the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne spends much of his vacation time fishing in beautiful Alberta. I mean, his wife might want that curtailed to have vacations at other places. I know that he really does honour the lakes in this province, and I would like to support this motion and thank him for bringing it forward.

8:20

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise this evening to also put a few thoughts out in favour of Motion 507. First, may I congratulate the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne for bringing this great idea forward.

It's pretty clear, Mr. Speaker, that Motion 507 is intended to address some behaviours we'd like to discourage in this province, and those are poaching endangered species and creating problems for our environment throughout the province. This is an issue, of course, that we're all very concerned with. Motion 507 would expand the spirit that we see behind Alberta's victims of crime fund, and really it would create new funds that are directly dedicated towards a conservation fund so that we could in fact help to promote some of these endangered species and bring them back to the point where they're more common and not endangered any more.

The problem that we often have in this area is finding the funds in government to dedicate to this program. We have many competitive pulls on us for funding. We have, you know, children that need funding, we have people on disability, we have health care, we have demands for education spending, we have demands for infrastructure and roads, and somehow at the end of that very long line of great needs in this province it's hard to find money sometimes for issues like environment and endangered species and things that perhaps not everyone is well aware of.

This idea, in fact, would help create a dedicated fund that is addressing the problem by going after the people who are creating the problem. It's a concept, I guess, from my experience in corporate troubleshooting in years past, where I used to go in and have to advise people on how they might help create better finances within their companies – you start by looking at: what are the problems in the company, and what's causing them? You start matching revenues to expenses.

Well, if you have expenses that are being incurred in an area and you start looking at the revenues attached to it and you start matching those revenues to expenses, that's how you start finding a proper balance. If something is causing you a lot of expense and has little or no revenue attached to it, in corporations you may have the option of dropping that product line or doing something different, but in government when it comes to environment, it's much more difficult.

By taking some of the fines that we're collecting from people who are breaking the law and applying that to creating a better environment for the endangered species and with these additional revenues going after the people who are poaching and the people who are creating the problem, you're in fact finding, in a sense, a market balance or an invisible hand that would help you address the

problems that are arising here. So it's a concept that is very applicable in the corporate world, and basically it's just taking the same concept and applying it in government to a small but very important area, Mr. Speaker, and that is protecting the environment.

Clearly, it's not a tax when you think about taxation and people being opposed to that. It's not a tax because it really is only applied to people who are breaking the law. I think the general public is very supportive of the idea that if someone is willing to break the law, they should be punished for that and that if their breaking the law causes great damage, they should be greatly punished for breaking the law. Fines commensurate with the damage that they're creating are a very good idea when, I think, it's supported by the public. The greater the damage that they're causing, the greater the fines that we could then collect against it. It is such a significant deterrent and an increasingly significant deterrent that, frankly, it would go a long way, I think, towards solving the problem.

Right now we have a victims' surcharge on fines levied in Alberta in the Alberta Solicitor General's department, and that fund has gone into the victims of crime fund. So we already have a precedent in how this could be used. The act that is before us would allow a surcharge to be added to the penalties associated with various pieces of legislation – that would be, for example, the Wildlife Act and the wildlife regulations and the Fisheries Act and the general fisheries regulations – so it would apply to a number of different areas and cover a wide variety of species that are being poached and being endangered in this province.

It is a significant problem, and that's why I think we should look at passing this motion. You know, this is not a small thing. Undercover operations conducted over the past six years, in fact, found more than 180 individuals and 17 businesses involved with over 1,100 offences. That's an incredible number of offences under the Wildlife Act and the Fisheries Act. Consequently, this is not a small problem. This is something we really should be addressing.

Of course, wildlife enforcement is part of Alberta's broader goals not only in improving the environment but educating the public about wildlife issues, and we'd like to ensure compliance with the regulations. Sometimes there's an issue where people are not aware of what they are doing and not aware of the fact that they are creating an environmental problem, so we do need education. Of course, where does the money come from to do that? This could also perhaps help do an education piece in which people are informed about the issue and therefore are not out breaking the law, endangering species, and that, of course, is a highly desirable direction to go in as well.

We do have a number of fish and wildlife officers. They are highly trained, but they just can't get to everybody out there without very much funding. We do have I guess about 200 fish and wildlife division staff with Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, and they do their best, but with 3 million people in the province obviously that doesn't go that far.

The overall idea of allocating surcharges from fish and wildlife offences would help fund important conservation and protection initiatives. That's really the main thrust of this motion. Increasing the existing surcharge or, in fact, adding another surcharge for the conservation fund will definitely offer a stronger financial deterrent, especially when you start dealing with repeat offenders. The very notion of a repeat offender by definition means that the deterrent was not significant enough. If we start looking at whether or not there are repeat offenders, well, clearly they weren't deterred by the current fines and penalties. That's another argument in favour of surcharges being added here, because clearly there have been repeat offenders.

The creation of this fund would create an opportunity for the

government to dedicate revenue to initiatives that enforce laws that protect Alberta's fish and wildlife. It would basically have a real deterrent effect on illegal hunting and fishing practices. Of course, we have seen in Alberta, particularly in the last decade, some pretty significant environmental problems coming up. We hear about lakes that have no fish in them any more. We see fewer and fewer animals. And it's not just the poaching or anything else: the dry weather patterns, the forest fires that we have seen, a number of environmental factors, much less water in the rivers. So the fish and wildlife in Alberta are clearly under stress already just from normal weather patterns and other issues coming to bear recently.

That makes it all the more incumbent on this government to do as much as we possibly can to reduce the human-caused stress on fish and wildlife in this province. This motion speaks to that and, in fact, would go a long way to reducing the human-caused injuries to the environment. As I mentioned, there is a fair bit of this poaching and a fair number of offences – 1,100 offences are a lot – so we definitely need to do something about it.

In the past three years fines imposed on and collected from those who violated Alberta's wildlife and fisheries laws already total \$1.6 million. The victims' surcharges collected were approximately \$300,000, or about \$100,000 per year. This is over three years. The addition of another \$100,000 per year could support several areas that protect and manage Alberta's game species and species at risk. For example, with that kind of funding we could get night vision, remote monitoring equipment, and other high-technology devices that would help our 200 officers go after these poachers and help them catch them.

The surcharge would have a multiplier effect. Not only would the extra \$100,000 go a long way to getting this extra equipment, but they would catch more offenders and levy more fines and penalties as well and, hopefully, really bring this sort of activity to a stop. So there's a multiplier effect on this surcharge that is being proposed.

I realize, you know, that there are some arguments against this. We hear arguments that if this department is allowed to collect fines and keep those fines within the department, there may be other departments that wish to do the same thing. It's long been an item of contention. For example, in Calgary we always had lots of contention that the police were allowed to do the photoradar and that they're allowed to keep those revenues, and there's always the question of: are they doing the photoradar properly, in a fair manner, or has it turned into a cash cow for the department? I'm sure those arguments will continue, but clearly a significant portion of the police budget in Calgary now comes from that revenue.

I could go on, Mr. Speaker, but I just urge everyone to speak in favour. Thank you.

8:30

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo*.

Mr. Cernaiko: Thank you very much and good evening, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to join debate on Motion 507. I'd like to congratulate and thank the hon. Member for *Whitecourt-Ste. Anne* for taking the initiative to introduce Motion 507.

This is a very timely and sensible initiative that I think will prove to be of great benefit to all Albertans both today and in the years ahead. Whether you're a person who is at his or her best when you're outdoors or someone for whom an armchair is the place to be, I'm sure that most Albertans are in agreement when it comes to our environment. It is something that we must treat with great care and respect not only because it behooves us to do that but perhaps even more importantly because it will be passed on to future generations.

Not only will they deserve to get as much pleasure and wonderment from the environment at that time as we do in the present, but also in what shape they find it will reflect on us to a great extent.

As a society we are fully aware, I'm sure, that poaching has been and continues to be a very real problem. The lure of a rare bird or mammal, the temptation to overcatch fish and sell it at a pure profit, or the desire to simply kill something solely for the sake of the kill: temptations like these are simply too much for some people to handle. I don't know what it is that exerts such an irresistible force on them, and perhaps it doesn't make much difference. The net result is the same: a devastating impact on our wildlife, dissemination of the herds and flocks of many species, and a loss of diversity of wildlife. Taken as a whole, Mr. Speaker, poaching represents a formidable assault on our province and our environment carried out by people who have little or no respect for others.

Mr. Speaker, as we've heard, Motion 507 would levy a surcharge of 15 per cent on the fines levied for anyone caught violating the Wildlife Act or the Fisheries (Alberta) Act. The funds so collected would be deposited in a wildlife conservation fund whose express purpose would be the restoration of species disseminated by the poacher's dastardly activities.

Mr. Speaker, Motion 507 is the right initiative at the right time. I've been advised that in the last six years major undercover operations resulted in charges being laid for more than 180 individuals and 17 businesses. Collectively they were charged with over 1,100 offences under the Wildlife Act and the Fisheries Act and attendant regulations. During the last three years alone convictions for violations of Alberta's wildlife and fisheries laws have netted close to \$1.6 million. Knowing just how active the poachers who were caught must have been, I cringe at the thought that for every poacher who gets caught and punished, there are several more who get away whose deeds go unnoticed and unpunished.

Mr. Speaker, this is a longstanding problem. We've been aware of and seen the effects of what poachers do for many, many years. Thus far the penalties we offer in exchange for what they do seem not to have been a sufficient deterrent. If they were, I doubt very much whether we'd be discussing this issue here tonight.

In Swedish there's an old expression that when translated says that you don't notice the cow until the pen is empty. What that means, Mr. Speaker, is this: when you take things for granted, you tend not to acknowledge the importance of something or someone until one day when you notice that it's missing. While I certainly think that most if not all Albertans are fully aware that we live in one of the most scenic and beautiful parts of the world, I think there are times when we just take this beauty for granted. It's as if we are inclined to think that because it was there when we got here, it will also be here when we leave.

Well, Mr. Speaker, part of that beauty comes from the great number and variety of species that call our forests, our rivers and lakes, our fields, our meadows, and our mountains home. Who has not been awestruck by eagles or other birds of prey? Who has not looked at deer in flight and noticed how graceful they are? Who has not found the sight of enormous schools of fish remarkable as they move through the crystal-clear waters? These are the very sights that poachers threaten. These are but a few of the species that populate our wilderness and make it such a treasure not just for Albertans but for people from all over the world.

Let us not forget that tourism generates about \$5 billion in economic activity for Alberta each year. One of the foremost reasons why people come here is to experience nature and the outdoors, something many of them cannot do in the towns, cities, or countries where they live. We have something they don't, and we give them an opportunity to experience something once that we can experience almost every day.

Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, as is the case so often in situations like these, there are those who will go to great lengths to spoil the fun, to destroy the experiences that others would otherwise enjoy.

Motion 507 will not end poaching as we know it once and for all. Poachers will continue to violate the law, and they will continue to place their own perverted interests and desires ahead of those of others. However, Motion 507 will provide a deterrent. It will I believe give some would-be poachers pause and allow them to consider the risks of poaching in Alberta. It will I hope lead them to reconsider and refrain from engaging in such appalling behaviour.

For those reasons, Mr. Speaker, I wholeheartedly support Motion 507 and the implementation of a 15 per cent surcharge to be dedicated to wildlife conservation and restoration activities in our beautiful province, and I urge all members of this House to do the same.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise this evening in support of Motion 507 and in support of my colleague from Whitecourt-St. Anne. I have to go back a number of years, Mr. Speaker, to lay a bit of groundwork for my support of this particular motion. As many members will know, I actually reside in a part of Alberta where hunting and fishing are kind of in your backyard, and I mean literally in my particular case in your backyard. The serious situation with respect to predation and poaching by certain members of the hunting community with respect to this particular resource and, I might add, what we think is an extremely important resource in the province of Alberta has been, as has been indicated, a very serious problem for a number of years.

I'll go back, Mr. Speaker, to a time in the mid-70s, probably 1973, '74, when we used to go in – guides were common in those days in the mountains west of Grande Prairie – to some beautiful lakes in that part of the world and fish. Partly the advent of industrial activity, partly the availability of things like charter helicopters and other modes of transportation opened up that part of the world. I can stand here this evening and tell you that in places like Belcourt Lake, where we used to go and legitimately fish for beautiful cutthroat trout, today that fishery is closed. The reason for it is totally, totally because of illegal fishing in those particular parts of the world.

In the mid-60s I did a lot of stream fishing along little creeks in the area that I lived in – Eagle Creek, Windfall, Rainbow Creek, the Simonette, Waskahigan, the Little Smoky River, and all of those places – in those years and into the mid-70s and early 80s. Mr. Speaker, they were wonderful places to visit for even two or three hours on an afternoon. You could take your son, park, and walk up some of those little creeks two or three hours, catch a couple of fish, have a beautiful experience doing it. I have to say that for the large part that particular enjoyment is now a piece of history and, again, mainly because of situations where people did not respect, number one, the resource and, secondly, the law.

8:40

The Little Smoky River, of particular interest to me, and of course the Waskahigan: I live about a half a mile from where these rivers converge. The headwaters of the Little Smoky still are reasonably good fishing, but anything much past where it comes out to highway 43, the north/south trade corridor, Mr. Speaker, you can pretty much forget fishing. If you want to just go for an afternoon to get wet, it's all right, but the fishing there has certainly gotten to the point where because of pressure, mainly from people who won't observe the rules, it's really become more of a situation where you've got to get farther and farther into the wilderness in order to enjoy it.

There's been some discussion, and rightfully so, with respect to dedicated revenue. Mr. Speaker, I have to put myself on record as being one of the individuals in this government that feels that there are certain circumstances where dedicated revenue is warranted. I believe that this is one of those circumstances.

We have a particular problem. We have a tremendous resource. We have at the moment a very difficult time putting enough presence on the ground in places in Alberta where it can actually make a difference. There is in my opinion a shortage of officers necessary to do the work that's required with respect to maintaining and protecting game species and species at risk in Alberta.

Certainly, in northwestern Alberta one of the most common complaints that we would get from avid hunters, fishermen, guides, and even people in the general public, Mr. Speaker, is that fish and wildlife, Sustainable Resource Development, do not have enough presence on the ground. I believe that this particular initiative could assist us in that respect.

I'm also a landowner in that particular part of the world, south of Valleyview along the Smoky River and the Waskahigan. We've owned land there for 40 years. Mr. Speaker, I have to say that the pressure on private land is another one of the problems associated with this particular initiative. There's a lot of pressure on private land, I believe, mainly because it's easy and, secondly, the penalties that are there are very, very difficult to enforce. I believe that an initiative such as this will increase the awareness of the problem and perhaps assist the officers that we do have to make some inroads into this particular problem as it relates to private landowners and their problem with illegal hunting.

Mr. Speaker, I'll close by saying that throughout the relatively short history of my family in Alberta we always until this generation were hunters and fishermen. My father and my grandfather before him told me on many occasions that there's absolutely nothing wrong with hunting what you eat as long as you eat what you kill.

We have a particular problem with individuals that kind of manoeuvre around slightly outside the bounds of the regulations and the law, and I believe that any initiative that we can put forward as a government to assist the guiding community, the people that enjoy hunting and fishing, the people that make good use of this resource and enjoy it in maintaining that right for future Albertans and curtailing the problem that we have with respect to individuals that operate illegally can be nothing but a positive. I am pleased to be able to support Motion 507.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to continue the debate surrounding Motion 507. The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne has asked the Assembly to support the concept of levying a surcharge on top of fines that are imposed for illegal hunting and fishing offences in Alberta. I'd like to begin my remarks by saying that I fully support this motion because I believe that harsher penalties are in order for offences of this nature. These people are breaking laws as surely as the person who is driving while intoxicated or an individual that is committing tax evasion.

These laws and regulations are in place for a reason, but there is a more cavalier attitude towards them because they can be perceived as not affecting people. I feel that these types of crimes are serious and they should be treated as such. They do not directly affect one person or a small group of people as other crimes tend to, but they affect Alberta and its people as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, passing Motion 507 will serve to accomplish two goals. First, by levying a surcharge on top of the existing fines, it

will effectively increase the penalty to be paid by those who break these laws, and secondly, these lawbreakers will be directly funding a pool that will be used to improve wildlife management in Alberta.

The proper management of Alberta's natural resources is an issue that concerns every person in this province. By properly managing Alberta's natural areas and wildlife populations, we can ensure that these areas and animals will continue to thrive for generations to come.

For myself I would expect that for most Albertans this would be reason enough to work for proper management. However, there is another, perhaps more concrete reason to ensure that our environment is sustained. This one reason is economics.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta attracts thousands of visitors each year. These people are both intranational and international tourists. They come to Alberta for the great natural beauty that our province offers. They come to ski in the Rockies, hike in our parks, and see the rugged beauty of Alberta. These people also come to see the wildlife that is abundant in our province. The herds of elk in the provincial and federal parks draw tourists as well as the fishing that is available in Alberta's lakes and rivers and streams. It is Alberta's natural spaces that draw tourists and their dollars into our province. The tourism industry in Alberta provides over 120,000 jobs for Albertans.

In addition to tourism, Alberta is also attractive to the film industry for the same reasons. It is imperative that our natural resources be afforded every protection that we can offer, not only because of the economic implications attached to it but also so that future Albertans are able to enjoy the same natural habitats that we enjoy right now.

Mr. Speaker, there exists a precedent for this type of surcharge on fines right here in Alberta. The Alberta Solicitor General is responsible for administering a 15 per cent surcharge on all provincial fines assessed in Alberta. This 15 per cent is used to service the victims of crime fund, a fund that provides services directly to victims as well as assistance to organizations that provide support to victims. This fund is not tied to a specific department or program but is available for those persons who have become victims of violent or serious crime.

The motion sponsored by the hon. member asks that the Assembly urge the government to install a similar fund. This fund would be specifically dedicated to financing programs and initiatives that would enhance our understanding of wildlife populations and could lead to the institution of better conservation measures.

To me a fund of this type makes sense. A person that is caught poaching fish or wildlife has committed an act that has the potential to permanently damage a specific wildlife population. As they have committed a crime affecting the environment, it seems fitting to me that part of the punishment they are subjected to should serve to benefit the environment. The money that is gained from this surcharge can be used to fund extra wildlife surveys and other programs on top of the efforts currently made by Sustainable Resource Development.

Currently, judges presiding over cases that are tried in court have the option of issuing court orders that would contribute to the protection of the environment. An example of this is the judgment that was passed in 2003 on a poacher and wildlife trafficker. This individual was ordered to pay \$20,000 after he was found guilty as charged. This money was used to conduct an aerial survey to measure the effects of poaching on big-game populations in a northern Alberta region. Motion 507 would serve to expand this reasoning to apply to all incidents of this nature.

8:50

By levying a set surcharge on fines, all persons who break these

laws would be subject to equal treatment. It is entirely possible that increasing the penalties that must be paid will be a more effective deterrent to those considering perpetrating crimes of this nature.

Mr. Speaker, it is for these reasons that I support Motion 507. I feel that the idea it puts forward holds within it the possibility of curbing poaching and other crimes against wildlife that occur in our province far too often. Therefore, I would ask all members of this Assembly on both sides of the Chamber to support this motion as well.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure. We only have about a minute left.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne for bringing this motion forward. I think it is a very timely one and one that we need to take very seriously and give due consideration.

Mr. Speaker, the motion talks just about a surcharge, but I believe there's another element that we need to look at. That is the whole concept of having through the court system alternate penalties, and by that I mean having the judges allocate portions of the fine money to specific programs. I'm thinking along the line of a lot of the conservation programs that are out there to assist in bringing back the species that are endangered or at risk. What can we do to enhance their habitat? What can we do to protect them in that manner? Quite frankly, in a lot of cases that will probably do more for the wildlife than just simply increasing the number of wildlife officers.

I wholeheartedly agree that we do need to have more officers out there, but in a lot of cases it's the degradation of the habitat that has caused a lot of the problem. I don't mean for one moment to ever suggest that I'm condoning poaching, because certainly that is also a very important problem that we have, and of course the increased number of officers and new technology and equipment would go a long way to answer that question. But with the combination of conservation programs that would enhance the habitat and increased wildlife officers, I believe that it would go a long way to help.

I listened with great interest to the Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky, and he talked about having all this wildlife in his backyard. I have the same situation.

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Infrastructure, but under Standing Order 8(4), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a motion other than a government motion to close debate, I would invite the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne to close debate on Motion 507.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to all the members that took the time to raise issues.

The issues raised by the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul talked about dedicated revenues, including the full fine revenue. A great idea, and I thank him for that.

The Member for Red Deer-North expanded on the role of conservation officers and the need to equip them with the tools to do the job. I think this is something that I've heard over and over again from the conservation officers in my area.

The Member for Calgary-Shaw did point out that this is not just a rural issue. You know, the city of Calgary has a world-known trout fishery right within the city, and the Bow River is a great trout fishery.

The Member for Calgary-Currie pointed out how all Albertans are

affected by those that abuse our fish and wildlife laws with over 1,100 abusers convicted last year alone. That's why I like the concepts of this motion: again, abuser pay.

The Member for Calgary-Buffalo, in his lifelong career enforcing the laws of this land, expanded on the problems that occur by not paying attention to these very serious issues. He explained very well why we must pay attention to this and the whole issue of the problems that we have in not restoring a fishery or something similar.

The Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky gave us some history on the fishery in northern Alberta and how things are today. Well, every river and stream that he talked about are places that my father took me fishing, but sadly to say, my dad didn't take his grandchildren because of the pressures on the fishery in about half of those rivers and streams.

I thank the Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose that brought up the economic points of why we need as government to fund our programs and departments properly.

And, too, the Member for Rocky Mountain House raised some great ideas to enhance our species and habitat that effect his area.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that out of all of this come some serious points, you know, the serious points raised this evening. I need the ministers of Economic Development, Finance, Revenue, and Sustainable Resources to take this debate very seriously and draft some meaningful legislation to address the seriousness of this motion. I think that the idea for me raising this through a motion was to do exactly what was done tonight, to bring out some discussion on how we can do this. I'm not saying that Motion 507 addresses it all, but it will give those ministers the ammunition they need to draft some good legislation.

Mr. Speaker, at this point I'll call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion Other than Government Motion 507 carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:57 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

For the motion:

Ady	Hlady	Melchin
Amery	Jablonski	Oberg
Blakeman	Jacobs	O'Neill
Boutilier	Johnson	Rathgeber
Broda	Knight	Stelmach
Cao	Lord	Stevens
Cenaiko	Lougheed	Strang
Danyluk	Lund	Taylor
DeLong	Magnus	VanderBurg
Doerksen	Maskell	Vandermeer
Dunford	Massey	Yankowsky
Goudreau	McClelland	Zwozdesky
Graham		

Totals:	For – 37	Against – 0
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[Motion Other than Government Motion 507 carried]

head: 9:10 **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Innovation and Science

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Orders the first hour is dedicated between the hon. minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We are here to look over the estimates for Alberta Innovation and Science, but before I begin, I should let the Assembly know that we have staff members from the Department of Innovation and Science in the gallery today, and I'd like to introduce them to the Assembly. They say that you're only as good as the people that work with you, and these people are very good, so I guess that makes me – well, you can fill in the blanks. So thank you very much to the staff for being here. They will be taking note of the comments, and if I'm not able to provide specific enough information tonight to the questions, they will follow up with information in writing.

I'd like to provide a brief overview of our business and financial plan, which are based on our commitment to two major core businesses, the first one being research and innovation and the second being corporate information and communications technology. Alberta Innovation and Science provides leadership and makes strategic investments in science and technology, which contributes to the sustainable development of the Alberta economy. That contribution helps to make the province increasingly competitive in global markets and positions Alberta as an attractive place for world-class researchers to come and to work.

Alberta Innovation and Science has three strategic research priorities in energy, information communications technology, and life sciences, and we're also focused on technology commercialization. We continue to look for ways to diversify the economy and to find the mechanisms to enable that to happen and to be able to invest in our future. Mr. Chairman, we look for ways to transform the delivery of government programs and services through ICT. I'm proud that we are part of the overall government plan for the next 20 years, and our business plan addresses key strategies needed to unleash innovation.

We're also committed to the other pillars of the government plan with respect to leading in learning, building the research capability and capacity to enable that key pillar to progress. Competing in the global marketplace, of course, is another one of the pillars, and we do that through the Alberta SuperNet technology commercialization and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. Long-term goals and a commitment to build a solid foundation for the future are key components of the plan.

Mr. Chairman, under core business 1, research and innovation, the vote estimate for research and development in 2004-05 is \$117.8 million. That's found on page 238 of the estimates. Goal 1 under that core business is to build Alberta's research capacity.

Mr. Chairman, I'd be remiss at this point if I didn't pay a small tribute to the outgoing chair of the Alberta Science and Research Authority, which is a key advisory body which advises the government of Alberta through this ministry in particular. Dr. Bob Church has served this province extraordinarily over many, many years. He

has provided advice to a multitude of government ministers and government people, and his work and contribution cannot be overstated. We have designated Dr. Church as chairman emeritus of the Alberta Science and Research Authority in honour of his contribution to this province. He assured me that I could hang on to his phone number, and we have done that.

In building Alberta's research capacity, we continue to build that research system through a skilled workforce, through internationally recognized research capabilities in areas of strategic priority, and a supportive environment that encourages innovation and collaboration. Some of the key initiatives in this area have been the National Institute for Nanotechnology, which is the first national institute in the province of Alberta and housed here in the city of Edmonton at the University of Alberta. We do this through the health research innovation centres which are currently under construction in both Calgary and Edmonton. We support our researchers through the Alberta science and research investment program and expand our efforts using leverage opportunities from the Canadian Foundation for Innovation.

Mr. Chairman, I want to reference one other program, just by way of example, in terms of some of the things that don't necessarily come to the attention of people but which are really significant, and that would be the Banff International Research Station. This is a collaborative Canada/U.S. venture that operates an international centre for mathematical innovation and discovery and is the only facility of its kind in North America. It's a fulfillment of a remarkable effort led by the Pacific Institute for Mathematical Sciences and the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute.

ASRA supported BIRS to the amount of \$1.7 million to enable this initiative to proceed. Other partners were Natural Science and Engineering Research, which contributed 1 and a half million dollars, the U.S. National Science Foundation in the amount of \$1.2 million, and PIMS and MITACS for \$1.3 million.

Projects undertaken at BIRS bring some of the world's leading experts in mathematics and science to Alberta. Mr. Chairman, the Minister of Economic Development could pay attention to this kind of strategic tourism initiative because not only does it bring the top mathematical people to Alberta, to our province, not only does it allow them to do their scientific and mathematical development, but it allows them to be tourists in one of the most spectacular places in the world, and of course that's in Banff. So we get a tremendous spinoff by having that important research station in Banff.

Mr. Chairman, moving on to goal 2, we talk about the energy innovation priorities. Of course, in this area I'm guided by the good advice of the Alberta Energy Research Institute, that implements the energy innovation strategy. We are focusing on the priority areas of oil sands upgrading, clean carbon technologies, and CO₂ management among others. Some of the specific examples in that area include the research called the Dover/Vapex heavy oil extraction project, which is underway. We have a fuel cell project that is currently operating, and I understand successfully, at NAIT. Of course, there's a lot of work going on right now at EnergyINet, trying to bring the collaboration of all Canadians – universities, the two levels of government, research institutions, and industry – together to solve a common problem.

Goal 3, Mr. Chairman, talks about ICT innovation. Again, following the commitment in the throne speech, we will look to the formation of an ICT institute to guide our research and innovation. This goes back about five years to when we first announced our ICT strategy. From that was the formation of the Alberta SuperNet, the formation of ICORE, and the formation of encouraging the increase of spaces in our universities and colleges in this important area. We want to use this opportunity now to update that strategy and to look forward to the next five years in terms of what's important.

In the particular research area, Mr. Chairman, we continue to invest in high-priority ICT research areas like wireless, high-performance computing, nanotechnology on a chip, among several.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

Goal 4 talks about life sciences innovation. Again, the throne speech talked about creating a life sciences institute, which will link and co-ordinate agriculture, environment, forestry, health, bioenergy, and water research. Mr. Chairman, this is a very important area of focus for us and one that we will be paying more attention to over the next years. We are working closely with the Alberta Agricultural Research Institute and the Alberta Forestry Research Institute, finding ways to collaborate and bring platform areas of research together to make sure we can have the maximum impact for the work that we do.

9:20

Goal 5 is a globally competitive economy, and our priority there, Mr. Chairman, is to create an environment where ideas are developed and commercialized. We support the implementation of the value-added strategy, which was released last week and is one that sets the plan for the Alberta economy over the next 10 to 20 years. Our role in that strategy is to make sure that we provide the innovation capability that is necessary for these strategies to occur.

Core business 2 relates to our corporate information and communications technology. This plan is supported by a new strategic direction for the use of ICT by government, and in accordance with this, in October we created the office of the corporate chief information officer to focus on the transformation of delivery of government programs and services through the innovative use of ICT. Updating the ICT strategy, as I referred to earlier, to reflect the change in the technology and the changing business needs of the government is important in terms of our delivery to Alberta's citizens. Investments in ICT must be carefully planned and implemented to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks.

Mr. Chairman, the government is always looking at new ways to interact with Albertans and looking at new ways of delivering programs, services, and access to information for Alberta's citizens.

The voted estimates for the corporate ICT strategy, which excludes the SuperNet build for 2004-05, is \$58.4 million, and that amount does include \$12 million for SuperNet amortization. You can see that at page 240 of the estimates.

Goal 6 under this core business talks about an integrated ICT strategy. We want to establish and implement cross-government business and technical standards and continue to implement the government of Alberta enterprise architecture framework, which minimizes duplication in government. We are working with Alberta Government Services to develop a corporate electronic information management framework and also using the corporate project management office for promoting ICT project management best practices.

Key initiatives in this area. We're currently working on developing a business plan around the ICT service co-ordinator strategy that will help us to align ICT investments and maximize our benefits to government and to utilize ICT to provide services to Albertans by ministries or service delivery partners. We must ensure that technical standards best practices are used in system design and business standards that are adopted across government.

Goal 7 talks about the ICT infrastructure, and of course the priorities in there are to complete the Alberta SuperNet build and to develop and implement a common, shared ICT infrastructure.

The voted estimates for the SuperNet build in 2004-05 are \$41 million, and that's on page 241 of the estimates.

Goal 8 refers to using ICT to improve service delivery in the government. Our priorities are to identify, evaluate, adopt, and implement approaches to improve service delivery and/or reduce costs and to leverage the capability of the Alberta SuperNet to transform the delivery of programs and services to Albertans. We wish to optimize the internal administration of government by re-engineering business processes to make them more efficient.

One of the key initiatives that has taken place in this area is Service Alberta, which is a web site that provides citizen access to many services inside government. We want to eliminate unnecessary duplication in application development, and of course, Mr. Chairman, we're always looking for improved productivity of employees due to the use of the tool of information technology.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, Alberta's blueprint to unleashing innovation is to support research and attract skilled workers and investment. The most important element in any innovative economy is having the right people here to help us do the right things. We want to create an environment where research is applied to produce new products, processes, and services that are commercialized in Alberta and to use technology to improve the delivery of programs and services to Albertans.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our priorities. I look forward to answering any questions. As I indicated earlier, should I not be able to answer them in their entirety, we will provide a written response.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods, who has allowed me to jump the queue in order to get in some of the questions that I wanted to make sure I had enough time to ask.

In the first question I'll reference something that the minister brought up. Looking at page 240 of the estimates, under vote 3.4.4, Alberta SuperNet, the minister, if I heard him correctly, said that the \$12 million that's reflected here is an amortization payment. I'm asking him to expand on that and to give some details. If it is an amortization, is this the beginning of the amortization period then? There's no payment in that vote that appears in previous years, and I'm wondering how this relates to the \$193 million total cost of the SuperNet. I'm wondering if that \$12 million is included in the \$41 million that is noted as capital investment to be voted on for this department.

So if I could get some details on that, please. That was not what I was expecting him to say that that \$12 million meant.

Dr. Massey: Are you going to let him answer?

Ms Blakeman: No. I'm going to put all my questions on the record and then let him answer.

I also note that on page 302 of the ministry business plans document there are a number of strategies that are outlined for the SuperNet and some performance measurements as well. Under the strategy of co-ordinating and managing the Alberta SuperNet operations for the government, I'm wondering if this department is charged with controlling the costs of the SuperNet. Under that would also come co-ordinating the costs of the SuperNet.

From questions asked in question period, we started to establish that not only is money being spent from this department on SuperNet, but it's also being drawn increasingly from other departments like Learning and Municipal Affairs to help pay for things like the connection costs for municipal buildings and libraries and schools. I'm interested in whether the minister is able to provide me with a

total cost paid out by the government from all departments in this fiscal year on the cost of the SuperNet including the assistance which is being offered to various municipalities, libraries, educational institutions to help with the additional charges that the opposition has brought to light. That is not only what I would call the capital cost of laying the backbone and the actual connections, but then there's a connection cost to actually meld the two wires together.

9:30

Then there's a service cost that is billed on a monthly basis. We were in Daysland, and that library was struggling because they were going to be assessed \$250 a month for – sorry; not the hookup. The hookup charge comes first, then comes a monthly service charge, and then they still have to get in touch with Shaw or Telus or whoever and actually get hooked up to the Internet.

So there are a lot of additional costs that are coming up, and I'm wondering if the minister is able to provide us with a total cost that the government is expecting to spend. In other words, as the co-ordinator can he pull those numbers together from all of the departments?

I'm also interested in the contracts with Bell, who is the primary contractor for the SuperNet. How are those contracts (a) monitored, (b) reviewed, and (c) enforced? I'd like to get some working detail on how that happens. I'm also interested in how the contracts with Axia are monitored, reviewed, and enforced. Further to that, where Axia has access to government-owned equipment, how is Axia's use of that equipment monitored for appropriate use? Still on Axia, do all payments to Axia flow through Bell?

Is the minister able to tell us if Bell is taking a management percentage or a cut or a subcontractor fee or a general contractor fee? I'm fishing here for the right words. What I'm trying to find out is: is there a contract set up with Axia and Bell takes its 10 per cent off the top and off goes the money to Axia? Do we know what that percentage is that's going to Bell, if there is one, and what it covers? Management: are they doing the monitoring and enforcement? What's the deal here? How is this controlled?

I'd also like to hear some detail from the minister on the arising complexities around wireless technology and the SuperNet. Now, I think I heard the minister respond to one of my questions by saying, "No problem; the SuperNet is wireless," which I thought was a bit odd because there was all that money to lay the cables and stuff in the ground. But if it's wireless, as well, then perhaps he could explain how that works or what he meant by that response to me.

Now, on pages 302 and 303 of the ministry business plans, under Performance Measures there are some numbers here that are causing me concern. There may well be a very good explanation for this, but I'm just an Albertan looking at these numbers right now. What the performance measurement around the extended area network is telling me – there's a sort of chart laid out here in which we're given the total connections or total kilometres, in some cases, of line, one assumes, and then a column for "in place", "in progress", and "to complete."

When I look at the bottom half of the list, I'm looking at numbers that are significantly under 50 per cent complete. I start looking at wireless towers: a total there of 101; to complete, 70. So significantly more than 50 per cent still to go, and these are all to be available in 2004. Well, we're a few days shy of the fifth month in 2004. Now, I understand that it's reasonable that there would be significant progress made over the summer months, but I'm also aware that they've been working all winter. So I am very interested in whether the minister is confident that these performance measures will be achieved, because it strikes me that we are – well, if I were managing this project, I'd be pretty nervous about any kind of early completion bonus. Let me put it that way.

Following down that list then, wireless shelters: 83 in total and 57 to go. Communities fully connected: 402; 391 to go, so we've only got 11 in place, and we're five months into this year in which we're supposed to have all of these connected. Government facilities fully connected: 558; to complete, 526. We've only done 32 of them. Health facilities fully connected: 201 is the goal; 185 to go, not completed in other words. Libraries fully connected: 244; to go, 237. We've only got seven of them done; that is, connected. That's not the hookup, that's not the monthly service fee, and it's not the Internet provision. Schools fully connected: 883 is listed; 835 to go. Only 48 of them are finished, in, done, complete, finito.

When I look at the base area network, which is performance measure 2, again "SuperNet services available from Bell West in 2004." I'm assuming they mean by December of 2004, and these numbers are all status as of January 15. Again, I'm only picking the ones off the list that are significantly worse than 50 per cent incomplete. So government facilities connected: I'm assuming here that we're talking about what I would know as the backbone as compared to the extended area network. We're looking for 744; we've got 526 to complete, like five-sevenths to go. Health care facilities connected: 258 is the goal; 242 to go – in other words, incomplete. Libraries connected: 65; to complete, 63. Schools connected: 1,231; to go, 1,203.

So this isn't looking very good. It's possible that I'm misunderstanding something significant here, but I don't think I am. I've been watching this and consulting with people and going out to centres and looking, and I'm pretty sure that I understand what's going on here. So these don't look hopeful.

What's in that contract? Is that contract from Bell available? Can I get that somewhere? Is it on your web site or something? Can you let me know that? Because I'm wondering about completion targets. Are there penalties for not being complete? If Bell is implementing at least the base area network, which I would call the backbone, and they don't get this stuff done – and, frankly, from here they're a long way off – what kind of retribution do we stand in line to get from them for failing to achieve these completion dates? Who is responsible if we don't complete the ones under the extended area network under performance measure 1?

So those are the issues and concerns I have. As you can see, Mr. Minister, I'm mostly concerned about, you know: what is the contract? What are we laying out here? What did we expect? What's in place if it doesn't go well? Where are we right now? It doesn't look good, having read off our status as of January 15. Who's responsible for monitoring Bell, and who's responsible for monitoring Axia?

Now, my concern here, Mr. Minister, when I keep bringing up Axia, is that thus far I've only heard the government talk about Axia as a subcontractor of Bell, and I have serious concerns that this could get away from us, that if there were concerns about any of the work from Axia, in fact the government wouldn't be on top of it and wouldn't be monitoring it and wouldn't be able to catch it and wouldn't have any monetary recouping mechanisms or processes in place or any punishments in place because this is all a contract of a contract. Also, I know that in some cases Axia has access to equipment that's owned by the government. How do we know that they're using that government equipment appropriately? Who is monitoring them?

9:40

This is a business that works very quickly. The government has invested \$200 million. The minister says \$193 million. That's enough to make anybody's head spin and visions of sugar plums to dance in their head. So how are we to be assured that all is progress-

ing as we expect and that appropriate measures are in place to monitor and to enforce? That's overall what I am seeking to be reassured about, because I certainly have some concerns about what's happening here.

I really have concerns that we will spend a lot of money trying to do a good thing, which is to get that broadband out into those communities for their use and, great idea, used by municipal buildings, the schools, the libraries. But what we've done in doing it – and this is essentially a P3. In subcontracting, we (a) lose control of it, and (b) by the time it all gets done, it's too late; technology has passed us by. Everything is now wireless, being beamed down from a satellite somewhere. We didn't need all that wire in the ground or fibre optic cable or however else this is being achieved.

In fact, we cripple our libraries, municipal buildings, schools, and health facilities because we've now hooked them into 10 years' worth of service connection fees at, you know, three grand a year for a library. As we know, having already gone through the Community Development estimates, there is no additional money being forwarded to libraries to cover that \$3,000 cost. So they're now expected to do additional fundraising to come up with that money. If they can't do it – and that's quite possible in some communities – then they've got a bunch of wire sitting in the ground or sitting in the basement that they can't afford to hook up to.

Beyond that, you're now talking all the wonderful equipment that you need to be able to make really good use of that broadband: you know, those whoop-de-do new cameras and the video recording equipment and the sound editors and all the rest of that stuff and the software that makes this all possible. You're not going to do it with an eight-track and some sort of home video camera. So my concern is that we commit our nonprofit public agencies to a significant outlay of money and they are never able to keep up with the requirements in the cash and in the technology and equipment and software to keep up with it. That's where I'm afraid we've gone off the rails on this project.

By the way, the last time I talked about this, Axia sent out some guys in suits from the communications department to talk to me. If they're reading this, they can save themselves the trip this time, because they didn't, obviously, reassure me enough. I did stay quiet for about a year, and now I'm back again because the same concerns are coming up. So the guys in suits can save their time. I'll hear from the minister.

Thank you.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Chairman, I know for sure that the hon. member would not want us to go back to eight-track technology.

I'll try to answer a few. You gave me a barrage, so this might be more broad in its explanations than maybe more specific. But to the specific point of the \$12 million amortization: yes, this is the first year that it's being recorded. This is actually a change in all government accounting procedures in terms of recognizing our capital assets and showing the amortization number, so that is why that is there. The \$12 million amortization figure is not part of the \$41 million. Those are separate figures. The \$41 million completes the cost of building the infrastructure, which is part of the contract, and we have a \$193 million contract.

Now, more to the questions around the contract, performance measures, Bell West, and Axia, let me make some comments that I hope are somewhat connected. Let me start by making sure it's clear we understand that there's infrastructure, and then there's a cost to build the infrastructure which builds the highway which permits the broadband or the traffic to flow along that highway. So there's that element of the cost which is infrastructure. The \$4,000 grant that we

announced to municipalities is part of the infrastructure bill, which only helps them take the infrastructure to their door. So if you can imagine, keep that separate in terms of building the infrastructure.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

From there, in a municipality's case they are responsible, then, to pay the – I'm going to use the word "access" fee, although I think that confuses people. It would be a monthly charge to them to have broadband services, no different than they would have to pay a monthly fee to have telecommunications services. Because we have taken the infrastructure to their door, they can now deliver better quality, different kinds of services because they'll have access to broadband and can use different kinds of technology. So they have a choice to make now in terms of the service levels that they wish to purchase, how much capacity they want to utilize, and that's their decision.

So let's move now to the case of Learning. Learning, through its budgets – and I think that's been explained already in this House – provides the access fee. Again, the schools have to purchase the broadband capacity with a monthly charge. That's provided for in Learning's budget, so Learning provides a certain level of service through their budgeting process. Again, the infrastructure is already there. Now, if you go to Learning's budget, just like the schools have to pay for telecommunications or network services that they already have, they now have competitive rates in all of their schools through the Alberta SuperNet, and they get expanded broadband capabilities and capacities that they didn't have before. I hope that explains keeping the infrastructure separate from, now, the operating cost.

I just want to make sure that I have all my information. The other point that I want to make on the SuperNet I want to make clear because this has come up a few times in questions even in question period. You have to realize that the Alberta SuperNet is more than just Internet. Okay? Internet is a service that runs on top of a network, and the Alberta SuperNet is the network; it's not the service. But you're not having to go somewhere else to purchase the Internet services. [interjection] Well, Mr. Chairman, we'll make sure that this is completely clarified, but that is certainly not my understanding.

The other thing that I want to clarify is that SuperNet provides a dedicated, high-speed broadband telecommunications circuitry where the quality of the service can be guaranteed. This is important for video conferencing or transmitting huge files like X-ray files. Often on the Internet quality can drop off and video-conferencing signals can be lost. With SuperNet this won't happen. All right? So you're getting capacity.

I want to refer the member again to the estimates, and I've got it here somewhere. If she looks on page 240 of the estimates, she will find an operating expense which shows \$14,820,000 for corporate network services. That's to cover the costs that we use on AGN-PAC, which is currently the service that we use to provide data networks to the government, and that will be replaced as the SuperNet infrastructure is built. The data track will now run over SuperNet as opposed to AGNPAC. We will be providing greater bandwidth to more sites for approximately the same cost. So that begins to show you the benefit of the network that we are envisioning. The short answer is that it's more sites, more community service, better service for less money.

9:50

On the contracts between Bell West and Axia, I'm going to be careful here because some of this is likely subject to confidentiality.

I'm going to speak in general terms about this. As part of that, I want to go to the comments you made on performance measures and the build. It was quite clear in this House several times that we had a contractual dispute between Bell and Axia, and that goes back probably a year from now. That did cause us some delays in the build, but we were open with that to the Assembly and in our comments. Axia is no longer engaged in the build of the network. Bell West is solely responsible for the build, and we are working diligently with them to ensure a 2004 completion, so this year.

When you look at the performance measures, you should think of the build in several stages. One would be that the top lines talk about the intercommunity conduit and the intercommunity fibre. You can see the progress that has been made in terms of actually laying the fibre over vast distances across this province. Once you get the conduits and the fibre in place, then you can start taking it into the communities and from the communities into the various buildings. I understand the member's concern on whether we'll get there, and I assure you that we're working diligently to ensure that they live up to their contract to deliver the service on time.

The member mentioned the concept of wireless, and again I want to emphasize, as I think I did in answer to the question, that wireless has always been contemplated as part of the SuperNet build. There are some areas where it just made no practical sense to dig fibre, so we've always contemplated the use of wireless in the network.

We had the question with respect to some of the school boards. The contract that we have requires Bell to deliver the service levels we asked for, and that's the important element, that the schools and the hospitals and the libraries and the government buildings will get the required levels of service that we have indicated have to be met inside of that contract. That's their performance measure, that they can deliver that bandwidth to that area in a reliable manner. We certainly have to sign off on the engineering to make sure that we agree to the service levels that are being delivered.

Those are some general comments around the contracts. Again, for more specific answers, if we can provide them, that aren't in violation of the confidential nature between private business, we'll see how we can address those.

So, Mr. Chairman, I think I will sit down and see if there are some more questions that I can take.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to, if I may, deal specifically with the estimates with respect to programs 1, 2, and 3, starting on page 237. If I could maybe go through them program by program and have the minister respond. With respect to program 1, ministry support services, the first question would be: what is corporate services using the \$608,000 increase in the budget for? And why does the deputy minister's office have a \$105,000 increase in the budget?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Chairman, if I could just beg the indulgence of the member to help me out with what page he's on again.

Dr. Massey: I'm sorry. It's page 237, and it's program 1. It's 1.0.2, the deputy minister's office, and 1.0.4, corporate services.

Mr. Doerksen: Okay. In 1.0.4, under corporate services, the – Mr. Chairman, if you don't mind, on that one we'll provide you more details. I'm just struggling to catch up to my notes here, but carry on.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'm only going to add to your grief, I'm afraid. Program 2, research and innovation, on pages 238 and 239. What is the \$7 million innovation program that's been added to the budget? That's line 2.2.1. Could we have some details of the innovation program? There is a \$2 million addition in the innovation implementation budget. I wonder if the minister could enlighten us in terms of what that is being used for.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Doerksen: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I do want to talk about the \$7 million point that the member has raised. I know I had this information here somewhere. I do beg your indulgence. This is an important question, and I do want to provide the answer to this one.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, in the event that you need to submit the response in writing, that is acceptable as well.

Mr. Doerksen: Okay, Mr. Chairman. I'll try to answer because this is an important question. This is a new program, and it follows from the government's commitment to create an innovation culture in the province of Alberta. We've not completely defined the competition that we're going to have for this money, but it's designed for government departments and agencies to come forward with proposals that will encourage innovation within government service delivery and to see how we can accelerate innovation within the government and also within our agencies.

We're going to have a competition where ministries which require seed capital – this is not ongoing program funding – come up with some innovative suggestion that can improve service delivery to Albertans or can improve our economic performance and perhaps could follow along the lines of something that I commented on with respect to BIRS, where we saw an investment of \$1.7 million from the government over a number of years that brought in outside capital to establish that institute at Banff. It has generated far more economic activity and goodwill and tourism for this province through that initiative than any other kind of program could have done. So that is the \$7 million. It does go out, I think, over three years for a total of \$33 million if I have my numbers right. It's an exciting program, and it's one that we want to use to encourage and develop an innovation culture within the government and its agencies.

10:00

Dr. Massey: Is the assumption that the \$2 million for the innovation implementation in 2.1.1 is part of the same program, or is that different?

Mr. Doerksen: What is happening in there is that there's been a transfer into that fund – if I'm wrong in this, we'll correct it – of the strategic investments research fund from the envelope to do with Alberta science and research, the ASRA program. I moved it under this program to aid our innovation particularly with research and technology commercialization and, again, for strategic innovation kinds of initiatives that will come forward.

Going back to your first question in the first program, some of those costs in office support will go to administrative support for these new programs. That \$7 million will require some administrative due diligence, so some of the increase in the office expenditure shows up in that line from your earlier question, particularly 1.0.4, which you had asked about earlier.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. With respect to the Alberta Forestry Research Institute and the increase in the budget, can we have an explanation as to what that increase is for? Where are the findings of the Alberta Forestry Research Institute reported?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Chairman, the Alberta Forestry Research Institute is co-chaired by the Member for West Yellowhead. He assures me that there is an annual report filed by the Alberta Forestry Research Institute, so you would be able to examine their reports. As a matter of fact, if I look now on my web site here, it should be on there. I don't see it.

Let me assure you that they have developed a research program, particularly in the development of fibre and the uses of fibre, that complements the direction that we're trying to go under our value-added strategy. Rather than just ship raw product out of the province, we want to add value to it. The fibre initiative also begins to move into the life sciences area and agriculture in terms of fibre uses with respect to cereal crops or the straw that comes out of it. I'm not the scientist around it, but they tell me that there are overlapping technologies that are applicable right across the piece, and they're providing us with direction and suggestions in terms of where we should put our research dollars in forestry.

Let me assure you, hon. member, that the amount of increase we were able to give them pales in comparison to the amount that they would really like to see. They keep reminding me that we mustn't forget the amount of impact that the forestry industry has on the provincial economy.

There are reports available.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. I guess that I'll wait for the answer with respect to the increase to the Alberta forestry institute.

If I could move on, Mr. Chairman, a question I had is: why is \$6 million being cut out of the operating expenses grant to the Alberta Science and Research Authority? It's program 2.3.1, and it's the third line, the operating expense line, on page 238.

Mr. Doerksen: Under our objective of increasing research capacity – this isn't going to specifically answer your question, but it's going to answer it in a more general way – we have a number of different program areas that increase the innovation and research capacity in the province. We do this through a number of different programs.

One of the more significant programs, of course, is the competition we have under the Alberta science and research – we call it ASRA – that researchers can apply to to help fund their particular projects. We want them to follow our three strategic thrusts, being energy, ICT, and life sciences. We place a higher importance on those. Also, this is the money that they then use in terms of matching their applications to the federal granting agencies, particularly CFI. In the last couple of weeks we just announced our matching component to the CFI awards, and we were able to accommodate all of the requests that came forward that met the criteria that we were looking for, that met the criteria of the peer-reviewed scientific body to make sure that these were scientifically demonstrable, is the word I think I'm looking for. That's one program.

Also, through the various institutes, the Alberta Energy Research Institute – they work very closely in terms of their program. They work with the research institutions. They work with industry. We use their money to leverage research and innovation not only in the

research institutions but also in industry research for trying to leverage off of our investments and use industry resources, federal government resources. Similarly, Alberta Agricultural Research Institute provides us with key direction in terms of where our thrust should be, and again we use that money for leverage. So we use all of these different programs.

Well, let me talk about another one. ICORE, for instance, informatics centre for research excellence, particularly targets research in the areas of ICT. Their objective was to bring top talent to Alberta. We've been extraordinarily successful in that program bringing top people to our research institutions. The benefit of that is that then they attract top-quality students and other graduates to build a critical mass of people around that area.

10:10

So we use all of these programs, and sometimes you almost have to put the entire package in an envelope to look at the amount of support that we are providing to build the research capacity. The best performance measure to show that, really, is a report that we do in terms of research funding at Alberta universities which shows some very significant increases. If you go back to '91-92, for instance, total sponsored research revenue to Alberta universities was \$143 million, and if you fast-forward to 10 years later, '02-03, we were up at \$434 million in total sponsored research. They're able to do this because of some of the programs that we use to help them leverage industry money and federal granting agency monies.

That's pretty general, hon. member, and we'll get you more specifics through the written answers.

Dr. Massey: I was looking for the \$6 million.

Because of the time, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask maybe just a couple of questions and leave them with the minister.

I've got questions about the objective of trying to increase the number of Albertans working in the information and communications technology sector. What impact does having contracts for programming going to international companies like IBM have on that objective? Related to that is: how many companies does the government use for IT technology and outsource their programming to places in the Far East?

I'm looking at, I guess, the outsourcing of jobs really, and I notice in the performance measure – sorry; I'm not quite sure where it is right now – that the goal is that there would be 500 less workers in the ICT sector next year than this year, if I remember that. Yes. It's on page 297. Last year the actual number of Albertans employed in the ICT sector was 54,500, and the target for 2004-2005 is 54,000. So I think the questions are related to that performance measure, Mr. Chairman.

A related question, I guess. On page 295 of the business plan one of the strategies is to encourage youth to enter careers in science and technology. I wonder if there's information on the impact of tuition on those programs and if anything has been looked at in terms of what is being done at universities in the way of increasing the number of students that choose IT as a career.

I think those are some of the general questions that I'd leave with the minister for response. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Doerksen: If I could provide a brief response, would that be acceptable?

Just in terms of the number of ICT employees one of the benefits or disadvantages of having a performance target is that you need to report on it, and without question the IT sector has undergone some severe downturns over the last number of years. Actually, I think that in view of what was experienced globally, Alberta did excep-

tionally well in terms of pretty much maintaining our ICT base and have positioned ourselves well as we come out of that decline.

In terms of outsourcing I'm not aware of any outsourcing that we do in the Far East. As a matter of fact, on that issue Alberta is viewed as a place to outsource because we have a very talented workforce and we're in fairly close proximity to of course our major trading partner, the United States, and are a stable political climate. We are actually ranked very highly in terms of countries, including Far East countries, in terms of being a place to have outsourcing done. So that's actually a growth area.

I don't want to get into a debate on tuition. We certainly do encourage youth in the science and technology areas. Mr. Chairman, in terms of whether it has any impact on science or technology, I don't think so. I think what we're trying to do is encourage some interest in those areas, and the financial question comes at a different place. Clearly, we have programs that are trying to encourage youth with respect to science; for instance, our support of science fairs. We have a function called Scitechweek, and we try to engage all of our schools in this area. So we do a lot of work in that particular area.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, after considering the business plans and proposed estimates for the Department of Innovation and Science for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$185,910,000
Capital Investment	\$41,000,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Chairman, I would move that the committee now rise and report the estimates of the Department of Innovation and Science.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Innovation and Science: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$185,910,000; capital investment, \$41,000,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: 10:20 Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill 25 School Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to once again speak briefly about Bill 25, the School Amendment Act, 2004. At this Committee of the Whole stage I'd like to specifically address some House amendments to this bill.

As mentioned during second reading, Bill 25 reflects government's action on yet another recommendation of the Learning Commission. It balances the interests of teachers with the rights of our children to receive an education that is responsive to their needs. It will achieve this by improving the functioning of the Board of Reference to make sure there is a process to deal with situations where an educator might not fulfill the high standards of his or her peers. The intent of the bill is quite simple. We need appropriate measures in place to ensure the highest quality of service in the profession, and all measures taken must be effective and fair.

Mr. Chairman, there are five House amendments to Bill 25 that I'd like to discuss during my time this evening. These changes are relatively minor in nature, but they are important to help ensure that the bill achieves its intended goals.

In relation to section 61 of the existing School Act, the House amendment will clarify that the power of a school board . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, sorry to interject. Are you moving these amendments so they can be circulated now?

Rev. Abbott: I would like to move these amendments so that they can be circulated now.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. You may proceed.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. These five House amendments are changes that are relatively minor in nature, but they are important to help ensure that the bill achieves its intended goals.

Firstly, in relation to section 61 of the existing School Act the House amendment will clarify that the power of a school board to either suspend or terminate the services of a teacher may only – and I stress “only” – be delegated to a superintendent. This reflects the original intent of the amendment to the School Act proposed under Bill 25 that other than a school board only the superintendent may fulfill this responsibility.

The second House amendment I'd like to discuss refers to collective bargaining. Section 96(2) of the School Act currently allows school boards and the Alberta Teachers' Association to agree to exclude certain central office administrators from the collective agreement.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, I'm sorry to interject again.

Since there are a number of different portions of the amendment, are you proposing that we deal with all these amendments together as amendment A1?

Rev. Abbott: Yes, Mr. Chairman, I am.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. If that's okay, then we shall deal with them as one amendment, refer to them collectively as amendment A1.

You may proceed.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The second part of the one amendment is that the proposed House amendment ensures that central office staff members who choose not to be active members of the ATA will also be excluded from the collective agreement. Central office staff who fall under this category will have their own contracts with their employer.

The third part of amendment A1, Mr. Chairman, deals with eligibility to appeal to the Board of Reference. Bill 25 excludes central office administrators who are not covered by a collective agreement from appealing their suspension or termination to the Board of Reference. This amendment ensures that central office staff members who elect not to be active members of the ATA and who are therefore excluded from the collective agreement are also not able to appeal to the Board of Reference.

This preserves the original intent of the amendment, which is to exclude all individuals who are not covered by the teachers' collective agreement from accessing the Board of Reference. The Board of Reference was originally established to ensure that classroom teachers' terminations or suspensions were fair and reasonable. It was not intended to protect school board administrators or managers who have their own individual contracts with school boards.

The next House amendment, Mr. Chairman, refers to the disclosure of evidence in advance of a hearing before the Board of Reference. The changes to the School Act introduced in Bill 25 are intended to improve the way the Board of Reference functions. Although its current role will change in terms of assessing professional competency of teachers, it will continue to fulfill an important role in terms of hearing matters on employment issues, such as cases of misconduct.

A provision under Bill 25 required all parties to a Board of Reference hearing to fully disclose to each other the evidence they plan to present to the board. We recognize that the timing of the disclosure is important in giving both parties appropriate time to prepare their cases and to make decisions on whether they need to introduce any additional evidence. Therefore, we are going to consult with stakeholders to develop a regulation on disclosure requirements to ensure that the process is fair and effective.

Mr. Chairman, the final portion of this amendment that I'd like to discuss tonight is in reference to decisions that are made by the Board of Reference. While the act indicates that there is a 45-day time limit within which the board must render its decision, the bill does not explicitly state the time frame within which the reasons must be released. This House amendment will specify that both the decision and the reasons together must be released within the 45-day time frame.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, Bill 25, including the House amendments I've discussed tonight, will help maintain and ensure the integrity of the teaching profession in a way that protects the best interests of both students and teachers. I urge members of this Assembly to support Bill 25 and the House amendments we've discussed this evening.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the member for having shared with us earlier today the intent of the amendments that are before us this evening. I think that more importantly we have that member's assurance that these amendments are supported by both the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association, and they are the two groups primarily involved with these sections of the bill.

I don't think we should let it go by that it is, I think, unfortunate that we have to amend the bill as quickly as this. That indicates that something happened in the drafting that wasn't paid attention to at the time.

The only one that I have some concerns about is the one that has things being resolved through regulation, and I hope that works out.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Deputy Chair: Does anybody else wish to speak on the bill?

[The clauses of Bill 25 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 26

Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Today at the committee stage I'd like to discuss some House amendments which have been introduced for Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004. I'd like to move these amendments. I have consulted with hon. members of the opposition and would have these moved as A1.

As discussed previously in the Assembly, this bill deals with important changes to reflect the Learning Commission's recommendations regarding the teaching profession, and it has been a pleasure to respond to this bill on behalf of the government.

The Learning Commission identified a number of different opportunities for Alberta to enhance our learning system to meet the needs of today's students. Likewise, we must keep our legislation up to date to keep pace with Alberta's evolving learning system. The amendments to the Teaching Profession Act introduced under Bill 26 are very much a companion piece to Bill 25, the School Amendment Act, 2004, sponsored by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

As mentioned during second reading, Bill 26 will achieve two main goals. It will allow a new practice review process to be established for teachers whose competence is in question. It will allow certain certificated nonteaching central office staff the option to be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

Rather than getting into the details of the bill again today, I'd like to instead use my time to discuss four House amendments that are currently before the Assembly for consideration.

10:30

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, before you proceed further, I just wish to have an understanding that there are amendments to various sections. Are we to consider them collectively as amendment A1?

Mr. Maskell: As A1.

The Deputy Chair: That's in agreement? Okay. We shall proceed and deal with them as one amendment, amendment A1.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Section 4 of Bill 26 refers to the ATA membership of certain teachers who are employed by a school board but who may not necessarily be carrying out teaching functions, such as those who are carrying out administrative duties for the board. As drafted, Bill 26 will allow these teachers to choose whether to be an active member of the association, an associate member of the association, or not to be a member of the association.

Another line in the bill stated that "notwithstanding anything in the bylaws" the ATA would act in accordance with the affected teacher's choice. In response to a request by the ATA this phrase will be deleted through this House amendment. Eliminating this phrase will allow the ATA to address exceptional circumstances in which the association does not wish to admit an individual as an active member. It would achieve this by allowing the minister in appropriate circumstances to authorize the ATA to not act on an individual's election regarding membership. In order to provide certainty for both school boards and the ATA with respect to these members' status, another clause will be added to make the option elected by the teacher irrevocable for so long as the individual occupies the central office staff position.

The second House amendment I'd like to discuss will allow the provincial executive council of the ATA to pass the practice review bylaw as opposed to having it done by the association at an annual general meeting. While the association can currently pass bylaws at its general meetings, this House amendment recognizes the unique nature of the practice bylaw and that it will be approved by the Minister of Learning. For practical reasons it is appropriate to have this bylaw developed and passed by the ATA's provincial executive council. This will help ensure that the bylaw has been approved and is in place for the 2005 school year.

The next House amendment involves complaints made about a teacher's conduct. The Teaching Profession Act allows a complainant to request a review of a decision if the complaint about a teacher's professional conduct does not result in a hearing before a professional conduct hearing committee. This amendment would allow the ATA to charge a fee to a complainant who requests a review. A request for reviewing a decision not to refer a teacher to a professional conduct hearing committee involves a thorough review of the decision by the complainant appeal committee. This process should not be automatic and should involve careful consideration on behalf of the complainant.

The introduction of a standard fee is intended to encourage reflection on the part of the complainant and help ensure their commitment to the issue. Because similar fees will also be charged to complainants who request reviews under the practice review bylaw, the introduction of this fee will help ensure consistency between the practice review and conduct review processes.

The final House amendment I'd like to discuss today addresses the section of the Teaching Profession Act that allows teachers to appeal decisions reached by the professional conduct hearing committees.

This House amendment would allow the ATA to require an appellant to post a deposit of up to the cost of the appeal. This deposit would be forfeited to the ATA should the appeal not be successful, it would be returned to the appellant if the appeal were successful, and it would be split between the appellant and the association should the appeal be partially successful.

Currently a hearing committee can require an appellant to pay the cost of an appeal. However, if the appellant does not pay the costs, the ATA must recover them from the appellant in a civil debt action. This amendment will allow the ATA to collect a deposit from the appellant against the cost of the appeal and provide for the appropriate disposition of the deposit pending the outcome of the appeal. As mentioned, because it is planned that deposits will also be collected in matters involving practice reviews, this change will ensure consistency between the practice review and conduct review processes.

To ensure that our learning system maintains the high-quality services Albertans have come to expect, it is essential to ensure that appropriate, professional conduct and practice review processes are in place. That's why we worked closely with the ATA in developing Bill 26. The House amendments I discussed today as well as other amendments to the Teaching Profession Act outlined in Bill 26 will further this government's efforts to continually improve Alberta's learning system.

With that said, I urge this Assembly to support these important amendments. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In speaking in support of the amendments, again we thank the hon. member for sharing the essence of the amendments with us earlier today. There was a concern that the fees being talked about might be a deterrent for some teachers taking action, and we are assured that that was not the case. We were given some indication of the level that the fees might be, and that seems reasonable.

Again, one of the reasons for our being able to support the bill and to do that so quickly is the assurance that the member gave us that these amendments have the full support of both the Teachers' Association and the School Boards Association. They are the two groups that are very intimately involved in actions that are taken under these sections of the act, and that seemed to be a necessary prerequisite. I'm pleased to support the amendments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to speak?

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

[The clauses of Bill 26 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would move that the committee now rise and report bills 25 and 26 as amended.

[Motion carried]

Hon. Members: Agreed.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following with some amendments: Bill 25 and Bill 26. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to all members for the excellent progress tonight. Given the hour, I would move that we now stand adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

[Motion carried; at 10:39 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 27, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/04/27

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We confidently ask for strength and encouragement in our service to others. We ask for wisdom to guide us in making good laws and good decisions for the present and the future of Alberta. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly the Minister of Education from the Basque Country in Spain. The Hon. Anjeles Iztueta is here, and with her in the Speaker's gallery is a delegation which includes education officials from the Basque Country: Abel Ariznabarreta – and I do really apologize for my pronunciation of those names – who is the Vice-Minister of Education; Amaia Goikoetxea, who is the press and public relations adviser; Josu Sierra, who is the director of the Basque Institute for Research and Evaluation in Education.

Minister Iztueta and her delegation have come to Alberta to learn more about our learning system. They will be examining our best practices and some of our new initiatives that contribute to the success of Alberta's learning system. I'm proud to share with the Assembly that it was the high achievement of Alberta's students both nationally and internationally, in particular the success of the students in the PISA 2000 assessment, that initially captured the Basques' attention.

I'd like to thank Minister Iztueta and her delegation for the opportunity to exchange knowledge and experiences, and I will say that we had an absolutely delightful lunch today while talking about our respective education systems. I would ask Minister Iztueta and her delegation to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Shariff: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly four individuals from Tanzania who are studying here in Alberta as part of the Canadian International Development Agency ethics promotion project in Tanzania in collaboration with the University of Calgary: Mrs. Adieu Nyondo, director, and Mr. Peter Mushi, administrative officer, both of the ethics division, office of Public Service Management; Mr. Cathlex Makawia, inquiry officer, and Mr. Waziri Kipacha, inquiry officer, both of the Ethics Secretariat, President's Office of the Ethics Commissioner. Escorting them are Mr. Don Hamilton, Alberta Ethics Commissioner, and his senior administrator, Ms Karen South. [Remarks in Swahili]

Mr. Speaker, my remarks in Swahili translate as follows. With your permission I would like to extend to our honoured guests a very warm welcome to our fine province of Alberta and this great Legislative Assembly. I hope that when they return home, they take back with them fond memories of our province and are able to implement their learnings in developing good governance in Tanzania.

Mr. Speaker, our guests are in your gallery. They have now risen, and I request this Assembly to accord them the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of guests to introduce. I'll do the first one on behalf of my colleague from Athabasca-Wabasca. There are 34 students and a number of group leaders and teachers and parent helpers from Mistassiniy school in Wabasca. I'll just name the teachers and group leaders, and I'd ask that they stand as I name them: Mrs. Christine Gullion, Ms Doreen Gullion, Ms Joanna Schroeder, Mr. Bruce Joudrey, Mr. Leon McLeod, Shaina Merrieu, Kelly Auger, Jesse Auger, T.G. Taron, Kaine Young, Terrance Alook, and all the students from the Mistassiniy school in Wabasca. I'd ask that they stand and receive the warm welcome of this Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, I also have the great pleasure of introducing to you and to Members of the Legislative Assembly a group of students from Roland Michener secondary school. We have 37 visitors. I'd ask that they stand as I introduce the teachers and group leaders: Tracey Crain, Gail Nelson, Rose Barore, Mike Sowada, Kris Reucker. They're seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask that they stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The first Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Government Aircraft

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response to opposition questions yesterday on government flights the Premier mentioned that "what we try to do is make sure that the plane is loaded." Well, according to the government's own passenger manifests, this is hardly ever the case. Indeed, in 2002 nearly one-quarter of the flights taken by the government had only one or two people on them out of a maximum of a seven- to 36-person capacity. My questions are to the Premier. How can the Premier claim that 128 flights with only one person on them is cost-effective?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it is wrong and misleading, to say the least, to say that a King Air 200 or a King Air 350 holds – whatever she mentioned – 30 or 36 people. One aircraft holds six people; the other aircraft holds eight people, nine if someone sits on the toilet seat. The Dash 8, which is used to transport people to do energy sales in Calgary and forestry crews and others, is never used unless there are more than at least 10 passengers. So the hon. member is misleading this Legislature and the Alberta public by saying that government aircraft accommodate in excess of 30 passengers. That simply is not true.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: how can the Premier claim that 239 flights with only two people on them is cost-effective?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it depends on where you're going. Indeed, many of the members from Calgary and the surrounding region fly to Edmonton and fly commercially, and that is hardly cost-effective to go to the International Airport and pay the price – I don't know

what a ticket is right now, but I understand it's fairly expensive – and then take a cab or rent a car or pay the parking fees to have a car there and to drive it.

There is a matter of convenience as well. I don't apologize, not one single bit, for this afternoon, for instance, going to Calgary. I don't know who is going to be on the airplane with me. I book it and invite anyone who wants to come along to Calgary. They can come on the aircraft. I have to be in Calgary, and there is no way – there's no way – that I'm going to leave here at 3 o'clock, when I have my obligatory scrum with the media, to arrive at the International Airport – I have to be in Calgary by 5; that means I have to be down there by 4 o'clock – and wait around an hour, when I can go 10 minutes to the City Centre Airport, which they didn't defend, by the way, as Edmontonians, and get the aircraft and be in Calgary. So it is a matter of convenience.

Believe me, to put one's rear end in a seat and go back and forth to Calgary or to Oyen or to all points in this province is not a luxury. I'll tell you that for sure.

1:40

Ms Blakeman: Edmonton voted against the City Centre.

My final question to the Premier: given that on January 31, 2002, there were 14 flights within Alberta on the government aircraft, six between Calgary and Edmonton and one of those carrying a backbench MLA flying solo, how is this filling the plane?

Mr. Klein: It happens, and it's wide open, Mr. Speaker. What would the Liberals have us do: have these planes and park them? Park them? We want to keep them in the air. The best use of an aircraft is when the aircraft is flying. The worst use is to park it.

I'll have the hon. minister comment.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I don't know about that particular day, but let me tell you what very often happens and likely what happened in this case. At times the aircraft will go to Calgary, and people will stay there. We keep a list of people that are in Calgary that want to fly back to Edmonton. If that individual that was on the aircraft coming back to Edmonton had gone back in some other way, then the plane deadheads back to Edmonton empty. So is there anything wrong with one person coming back when in fact they need a ride back to Edmonton?

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Water Use for Enhanced Oil Recovery

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's water for life strategy isn't worth the recycled paper it's printed on. Today industry, communities, and farmers were looking to the Environment minister for clear rules on the use of potable water by industry for injection. Instead, we got a clear message from the Minister of Energy that water is not for life but rather for industry. My questions are to the Premier. Why is your government putting the fox in charge of the henhouse by allowing industry to voluntarily monitor its own use of potable water?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister had a news conference on this issue today in which the preliminary report, as I understand it, on practices that remove water from the water cycle, primarily oil field injection, was discussed.

Before I have the hon. Minister of Environment respond, I wish the Liberals would stop pretending that there are easy answers to

every public policy question. And they do. If they ever, God forbid, got into government, they would learn that that is not the case. These are difficult situations.

The government, quite briefly, has struck a provincial committee of stakeholders, including the energy sector. This is not the fox being in charge of the henhouse. This is meaningful consultation. It involves environmental agencies and advocacy groups. Are they suggesting that these environmental agencies and advocate groups are part of the fox that guards the henhouse? If they are, then stand up and say so. The stakeholder group included rural municipalities to look at this extremely complicated issue.

Relative to the details I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Dr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Premier. I would point out that what we had today was a preliminary report that we have consensus on. This is a consensus-based process, and I would remind the opposition that flaring will be reduced probably by over 80 per cent because of consensus. I would remind the opposition that we have the toughest standards in North America on emissions coming from coal-fired plants because of consensus. So consensus works.

I pointed out very clearly at the press conference – and this member obviously didn't listen at the press conference either – that we will have a final report by June 30. In regard to the specific issue that she identified, I will . . .

The Speaker: Hon. minister, you will have another chance. We'll just keep the question period going.

The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: when is the government going to invest the research and resources into making CO₂ injection economically and technologically viable?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is an interesting question. Certainly, there is technology available, and there is the ingenuity fund that can be used to enhance and develop research into the use of CO₂ for oilfield injection. It's my understanding from speaking to industry leaders that the technology now, although it exists, is very, very expensive. It's uneconomical at this time, but as research and development progress, I'm sure that this technology will become less expensive.

I will ask perhaps the hon. Minister of Energy, because he's been involved with this issue, and maybe the Minister of Innovation and Science to respond.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, this is the only jurisdiction in Canada that is taking active steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. One of those components is carbon dioxide sequestration, or storing CO₂ in areas below the ground.

There is a substantial flood going on in Saskatchewan. It's called the Weyburn miscible CO₂ flood. This has replaced water in some cases, or it's mixed with water. We co-operate with the province of Saskatchewan and with EnCana, the company that's responsible for this.

Do you know where they get their carbon dioxide from now? They buy it from the United States. So what has to happen, Mr. Speaker, is that we have to get the carbon dioxide. It has to be sourced; it has to be piped; it has to be cleaned up. There are a whole bunch of steps other than just saying something off the top of your head that says: CO₂ when stored. Lots to be done. We're on the file.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: when will this government get serious about its water for life strategy and put a moratorium on its use of potable water for injection?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. minister indicated, there is a process right now involving all stakeholders, including environmental advocacy groups, industry, and municipalities, to look at this complicated issue.

I would remind all hon. members that while this issue is one that's important to Albertans and obviously to the opposition – it certainly is to this government – it represents a fairly small portion of the province's water. I'm given to understand that only 4 per cent of Alberta's total water allocations, including both surface and groundwater, is used in ways that remove it from the water cycle.

Mr. Speaker, looking at that in context, we allow over 50 per cent of the water that comes down the east slopes of the Rocky Mountains to flow freely into Saskatchewan and other jurisdictions.

An Hon. Member: That's by treaty.

Mr. Klein: We allow much more than 50 per cent. We are obligated to send 50 per cent. We send far more than 50 per cent. So this is to put it into context.

But we do understand that even that 4 per cent is an issue that needs to be dealt with, and the hon. minister is dealing with it.

The Speaker: Sorry, hon. minister. We've now spent seven minutes on this set. I've got 15 members who want to raise a question, and we're getting into a debate.

Coal Bed Methane Development

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, clearly the hon. Minister of Energy is calling the shots when it comes to water management and industry. This is troubling news for stakeholders concerned over this government's incompetence on coal bed methane development. Coal bed methane could be and should be Alberta's next big energy bonanza if it is done right. My first question is to the Premier. Will the Premier guarantee that no – not one – freshwater source in Alberta will be contaminated as a result of coal bed methane developments?

1:50

Mr. Klein: Again, that is a very interesting question. I've asked the Minister of Energy to provide me with some information, and he has quite capably. Indeed, I've spoken with EnCana, one of the companies doing major development relative to coal bed methane.

I'm given to understand that unlike the Powder River basin project in Wyoming where, indeed, extraction of gas from coal bed produced a lot of waste water and there were problems disposing of this water, the coal bed methane development, ostensibly, in Alberta – and I don't know to what extent – involves dry coal, and it doesn't involve water. I'm given assurances that the processes used here are entirely different and much safer than those that were used in Wyoming.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Environment: given that no two coal bed methane basins in Alberta are the same, what is the chemical composition of the saline, or brackish, water that is produced as a result of coal bed methane production?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, I have a PhD in psychology, not

chemistry, and even with my PhD in psychology it doesn't help me understand him. Certainly, that's a question that I can't answer here, but we will get that technical chemistry-based information and provide it to the member.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. My third question is to the Minister of Energy. Will this government promise to preserve water for future generations and place a moratorium on coal bed methane drilling until Albertans see for themselves – if this hon. minister doesn't know, hopefully someone else does – what kind . . .

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Practices

The Speaker: Hon. member. Hon. member, please. Now, hold on. The second question that the hon. member raised had nothing to do with government policy. I could have ruled it out. So having said that, please don't then extrapolate from the fact that you were given the right to proceed with your second question that the hon. minister doesn't know. This is this baiting that goes back and forth. I've got 15 members who want to ask questions. I'm going to keep this thing going along. Let's deal with policy.

The hon. Minister of Energy to respond.

Coal Bed Methane Development (continued)

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I certainly can't speak on behalf of all government. I can speak personally about my commitment to future generations of Albertans to ensure that not only is there water here but that there is a healthy lifestyle, there are sufficient resources, and there are sufficient jobs created so that they can get educated in this place, they can live here, they can raise families here and maybe sit in this Legislature some day.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Calgary Courthouse

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Information that I released earlier today reveals that the P3 partners involved in the Calgary court centre project consortium had contributed over \$21,000 to the Alberta PC fund in the last three years. No wonder this government is continuing negotiations with this consortium for a drastically scaled back court centre rather than cancelling the flawed bidding process and starting over. My question is to the Premier. Can the Premier please explain why the BPC consortium, with its close political connections to this government, wasn't sent packing when it became obvious that they had lowballed their bid to win a project now facing cost overruns of 67 per cent?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, I don't know to what steps and to what depths the opposition parties are willing to sink to find something. The suggestion in the ND press release is that this company, BPC – and I thought it was Kingsway or something – donated \$21,000 over three years to the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party. Over three years. First of all, I don't advise myself of who makes donations and who doesn't. Maybe the Liberals and the NDs do because they get so few donations that they monitor every single penny that comes in, but I don't. I leave that up to the party's finance committee.

Mr. Speaker, companies in this province compete for, win, or lose

government contracts, and they do this all the time regardless of whether they contribute to the PC Party, the Liberals, or the NDs. Now, the Calgary courthouse project is moving ahead through an open and transparent bidding process. It's an innovative approach in that it's a P3 initiative and that it's been carefully reviewed every step of the way.

Now, here's where the ND press release is totally and absolutely wrong, misleading. Mr. Speaker, when we saw that the costs were going up on this particular project, we revisited it, and now the costs, instead of \$500 million, are back to \$300 million, the original price. Even at a reduced scope we are confident that we can build an excellent facility that attends to the needs of Calgarians and consolidates the Provincial Court and the Court of Queen's Bench.

Mr. Mason: Can the Premier please confirm for this House that the new courthouse, the scaled back version, will in fact not contain all of the elements that it was originally planned for?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know what it will or will not contain other than courthouse facilities. I'll have the hon. Minister of Infrastructure respond.

Mr. Lund: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, it's terribly unfortunate that the New Democratic Party would go to the extent that they've now gone because, quite frankly, what they have said is simply not factual. The whole process was so open and transparent right from the start when we put out a request for interest and then a request for qualifications and then a request for proposal. There were three companies that replied to the request for proposals. We took the lowest one and then worked with them, and as a matter of fact the price came down through the negotiations.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the government yaps on about the transparency of this process, in order to make sure that Albertans aren't getting taken for a ride, will the government table in this Assembly the project estimates of the two bids that were rejected as well as the results of the so-called dummy bid as well as the process that was used to evaluate them?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'll leave that up to the hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, I noticed on the back page – well, I don't pay much attention to the front page of an ND news release, but the back page . . .

Mr. Mason: Yes, you do. Yes, you do.

Mr. Klein: Well, I happened to have it here because it was on the desk of my colleague the hon. Attorney General and Government House Leader. So I was able to pick it up and look in absolute amazement and disbelief at how a press release could be so misleading. And then I saw: New Democrat opposition. I said: well, there you go.

Now, I just looked at the back page, and here BPC as a company made no donations. I understand that some partners did. GWLRA donated \$3,750 over two years. Cana Construction donated \$5,000 to the 2001 election, and for that we are truly grateful. Kasian Kennedy, the architectural firm, donated \$4,700 in 2003, \$4,500 in 2002, and \$2,000 in 2001. SNC-Lavalin ProFac property operations donated the huge sum of \$1,000.

Mr. Speaker, you know, it goes from the sublime to the absolutely

ridiculous, but again, when you're dealing with an ND press release, how can you expect anything more?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

2:00

Oil Sands Royalty Regime

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituents and Albertans have questions about the royalty regime as it applies to the Alberta tar sands projects. Recently we have been hearing about Suncor wanting their Firebag project included for royalty purposes with their Steepbank project. Also, Albertans are starting to ask questions in regard to the actual revenue Alberta is realizing from the tar sands, especially in light of demands for more infrastructure. My questions are all to the Minister of Energy. Could the minister tell this Assembly: what is the present royalty rate, and how is it applied to tar sands projects?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, it's an important question because the member refers to what is an area of Alberta larger than the state of South Carolina on which much of our future revenue depends. But it is not conventional oil and gas exploration; it is mining. With mining comes a large and substantial investment. Billions and billions of dollars must be spent in order to extract that resource, then take the resource and convert it, take the sulphur out of it, and turn it into crude that is marketable at today's prices.

In order to facilitate the movement of investment into this area to develop these oil sands, Mr. Speaker, we applied in 1996 a generic royalty regime. This means that 1 per cent of all the company's revenues from its investment are subject to royalties. We charge that 1 per cent rate. When those investments are paid out, we then take the revenue minus the cost and charge 25 per cent on that rate, and that rate occurs at the time of payout.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Are any projects at or nearing payout that will soon be paying a higher royalty rate?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, at present the department has on file some 52 projects paying royalty under the oil sands royalty regime. Of that, 37 are in prepayment status; 15 are in postpayment status. I don't want to get into the individuals, because a lot of that is proprietary commercial information, but I can say that the removal of the machinery and equipment tax in 1995 combined with the generic oil sands royalty regime has resulted in some 50 billion plus dollars' worth of investment.

This investment, if I can put the numbers forward, in projected payout, all by 2017, if you assume 1 per cent inflation, means that the price of oil would be \$60 a barrel. Roughly a \$10 spread for operating puts us at \$50. At \$12 for operating, that's \$38. Twenty-five per cent of \$38 is nine and a half dollars. At 3 million barrels a day, Mr. Speaker, that's \$11 billion a year that is contributed to the coffers of Albertans for their building, for their use, for their development.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you. To the same minister again: what is the present cash flow that Albertans are realizing from the tar sands projects per day?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, that's a good question. I can say that for

the 2003 production year the 37 prepayout projects paid \$8.1 million in royalties, and the 15 postpayout projects paid over \$217 million in royalties.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Firebag Oil Sands Development

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Firebag is an in situ oil sands development which will increase Suncor's oil production to more than one-half a million barrels per day in the next six to seven years. This government currently classifies Firebag as a separate project from Suncor's existing operations, while Suncor believes that Firebag is an expansion of its existing operations. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. What information is this government using to determine that Firebag is separate from the existing Suncor operations north of Fort McMurray?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, we use the terms and conditions and details as outlined in the oil sands royalty regulation.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister: will this dispute harm future investor confidence in future northern Alberta tar sands developments?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the oil sands royalty regulation has proven to not only stimulate investment today but to stimulate investment as far back as 1996, will continue to stimulate investment, and will continue to ensure that Albertans share in this great resource as well as the companies that are in there mining the resource.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister: what is the difference in royalties payable by Suncor to the people of Alberta if Firebag is classified as a separate project?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is a question subject to a great many variables. Those variables are as tangible as the changing price of oil, which changes on a daily basis, when suicide bombers are found close to oil field terminals on the coast of Iraq, to holes drying up in the North Sea. We don't know how that will specifically impact it. We don't know what's going to happen with future construction costs and how they will change with respect to labour rates, budgeting, engineering procurement, and contracting. So, in fact, it is impossible to give a definitive impact.

But let me finish the question by saying that we do know we have the right regulation. We also know that we have the right companies up there and that they're developing this resource in an environmentally responsible fashion.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to supplement.

Mr. Norris: Yeah. I would just like to supplement the Minister of Energy. I'm sure that he wanted to tell people, but the actual amount of construction that's estimated or underway in the next 10 years is \$70 billion, Mr. Speaker.

An Hon. Member: How much?

Mr. Norris: Seventy billion, and that translates to about \$3 billion or \$4 billion per year. The hon. member's question to the minister doesn't translate into what's happening now, and I thought I'd put that on the table.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Edmonton City Centre Airport

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Edmonton City Centre Airport is located within the Edmonton-Calder constituency. A recently released airport consultation report recommends continuation of 10-passenger flights' access to and from the airport. My questions are for the Minister of Economic Development. Since his department participated in the consultation group, what steps is his department taking to ensure that the Edmonton airports authority follows the recommendations?

The Speaker: The hon. minister. [interjections] The hon. minister has the floor. [interjections]

Mr. Norris: Apparently, I don't.

The Speaker: Hon. minister, you do have the floor. You've been recognized now three times.

Mr. Norris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the hon. member for the question and, before I give an answer, would like to make reference to the outstanding work done by the Member for Peace River, the chairman of the Northern Alberta Development Council, who did an awful lot to bring this issue to the front.

As every member here knows, the committee has finished its work, Mr. Speaker, and is reviewing the recommendations. We're very, very pleased with the process that took place not only through our department but through the Member for Peace River, who is on the committee. Obviously, we feel very, very strongly about the importance of that airport for economic development not only for northern Alberta but for all Alberta. This is Alberta's capital city, and it came out loud and clear that that was a big concern.

The process, as I understand it now, will be that the authority is reviewing all the recommendations. Where we can work and are working with the hon. Minister of Justice is on enforcement rules. One of the complaints was that if some of the planes are capped at 10 seats and 10 passengers, why isn't that happening? So with the Minister of Transportation we're looking at that. But our ongoing role in this now is to observe what comes out of the airport authority's recommendations, and at that point the committee is still in place to act on any future suggestions, Mr. Speaker.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: if 19-passenger planes are landing and taking off at the airport, why can they only have 10 passengers on board?

Mr. Norris: Well, that's a very good question, Mr. Speaker. Our government planes are actually not part of the equation, and some clarification might be good for the hon. members opposite. What the airport authority had talked about at the outset was never the charter flights, the medevacs, or the government planes. What they were talking about is scheduled flights, which is what we're talking about. So if they want more information, I'm happy to provide it.

The issue as such is I guess one of economics. Whether the planes that are flying are able to do so economically at a 10-seat or 19-seat capacity remains to be seen, but the understanding that we have is that it's cheaper to fly a 19-seat plane. The airport authority wanted

a 10-seat cap so as not to cannibalize activity out at the International Airport in Leduc, and that made some sense.

So the reality of it is that if both sides are going to work together to promote what I believe is a remarkable economic jewel, they're going to have to come to a compromise, and that was the compromise that was suggested with the exception, Mr. Speaker, of High Level and Fort Chipewyan, where it was indicated that they may have more of a compelling case to have 19-seat planes with 19 passengers due to the length of time to fly in and out. That's something that's being reviewed as well.

So the answer to the hon. member's question is that it's one of economics, but it's certainly something that we're going to stay on until it's concluded.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can the minister assure that both runways at the City Centre Airport will remain open?

Mr. Norris: Well, clearly, no, I can't, but I can certainly say that we are vitally concerned that the suggestion that one of the runways should be shut down was put out there. Clearly, anybody who's involved in aviation knows that after a certain degree of wind either way, 20 knots I believe, it makes one of the runways very difficult to land on.

The suggestion that one or the other should be shut down was not received well by the consultation group, and as such they recommended that both be left open. Our belief, Mr. Speaker, is that in order for that airport to remain viable and to continue in the future, both must remain open. So the committee that the Deputy Minister of Economic Development and the Member for Peace River sit on will continue to push for both runways being open because it's just that important.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Daycare Accreditation Policy

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hope of the new daycare accreditation policy rests on adequate funding to support implementation. With wages less than \$8.50 an hour and the highest staff turnover rate in the country, we could see the promise of accreditation lost. My questions are to the Minister of Children's Services. What good will accreditation do if no one is willing to work in a field with such low pay scales?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to reflect on the article in the parent magazine that so poorly quoted the issues surrounding accreditation, daycare, and costs in Alberta. There was a reference point to the lack of opportunity to sustain qualified daycare staff. In this House I will be tabling what will be sent to *Today's Parent* and talk about the actual truth of the matter as it relates to the funding for daycare, the experience for daycare. Fundamentally, the comparisons across the country in that study were evaluated on the basis of children from zero to 12 years of age, and we count those children that we are providing care to between zero and six years of age. So there was a flaw in the gathering of the data right off the bat, and I want to make that perfectly clear.

In terms of salaries and standards and the accreditation process we have looked at the opportunity for contracted service providers to engage a qualified accreditation authority to come in and evaluate

the quality service standards. But today, Mr. Speaker, we are not only looking at daycares and day homes but for all of those people through parent resource centres or other preschool/early-years programs to have some type of accreditation standard to make sure that parents and children and families are engaged and that staff are qualified and well trained.

Mr. Speaker, the short answer for the hon. member opposite is that I will table exactly what our intentions are on qualifications, and I will provide what we're currently doing on the training of qualified staff.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a question of wages.

How will the current small income supplements to parents result in better qualified care workers, required under the accreditation, actually being hired?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, while it will rest finally with each individual service provider, the amounts that we're providing aren't all that that will be done. The supports for training, the supports for building qualified personnel, the other kinds of service provisions and supports that will be provided will assist in enabling those service providers themselves to pay a higher wage. The very minimum that was provided at the outset was recognizing the willingness of each daycare and day home to get involved in the process, but we have yet to achieve accreditation. We have yet to deliver more than what the current programming has required. An accreditation in the system will require significantly more supports provided by the providers, and at that time then we will be evaluating what the salary differential is from today's rates and see if we've achieved success.

Mr. Speaker, on the level 3s, admittedly, I think we can do better, but again it's the providers of that daycare as opposed to this government paying those people that are delivering the service.

Dr. Massey: A third question to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: when will the government commit funds to improve the current meagre daycare resources so that those qualified daycare workers are actually able to do their job?

Ms Evans: Let's be clear that the provision of funds or the lack thereof is not something that inhibits a person from doing the job of taking care of children. That is not something that stops people from doing it, nor do any of those daycare workers tell you that because they're paid more, they'll do better at the job.

Let's be clear that when we have got the full accreditation process in place, then the evaluation about the credits and the standards will be maintained. Last year we provided \$6 million for the system of daycares and day homes. We've added almost double that fund this year.

So, Mr. Speaker, there are extra resources, and the accreditation isn't complete yet. We're at the outset of this process, and I think we'll be well satisfied that we've achieved results by the time people are fully accredited.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Seniors' Benefits Program

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Funding to the Alberta seniors' benefits program was increased in Budget 2004 by \$21 million, yet the seniors haven't seen any positive changes to their

benefits. To the Minister of Seniors: as a result of this increase, are there any plans in place to increase the thresholds for the Alberta seniors?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Budget 2004 increases the benefits program to some \$199 million. With respect to the \$21 million increase \$11 million will be used to accommodate new entrants to the program as well as to deal with the increased support in the long-term care accommodation rates. The remaining \$10 million will be added to the seniors' program, but currently we are looking at where we can get the best effect with the \$10 million to ensure that the largest number of people get the support that they should get.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is to the same minister. How does the ministry arrive at the thresholds, and who did the ministry consult with to arrive at the current threshold levels?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, it's important to note that the Alberta seniors' benefits program was designed to act as a supplement to the federal financial assistance provided through old age security and guaranteed income supplement. The original thresholds for the program were established in 1993-94, and that was done through consultations directly with seniors and with a variety of seniors' organizations. The current thresholds are reviewed on an annual basis, and we continue to monitor the costs that the seniors are facing, costs such as increases in utilities, taxes, cost of living, and so on. Whenever possible we make adjustments to the program, depending upon our ability to get resources and the ability to show the need. I might point out that during the last 10 years the thresholds have changed several times.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. How do the seniors' benefits in Alberta, the richest province in Canada, compare to those of other provinces?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to say at the outset that Alberta's benefits program compares extremely favourably with the other provinces. For example, we have a maximum of \$235 per month for seniors who are not in long-term care. Seniors in long-term care get much more. No other province offers as high a cash benefit to low-income seniors, and in fact some provinces don't have any cash benefit for seniors, no program similar to this.

In addition, our eligibility thresholds are currently very generous. An individual senior whose income is under \$18,850 would be eligible for the beginning of cash benefits; \$28,740 is the threshold for couples. Approximately 126,000, or 38 per cent of all the seniors in Alberta, do receive a cash benefit. If you add to that, Mr. Speaker, the number of seniors who get some health care premium exemptions, that number rises to 56 per cent of all the seniors.

In addition, seniors on the benefits program are eligible for special-needs assistance. Alberta is the only province with that program. Mr. Speaker, this year's budget allocates some \$33 million to that program. The number of individuals who have become eligible increased to some 35,000 last year. I might point out that

some provinces have no support for seniors at any level for dental, no support for optical, no support for hearing aids. Not all provinces but some provinces don't have those. We are quite generous in how we support our special-needs seniors. I might add also that about 1 in 3 of the seniors in this province receive some support with their housing.

Mr. Speaker, I'll close by saying that the Alberta seniors portion of the budget is \$250 million for the whole package, and to that you have to add what Alberta Health puts in, and that comes to well over a billion dollars for seniors.

Highway Safety

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, as the road construction industry swings into high gear for the summer, public safety is a major concern for construction workers working on or near Alberta highways. To the Minister of Transportation: what policies is the government undertaking to enhance the safety of construction workers who work on the province's highways, bridges, and overpasses?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have a number of projects that we're working on co-operatively with various municipalities and the contractors in the province. One of them is RIP, which is really rest in peace. It's a sign of a cross, trying to impress upon Albertans to please not rush through a construction zone; there may be a construction worker that may not see the oncoming car or lose attention while they're working on the site. So that's just one of the many media campaigns that we'll see occurring in the province.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: does the minister not have the power under the rules of the road, section 112 of the Traffic Safety Act, to govern the utilization of highways and the use and operation of vehicles on Alberta highways?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the law is in place. It is a matter of communicating to Albertans that they should obey the rules of the road, that they should pay attention while they're on a public highway and have respect for those individuals that are employed in making our highways much better and improving the infrastructure in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: with the authority granted the minister under rules of the road, section 112, will the minister then implement a reduction of speed on roadways and areas where emergency vehicles are attending to an incident and have their flashing lights in operation?

Mr. Stelmach: He's referring to a section that's defining emergency vehicles, and there is a private member's bill before the House looking at bringing about some amendments to the current legislation. [interjection] I hear the hon. member insisting on talking over there. Obviously, he must need the practice. He's not listening.

What we are looking at is the total definition of emergency vehicle and then looking at how we can make those particular circumstances, when emergency vehicles are out there, much safer and looking at incorporating construction zones at the same particular time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Utilities Deregulation

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just before Christmas the province's Energy and Utilities Board quietly allowed Direct Energy to add an extra \$40 million a year on the gas and electricity bills of Albertans as part of the deal to buy ATCO's retail business. Now that Direct Energy has finalized this deal with ATCO, the city of Calgary is challenging the decision to approve these extra charges in court. My questions are to the Minister of Energy. Why is it that with every additional step down the government's utility deregulation road Albertans are being asked to pay more, not less, for so-called competition and customer choice?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, this particular charge was put forward as a result of the passage of Bill 19, which was the final step in the natural gas competitive market restructuring that started in 1986 and culminated in 2003.

The member, if he wasn't here, should have been here to attentively listen to the debate and determine why the bill was passed and what benefits should accrue from that. [interjections] Now, instead of listening to the reply, just as listening to the debate, they choose to heckle. I can't make them listen, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, no answer by the minister.

Again let me try. How does the minister keep his nose from growing in peddling the fiction that Direct Energy's entry into Alberta is beneficial to consumers when the cold hard truth is that an extra \$40 million per year is quietly being added to customers' utility bills?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is not quietly being added to utility bills. That was a very clear decision made by the EUB. They publish their decisions. One decision is just like the other decision, and they make no differentiation. It's posted on a web site. We do know that the separation of the ability to market this product and the ability to deliver this product through distribution has represented a 10-cent a day charge put forth, approved by the EUB.

The EUB has also asked for a detailed study from Direct Energy to examine those costs to determine if they're prudent, and in fact, Mr. Speaker, if you look at being able to purchase rates that are now combined, as I said yesterday in the House—I hate to go forward and recap it, but because they won't listen, I guess I'm forced to use the good time of this good House to do that. Those rates combined with the flexibility in marketing should more than override any additional cost that was publicly approved through a legislated process in a matter of a press release posted on a web site, nothing surreptitious, nothing designed to put one company ahead of another but just simple good, hard, honest, open, transparent legislation.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:30

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplementary to the same minister: will the minister or the government order its toothless Utilities Consumer Advocate to support the city of Calgary's attempt to overturn the EUB decision to allow these extra charges, and if not, why not?

Speaker's Ruling Sub Judice Rule

The Speaker: Hold on, please. The hon. leader of the third party in raising his first question indicated that there was a court action. The difficulty the chair has in understanding this is determining whether

or not this is sub judice. If the hon. member now in his third question is asking for a minister of the Crown to interfere in an ongoing court process, that clearly is not within the rules of the Assembly.

Now, the difficulty the chair has: the chair does not know if this is actually before the courts or not and usually would turn to the Attorney General for some guidance with respect to this.

Mr. Hancock: Far be it from me to contradict the chair, but the Attorney General also does not know every court case that has been filed in the province of Alberta on any given day.

The Speaker: There was no contradiction. It was a matter of guidance to the chair with respect to sub judice matters.

Now, the hon. minister.

Utilities Deregulation (continued)

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I think it's only appropriate that we finish this line of questioning by saying that the member is asking the wrong minister. The Utilities Consumer Advocate is directly placed with the Minister of Government Services.

So had the member listened to debate on Bill 19, had the member followed the discussions in the EUB and the posting on the web site and the transparency in the decision, and had the member read the report from the Bolger commission, the advisory council on electrical issues, that showed the creation of a utility advocate, he would be up to date in Kansas City. Mr. Speaker, he's long and lost somewhere in NDP land.

The Speaker: Did the hon. Minister of Government Services want to supplement this final answer?

Mr. Coutts: No.

The Speaker: No. Okay.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of four members to participate.

The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Jim Dixon

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 21 the members of this Assembly and the Alberta public service lost a trusted friend, a colleague, and a leader with the passing of former Public Service Commissioner, Mr. Jim Dixon. His career in the public service spanned more than 35 years, including 25 as Alberta's Public Service Commissioner.

Jim began his long career with the Alberta government in the 1960s. His extensive career in human resources with the personnel administration office and his strong leadership within the Alberta government earned Jim the deepest respect from everyone he worked with. Jim brought vision and integrity to the public service. He was a leader not through his exercise of authority but through his example of competence, reason, and influence.

As Alberta's top human resource executive Jim positioned the Alberta public service to succeed through decades of challenge and change. A man of renowned talent and insight he created and implemented innovative human resource policies which positioned the government of Alberta as a preferred employer. This is demon-

strated by the creation of the award-winning corporate human resource development strategy under his leadership. It was one of the first cross-ministry initiatives and remains a key administrative initiative today.

Over his career Jim was involved in many rounds of bargaining since the first collective agreement was reached with the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees in 1975. His characteristic sense of balance, respect, and fairness contributed to Alberta's prolonged productive relations with the union. Jim's colleagues across Canada looked to him for his wisdom and counsel. Thanks to Jim's leadership and abilities the Alberta public service has rightfully gained a reputation for excellence across Canada.

Jim was also a dedicated family man. I'm sure that you, Mr. Speaker, and all Members of the Legislative Assembly will join me in extending our deepest condolences to his wife, Pat, his two children, Jay and Julie, and to other family members, colleagues, and friends.

Jim Dixon's legacy of achievement in this province will live on for many years to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Education Week

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From the time we're born through to enjoying our grandchildren in our golden years, every day is an opportunity to learn, be it an elementary school classroom, a lecture hall on a postsecondary campus, or perhaps seniors learning to install new software on their home computer or maybe just trying a recipe for the first time. Lifelong learning results.

This week, April 25 until May 1, is Education Week. This year's theme is The Learning Edge in recognition of the fact that Alberta's learning system, its students, and its educators continue to be among the best in the world.

Mr. Speaker, learning is a priority for Albertans. Education Week is an opportunity to celebrate learning successes that are taking place throughout Alberta and recognize everyone who contributes to Alberta's leading edge in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary learning systems.

These successes exist because of the partnerships between government, institutions, school boards, teachers, parents, and students. They also exist because of the special dedication of professionals that devote their lives to the formation and education of all of our children.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's knowledge-based economy and society requires innovative, well-educated, well-mannered, skilled, and adaptive citizens. The people of Alberta have long recognized that learning is the cornerstone of Alberta's future. Those involved in the learning system today have an awesome responsibility to help model and preserve the values and attitudes of successful Albertans and nurture the calling from within of their children for tomorrow's promise.

I hope that everyone will take time this week to celebrate learning, to thank those who contribute to our world-class education system, and to make Education Week special for everyone involved. Mr. Speaker, hug your teacher today.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Internationalization of Alberta

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a dream or rather a vision

for Alberta: an internationalized and competitively enterprising Alberta with its operational focus on being the most efficient, effective, economical, and ethical.

Why does Alberta need internationalization? History has many times over proven that a country, even small in population and landscape, becomes strong and influential when it goes beyond its borders. Historical city states such as Athens, Changan, Rome, Carthage, Venice became prosperous when they traded beyond their borders. Small countries such as Portugal, Spain, England, Holland roamed the world beyond their borders to become influential all over the globe. Recently small jurisdictions like Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Switzerland have become respected economic world powers when they go beyond their borders. Many businesses that started out very modestly locally became big enterprises only when they went international.

For the benefit of Albertans Alberta needs to grow beyond its borders and go beyond its modest population. Let's look at public revenue development, for example. Alberta needs to go international, beyond our 3 million Albertans and 30 million Canadians. Let's obtain international revenues for Alberta. Our public institutions should be allowed and encouraged to look for revenues from international sources as our population is very modest and we want to maintain a low tax environment.

In general, a public strategy for dealing with continuous growth is to build extra or buffer capacity on top of the public capacity with private and international resources for the use of clients who pay. This extra capacity is turned over to our local public use as our public needs grow. It is a buffer we can count on for our tight public system, assuring our citizens that when they need it, it will be there. It is also the revenue earner for the public systems.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

2:40

Education Week

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I join the Member for Calgary-Egmont in recognizing Education Week, which runs from April 25 to May 1. The theme this year is Public Education: The Learning Edge, which is especially fitting for Alberta public and separate schools who are learning to do more innovative programs with less funding.

Alberta teachers and principals have striven to respond to parents with new alternative programs to meet the needs of all children. In the process they have redefined public education. School boards have responded to a desire by communities to have local control over school resources in order to meet local needs by introducing school-based budgeting, which allows principals and parents to decide how resources should best be used in their own schools.

Competition from private schools in the late 1970s encouraged school boards to offer programs that were as good as those in private institutions. Plans entailed eliminating school boundaries, allowing students to attend any school in a district, offering alternative programs such as dynamic arts and athletics, and inviting independent schools to join school boards.

Alberta schools are not rigid cookie-cutter copies of one another. Parents and students have a wide selection of programming from which to choose thanks to the creativity and dedication of principals, teachers, school officials, parents, students, and the support of the Alberta public. In Alberta there are choices of modified school calendars, year-round schooling, and specialized programs such as academics, arts, or athletics.

During this Education Week we must take time to reflect on the

value of a strong public education system not only to the young people it moulds into productive citizens but also to society as a whole. It's not good enough for Alberta children to have a right to an education. All Alberta children must have the right to an excellent public education.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: **Presenting Reports by
Standing and Special Committees**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The Standing Committee on Private Bills has had certain bills under consideration and wishes to report as follows. The committee recommends that the following private bill proceed with amendments: Bill Pr. 4, Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004. As part of this report I will be tabling five copies of the proposed amendment.

Mr. Speaker, I request the concurrence of the Assembly in these recommendations.

The Speaker: Shall I call the question?

Some Hon. Members: Question.

The Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Speaker: Opposed? Carried.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table five copies of the Law Society of Alberta annual report 2003. The mission of the Law Society of Alberta is to serve and protect the public interest. They promote a high standard of legal service and professional conduct. I appreciate the work that the members of the Law Society do in the community and their commitment to providing excellent service. Their feedback is always valuable as we work together to achieve the best possible legal system for Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, many of us here sometimes indulge in humour with respect to lawyer jokes, but I like to take every opportunity that I can when speaking in public to thank members of the legal profession for the work that they do in our community organizations, not-for-profit organizations, and elsewhere on a pro bono, or free, basis to help improve our communities.

The Speaker: No other tablings?

The chair would like to table a letter he received at 11:30 this morning from the Opposition House Leader concerning certain events that occurred in the Assembly yesterday in conjunction with comments made by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar during his tabling and a subsequent point of order raised by the Minister of Infrastructure. As well, I'm tabling a handwritten note from the Minister of Community Development respecting this matter.

**Speaker's Ruling
Parliamentary Language**

The Speaker: I would like to make some comments as well with respect to these events that occurred yesterday. I indicated a little

earlier that I received at 11:30 a.m. a letter from the Opposition House Leader concerning certain events that occurred in the Assembly yesterday in connection with comments made by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar during his tabling and a subsequent point of order raised by the Minister of Infrastructure. Both the Government House Leader and the Minister of Community Development were copied on the letter sent earlier today. As this is the last tabling under this item of business, I want to make some comments about the contents of the letter.

The chair should explain that essentially the Official Opposition House Leader takes exception to the manner in which the point of order was raised and some comments by the Deputy Government House Leader. First, as hon. members who have been here for at least three years will know, certain things develop quickly in this place, and the atmosphere can become very, very heated at times. In the chair's view that was the case yesterday when the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar made some comments in connection with his tabling which carried on the exchange from question period. The Minister of Infrastructure took exception and raised a point of order, which was dealt with by the chair by essentially saying that there was no point of order.

During the discussion the Deputy Government House Leader made some comments which the chair did not hear as a result of certain activities in the House – not only did the chair not hear, certain table officers did not hear – but which were found on pages 1020 and 1021 of yesterday's *Hansard*. The Deputy Government House Leader said, "Will you stop for a second and shut up and listen, please." Clearly, this is unparliamentary, and the chair appreciates the fact that the Deputy Government House Leader has indicated an apology by way of a handwritten note that he said that he had provided to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on a first-name basis.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader also indicated that he will have his comments withdrawn. How might that occur? We'll come to that in just a second. Then we'll call on the hon. Government House Leader to in fact withdraw those comments on behalf of the hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Members must know that this chair is absolutely committed to preserving order and decorum in this Assembly, but the chair is also aware of the games that go on in this place. He has been here since 1979. He's observed nearly all of the games, not to suggest that there aren't some new ones being invented on a daily basis, but he has seen them. He's been victimized by some and has been perpetrator of some. As the chair noted yesterday and will repeat again today, tablings should just be tabled without comment. That started the whole incident. The chair has also said many times that members know that they can do better.

**Speaker's Ruling
Oral Question Period Practices**

The Speaker: Now, the chair has absolutely no difficulty standing up ad nauseam and intervening in the dealings of this Assembly, but he has also said on many, many occasions that in essence this would completely bring to a halt the question period in this Assembly. There must be an ebb and flow.

Today let me just give you three examples of when there could have been interventions and questions could have been ruled out. There was one on the third question that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona raised. After the first question the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona said that there was a matter before the courts. Well, clearly, we know that if certain matters are before the courts, subject to certain interpretations of our sub judice rule, specifically Standing Order 23(g)(ii), those questions could just very

easily have been ruled out, and they would not have been applicable, and they should not have been proceeded with.

Hon. members will know as well that *Beauchesne* 411(1) basically says that there's no provision in the question period for legal interpretations to be given by ministers themselves. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry on several occasions asked the hon. Minister of Transportation to provide a legal interpretation with respect to a certain question. Well, those questions could have been ruled out, but under the wide-ranging guise of government policy they were let proceed.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder raised two questions. One, he wanted to know about airplane seats being 10 or 19. Subject to correction the chair is unaware of any law passed by the Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta which will determine the number of seats that are applicable to aircraft in the province of Alberta. Neither is the chair aware that the province of Alberta owns the Edmonton City Centre Airport and has any jurisdiction whatsoever in terms of either of the two runways operating within the city of Edmonton at the City Centre Airport. Yet questions were raised; policy was presumably wide ranging.

There's an ebb and flow; there's a give and take. However, there is no great difficulty in the chair's purview of applying all the rules. It would make a very, very different Legislative Assembly. But subject to wide consultation of all 83 members, that will not occur in the interim.

The hon. Government House Leader.

2:50

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you indicated, the Deputy Government House Leader, the Minister of Community Development, had provided a handwritten note, and in that handwritten note he indicates, in reference to the comment that he made, "However, it was also inappropriate" – I'll delete the part in brackets – "for me to use the words 'shut up'" and "I will have my comment withdrawn!" He specifically asked that I rise on his behalf, withdraw those comments and apologize for them.

Mr. Speaker, on my own initiative, not on behalf of the Minister of Community Development, I would just say that I can understand how one is tempted to make comments of that type because sometimes when you are speaking and there are interjections, it's really difficult to concentrate. That does not, however, in any way suggest that one should use words like "shut up" in this House, and the hon. minister has asked that I withdraw those remarks and apologize on his behalf.

The Speaker: Just one addendum to that. If all hon. members would read their own Standing Orders, Standing Order 13(4)(b), and ask themselves what it really means. When the chair has given a certain person recognition to speak, what does that mean for all other members?

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: We'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Solicitor General

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Order the first hour will be

allocated between the minister and members of the opposition, following which anybody else may participate.

The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to present the Alberta Solicitor General business plan for 2004 to 2007. Before I begin, I would like to introduce members of my executive committee and senior officials who are attending the meeting with me today: the Deputy Solicitor General, Jim Nichols; Bob Dunster, my ADM of public security; Arnold Galet, ADM of correctional services; Dan Mercer, assistant deputy minister of strategic services; Don Mottershead, chief information officer and executive director of strategic management services; Shawkat Sabur, senior financial officer and executive director of financial services; Maureen Geres, my executive assistant; and Debbie Malloy, my special adviser.

Mr. Chairman, these people are incredibly dedicated to what they do. Their support over the last three years has made my job a lot . . .

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Solicitor General, just for the record, just for correction: you are presenting not only the business plans but also the estimates for 2004-2005.

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes.

The Deputy Chair: You may proceed.

Mrs. Forsyth: Yes, Mr. Chair. Thanks. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge all the staff that work in the Solicitor General area also. They do an unbelievable job in sometimes very difficult situations.

Mr. Chair, I'll open with a few remarks and then respond to any questions that might come up from the House. To the extent that either time does not permit or I'm unable to answer questions in sufficient detail, we'll certainly be prepared to respond in writing to any questions that were not addressed.

The Financial Management Commission recommended that the ministerial business plan and estimates address our strategic priorities rather than activities and operational manners. I'm sure you have noticed, along with other government ministries, that we have responded to this direction by developing a more strategically focused plan that reflects our priorities.

Our vision and mission statement remain unchanged. We have a vision of a province where Albertans feel safe in their homes and in their communities. The ministry works to achieve this vision through joint initiatives with community partners and through its participation in cross-ministry policy initiatives.

While we have not changed our core businesses, they have been aligned more closely with our goals. Under the core businesses of policing and crime prevention is goal 1, "ensure safe communities in Alberta," \$179 million, 52 per cent of our budget. Under the core business of victims programs and services is goal 2, "provide services to victims and ensure that they have a more meaningful role in the criminal justice system," \$12 million, 3 per cent of our budget. Under our third core business – custody, supervision, and rehabilitative opportunities for offenders – are goal 3, "facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders," and goal 4, "ensure secure and efficient custody, community supervision and transportation of offenders," \$138.9 million, 40 per cent of our budget. Under the core business of security services is goal 5, "ensure the safety of Albertans by providing government security services and crisis management planning," \$16.4 million, 5 per cent of our budget.

As I've already alluded to, our 2004-2007 ministry business plan outlines our strategic priorities for the next three years. These

priorities rise from our environmental scanning process and from consultation with Albertans through three major reviews that we have undertaken over the past several years. Our seven strategic priorities for 2004-2007, the main drivers for action, include action on the MLA reviews, crime prevention, organized crime and terrorism, offender management, children and youth initiatives, aboriginal initiatives, and utilization of emerging technologies.

With regard to our strategic priority of taking action on all three MLA reviews, we recently released both the policing and corrections reviews, with the victims review coming in due course. For example, Mr. Chair, we recognize that towns and cities are experiencing serious financial problems in meeting their policing needs, so we are adding \$58 million in extra funding to bolster policing services in the province, a 50 per cent increase in spending on policing programs. This boosts spending on policing programs to \$174 million for 2004-2005. Likewise, as part of the response to the corrections review we are set to hire more probation officers, launch an electronic monitoring pilot project, and implement a smoking ban in adult jails.

In order to meet our financial targets back in 2002-2003, a significant part of the crime prevention and restorative justice program budgets were eliminated. I'm happy to say that crime prevention and restorative justice grants will be restored. My ministry will work towards addressing the strategic priority of crime prevention through continued community partnership, agreement with provincial crime prevention associations, and adjustments to crime prevention and restorative justice program funding.

Another one of our strategic priorities is organized crime and terrorism. If we are to maintain our safe communities, we must strengthen our police resources to bring these groups to justice.

Back in June 2003 Treasury Board provided funding to move forward with the implementation of the integrated response to organized crime and gang units in Alberta, commonly known as IROC. IROC is unique in that it will not replace any existing enforcement efforts. Instead, it will conduct investigations currently difficult to undertake because of the complexity of the scope.

This unit will be in addition to the continuing efforts of the Criminal Intelligence Service Alberta, CISA. The security and information management unit, SIM, developed under the 2002-05 business plan, will enhance security information, risk awareness, and develop and implement counterterrorism strategies. Together, IROC, CISA, and the SIM unit will go a long way towards addressing crime and terrorism.

We are working towards a number of initiatives that address the strategic priority of offender management. We are furthering the development of the youth justice committee program and working closely with other departments and agencies to divert individuals with mental illness away from the criminal justice system. We are also looking towards expanding the availability of domestic violence treatment programs, in addition to working with Children's Services to prepare a provincial-wide response to family violence.

In support of the strategic priority of children and youth initiatives we are preparing a strategy with law enforcement agencies and government departments to address all types of child exploitation, including child pornography, child prostitution, family abuse, and Internet crimes.

Another priority from my ministry as well as a cross-ministry priority initiative is the aboriginal policy initiative. In co-operation with the federal government and First Nations communities we are developing a strategy to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of First Nations policing in this province.

For the strategic priority of utilization of emerging technology we are evaluating a project that we are involved in with Alberta Justice

on the implementation of video conferencing for first appearances and setting final trial dates at the Edmonton Remand Centre and the Calgary Young Offender Centre. Video conferencing is intended to enhance the safety of the public, staff, witnesses, and the accused, because fewer prisoners need to be transported to and from court. If the pilot project is successful – and it does look like it is successful – we are looking towards implementation across the province.

3:00

As with the rest of our business plan over the past year we have also worked to enhance the strategic focus of our performance measures, attempting to move away from the operational or output measures. Our focus is now more on measuring the long-term outcomes of the goal. Several measures which have appeared in previous ministry business plans have been removed from this year's business plan in an attempt to enhance the strategic focus of this document. These include public satisfaction with police, number of victim service initiatives, and successful transportation of prisoners to court. Although all these measures have been removed from the business plan, we will continue monitoring our performance in these areas to ensure that we continue to provide satisfactory performance.

The 2004-2007 business plan financials, the financial content of our business plan, reflect Treasury Board's approval over the past year as well as federally funded programs and funds for continuing core programs and services. The Alberta Solicitor General's budget for 2004-2005 is \$334.4 million. This is an increase of \$62.6 million over last year's comparable forecast and \$66.1 million over last year's comparable budget. This is almost a 25 per cent increase in program funding.

Overall spending on policing and crime prevention will increase by \$61.2 million over the 2003-04 budget. We have heard the concerns from communities across the province. We have come to an agreement with the municipalities. Funding for supervision and rehabilitation of offenders has increased by \$3.5 million and continues to account for roughly 40 per cent of our total budget. There is also increased funding of \$0.9 million for protective services and counterterrorism operations.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my comments on the 2004-07 Solicitor General business plan and estimates. Our strategic business planning and budget decisions are all guided by and focused on making Albertans feel safe in their homes and their communities, and I'd be pleased to address any questions regarding the plan and will provide a written answer to any questions not fully covered today.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to the minister for her opening comments and thanks and welcome as well to the staff that are joining us in the gallery.

I know that in the past I've been accused of speaking very quickly and giving a barrage of information, and I hadn't quite understood that until now. I didn't catch everything that the minister said. I did try and take notes, and I'll apologize in advance if I repeat something that in fact she has already provided information on.

I'm just going to give the minister an overview of the categories of issues that I'd like to discuss with her today. We have about two and a quarter hours. I'm hoping, unless there is participation from other members, after the initial discussion of performance measurements and core businesses, to do a give-and-take on much shorter exchanges so that we can get into the detail of specific categories, sort of three or four minutes from me and three or four minutes from the minister, if that's possible. It may not be, in which case we'll revert to the usual 20-minute style.

Essentially, the categories I'm discussing today – there are some questions and comments around performance measurements and core businesses; then some discussion around the remand centre, the corrections review, including the phone policy, the smoking policy, electronic monitoring, young offenders, private prisons, and alcohol-addiction treatment; then some discussion around victims of crime, going on to integrated organized crime, the sex offender registry, the MLA policing review, and Amber Alert.

I tried to slow down for the folks taking notes. I hope that's better.

I'll refer the minister to page 334 of the estimates book. Specifically referencing vote 2.2.1, crime prevention, in which there is an increase, it looks really impressive on the page. In fact, it comes out to \$1.1 million. I'd like the minister to please provide some detail on what's included in that increase, if I could get a list of the programs that are going to be funded or expanded, allocations of money to each of those programs so that I have an idea of where that increase in money is going. So I'm really looking for an expansion of detail, and she may want to provide that in writing.

Also on page 334 of the estimates book, reference 2.2.2, provincial policing programs, there is an increase there. It looks like \$19 million. Yes. Again I'm looking for a detailed breakdown there. This is where I'm assuming that the costs for additional protective wear, high-tech equipment, training of officers, that sort of thing is coming under. So not only the detail on what is anticipated in this increase but also what we're looking for for the rest of the '04-07 business cycle. I find the detail helpful to avoid misunderstandings, and the more detail the minister is able to give, the more I'm likely to understand the examples and the direction that the minister is going.

I'd now like to look at vote 2.2.4, policing assistance to municipalities. Now, this is a new amount of money. It's not showing up in previous budgets, and I'd like confirmation. I've heard various numbers tumbled about, and I'd like to get some confirmation, please, around this number. Is this reflecting the \$16 million that was from the unconditional municipal grants through Municipal Affairs, that the \$16 million came from that and is somehow rolled into additional money and shows up as the \$37 million? It is a new entry into the budget line item, so I would like a breakout, please, of how that \$37 million is arrived at and, specifically, if it includes the \$16 million that previously was under the Municipal Affairs budget under unconditional municipal grants, which, in fact, is how policing was paid for in many municipalities prior to the changes introduced by the Solicitor General.

There's also a new reference, 2.2.5, special policing assistance. I would like a detailed breakdown of where that money is going. Where is it being allocated? Is there a formula? Can we look forward to that formula being in place for a number of years? Is it allocated to specific sizes of municipalities that are receiving it, or is this covering some of the special units that she discussed, like IROC? What exactly is it being used for? Again, it has not appeared in the budget previously. It is a new vote, and I would like the detailed breakdown on it.

Maybe I'll stop there, and let the minister answer that, unless she prefers to do it, because it is detailed, in writing. Then I'll go on to the Edmonton Remand Centre category.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Chairman, some of her questions are quite in depth, obviously. We'd be pleased to provide the answers to you in writing, hon. member. I could start with some and then provide you with some, but my staff, as I indicated earlier, is great and would be pleased to provide you with things in writing.

You are right in some of your questions that you've asked in

regard to the reinstatement of crime prevention programs and what new initiatives are planned in the area of crime prevention. You know, if you recall several years ago, because you've been the critic, it was in our budget at one point in time. Then when we had to make some difficult decisions in our budget, it's one of the things that we had to let go. What we're planning on doing with the crime prevention is similar to what was done in the past. People with crime prevention initiatives that they feel are important to their community will apply, and it will be distributed on a grant basis.

3:10

Restorative justice is a philosophy that we believe focuses on understanding crime and acts against individuals. Again we're looking at restoring some sort of grant process where they can apply for restorative justice. It's something that we're currently working on. The community is excited about bringing back the grants. It's a decision that we made, and it's a good decision, and we hope that many of the communities that participate in regard to crime prevention and restorative justice are looking forward to the establishment back of those particular grants.

I'm like you. As you were talking very quickly, I was trying to grab some of your questions. Yes, we've got new money in policing, and we believe it's a substantial increase for policing. It's something that we've worked long and hard on. It's something, in consultation with the AUMA and the AAMD and C, that they came to an agreement with over 30 years. We knew that policing was a priority for every community in this province. The first thing we did was take the level from 2,500 and raise it to 5,000, and we're providing a grant of \$16 per capita back to the community. That's a significant increase for a lot of communities in this province, and they're pleased with it.

I'm going to ask the hon. member to talk, and I'll continue to write and try and answer some of your questions. If I miss anything, please tell me till I get going here.

Ms Blakeman: Sure. Happy to oblige. I'm just picking up on one specific question on the comments that you've made. I'm assuming that this is under crime prevention, the 2.2.1 vote, and that's specific to the Edmonton restorative justice centre. I guess what I'm looking for is whether an agency like that would be in line for operating grants; in other words, if that's a sort of general administrative grant to help them run all of their programs or whether what's being contemplated is a project grant that organizations like that would have to apply for and would only be eligible for a small amount of funding to cover something very specific that they're offering. I'm urging the minister to consider the wider general funding of operational grants, but I'm interested to hear what the choice is that's been made there.

I think that there's a larger argument that I won't spend a lot of time on now. If we want these agencies to do this work and in some cases pick up programs and services the government used to provide, we need to be willing to provide them with stable, predictable long-term funding. Kind of lurching from project to project, year to year, and having to redesign everything that they're offering in order to fit into new project funding guidelines is certainly one way to use the administrator's time, but I think there are other good uses that could be put into delivering the programs. So I'll wait to see what the answer is on that one.

I'm going to go on and talk a bit now about the Edmonton Remand Centre. I have questioned the minister a couple of times in question period about the condition of the Edmonton Remand Centre, and I'd like to go more into detail about what the minister is considering addressing and how she plans on alleviating the situation that's been created there.

Just as a brief recap, we're now in a situation where people who have served time in the Remand Centre, which is essentially a holding facility – this is prior to court or during the court process; they have not been convicted of anything. Generally, if they are convicted, the judges will allocate two-for-one time. So for every one day served in the Remand Centre, they get credit for two days, and that is taken off their sentence. In at least one instance – I think there's only one at this point, but I could be wrong – the judge recently gave three-for-one time. So for every day served in the Remand Centre awaiting trial, that particular individual was credited with three days that were taken off their sentence to be served in a provincial correctional facility.

We certainly do have a problem with the Edmonton Remand Centre. I've heard the minister say: "Well, you know, nothing we can do about it. We don't create them. We just have to deal with them once they come out." But I respond equally that the minister is the minister responsible for this and has to deal with the conditions. Some of those conditions – they've been documented other places – have been described as Third World.

There's a significant problem with overcrowding, with the number of inmates. Sorry; inmates is the wrong word because that indicates that they've been convicted of something, and in fact they haven't. The number of people being held there is far above and beyond what the Edmonton Remand Centre was designed to handle. There are a lot of complaints and concerns around a lack of fresh air, complaints around poor food quality, complaints and a lot of concern around the lack of exercise. All of this usually can be explained by the fact that there are so many people in that facility, and it wasn't built to provide, you know, high-quality, hot food to the number of people that are currently in there. It was built to deal with considerably fewer people.

Some of the things that I'm being told by people that work in the field and who know enough that I will take their word for it is that inmates instruct their lawyers to plead guilty in order to get them out of the Remand Centre because they can't hack one more day, which I find appalling and also hard to believe. I don't know that if I were in a facility, I would be willing to barter away my freedom, but I think that also underlines to me how desperately people do not want to have to spend any more time in the Remand Centre if that's what they're considering.

I think that, if I may paraphrase the minister, there's been an indication from her that people don't end up in the Remand Centre if they're angels, that there's a reason why they're not released on their own recognizance, why they, in fact, are remanded to the Remand Centre. I think I have the minister saying: you know, they've got a previous conviction, or there's a reason for them being there.

But the Solicitor General, I'm sure, is aware that having a previous conviction does not mean that a given person is guilty this time. Really, the recidivism rates simply don't support that. We do tend to do that a lot. We've got that phrase about: well, round up the usual suspects. Well, fine. The police go out and they round up all the people that they know of that were convicted last time of something, but when we actually look at the recidivism rates, that simply is not supported. We still, ultimately, are in a society where we say that you are innocent until proven guilty.

Who tend to be the people who cannot meet the tests set by release on your own recognizance? Well, there are two tests there. One is that the person is a danger to themselves, and the second is that there's a likely failure to appear. What are some of the ways that they ascertain that failure to appear? Well, things like a current address. Do you have a stable home? Do you have a place to go to? If we can't find you, you're going to make us want to hold you in

one place so we do know where you are. Okay. Well, another way is: do you have a job? Again, is there a place where we can go and find you when we need to find you if for some reason you have not appeared? Or do you have money? Money means that you can in fact set bail, and it'll be in your interest to show up and get your cash bond back.

3:20

Well, who are the people that are least likely to have a permanent home address or a job or ready cash? Those people are most likely to be homeless. In this society they're likely to be aboriginal, and quite often they are mentally ill. Those, in fact, are the people that we have in our Remand Centre in a lot of cases. Those are the ones that don't meet that test of permanent address, job, ready cash.

Yes, there are gang members in there, and we certainly just went through an episode where there were a lot of gang members in the Edmonton Remand Centre. But I'm questioning, given the overcrowding in those circumstances, whether we've really got the people in there that it was intended to have in there or whether in fact, without really paying attention, we've gone a long way down a road where we now look around and go, "Gee, that's not really who should be in there: the homeless, a disproportionate number of aboriginal people, and the mentally ill." We're using the Remand Centre as a shelter in that case but a very restrictive shelter and, given that these people are still innocent until proven guilty, quite unfair.

I'm looking to see what short-term action the minister is taking to alleviate the conditions at the Edmonton Remand Centre. I had asked her the questions in question period. I did bring forward suggestions that had been brought to me about moving some of the people that have been remanded there for a longer period of time to Fort Saskatchewan, to one of the closed wings there. If it was, you know, longer than a month or two that they were expected to be in, they could be housed there, or they could be taken there and bused back in or something like that.

But there are really two questions with this. What short-term action is the minister taking to alleviate the conditions that are actually there? Those are the ones that I'm talking about: Third World conditions, overcrowding, lack of fresh air, poor food quality, lack of exercise. What long-term action is the minister taking to alleviate the conditions at the Edmonton Remand Centre?

When I look at the budget, what I'm seeing is that there's about a 3 per cent increase to corrections overall, and that's appearing on page 335 of the estimates book. I'm assuming that the 3 per cent is not in there to cover changes to the Edmonton Remand Centre. Perhaps the minister can confirm, then, that there is no money to deal with this problem and that we can expect it to get worse. I guess that starts to involve the Minister of Justice, who I get to deal with tomorrow, about how he's going to start to handle even four-for-one time or, potentially, cases being thrown out, because there's an argument there that people have been treated cruelly.

A couple of other specific policies are coming out of the corrections review. Would the minister like me to stop so that she could respond to the Remand Centre or keep going?

Mrs. Forsyth: Whatever is easier for you is fine by me.

Ms Blakeman: I'll stop.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thanks, Mr. Chairman. The first thing the hon. member talked about was restorative justice. In response to the '99

Alberta Summit on Justice the department at the time under the Attorney General developed the community justice policy, that was based on restorative justice principles.

The policy aimed to make restorative justice processes more widely available in the province, if you remember.

With the recent provincial announcement of new and increased funding, the \$1 million that we're looking at has been made available for crime prevention and restorative justice programming. The department is looking at renewing the community justice policy as a framework which will guide us in the allocation of new money for restorative justice. I know that doesn't exactly answer your question, because you mentioned I believe it was the Edmonton restorative justice centre, on operational. They're all things we're developing, but at this time I would have to say that it's probably all going to be on a grant basis. They'll have to apply for restorative justice grant funds that will be accessible, similar to what we had in the past. I believe that's the way we're going.

The member talked a lot about the Remand Centre and the overcrowding, and I appreciate that this is something that's dear to her heart. You know, I have to say to her that in the remand centres right across the country the populations are going up. So really it's nothing that's unique to Alberta and something that we have to deal with. I think that one of the things I clearly want to make sure that everybody understands – and I know the member understands – is that we do not send people to the remand centres. We have to deal with the people that are sent to us by the courts.

One of the recommendations that was in the corrections review was the establishment of a judiciary committee where you hear from the probation officers and things like that and try and establish maybe a working relationship with the judiciary and talk about some of the things that are concerned.

I know that she's brought it up to me in question period, and it's something, as I indicated a little earlier, that's dear to her heart, but again, you know, it's important to understand that we have to deal with the people that are sent to us in the remand. They are sent to us, and it's the courts that make that decision. So you can't put up a no vacancy sign – and I've said this in the House – but we try and deal with them as best we can with a very dignified, humane, as kind as we can policy.

We have reconfigured the interior of the building to make better use of the space we have. It's important that you understand that the population varies in the Remand Centre day to day, and what we're finding is that the average stay in the remand is approximately 13 days. We also have a special unit for those in long-term remand because of lengthy trials. They have single cells, and we've provided greater freedom.

I can tell you that the number one priority for corrections is a new remand centre, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's a number one priority for Albertans. I want to be cautious on some of my answers, because as you're well aware, we're dealing with this in front of the courts. But Albertans have continually told us over and over again that their priorities are a new hospital, schools. I can tell you that the priority in my riding is a hospital in the deep southeast, where the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw and I live. It certainly, unfortunately, isn't a new remand centre.

We have been also dealing with considering how we can deal with this and long-term options, and one of the things that we're trying to do is that remanded offenders who are sentenced but facing other charges are sent to the Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre. They're carefully selected when they're sent there, and they're low risk. We certainly can't jeopardize public security by putting maximum security remanded offenders in there, because it's not designed to do that.

We're doing the best we can to accommodate the people that we're dealing with and that are sent there. As I explained to you earlier, the population changes day by day, and we have tried to reconfigure the Remand Centre and tried to deal with some of our people at Fort Saskatchewan in some of the empty units. I know that you've asked me that in the past.

I'll let you continue.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Just a couple of follow-ups, responding to the minister's comments on the Remand Centre.

Yes, I understand that the issue around overcrowding in remand centres is taking place across the country. Nonetheless, I'm looking to the minister for her plans on what's going to happen in Alberta. Yes, she doesn't send people to the Remand Centre, but what I think and what I'm sensing is that there is a concern over public safety. People wouldn't like to see cases punted out of court or people with significantly reduced sentences, once they've been sentenced, because of the conditions that are in place based on choices that this government has made.

3:30

What is the horizon on a new remand centre? Obviously, the minister has thought about it. What is the horizon we're looking at? Are we looking at five years? Are we looking at 10 years? Are we looking at 25 years? I think this needs to become part of the public discussion if we are at the point where courts are making decisions about time served. The onus is on this minister to be making those decisions. So I'm going to put that question back on the table.

Out of the corrections review – I'm pretty sure it's the corrections review. There was a change in the phone policy in which there's a \$1.85 charge now being charged against the recipient of phone calls made from people in provincial facilities. I could be wrong here. It could be out of the Remand Centre. I'm wondering what the rationale was behind that. What I see happening here is that there is a definitive bias against those people that are incarcerated or remanded that have less resources or with families that have less resources.

Essentially, for anybody that's poor in this day and age getting a phone is darn tough to do because the phone companies now require a fairly significant deposit, whether you've got a history with them or not. You can have a perfect history and still be levied a \$300 to \$500 sign-up fee, a deposit to get a phone. In many cases working low-income or poor families don't in fact have phones. They often have those pay-as-you-go cell phones. They use it for those emergency phone calls, and that's all they use it for. But my understanding is that this policy specifically prohibits calls to cell phones.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

Has the minister now set up a policy where someone that has been remanded or incarcerated in fact could not contact their family if the family doesn't have a regular phone, if all they have is a pay-as-you-go cell phone? I'm assuming – but I'm looking for clarification from the minister – that that was not what she was trying to accomplish. But that is, it appears, what in fact is the outcome. Is there any anticipation of changes to that?

I understand that the point of this was to stop harassing phone calls and stalking phone calls, and frankly I don't like getting those phone calls from the Remand Centre at 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning or 10 o'clock on a Friday night from somebody that's been

remanded there and because I'm the Justice critic, they're going to phone me and think I'm going to get them out of jail. I don't like those phone calls either. Okay? But I think that what we've done here is cut off someone's nose to spite their face. When we're looking for the conditions that help people not offend or help them exhibit good behaviour, strong role modelling, one of those things is support of family, and if we cut them off from family, how are we accomplishing that?

I'm moving on here to the no-smoking policy. I would like the minister to detail, please – and, again, she may want to provide me with written material here, particularly if a policy does exist – how the no-smoking policy is going to be implemented. I'm looking for: what is the phase-in time? Is there a target date that's set, and then six months in advance programs start to kick in and notices and group sessions and availability of smoking cessation programs and encouragement of people that are remanded or incarcerated to take advantage of that? What's the anticipated rollout of this program?

I'd also be interested in how the minister plans to deal with an anticipated black market in cigarettes. Having quit smoking and recognizing myself as a lifelong recovering addict to nicotine, I understand how addictive nicotine is. It's more addictive than heroin, and I understand what that does to people. And, by the way, I approve. I've been pushing for a no-smoking policy in all provincial buildings, and I think they need to be the same, and the prisons are one of the places that it needs to happen. So no misunderstandings here that I'm saying that this shouldn't be instituted. It should.

What I'm looking for is: how's it going to roll out? Two, how's the minister planning on dealing with a black market? Once there's this supply and demand – and that works even inside prisons and remand centres. Once you can't have it any more, everybody wants it and they want to pay more for it. So a \$10 pack of cigarettes will likely be in the hundred dollar range. What's in place or planned to deal with that black market? What's in place or planned in helping or anticipating those addicts that are going to look for alternatives? And they will be looking for those alternatives. I'm back to reminding you about being more addictive than heroin.

Finally, as the minister mentioned, most of the people that are incarcerated in provincial facilities are in there for 13 days. Frankly, some smokers might be able to just make it through in the 13 days and they're out. But how is that being worked in? How is the fact of what the average length of stay is being worked in with the no-smoking policy and rolling out, one presumes, smoking cessation.

I'm going to go on to electronic monitoring, which was also included under the corrections review. I'd like to hear from the minister: what is the goal? What is the minister trying to achieve that she is using electronic monitoring to achieve?

I would argue that if the goal is to protect the public, then the only thing we have that is provable repeatedly in protecting the public is effective treatment programs for people that are on probation or parole situations. That is the only thing that has been proven over time to be effective. Electronic monitoring does nothing to protect public safety, absolutely nothing. It just tells you where the bracelet is, and the jury is definitely out on the success of this program.

So I'm curious as to what the ministry was looking at: what studies, what reviews, what literature reviews, what cost-benefit analysis? What were you looking at that brought you to a decision that you wanted to pursue this? Why do I not see with equal vigour treatment programs that include things like job skills, literacy, other treatment programs that we know reduce recidivism? You know, if somebody can get a job and have a decent life and a paycheque, that's easier than committing crime and being incarcerated. And literacy is a huge part of that, and numeracy goes along with it, of

course, and other programs that help people to literally get on their feet.

On the one hand, the government has got this Alberta Works, and we're going to give people a hand up and not a handout and the other rhetoric that they use there, but I don't see that reflected in the choices that are being made in the Solicitor General's department. So I'm interested in the policy discussion that points staff members and the minister toward implementation of programs like electronic monitoring versus implementation of treatment programs around literacy, job skills, and that sort of thing.

I'll pause now and allow the minister to offer comment on my last question on the remand centre and on the corrections review phone policy, smoking policy, and electronic monitoring.

Thank you.

3:40

The Acting Chair: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thanks, Mr. Chair. The hon. member started talking, first of all, about phones. We currently have phones in our correctional facilities, and one of the recommendations in regard to the correction review was to expand those phones, and we are doing that. We had tenders close in December, and we're moving forward to a fully integrated system expected to be in place by the summer.

I think it's important, first of all, to understand that there are no charges – no charges – for calls to the lawyer, the Ombudsman, agencies such as the John Howard Society, Elizabeth Fry Society, and so on. You are correct; there is a \$1.85 charge per call. We are well aware of the cell phones that don't accept these charges of \$1.85, and we've thought a great deal about that. But we also believe that if someone is in the Remand Centre and they need to talk to their family, then, you know, they can make some arrangements for that call to take place, whether it's at a friend's house or whatever they can.

On the charges themselves if we have somebody – and you referred to that – that doesn't have the money to be able to accept the call, we certainly will make arrangements for those individuals and have no problem making those particular arrangements for those individuals that, you know, feel that their family on the other end can't afford the call, et cetera. I mean, we're not going to cut them off from the world, for goodness' sake.

The no-smoking policy that you referred to and you've indicated you support is something we've been watching for some time now. It was another recommendation from the correction review. We've been watching what's been happening around the country and how they've been dealing with no smoking, and so far this has been fairly successful. We hope to implement this policy by the end of September. People will be well aware that the correctional facilities in this province and the Remand Centre are smoke-free. We think it's important.

One of the things we've noticed by watching what's going on around other jurisdictions and what they have told us is the fact that it was important to give ample notice. So we were going to do that. We will move into that on September 30. That will be the roll-out. There'll be good notification for everybody that the facilities are going to be smoke-free.

The black market cigarettes is in my mind no different than what we try and deal with in our centres on drugs. We've got wonderful correction officers that do an incredible job in this province on a daily basis, and they'll be monitoring the black market cigarettes. The AUPE supports this initiative, so the correction officers that work in the facilities are well aware of some of the issues that they're going to have to face.

Yes, we're looking at smoking cessation. You asked about that. One of the things that we had found in one of the jurisdictions – I'm sorry; I'm not exactly sure – is that popcorn was working really well, believe it or not, so they were providing popcorn. That surprised me, but that's one of the things that they found. Yes, we're definitely looking at smoking cessation, to provide our offenders with that.

You're right. It's a terrible, terrible addiction, and it's something that we're going to take time to put into effect and be able to make sure that it rolls out, as you say, fairly smoothly so that people know when they are coming into our facilities that they're smoke-free. Again, I want to emphasize the fact that we've monitored what's happened across the country.

The last thing you talked about was electronic monitoring and why we're doing that. Again, one of the recommendations that is contained in the correction review that was done by three of our members, who did a remarkable job and looked at what was happening across the country within the correctional facilities – and, yes, again we're looking at a pilot project. Which way we go is yet to be determined. But I said, again, it's going to be a pilot project. We want to have a pilot project to see if it's successful or not.

The offenders that are subject to electronic monitoring are those sentenced by the court who will be serving their sentences in the community, and as such they've already been determined to not pose a risk to the public. I think the advantage of the electronic monitoring is that the technology provides an immediate notification if an offender fails to comply with their curfew by leaving their residence, and this also provides solid evidence for the probation officers to use in proceeding with violations against that particular offender. Once it's been determined that the offender has breached a condition of the court order, then the police have the authority to arrest and detain that particular offender.

We have been talking to British Columbia and will continue to talk to them because they have electronic monitoring in their province, and I think it's a good idea to always talk to your neighbours or people and see if they think they're effective and if they're worthwhile and if they're useful. I want to emphasize again that it's a pilot project. It's not going provincial. We want to see if it's working. If it works, great. If it doesn't, then, you know, we'll have to look at something else.

Thanks.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you to the minister for those responses.

With the electronic monitoring pilot project I understand that it's a pilot project; I understand that you're going to monitor it. I am still interested in what background you considered or looked at or reviewed – studies, reports, literature reviews, cost-benefit analyses, whatever – that brought you to this point where you thought you might do this. I understand that you've spoken to people in B.C., and if that was what you did and all you did, fine. Let me know that. Otherwise, I'm interested in knowing what those reports and studies were, and I'd love to get a copy of what you were looking at that pointed you in that direction.

Before I move off corrections, once again I will ask the minister if she has any plans to institute harm reduction strategies in provincial facilities, because this is a protection for the staff and a protection for the individuals. It's been noted before that the likelihood is that they are incarcerated for 13 days or less, and we are still running the likelihood or the opportunity to be infecting people who will have served their time and be out in two weeks. We run the risk of infecting them with hep C or worse because there are no harm reduction strategies in our provincial facilities.

So I will ask the minister again and I'll probably continue to ask

the minister as long as I'm the critic on regular interviews how she's planning on addressing this. I know that she searches for drugs more often, and I know that she has made punishment for people that smuggle drugs in and use drugs well known in the system. Fine, but I am looking at the other side of that coin, which is around harm reduction strategies.

I'm looking at moving on to young offenders. When I look at strategic priority 5 appearing on page 387 of the business plan, it's noting:

Children and Youth Initiatives. Youth are our future and we are working to protect them from becoming victims of crime, holding them appropriately accountable when they commit a crime, encouraging and facilitating rehabilitation, as well as preventing future offending.

This links to goals 1, 2, 3, and 4.

I am curious what the thought process was, what the decision-making/policy-making process was that led the Solicitor General to the changes in closing the young offender centres in Medicine Hat and Red Deer for a couple of reasons. We now move the young person further away from their support systems, given what we've got about the \$1.85 charge and if they don't have the wherewithal to insist that their legal aid lawyer get in touch with the family and tell the family to go down the street to the neighbour's place at such and such a time, at such and such a place so that the kid can phone them and the neighbour or friend can accept the \$1.85 charge. I am curious about why these decisions were made, because other facilities, in fact, were less well used, like the alcoholic treatment camp. It was kept over, but this was closed.

3:50

The second issue that's been raised with me around this is around officers' time and transport to move a young – I don't know that they'd be a young offender at that point – person charged with a crime. If they can't hold them in Red Deer, for example, because that facility is now closed, then they're going to have to be transported to Edmonton.

So it's 11 o'clock on a Friday night. You've got a young person that you've picked up. You think there's a problem here. They're going to be charged with some kind of crime, and you can't hold them in Red Deer. So what are we going to do? Well, you're going to have to transport them to Edmonton or Calgary, one presumes. I don't know if policies allow you to put that young person in a squad car with one officer or whether you need two officers, so potentially you've got one or two officers and a car now spending a round trip driving time of three hours to move that young person to either Edmonton or Calgary.

Not that I would ever believe that police would be anything else than absolutely rigorous in enforcement, but even I can look at that and go: hmm. What's the officer going to do? Go back to their supervisor and say: "Gee, Supe, sorry; the rest of my shift I'm gone; I'm busy because I'm going to drive this kid to Edmonton, book him in there, turn around, and drive back; booking time and everything included, probably looking at five hours, so my shift is done; see ya; I'm on the road"?

I'm wondering if we aren't setting ourselves up for a position where, oops, we just look the other way as soon as we realize the age, that they're under 18, and that we would have to spend this amount of time and resources. So I'm wondering: what was the logic behind that decision? How much money are we saving by closing that centre versus the amount of money we're going to have to spend sending that police car and gas, frankly, and wear and tear on the vehicle, and the officers' time, whether it's one or two officers, to ship him off to Edmonton or Calgary, plus the booking time, and lose them out of performing their duties in Red Deer or

surrounding area. The logic in this is escaping me, so I'm looking for the details of how this particular idea was arrived at.

Also as part of the corrections review I note that there's been no definitive answer coming from the department around private prisons. There's a sort of: well, we'll continue to monitor this and think about it; it might be possible. I'm interested why there is not a definitive answer: no, we're not going to go there.

Without exception everything I've looked at around private prison use in the United States and other countries has been not a happy situation, where we end up with, you know, delays in reporting escapes to the local community, recidivism rates, more complaints, more court cases around their treatment, et cetera. It's just not worked. I'm wondering why the minister keeps leaving the door open on that one, keeps leaving the back gate open, saying: well, you know, we're going to continue to look at it or monitor it or consider it. Why can't the minister just go: "No, we're not going there. For sure we're not going there in what this business plan covers to 2007"? What is the interest? What is the draw? What studies is she looking at that tell her that she wants to keep that door open to be able to move to private prisons?

At the same time, we see a discussion around provision of private security services, which is kind of a stepping stone for some people. Privatization of police and security and public safety services is how that all gets rolled in in some people's minds. So I'm just continuing to be really curious about why, when there's been I think fairly clear direction from the public that they don't want this, this government continues to consider it and to leave the door open. So what's she looking at that I'm not looking at? If she is looking at something specific, could I get a copy, please?

I'd like to move on and talk about the victims of crime fund. Now, it is referenced on page 337 and 338 of the estimates, and what I'm starting to piece together from this – and the minister, I'm sure, will tell me if I'm misreading this or misunderstanding it. This fund is designed to give grants to various victims' services programs and also to offer financial compensation to victims and to help with expenses related to judicial operations that could be incurred by victims. There's a 15 per cent surcharge that is levied on fines against people that have been convicted, and the money collected from this goes into the fund. I actually was at the launching of the original fund when I was with the Advisory Council on Women's Issues. I think this fund is configured slightly differently, but I do remember the intentions behind the first one. The victims of crime fund also seems to have some sort of joint federal/provincial part to it.

When I look at this year's estimates, there appears to be a surplus that's being expected of around \$6 million. There's also a forecast surplus from last year of around \$6 million, and the year before that, in 2002-2003, there was a surplus of \$3.8 million. So there is money accumulating in this account, and it's accumulating year after year after year. Now, the accumulated surplus doesn't show up in the books that I'm looking at, in the estimates books, for example. So, one, I'd like confirmation that there are these surpluses accumulating and that I have the numbers right. What I have is \$6.2 million surplus this year, \$6.16 million from last year, and in '02-03, \$3.8 million.

I want to know where these surpluses are going. Are they going back into general revenue? Are they being directed to some other program? Are they part of the money for some of the other funds that we've discussed here that are new funds, crime prevention or something like that? See, I'm remembering that original one, and with the original version that money sat there. It sat in that fund for victims of crime.

I am very interested in this because I know that the Member for

Calgary-Shaw under the direction of the Solicitor General did a consultation on the victims of crime fund, and I know that there were recommendations that came from it. I don't know what the recommendations are because they haven't been released.

Once again, the water torture method of releasing information is the favourite method of this particular Solicitor General. It took two years to get the MLA review of the Police Act out. It took almost two years to get the corrections review. I'm wondering how long it's going to take us to get the victims of crime fund.

Now, I think there are 35 or 38 recommendations that came out of the victims of crime fund consultation. I'm wondering: if there's a surplus sitting there and if you add the \$3.8 million, the \$6.16 million, and the \$6.2 million, we've got \$16.16 million sitting in a surplus fund there, if it is in fact sitting in a surplus fund and hasn't gone back into general revenue. I don't think you can do that legally because that money was levied on fines and has to be used for what it was collected for. So it must be sitting there somewhere, but the minister can confirm that with me.

4:00

So we've got recommendations that are made by Calgary-Shaw. We don't know what they are. There are some 16 million dollars that are sitting in a fund. Now, why are we not seeing that \$16 million used to implement the 35 recommendations? If we are, then what's the delay?

I, off the top of my head, can't remember when the victims of crime consultation was done, but I think it's been at least a year now. We have organizations out there that could really use this money, and I'm going to talk about one of the sectors that could really use some of this money. Why is it being sat on? Why is there a delay in implementing this? What is it that we're waiting for or studying or doing a cost-benefit analysis on before this money is released when we have organizations and individuals that I'm sure can make use of it? I'm just interested in what the policy is that's being developed that would hold this money for an extended period of time.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

I'm going to reference page 16 of the minister's annual report, the most recent one that's available. When I reference information that's available in that annual report and I look at what's available in the business plan and in the estimates, some interesting things start to come up. This is basically a discussion around performance measurements. On page 16 of the annual report we've got the goal to "facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders," and a number of measures and targets and results appear. When I look at page 388 of the business plan, the goals from the previous year are not carried forward, but we are getting a reduction in the target. I'm curious about that.

Percentage of cases of adult probation sentences successfully completed did not meet the targets set at 70 per cent in the '02-03 year. The actual result was 66 per cent. When we look at that carried forward . . . I'll use another example. On page 388 we've got the one about people feeling that they're safe walking alone at night in their neighbourhood. Now, when you look at the annual report, the target there was 80 per cent, and 77 per cent of the people felt they were comfortable. When I look at the target carried forward in the business plan '04-07, the target has gone to 82 per cent. That's good. So we're expecting that one to go up. It stays flat at 82 per cent.

Now, the other one. When we look at the "outcome of correctional sanctions: successful completion of adult probation" and the percentage of "offenders involved in work, education, treatment or

life management programs,” that one was at 90 per cent and the number of hours of community service was at a million. When I look at what’s appearing on page 390, the supervision cases that were successful was at 66 per cent. The target for this year is being dropped from 70 per cent to 65 per cent, and I’m wondering why the minister is dropping the target.

The target percentage of offenders “involved in work, education, treatment or life management programs” was 90 per cent in ’02-03. The target for ’04-05 is 80 per cent, 10 per cent less. What’s leading to a 10 per cent reduction in the target? And it stays flat at that 80 per cent.

When I look at the target number of hours of community service at a million, offenders actually completed a total of 827,900 – I’m going to round up there – hours of work. But we’ve now got the target dropping from a million to 825,000. These are the targets that the minister kept, and I know that there were targets that were jettisoned, so I’m just curious about why there’s such a downgrading of expectations for performance in the ministry. It looks like things are being reduced so that they’re easier to achieve. That’s what it looks like, but I’m sure the minister can tell me why those choices were made.

The references for that last discussion are page 16 of the annual report ’02-03 and reference back to page 390 of the business plan and 388 matching with 15.

Now, page 385 of the business plan, Significant Opportunities and Challenges. There are special challenges presented by the use of the Internet for criminal . . . [Ms Blakeman’s speaking time expired] Oh, I’m going to have to let the minister respond.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, just for your information the one hour that was allocated has passed quite some time ago, so if anybody else wishes to participate, the chair will recognize those individuals.

The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We’ve had a lot of questions thrown at us for the last 20 minutes, so I’ll endeavour to answer what I can and again my commitment to obviously get you some answers in writing.

The first thing that the hon. member talked about was her harm reduction strategies, and I think she said that she will continue to talk about harm reduction strategies. I guess, for me, I have to understand what she considers harm reduction strategies. If I recall some questions during question period some time ago about a needle exchange program and bleach – I’m on that kind of same track – I have to again emphasize that we don’t support drugs in jail and we are concerned about the safety of our corrections officers, and I’m not going to change my mind on this. My number one priority is my correction officers and their safety.

What we try to focus on is education, prevention, and withdrawal of the drugs. Every offender that comes into our facility is assessed for their unique needs when they are admitted. It’s sad, but it’s true that most of the offenders that come into our facility have an addiction one way or another, whether it’s drugs or whether it’s smoking or whether it’s alcohol, so we try and provide programs to help them.

We offer several different programs. It can be a core addiction awareness program that’s available in our correctional facilities. Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, life management programs are offered, and we’ve got a New Dawn program for First Nations offenders offered at our Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre. We provide awareness programs that address unique needs

of impaired drivers and First Nations offenders. And we’ve got the Alsike centre that you alluded to some time ago, wondering why it had not been closed, but it’s something that’s very, very successful. The other thing that I’d like to mention is that offenders who are on medically supervised methadone programs upon admission are kept on that program under medical supervision. They are maintained on that program while they are in our facilities.

We have done our utmost to keep drugs out of jail, and it starts with the Corrections Amendment Act and some legislation and dealing with that in providing our facilities drug-free. We announced a little while ago about our drug dog. It’s a problem. It’s something that needs to be addressed. Utopia would be a drug-free jail, but we don’t tolerate drugs in our jail. Yet we try and help the people who are in our facilities deal with their drug addictions.

4:10

I want to emphasize again that my number one priority is the protection of my correction officers. I need to make sure that they’re safe at all times when they’re at our facilities. So starting a needle exchange program isn’t going to happen while I’m the minister responsible.

You talked for some time about our closing our centres. You referred to, actually, Medicine Hat Young Offender Centre, Red Deer, and we’ve also made a decision to close the Lethbridge Young Offender Centre. Difficult decisions; very difficult decisions.

You alluded to some smart remark about the minister taking her time on her reports. Well, I’m going to tell you that this minister takes that time to make sure that she’s doing the right thing and to make sure that she has the funding available to be able to do these. You know, you have hard-working MLAs that go out. They work their little hearts and souls out in regard to a review, come back, and they provide you with all sorts of recommendations. Well, with those recommendations come expectations, and with those expectations usually comes money.

So, yes, the corrections report was a two-year process. I wouldn’t say that I sat on it. I would say that I was monitoring all along some of the recommendations that were made in that report. That goes to the closure of Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer young offender centres, work camps.

I can tell you that this province and many, many other provinces across this country and our Attorney General and Minister of Justice have been advocating since even before I arrived on the scene about the huge number of conditional sentences we’re dealing with in this province and the huge number of intermittent sentences we’re doing in this province. If you do not have the offenders in the facility, then why keep the facility open? I mean, we’re talking five, four, six. While I appreciate that a young person should be near their family, we have many, many offenders in this province that, whether they’re in Lloydminster or Peace River, their family has to travel. We have to do what we can to look at what’s happening generally across this country.

You know, the unfortunate thing is that when we looked at closing the work camps, we had feedback about that and the wonderful job that the offenders did at these work camps. No question; absolutely no question. That goes to the community service hours that you talked about when you said: you had one million; now you have 827,000. Well, unfortunately I don’t have the minimum offenders to be able to do all of those community services hours. I think we’ve accomplished a huge amount of community services hours.

I was driving home a couple of weeks ago from a function, and the offenders were out on Deerfoot cleaning it up. So we’re trying to accommodate, when we have the ability, to have offenders working out in the community. They like to do that. The public likes to see them do that. They do a remarkable job.

You talked about private prisons and why I won't just close the door. Well, I guess it's always nice to watch what's happening. The corrections committee went down, and they looked at the private facilities that are in Ontario, and they didn't say privatize. What I believe they said – and I don't have the report in front of me – was to monitor on a continuing basis.

You know, I may be wrong, but it's always okay to watch what's happening across the country. It's okay to watch what other provinces are doing. It's okay to monitor and see what they're doing. If you're asking if I'm going to privatization of prisons tomorrow, no, but I'm going to monitor and see what other jurisdictions are doing. You know, it never hurts to keep the door open and watch what's happening. I think it's important.

You alluded to the fact that you've never seen anything good happen in regard to private prisons. I don't disagree with you, but it doesn't hurt to continue to watch and see what's happening, as I explained. Will I privatize tomorrow? No. But I think it's something where you learn from what other people are doing. You learn from their experiences. You learn if it's working or if it's not working. The corrections review committee, I believe, in their report said to watch what's happening.

You talked a lot about the victims of crime fund, and I think it's important first of all for me to make it very clear that victims are a priority for this government. I think it's important for Albertans or anyone who reads *Hansard* to know that the funding for victims of crime comes from a portion of fine revenue, and you understand that. That means that how much is going into the victims of crime fund is unknown every year, and it depends on how much and how large the fines are on a yearly basis.

Will every dollar we receive go to victims? Absolutely. Yes. Every dollar that we receive goes to victims. Will we distribute every year the same amount that we received during that year? No. It's simply because fine revenues are unpredictable. We hold back a portion so that we'll have stable funding for next year, and I think that's good financial management.

When we look back over the last four or five years, the number of victims receiving financial awards has increased almost every year. I think that's good but sad in some way, because when you see that we're increasing the funding every year for victims, it means that we still have victims. But we will continue to support the victims of this province, and the number of victim programs that we support, I must say, has also increased every year.

You alluded to the victims of crime consultation, and I've said that we'll respond to that report. One of the things that I want to do and I'm waiting to do is our involvement on family violence on I believe it's May 7. I want to listen to what they have to say. I know from reading *Hansard* that you brought up about the sexual assault centres, which was good, and the co-ordination. By listening about family violence and going to hear what the people say and spending the day listening to what they have to say, what the round-table has to say, there might be some relevant discussion around that.

I think that one of our priorities on victims is to establish a 10-year strategic direction for victims' programs and services – you will like that – and to ensure that, obviously, the victims have a meaningful role in the criminal justice system, and it's a priority.

I want to assure you that the victims of crime fund is a regulated fund and is separate from the government's core voted budget, and all of the monies or funds are dedicated to victim programs and services. The money that is in that particular program is not diverted to any other programs.

The one last thing I want to say is that as a result of the increased fund for policing, law enforcement is going to be stepped up, and hopefully we'll have fewer victims, and I think that's a good thing.

To see fewer people applying for funds means that we're dealing with them, that fewer things are happening to them. I don't know, hon. member, if that will ever happen. I guess that if you don't have victims, then you certainly don't have crime, and that would be something that I think is important.

I will let you or the other hon. members continue with your questions.

4:20

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have a very simple question for the hon. minister, and I know it's certainly something that she is concerned about. It has to do with the drug detection issues that she was mentioning. One of the things that apparently happened today, in watching the news, was that a truck of anhydrous ammonia was stolen. One of the issues about anhydrous ammonia is that certainly it can lead to things such as explosions.

One of the other very important uses of anhydrous ammonia, though, is in the making of crystal meth, and anhydrous ammonia combined with lithium is one of the ways that crystal meth is manufactured. I'd like the hon. minister's comment on the whole manufacturing of crystal meth and whether or not she feels that this potentially could be a severe problem, considering that an amount of anhydrous ammonia was stolen, and how in direct relation to her budget something like this would impact her budget.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, the minister has brought something up that we've been monitoring for a bit. We're well aware of the theft of the tanker truck, and we're well aware of the contents of the truck, of what's involved, and he referred to the ammonia. Yes, he's correct. It's one of the main ingredients in meth, and it's one of the things that we're concerned about, and that means meth, period.

Alberta has taken the lead in how it's dealing with meth in this province. I had the honour to be able to go to the States on sort of a three-day trip to several states on how they're dealing with meth, and they've acknowledged that Alberta has taken the lead on this to try and get in front of the problem instead of behind.

We have been very vigilant on the stolen truck that the minister alluded to. Our SIM unit is watching it very carefully. We're working very closely with the RCMP. We're well aware of what it can be used for. It also is fertilizer, obviously, for fertilizing farmers' fields. It's something that we're watching and have been keeping very close contact on with the SIM unit and our RCMP.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I just wanted to go back very quickly to something I heard the minister say that's puzzling me, and this is around the surpluses in the victims of crime fund. She seemed to be saying that we could be having fewer victims and fewer crimes and less money going in there.

There are two issues that arise. When I look at the comparables that are supplied on page 338 of the estimates, in fact in '02-'03 the revenue for the victims of crime fund was \$13,700,000. The actual forecast for that in '03-'04 is going to be \$18 million and the estimates for '04-'05 at \$18,105,000. So there's certainly an expectation of increasing amounts of money going in here.

When I looked at the minister's explanation around the surplus building, she seemed to be saying: well, there's a holdback because we get differing amounts of money every year.

Mrs. Forsyth: Crimes are unpredictable.

Ms Blakeman: Well, I'm just looking at a fairly regular increase in the amount of revenue. Even if you wanted to say, "Well, okay; let's get as close as we can, and we'll commit to spending \$13 million" – that was from almost two years ago now – "and let's keep it at that," that's still not going to account for what's being done in this budget. You've got revenue coming in of \$18,105,000. You are expecting to expend \$11,870,000. You're creating a surplus of \$6.2 million. That's almost 50 per cent of what you're spending. That's way more than a sustainability fund, way more, and you've now done that for three years running.

So you're socking away a lot of bucks under the mattress here, Minister, that really need to be spent in assisting all of these groups out there. I don't understand the argument that's put forward by the minister that somehow there needs to be an almost 50 per cent holdback to account for a variation in the money that's being received as revenue into this account. Obviously, it's not a variation. It continues to increase, but I'm not seeing a corresponding increase in the money going out. So that explanation didn't make sense.

As well, if the minister is now waiting for the family violence round-table on May 7, can she not give us some indication that's a little narrower window about when we can expect to see the victims of crime fund consultation report released? Please, let's be reasonable. I think we're a year out now. Can we not get some kind of indication? Would it be fall? Could it be before November, before December? Something. She must know what is being anticipated. The recommendations are in. Even I know there are 30 some odd of them. We've talked about the amount of money that's available here. I hear her saying that we want to be careful, but how careful? You've had an awful lot of time to consider this. Can you not give us some window of expectation about when that would be out?

My thanks to my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Strathcona for allowing me to leap in and just get that little bit on the record.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and provide some relief to my hard-working colleague from Edmonton-Centre, who's been on her feet for a considerable time.

I have some general observations to start with as we move along in our discussion and debate on the estimates for the Solicitor General's department. In looking, Mr. Chairman, at the business plan for the ministry and looking in particular at page 387, under Strategies, 1.1, the first item is of course to "implement a Policing Strategy incorporating the approved recommendations of the MLA Policing Review Committee Report." There are four bullets under this. I'd like the minister to perhaps comment on how these four bullets, these four strategies or action plans, if you wish, are reflected in the 2004-2005 budget.

One particular item here – it may not have a direct relationship to the budgetary allocations, but the minister might want to comment on it – is: "Promotes citizen oversight of policing in Alberta." Clearly, the minister accepts this issue in principle. Yet when I look at the news release from the minister's department dated I believe it's March 26, she has turned down the one important recommendation of the committee on policing, which has to do with the committee's recommendation for an Alberta policing secretariat to investigate complaints and oversee police services and police commissions. While the minister accepts the need for enhanced civilian oversight of police services, she has rejected the specific recommendation of the committee regarding the establishment of the Alberta policing secretariat to investigate those complaints against police.

So my question to the minister is: what alternative does she have

in mind? She does agree with the principle, yet the mechanism proposed is something that she has rejected. What specific alternative plans does she have with respect to making sure that the recommendation that she accepts in principle takes public policy form, and what will that public policy form be? That's one question there.

4:30

I'll move on to some other questions. There is a news release, the same news release as a matter of fact, where the headline is Provincial Policing Standards and Enhanced Civilian Oversight Coming for Alberta Police Services. With respect to the first part of this commitment, having to do with establishing policing standards, I've been looking at the persistent way in which the Auditor General's department has been urging the government and the department to establish policing standards. I have from the 2002-2003 Auditor General's report some observations that I would like to share with the minister. I'm sure she's familiar with them, but it's good to reiterate them so that they're on the record.

In this respect, the findings of the Auditor General, which are stated on page 273 of the annual report for 2002-2003, say the following: "Progress is not satisfactory on this recommendation." That's the recommendation with respect to the need to establish policing standards. This recommendation was made by the Auditor General's office over several previous years.

The manual has not yet been issued. The delay in issuing the manual is a result of the Ministry decision to wait for the government response to the committee's recommendations because the response to some recommendations in the report may impact the manual. While the MLA report was released publicly in July 2002 . . .

Over a year and a half ago now, Mr. Chairman.

. . . the MLA committee subsequently conducted further consultations on its recommendations.

I acknowledge that.

These further consultations resulted in a supplementary report being issued by the committee in late 2002.

So we are nearly 16, 17 months from the time that the second report, the supplementary report, has been available to the department and to the minister.

The statement from the Auditor General's department goes on to say that "the government is currently considering its response to the initial and supplementary MLA reports; however, the response date is uncertain."

Now, when I look at the news release dated March 26, 2004, there's still uncertainty about the dates and about the manual and its preparation and its release. So my question to the minister is: are we any more certain now about the response date? It's not clear to me that that date is specified here in the latest news release from the minister's office.

The Auditor General observes that "the Ministry intends to issue the manual once the government response to the recommendations in the MLA report is known." Now I guess we know the government's response. I think that it is stated in this news release of March 26, 2004. With the exception of two or three recommendations, the rest of the recommendations of the MLA report are accepted. Given that that acceptance has been indicated by the department, when is the manual to be released?

Now, the Auditor General further states that "the Ministry also needs to obtain funding to proceed with the audits of police services. There is no date as to when audits of policing standards will commence." My question again is: does the current budget, the budget for 2004-2005, the estimates that we're debating today, include the money that the minister was waiting for in order to undertake audits

of policing standards? If the money has been allocated in this budget, when will these audits commence?

These are questions which are raised by the Auditor General, and I'm sure the minister would like to respond to these. Under Implications and Risks the reason, I suppose, that the Auditor General wants to give for urging the department and the minister to take action on enforcement of policing standards is that "until the plan is implemented, the Ministry does not know whether police services meet the province's minimum policing standards. Public safety could be at risk." That's the concluding statement, so there's lots at stake. How long will Albertans have to wait before they see some action along these lines, which, in the judgment of the Auditor General, is needed in order to make sure that public safety is secured for Albertans?

I will just sit down with these questions, and perhaps the minister would like to respond.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you. I want to answer the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre's question. If I've confused her, I apologize for that.

Will every dollar that we receive go to the victims? Yes. Will we distribute in a year the same amount we receive during that year? The answer is no. Why? Because the fine revenue is unpredictable. We hold a portion back so that we have stable funding for the next year. So it's important for us to understand.

Yes, it's increased, and there's no question it's increased, but with the work that we're doing with the Minister of Transportation, in the future you can't continue to count on high fine revenues. The work we're trying to do with the Minister of Transportation is to provide the roads and our citizens that drive those roads safety. So we're hoping that we don't have to count on the revenues.

I want to go for a minute to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, who talked about several things. First of all, he talked about goal 1, strategy 1.1, in regard to the implementation of a policing strategy "incorporating the approved recommendations of the MLA Policing Review Committee Report," that, first of all, talks about enhanced provincial leadership in policing, about sustainable funding for policing and restructuring responsibility for policing and promoting citizens' oversight of policing in Alberta.

We've accepted the majority of the recommendations, as you're well aware, of that report. One of them you referred to is on citizens' oversight. I've also said that I'm not accepting that particular recommendation in the report, but I also support citizens' oversight. I think it's important for us to establish and ensure a fair, objective, and impartial investigation into the complaints against police.

I have to say that as the Solicitor General for the last three years I'm honoured, first of all, to be in this position and, secondly, that the police in this province do an incredible, incredible job in very, very difficult situations. I've been on many, many ride-alongs with them, and honestly I can't even explain what they do on call after call.

4:40

I think the objective of citizens' oversight is to enhance the credibility of the process and to obviously ensure public confidence that there is a proper review of the conduct of members of the police department. We will be working on that over the summer and hope we'll have legislation ready in the fall. I think it's important for us to understand that the system that we have in place right now works, and I believe it works. But it's a huge process of education so that

people understand that there is a mechanism in place for them to complain.

The police in this province do an unbelievable, remarkable job. I think that what's unfortunately happened lately are some of the things that have come out in regard to allegations against the Edmonton police from something 20 years ago and how it was dealt with then. How it was dealt with then and how you deal with it now – again, I want to say that there is a process in place that's credible and ensures that the public feel confident in how the complaint was established. So we are working on it and hope to, as I said, have legislation ready in the fall.

The police report that was done by the committee talked about several things that we're working on. One of the key things that has been very well accepted in this province is the establishment of a centre of excellence, and we're working on that currently. I will be putting together a committee to look at the centre of excellence. We believe that it's not only bricks and mortar. We can utilize the centre of excellence with distance learning, et cetera.

So we'll be putting together a working committee on how they see the centre of excellence. That will be the stakeholders that we think are part and parcel of that centre of excellence. We'll ask the Minister of Learning to participate, obviously the police. We will have colleges, the university, anybody that we believe is a stakeholder in opening up and talking about the centre of excellence.

You talked about standards. I want to assure the member that the standards manual has gone out, and the police now have the standards manual. You refer to the Auditor General talking about that. All the police in the province now have a standards manual to operate from. We want to make sure that the standards manual is followed, and we will be doing audits and looking at if they're following the standards. We're looking forward to that.

I think that's all I have actually: the centre of excellence, citizens' oversight, standards, and the audits you referred to.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of questions and perhaps a comment with respect to the hon. Minister of Learning and his question on how the crystal meth situation might affect this particular minister's budget. It came to mind that that may end up being more of a health-related issue in the long term. Perhaps if we could get the Graydon report released, we might find some answers to that.

More to the topic, on page 385, under Significant Opportunities and Challenges, there is some information that the crime rate in Alberta had increased by 2 and a half per cent in 2002. My question on that particular issue is: is there any more recent information, and can we from the information have some idea of whether this is a trend? That type of an increase, 2 and a half per cent, seems on the surface to be quite large, so I'm wondering if there's more recent information and if, in fact, that appears to be a trend.

The second concern that I have comes in the area of effective provincial crisis management planning. There is an issue with respect to that, and of course it's addressed in there as well that we do have some very, very serious cross-border connections, not only in our transportation system but certainly with respect to energy supply and security and that type of thing. Alberta has been shown to be a leader in this initiative, and I'm wondering if the Solicitor General's department is prepared or will prepare itself to engage with other states and provinces with respect to a more collaborative effort. I believe that certainly now the U.S. Energy Council and PNWER both have cross-border initiatives, and I'm wondering if there could be some co-operation there.

My last comment and question is with respect to aboriginal policing. We do have I think some successful First Nations policing initiatives in the province. However, in certain circumstances these initiatives come to an end in a rather rapid fashion. In other words, you have perhaps an on-reserve police detachment this week, and next week you don't have one. It puts quite a load on other policing resources in certain areas. The initiative, of course, says that they would like to enhance "the effectiveness of policing on First Nations communities." I wonder if there could be a bit more explanation as to how you see that happening.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The hon. member alluded to the issue of meth and the Graydon report and the release. I have enough issues on my plate worrying about his report, to be quite frank, but I know it's one of the reports that the Premier has talked about releasing.

Overall in western Canada the crime rate is down, but that doesn't mean that we should be less vigilant. We continue to monitor what's happening in this province. I mean, it doesn't take anybody to read in the news what's happening with organized crime and some of the issues that we're dealing with with organized crime. I think it was important. One of the reasons why we established the IROC is because of what we're finding out.

If I would have sat down with any of my rural colleagues three years ago, we would have been talking about their mailbox being vandalized or a piece of their farm equipment being vandalized, but now we're seeing organized crime moving into the rural areas. Our colleague from Drayton Valley has a huge problem with methamphetamines in his riding, and there are several other areas within that corridor that are dealing with meth. So it's the rural areas that are trying to adjust with some of the bigger, if I may use the term, city crime that we need to work on.

He talked about the crisis management planning. Alberta is way ahead on that, further ahead than any other province in this country. In fact, the federal minister announced a national security plan today with I think it was \$690 million in regard to securing an open society, and they talked about borders and things.

We're very, very lucky in this province. After 9-11 the Premier put together a ministerial task force in regard to dealing with terrorism, that was chaired by the Member for Ponoka-Rimbey, and right from the gate, because it's the critical infrastructure that we have to deal with in our oil, we've been vigilant.

4:50

I know I kicked off a conference – I believe it's going to be two years in November – and the minister for security at the time, the hon. Minister Easter, was here. He was very, very impressed with what we were dealing with at the conference and said to us at that particular time: why would I even invent the wheel considering what Alberta has done in regard to dealing with crisis management? So we have been very, very active in that, and it talks about the borders.

I know Ottawa has been down looking at our centre that we share with the Minister of Municipal Affairs. They were very, very impressed, and they talk about in their press release, which I don't have handy, establishing the centre, exactly what Alberta has here. I think that is something that is a compliment to Alberta. We have as the security task force taken a number of steps to deal with some of your security questions, and it goes back to the Alberta crisis management plan that we've established. We've gone out and talked to our partners. We've established a state-of-the-art crisis manage-

ment operations centre for when we determine that there's a terrorist threat.

I keep referring back to the people, not only in my department, that have done an incredible job monitoring what's going on around the world with the terrorist activities under our SIM unit and their contacts that they have established with CSIS and how they can at all times know what's going on in this world in regard to terrorism. It's great, but it also can be at times very frightening. One just has to look at the borders and see what's happening.

One of the things that Alberta has done is talked to our partners in the United States, and I think that's important. I know that shortly after 9-11 I had the opportunity to discuss in detail and at length with the FBI what's happening and our borders.

So I think Alberta is as planned as we can be in regard to what you discussed with our borders. All of our partners, whether it's oil related or it's transportation or it's anything to do with the border, are always vigilant about what's happening. I don't want to get into too many details, obviously. It's working. They're on top of everything and doing a very good job at what they are doing with the SIM unit and all of the other counterterrorism.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A few more questions to the minister. I would like to invite the minister's attention back to the business plan, page 388. Under Strategies 1.6 and 1.8 are the two items which I have brief questions on and would like the minister to comment on. At 1.6 it says, "Reinstate crime prevention and restorative justice program funding to support the Provincial Crime Prevention Strategy and the Community Justice Policy."

Now, I notice that on page 334 in the budget document crime prevention has got about \$1.1 million extra in the current year's budget, if I'm reading it right. The two actions mentioned here in 1.6 are the community justice policy and the provincial crime prevention strategy. How does this \$1.1 million additional allocation in the budget break down for each of these two categories? Or is there more than just these two things that are covered under crime prevention and therefore the increase is also distributed to more than just these two activities? I'm not sure, so I'd like the minister to comment on that.

The second question has to do with 1.8: "Work in partnership with Children's Services to develop an integrated province-wide response to family violence." I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre asked some questions in that regard already. I see that that strategy certainly focuses on partnership, but in terms of resources that might have been allocated in this budget, I'm wondering if the minister has in fact made some budgetary commitments to give substance to this commitment for the strategic action that she mentions here.

While I'm up on my feet, may I have a few other questions, Mr. Chairman, with your permission and with the minister's concurrence? The minister, of course, has said repeatedly how our government has put new money back into policing to assist municipalities to do their job, and \$58 million dollars in new funding to bolster policing services is indicated in the minister's March 26 news release. This, of course, includes \$16.5 million that the municipalities were already getting, so it seems to me as if the government is giving with one hand and then taking away with the other hand. That \$16.5 million has disappeared now from the budgets of municipalities because it's been taken away and then reallocated in terms of government money.

The second point I want to make about this is let's not forget that this new money in a sense is restoration, and only in part, of what the municipalities used to get until about '95-'96 when all these policing

grants were taken away. So my question to the minister is this. It will be difficult, I'm sure – it would be difficult if I were sitting in her place – to answer this question right now, but I'd like to get an answer to it, maybe a written answer. What was the amount of government funding for policing purposes in the mid-90s to municipalities? How does the new funding now as indicated in this budget, which was a resumption, in a sense, or restoration of part of that, compare to the total amount of money that municipalities used to get for policing purposes, say, eight years ago, when this was discontinued? I sympathize with the minister if she doesn't have an answer for it. She can certainly provide it to me later.

I must make another observation here. I'm very pleased that the government has made a commitment to pick up the costs of policing for all communities now up to, I guess, 5,000 strong? Right. I certainly support that and commend the government for doing that.

Another question. This question arises from a quick look that I had at the amount of money that the city of Edmonton would be getting, new money for policing purposes. The city will receive new money for policing estimated at about \$10.7 million, but this is offset by a reduction of about \$5.3 million in the municipal unconditional grant received from the province. So the annual increase is for a net of about \$5.4 million. I just wonder how much the city of Edmonton was receiving, say, in '96 when this grant was discontinued. I'm sure you'd like to get an answer to this question for yourself, and I certainly would like to know how this amount compares.

5:00

The question of sustainability. You know, we want to of course provide sustainable funding, sustainable both from the point of view of what the government thinks it can afford but also in terms of providing adequate policing services, which the municipalities are responsible for but need sustainable funding from this government to do, so they determine the adequacy of funding in order to make our communities safe, which is the title, I guess, of the business plan that I am referring to under the core businesses: policing and crime prevention and ensuring safe communities in Alberta. After all, if the goal is to make sure that our communities are safe, then surely I think that we have to ask the question about the adequacy of funding that municipalities get from the provincial government to achieve that goal.

Perhaps one or two other questions here. I'll let the minister speak to those questions while I'm looking at my notes. If I have a question, I'll ask again.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to respond to the Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky. He asked a question about aboriginal policing, which I had on another piece of paper. I apologize; I wasn't ignoring him. He's brought up an interesting issue in regard to the aboriginal policing model. We have some very, very, very successful aboriginal police forces in this province who are doing an incredible job, and we've had some struggles with some aboriginal policing in the province also. The government is committed to an aboriginal policing model; aboriginal policing is important.

We were at a function a few weeks ago at the Blood tribe. They have put in what they think is a successful idea in regard to aboriginal policing, and that's having elders travel with one of the aboriginal police officers. They were quite proud of the initiative and quite excited about the initiative. It will be interesting to see.

I was at a graduation in Regina a couple of months ago. It was the

first graduating all-aboriginal police force, which was initiated by my department. I'd love to take credit for it. It wasn't me. It was a fellow who works very hard in our department by the name of Ron Hepperle. That was something that he was pushing. He said to me three years ago: Minister, if I get this together and I put it together, you have to promise me that you'll be at the first graduating class of the aboriginal police force. And he did. It was very, very nice to be there. All of those aboriginal police officers that graduated came back to Alberta, which was especially nice to see, because they're from Alberta. They're going back to Alberta, and it's quite exciting.

We have signed several tripartite agreements, and we're also working on some community tripartite agreements with some of our aboriginal police forces that have been struggling in regard to aboriginal policing. We're not going to give up on them. We think they're an integral part of the community. We think it's important. They know their communities best. We will continue to be with them on their successes, and we will be with them on their failures and continue to help them work through some of the struggles that they have. So I hope that answers some of your questions.

The hon. member asked about the crime prevention grants, and I did answer, I think, some of the questions when Edmonton-Centre asked them. We're pleased to be able to put approximately a million dollars back into crime prevention/restorative justice, and I mentioned earlier that in 1999 under the Minister of Justice the department developed a community justice policy based on restorative justice principles. The policy aimed to make restorative justice processes more widely available in the province.

With the recent announcement of the new and increased funding we have made available a million dollars for crime prevention and restorative justice programming, and the department is currently reviewing the community justice policy as a framework to guide the allocation of new money. My visualization is that it'll be through a grant and that people will apply. I think they're the most important, and they know their community best. So if there is a problem in Edmonton-Strathcona and your Block Watch decides that they want to put together a program, then I think they know the needs of your particular constituency or community better than anybody and will be able to apply for a grant. That's how I visualize it, and I think that's the way we'll move. I hope that answers that.

You talked about our partnership on family violence. I think one of the things that we in government have to be committed to do is partnering instead of putting up silos all the time. Although family violence is the responsibility of the Children's Services minister, I think there are numerous departments that it spills onto, mine and the policing end, obviously. We have spent time training our police officers on how to deal with family violence relationships. You asked: is there any money in the budget at this particular time for family violence resources? Well, resources can be looked at as two things. If you mean resources as far as staff to train, we will continue to do that. Staff to work with our partners? Yes. If you're talking about a dollar value, no.

Certainly looking forward to the family violence day on May 7. The Children's Services minister has done an incredible job of putting this together. It's going to be well attended. It's going to be well worth spending the day listening to people about what they have to say. I'm looking forward to what comes out of that particular family violence day.

You talked about the police funding, and I'm sorry. I would like to get into dollars. I think the unconditional grant previously was \$32 million. I could be wrong, so I'd rather have my department talk to you and send you some information. Yes, part of the funding that we're talking about is the 16 and a half million dollars that was transferred and appreciated very much from the Minister of Municipi-

pal Affairs. The money, the 16 and a half million that was under Municipal Affairs, was an unconditional grant. I want everyone in the House to understand that one of the recommendations of the AUMA and the AAMD and C, who worked very hard in regard to a funding model, was that the unconditional grant come back under the Solicitor General and be a conditional grant because, like anything, if a grant is unconditional, it doesn't necessarily mean it has to be spent on policing.

You talked about Edmonton. Their new per capita grant total is \$10.7 million; \$5.3 million of that was a portion of the unconditional grant, which is now a conditional grant, which means that it has to be spent on policing. The other \$5.4 million is new funding under the \$16 per capita. I also think it's important to understand that we've continued to spend \$2.4 million on CISA funding, which is the intelligence gathering for the police on the organized crime and other activities that are going on in this province. Plus we have given the integrated response to organized crime, IROC, an additional commitment of \$5.2 million, I believe. That is a joint operation with the RCMP and police, separate and apart from the funding that they're already receiving and the money that they're using in regard to what they're doing with gang activity in their particular riding.

5:10

We sometimes forget about that, but that is a huge, huge amount of money and dollar value for a big problem that a lot of the major cities are dealing with in regard to organized crime. So we're providing them with some additional money. The IROC teams are working with CISA. CISA's doing the intelligence gathering; IROC is providing them with the information. I look forward to seeing some very, very good work done and some takedowns in regard to what's happening in this province by the IROC team. So I think it's something that we have to keep in mind.

Is it enough for policing? Probably not. I don't think that you'll ever have enough for policing, because when you have a rich and vibrant province like the province of Alberta and the organized crime and gang activity that we're seeing in this province – we're seeing an increase in meth – it's something new every day. The only thing we can do is continue to be vigilant, continue to watch what's happening, continue to support the police as much as we can, and, obviously, continue to carry on discussions with the police in this province.

We've got a good working relationship. I'm going to a meeting in the next couple of weeks once again with the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police. I meet with them twice a year – they bring forward the concerns of the policing communities that they represent – and still continue to talk to the police in this province. So we will continue to watch, listen to what they have to say, be vigilant, and continue to work on their behalf.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's rare that I get up to speak on some of my colleagues' budgets, but I think I'd like to bring up some issues and some concerns and some kudos.

I want to first of all thank the minister and her staff from the northern communities regarding the dollars for policing. The municipalities that have really been concerned about the costs, most specifically Slave Lake and High Prairie, have really suffered a lot in terms of the dollars that were coming. So I want to say a special thank you to the Solicitor General for being able to alleviate those concerns. I also want to thank the minister for her support for aboriginal issues.

One of the things that I do have is: what strategy do you have to alleviate the high numbers in jails?

Aboriginal policing. I know you brought out some of their concerns. As Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development I'm concerned about what we will be doing regarding aboriginal policing. I just heard that you were giving a status on what's happening with that, but any help that you can provide would be helpful.

The Indian Regional Council is one of the best police services in Alberta. They never complain. They always work with us to service their people. They have done really great things and tried to live within their means, but they're having some problems now. In fact, they were the first ones ever established, in 1992-93. I think it was '93-94 that the late Chief Walter Twinn came to speak with the Premier and suggested that this was probably one of the greatest things that could happen. So I'm just trying to find out what we can do to make sure that they continue to have their aboriginal policing and what can be done.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. minister, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the question.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and

Equipment/Inventory Purchases

\$334,425,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee rise and report the estimates of the Department of the Solicitor General and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Solicitor General: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$334,425,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we'll reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:16 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 27, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/04/27

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Municipal Affairs

The Chair: We'll do the usual of the opposition and the minister for the first hour, and after that it's open to whomever, of course including the opposition. So without further ado I'll call upon the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to say that at this point I present the Committee of Supply estimates for Alberta Municipal Affairs for the 2004-2005 operating expense and inventory purchases to be voted on of \$124,304,000. This is a reduction of about \$9.3 million, or about 7 per cent, from the '03-04 budget of \$133.6 million. I would also like to say that my ministry is committed to working toward safe, sustainable, and enhanced communities, serving 356 – you ask again: 356 – municipal governments across Alberta from every corner, and to working with our municipal stakeholders that make up these municipalities.

You may ask how many are elected. Of the 356 municipalities we have 356 mayors or reeves, but in addition we have 1,575 – that's 1,575 – either councillors, town councillors, rural councillors, or aldermen that make up these councils. This is not including the administrative side of each municipality, which is literally in the thousands.

You may also ask: of the 356 municipalities here in the province of Alberta how many are cities? Does anyone know? I have posed the question: how many are cities?

Mr. Mason: Fifteen.

Mr. Boutilier: The answer, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands has indicated, is of course 15. He is correct: 15 cities. I appreciate his information on that.

Now, the next question I ask is: how many towns are there? How many towns are there in the province of Alberta of those 356? Do you know how many towns there are? Anyone? I see that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry is indicating with his fingers, and I see that he has got the right numbers: 110 towns are in the province of Alberta. I appreciate his knowledge.

You may ask also how many villages there are. How many villages do you know that there are in the province of Alberta? I see that the hon. Member for Wainwright is one hundred per cent correct when he is indicating to me that we have 102 villages in the province of Alberta.

How many summer villages are there? I know that the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne is absolutely correct when he says 51 summer villages. Many of them are in his municipality. How many improvement districts are there? There are seven. How many specialized municipalities are there? There are four. How many special areas are there? There are three.

Now, each one of these municipalities serves their citizens proudly through an open, effective, and accountable government, governed

in accordance with the Municipal Government Act or, as it's referred to, the MGA.

I'd like to say, Mr. Chairman, that many of the very members of this Assembly here tonight started their political and public service in an elected capacity at the local municipal order of government. I'd ask that if you, in fact, served at a local municipal elected council level, could you put up your hand tonight? It looks almost like it is in fact unanimous. Almost everyone served at a local order of government, so it is very clear to me that this Legislature understands local municipal government.

Now, each one of our municipalities in fact serves our citizens in an effective, accountable way in accordance with the MGA. I'd like, Mr. Chairman, also at this time to say that municipal governments play a key role in terms of the Alberta advantage.

Before I continue on my estimates, I would like to acknowledge my deputy minister, Brad Pickering, and my executive assistant, Laurent Auger, who are in the members' gallery tonight. They are making up my contingent here in the gallery. I appreciate their continued support and the support of each and every staff member of the Municipal Affairs ministry. You have played a key role in the preparation of my ministry's budget estimates tonight.

Finally, in the coming year our budget will support six key goals. Number 1 is a well-managed local government sector that strives for municipal partnerships in excellence. I might also say that municipal partnerships are something I would love to hear examples of in questions tonight. I will attempt to use examples from every single municipality. Maybe it could be a give and take in terms of examples of best practices and municipal partnerships. I think I can pick out partnerships from every single geographical area in this province where partnerships are working well.

Number 2, I would like to be able to say that the goal of financially sustainable and accountable municipalities is a key goal that we continue to work towards enhancing.

An efficient assessment and property tax system obviously is key.

The fourth is an excellent safety system that protects Albertans and their families.

Number 5 is an emergency management program that helps Albertans prepare for, respond to, and recover from any major emergency and disaster.

Finally, there's 6. Last but not least is an independent appeal system that issues timely and impartial decisions of the highest quality.

All of these goals will be achieved through the excellent work of many people both internally through our public safety divisions and local government services divisions but also through the municipal government board and external stakeholders from every corner of our province.

I want also to thank the numerous members of the Assembly who sit on the minister's council on roles, responsibilities, and resources including the Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, who's the co-chair; the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, who is of course a member; and the Member for Calgary-Mountain View, who sits on the committee with me.

I might also say that we've made excellent work on numerous fronts through the council on roles, responsibilities, and resources. Just one example is the members for Calgary-Buffalo and Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, who headed up the ambulance committee that my learned colleague the Minister of Health has worked so diligently on in terms of helping and assisting municipalities in conjunction with regional health authorities. That, I think, has been a key factor in terms of roles, responsibilities, and resources.

All of this work and more will continue to strengthen our municipalities now and into the future.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Again, it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak to the estimates of the Department of Municipal Affairs. I would like to thank the minister for his opening remarks and his staff who are present tonight and ready to certainly answer any questions or assist in these all-important estimates.

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs is one of those ministries that impacts the lives of Albertans on a daily basis. It is one of those areas in government where people look to leadership from the ministry and from their local leaders. They look forward to a good working relationship, and certainly over the years that working relationship has been very good.

As well, Mr. Chairman, as the minister was making his opening remarks and informed us about the number of municipalities and mayors and reeves and cities and towns and improvement districts, it outlines how important it is that municipal governments have autonomy and have the resources required to develop the strengths of their communities. That is certainly one of the goals of the department, and one that all Albertans wish for is that we have safe, healthy, and sustainable communities.

In recent times we've certainly had an increased emphasis placed on the role and significance of our major cities in the country and the increased importance that these cities remain strong and the increased importance of these cities having the financial resources to fulfill their mandates to their citizens and to the province and the country. I think what we are seeing particularly from announcements made by the federal government earlier this year is that they are certainly more prepared than ever before to assist cities with the financial strains that all of them find themselves under at this time.

8:10

As well, municipalities do require the resources to chart their own course. The minister did refer to his three R's committee, and in speaking with a number of municipal leaders across the province, they continue to have faith in that committee. But the one area that gives them the greatest concern is the whole aspect of resources. I'll speak more to that later.

Again, in our province, because of our economic success in the last decade, we've had tremendous growth. That growth has taken place in a number of different areas in the province, and with that growth municipalities have been placed under stress. They not only have the stress of rapid growth; they also have the stress placed on them of aging infrastructure and the cost of maintenance of existing infrastructure. So certainly our municipalities are under a financial strain.

As well, they have a growing demand for social needs and especially low-cost housing. I know that this particular minister certainly has felt very strongly about developing partnerships with other government departments, local authorities, various organizations that focus on local issues, and the private sector to ensure that Albertans live in safe, healthy, sustainable communities. I think that if there is a department here that we could call grassroots, it would be Municipal Affairs.

Now, then, in looking at the estimates and the highlights of the estimates, as the minister mentioned, program spending in 2004-2005 is \$123 million. This budget includes a reduction of \$16.5 million that is being reallocated from the existing unconditional municipal grant program to the Solicitor General's department for policing and a continuation of the ME First program to provide \$100 million in interest-free loans to Alberta municipalities for energy efficient improvements. It's certainly a good program. I've heard

many good comments, particularly from our communities that are experiencing the pressure put on them to keep facilities open when energy costs are high. ME First is a program that will assist them in that particular area.

I also had the opportunity today, Mr. Chairman, to read through Sustaining Prosperity Together. This is a 10-point plan for getting on the provincial radar screen. It's put out by the AUMA. In here it certainly points out quite clearly that improvement is required. Improvement is desired in the relationship between municipal governments and the department.

I quote from page 1 in their introduction. It goes on to say that AUMA members agree new revenues are urgently required in order to meet the demands put on municipalities around the province.

They go further to say in The Challenge:

Every municipality in Alberta is currently facing the same challenge – how to achieve a truly sustainable prosperity using the limited financial resources within their means. To meet that challenge we need a fairer share of provincial tax dollar.

Regarding this particular statement, they had asked the Premier about the possibility of having 20 per cent of the surplus revenue that the province has enjoyed over the last few years. One of the questions the Premier asked was: "Well, where were these people when times were bad? They weren't here." But that is incorrect. When I was, again, speaking with a number of municipal leaders, they said that they were here in tough times. They were the people that were downloaded on. Certainly, with the cutback funding for municipalities hasn't been restored to the levels that it was at before the hard times. They are feeling the crunch here as well, and they felt that those comments by the Premier were certainly not well thought out given the fact that they had been there during the tough times and they have been experiencing these tough financial times from that time.

As well, you know, it was pointed out to me today that in the city of Edmonton they are now offering transit passes to people on AISH to help them get around the city. They've reduced the rate to \$29 instead of \$59, and that certainly is a great assistance from a municipal standpoint in assisting those people that are receiving assistance from the province.

In talking to them, other concerns that these people have were with the WCB facility at the city airport. Certainly, there seem to be differing views on the amount of property and business tax that is owed on that facility. The city of Edmonton is saying that it is not a hospital. This is also not part of a government department. It is a facility that first of all operates at arm's length from the government. It is also a facility that is funded totally by private business in this province. So, again, the city of Edmonton would like some clarification on this particular issue. As well, some of the people I talked to were saying that they still feel that there might be the question that taxes on the Belgravia site, where the Millard facility used to sit, are still owed. So we look at those issues.

In reading through the book put out by the AUMA, Sustaining Prosperity Together, they certainly have indicated that support from the provincial government to municipalities is lacking. On page 19, under Step VII, Engage Your Community, paragraph 2: "The current government has all but taken the support of smaller communities for granted. If it begins to perceive that support is either slipping away or at least is at risk it will have no choice but to act appropriately." Again, this points to the fact that communities in Alberta are certainly under some financial stress.

This is further highlighted by moving on to Step VIII, Sustaining Prosperity Resolutions. Some sample resolutions have been put forward from those municipal leaders. One, "Whereas, during the last 10 years municipal governments have been given increasingly

greater responsibilities but not the resources to meet them.” Again, it points to the fact that municipalities in this province require more funding.

8:20

Their second sample resolution, “Whereas, provincial transfer payments to municipal governments were cut by more than \$392 million between 1992 and 2002.” Again, to get back to the comments I heard on the radio this morning that were attributed to the Premier, certainly if this particular statement is correct – and I have no reason to believe it isn’t – then this is a clear indicator that the municipalities in this province did more than pull their weight during the tough times.

Their third sample resolution, “Whereas, municipal governments receive just eight cents out of every tax dollar collected in Canada and are forced to rely on property taxes.” Certainly, I want to say some more about property taxes later on, particularly in the case of Jasper and Banff, where because of their unique situation the value of their homes is quite in excess of any homes in many other locations here in the province.

The best example for me is the fellow who was best man at my wedding and I was best man for him. We built our homes at roughly the same time for comparable prices back in 1972. My house is now worth just under \$200,000. His house is probably in excess of \$400,000 and primarily because he lives in a national park, where further development is limited. Increasing values on homes like that certainly drives out young families, and I think the impact of this has been seen more so in Banff and Jasper, where the high school enrolment in Banff has dropped drastically, again just because young families cannot afford to live in these national parks.

As well, for the average person who has owned a home there for 30, 40 years, as the value of their home continues to rise and they continue to struggle with increasing property taxes because of the value of those homes, then certainly that puts them under a financial burden. You know, at some point these people, and particularly those that are retired, are looking at retirement outside of their own community, where they’ve lived and worked all their lives, just because they can no longer afford to stay there with, again, not only the high cost of living in a national park but the high cost of taxes on these homes.

We look at their fourth sample resolution. “Whereas, this shortfall has produced a municipal infrastructure deficit in Alberta of some \$7-9 billion and forced municipalities to curtail services affecting the quality of life in their communities.” I know from conversations with this minister and, as well, from his track record that he is very concerned about these issues. He has a long history of involvement in his community, a very outstanding record of commitment in his community, and quality of life issues are certainly something that he is very concerned with.

Getting to the estimates themselves, I have a few questions that I’d like to ask the minister at this time. If the minister would like to answer those that he is able to tonight, any that he wishes to put in writing would be fine as well.

When we look at the government and lottery fund estimates for 2004-2005, the operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases on page 290, the Municipal Government Board operating expense rose by \$69,000 over the 2003-2004 forecast. What was the reason for this increase? If the minister could also indicate why the equipment/inventory purchases for the ministry support services have risen by \$77,000. Also, why have the equipment/inventory purchases for public safety decreased by almost \$350,000 from the 2003-2004 forecast? Again, when we start talking about public safety, I will have some more comments, as we move through the estimates, on this particular issue.

Under program 1, ministry support services, and program 2, local government services, I will focus on program 2, on page 292. The operating expenses for division support have increased by over \$1 million. If the minister could please indicate some of the reasons why we had this increase. As well, the operating expenses for assessment services have also increased by over \$616,000 from the 2003-2004 budget. This seems to be again another large increase. If the minister could please point out why we had this increase.

Now, as well, one of the changes in this year’s budget was that \$16.5 million is being reallocated from the existing unconditional municipal grant program to the Solicitor General’s department for policing and the continuation of the ME First program. Could the minister please outline which programs have lost funding due to this reallocation?

One of the issues that continues to plague smaller communities is specialized transport, and it was a question that I asked the Minister of Transportation when we had the estimates on Transportation. It was something that the municipalities were given control of when the unconditional municipal grant program was changed. For the allocated portion that at one time had been designated for specialized transportation services, that designation was removed. Certainly, we have, particularly in rural Alberta, an aging fleet of vehicles that are providing specialized transportation services.

I look forward to more comments. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to first of all thank the hon. member for his recognition of Alberta municipalities and the grassroots that municipalities clearly are in this province. I know that he, clearly, by his example in the many grassroots organizations – and I speak of hockey arenas and others, which are truly grassroots here in Alberta and, for that matter, all across Canada. I appreciate his acknowledgment of how important it is for each of us as provincial representatives to be connected to the grassroots, to the people who get us to where we are today.

The hon. member has asked some very important questions. I would like to say that, clearly, the province of Alberta through our three R council – the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford actively participates on our committee – is doing some excellent work relative to that. I would also like to say to the hon. member that the president of the AUMA also participates. When we talk about sustainable communities, clearly we are all in agreement in terms of the importance of sustainable communities now and into the future. I want to also say that the mayor of the city of Edmonton also sits on this very important ministerial committee, and relative to the issue of his participation I really want to acknowledge the excellent work that he has provided.

Now, I would like to say that on a variety of the questions that the hon. member has brought up, I think it’s important to acknowledge as well the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane and the hon. Member for West Yellowhead, who have been working very closely with us relative to the uniqueness of the municipalities that are within our national parks, specifically Banff and Jasper. I want to say that the hon. Member for West Yellowhead, in fact, has provided some excellent advice in terms of how we bring this to a successful resolution. We want these communities to be successful. The hon. member indicated that from a perspective of education property tax we haven’t found, simply, a better system yet towards that end, but clearly we are all committed in this Assembly to look at better ways of serving Albertans. The role that education property tax plays in this province is a very important one.

8:30

I might add that in the Learning budget, which makes up over \$5

billion, the education property tax collected is about \$1.4 billion, so it makes up just over 35 per cent of the actual total funding for young people that are going to school. I think everyone in this Assembly and all the moms and dads that are here tonight watching this budget estimate can agree on the importance of educating our children. I also want to say clearly that the Learning Commission reflected that in some of their findings.

I would like to say, though, in terms of the AUMA that the president and the members that sit on our roles, responsibilities, and key resource committee play a very key role that I value significantly. I would like to say to the hon. member on his questions that in the 2004 business plan there is a commitment to completing the work with the AUMA that we have undertaken regarding the new relationship, specifically on the third R, that being resources. In terms of roles and responsibilities I think we have made significant progress on that.

If I could give an example on the resource side of things, I'm very proud this year that the recommendations of the roles, responsibilities, and resources committee – in fact, the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo headed up the ambulance review – that we put forth were accepted by the government. I might say that the additional \$13 million for ambulance as well as the additional \$55 million next year is a fine example of the resources that are going to allow municipalities to have greater breathing room. I think that's so important.

In addition, on the policing side, as the hon. member acknowledged, the \$16.5 million is of course being transferred over from unconditional to the Solicitor General's ministry. I can say that the additional almost \$60 million that is going to be assisting the city of Edmonton, the city of Calgary, and all of our municipalities I think is without question welcome news. I think it's something that was very active.

If you were to ask me the three key components of roles, responsibilities, and resources: the ambulance recommendation, the policing recommendation, and I also say ME First, which the hon. member acknowledged, municipal excellence, \$100 million, again, providing and retrofitting aging infrastructure issues within municipalities. I'm proud to say that \$25 million a year over the next four years is a program that is unmatched anywhere within the province of Alberta. So I appreciate the strategic priorities that the AUMA working with my ministry is achieving relative to and in conjunction with the roles, responsibilities, and resources.

Regarding education property tax, though, I would like to also acknowledge that one thing we want to avoid is any jolt in our system or any surprises. In one small way of assisting in that, ensuring that there are no jolts to our system, I am very proud to say that the province has reduced or frozen the education tax rate for 11 straight years. Not only that, but we are also capping an average formula to ensure that there are no jolts to homeowners, and that's either seniors or suburbanites. What's very important is that we want to ensure that there continues to be no jolt in that regard. So that's important to acknowledge.

Now, the hon. member also talked about the issue of aging infrastructure, which is so important. I want to say that I agree with the opportunities and challenges that all municipalities are facing relative to the challenges of growth, which he mentioned as well. As the hon. member is aware, not only in my community in the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo but in many other communities we are facing challenges of growth. As municipalities continue to face that pressure, of course we want to continue to look at ways to be able to provide, in rapidly shifting demographics, reliance on technology – and also the fact of the vulnerability of a resource-based economy impacts local governments. Industry clustering and potential threats

to security are also very complex in terms of the challenges that are facing our ministries.

So I would like to acknowledge the fact that from an infrastructure perspective we want to ensure that these challenges of growth are something that we will continue to sustain in terms of people coming into Alberta. As the hon. member acknowledges many times, when people move to Alberta, when they move to the city of Edmonton, or if they move to any municipality in Alberta, they don't bring their school or the hospital or the road or any of the infrastructure that we all know as former aldermen or councillors or a mayor or reeve that we have to provide to them.

I would like to say, though, that the new legislation, Bill 46, is enabling legislation for municipalities allowing municipalities to be able to have partners contribute to that infrastructure. I'm very proud to say that it was another product of roles, responsibilities, and resources, where the enabling legislation now is at the very least validating a code of practice regarding road levies where municipalities are allowed in fact to ensure that everyone contributes, not just someone who has been in the community for the last 50 years, but that new members that come to the community pay their share in terms of new infrastructure that is required in a growing community, that the hon. member has mentioned.

Now, also, the hon. member in his question regarding the MGB, I believe – and I'm trying to keep notes on what he was asking. Under the MGB, the Municipal Government Board, I would like to say that there was an increase of about \$69,000, which is 2.6 per cent. The Municipal Government Board, as the member is aware, is a quasi-judicial body and tribunal set to adjudicate appeals and disputes as provided for under the Municipal Government Act, of course the hearing of appeals of decisions of municipal assessment, review these types of situations.

Did you know that in this past year we had 16,000 hearings and we had about 700 appeals of those 16,000 hearings? I want to acknowledge tonight – and I'm sure that members of this Assembly would agree – the excellent work of Albertans who sit on the Municipal Government Board. Those stakeholders play an important role relative to the decisions they make in a fair and equitable and high-quality way in terms of providing a mechanism for reviewing all of the facts and making a decision that is fair and proper.

I would like to say to the hon. member that these expenses – the \$69,000 essentially is for the budget for this upcoming year – include the cost of a new salary settlement increase. Amortization costs are also included in the new database currently being developed to offset somewhat the reduced spending by the board. So I'm very pleased with that initiative as well.

Now, under Local Government Services I would like to deal with that question relative to divisional support. Under the issue of local government services we have an increase of about \$601,000; it's about 13.5 per cent. I want to say that a portion of that is due to our increased workforce costs, but also I would like to recognize the increased amortization costs pertaining to the estimates due to projected equipment/inventory purchases of about \$512,000, which are amortization costs related to development.

I'm very proud of this system, which is ASSET. We are very familiar of ASSET, assessment shared service environment, which is a system, you know, unparalleled in this country. So that has played a key role, which makes up about \$512,000 of that 13.5 per cent increase. I wanted to be able to say that that is attributed under the local government services question that the hon. member asked.

Relative to the issue of assessment services, another very good question, I would like to say that the increase of \$616,000 is allowed, again, for workforce costs that have been negotiated, but

also an increase in the contract services to accommodate anticipated increases in linear assessment appeals, which is a normal course of action in any province. We've also allowed for the increase in contracted services to accommodate these linear assessment appeals. It's difficult to predict what they are, but we are giving our best estimate relative to that, which is very important as well.

8:40

Now, also there was a question on the unconditional grants. There's a decrease of about 16.6, but actually – the hon. member is very astute and aware of our situation – the majority of our unconditional grant money has been transferred over to our Solicitor General and of course is being directed to policing.

Relative to that, I would like to give him just a bit more detail. The grant allocation of about \$15.1 million is for the ongoing unconditional grants to municipalities to assist in providing for municipal services. The remaining \$4.4 million is for restructuring grants. These grants are for actual restructuring costs. Grants may be provided to address critical infrastructure deficiencies in communities. This component also includes funding for regional partnerships, which the hon. member acknowledged and I appreciate, in terms of our partnership initiatives, which contribute to establishing or expanding intermunicipal partnerships that involve shared services.

Now, I want to say something that's really quite controversial, so it may get attention. If we were creating the province of Alberta again, would we have 356 municipalities? Probably not. But the purpose of this intermunicipal co-operation is to eventually work like there are six or seven regional centres across the province including the two major centres of Edmonton and Calgary. So those regional centres are those intermunicipal kinds of partnerships that we're continuing to explore to promote and enhance the service that Albertans receive through their municipal leaders. So that's something that I'm very proud of.

In fact, usually when a municipality applies for a grant, they are penalized if they haven't talked to their neighbour relative to the monies that they're applying for, because we believe that good neighbours work with each other. It comes to the words that I think are so important, these three words: and then some. You want to be a good neighbour and then some. You want to help each other and then some. You want to work with your neighbour and then some. Those three words "and then some" are something that I think separates Alberta municipalities from other average municipalities in other provinces across this country. So I want to acknowledge their good work relative to municipal partnerships.

The hon. member also asked a question, I believe, relative to equipment. Again, very astute relative to the equipment regarding inventory purchases. As you know, we have an increase in one area of \$122,000, but we also have a decrease pertaining to another area regarding the EMA branch management programs. What I'd like to say on the \$122,000 increase is that this reflects the purchase of equipment for the predictive monitoring system to warn residents of an imminent landslide and allow them ample time to respond. That was one of our initiatives.

The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, who I had the opportunity of visiting in fact just this past week – and I met His Worship Dr. John Irwin, the mayor of Crowsnest Pass, where they suffered a disaster last summer – took me there. In fact, I might add that the Premier made an announcement regarding the monitoring of Turtle Mountain. That was welcome news, I might say, from much of the feedback from the same municipal leaders that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry has been talking with. That's another example of "and then some." It's again not just average but excellent work by our municipal leaders.

I would like also to say that the reduction in the EMA branch management programs reflects the one-time costs associated with the improvements of our EMA operations centre and the media room and the web-based event management system. This has been decreased significantly, and I might say that I'm very proud of the fact that in this past year under disaster recovery in my ministry, Emergency Management Alberta, the Deputy Prime Minister of Canada indicated that every single province in Canada should be following what Alberta is doing. I might also say that the Auditor General echoed those words in terms of the quick action that we've taken relative to our new emergency operations. In fact, I invite the hon. member some day to go for a tour through that.

In that centre we have satellite dishes, where we actually could go to his residence. I went to my own residence to see what actually was taking place. It was close to the holiday season, and I thought I might be able to determine what, in fact, my wife was buying me for the holidays, but I wasn't able to determine that because that would have been a breach of privacy. So I could not do that. But relative to the incredible technology we have, I might say that it is quite significant.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, before I take my seat, regarding specialized transportation, I would like to just ever so briefly – and I thank the hon. member as he acknowledged the Ministry of Transportation, where a large portion of that is covered off. Under the issue of specialized transportation, which is under local government services, we continue to work on finding ways to assist our communities. I can say that we are working closely with the Minister of Transportation, and this is again a joint effort in terms of how we can assist in providing the greatest support for those in need relative to specialized transportation, and we will continue relative to that commitment in conjoint with the Minister of Transportation.

With that, I think I've covered the questions that the hon. member has asked, and I'll take my seat.

Mr. Bonner: I was very interested in the minister's comments on, certainly, the satellites and what can be seen, and that raises a number of questions. How is the ministry guaranteeing the personal privacy of people who are being monitored in that particular process, and which people have the authority to review those tapes to see what types of actions are taking place? As well, how long are those tapes kept on file? How long is that record of people's behaviour kept?

I think the general population certainly wants the added security. Events have certainly changed in this world since the beginning of the year 2000, so we do want a more secure world. We do have threats on facilities in this province, in this nation, around the globe that even five years ago we had a totally different view on. So those are some of the questions I have in regard to that.

Now, then, when I was speaking before, I was talking about specialized transportation services and how critical it is to the quality of life for people in rural areas. It is a question that I did ask the Minister of Transportation. I did not get an answer. I am now asking the Minister of Municipal Affairs the same question in that, certainly, it seems to be one of those issues that crosses ministries. Who is going to take responsibility to make certain that the people that require specialized transportation, particularly in rural areas, get that type of transportation? Also, who's going to ensure that their needs for such services are met?

Municipal debenture interest rebates have been cut by over \$1.6 million. Along with the \$16 million transfer from the unconditional municipal grants this presents a significant reduction in financial assistance programs for municipalities. Altogether there is a decrease of \$12 million in financial assistance programs since the

2003-2004 budget. What strategies are municipalities supposed to use in order to address cutbacks of this amount?

Earlier on I had said that I wished to make some comments and ask questions regarding program 3, public safety. Branch management and programs for Emergency Management Alberta went over budget by almost \$700,000 in 2003 and have risen by almost \$250,000 in 2004-2005. Does the minister anticipate that these numbers will likely increase again this year?

8:50

The same applies to disaster recovery. Will the cost of this expense again increase by almost \$6.5 million? Particularly given that we seem to be in a part of a cycle right now where we have increasing drought and certainly a greater incidence of forest fires in the province, does the minister anticipate that equipment and inventory purchases for Emergency Management Alberta's branch management and programs will rise due to last year's expenses?

Under the ministry statement of operations by program on page 296 my question would be: why is there a decrease of \$40,000 in premiums, fees, and licences from last year's revenues?

I now have a few comments and questions regarding the Municipal Affairs business plan for the period 2004-2007. This ministry's vision is outlined in the business plan as "viable, responsive, and well-managed local governments and a public safety system that results in safe buildings, equipment and facilities, and effective emergency management." This comes from page 351.

With regard to safe buildings, has the minister had a chance to investigate further the stucco wall systems issue? Certainly, when we look at the stucco and home building industries, they have long been ignoring the minimum stucco wall thickness of 19 millimetres laid out in the Alberta building code. If the minister would please indicate how this issue is going to be addressed so that we don't end up with the situation that Vancouver and Victoria ended up with whereby the walls on their buildings had damages in the billion dollar range because of inadequate exterior coating. As well, would the minister please indicate what his department is doing to enforce compliance with the Alberta building code?

The business plan also refers to "the vulnerability of a resource-based economy" and "potential threats to security" as two among a number of challenges for the Department of Municipal Affairs on page 352. What work does this ministry plan to undertake to deal more specifically with the issue of sour gas and emergency preparedness in order to prevent any security risk to sour gas facilities and the populations around them? As well, what other departments will the minister be working with in order to address what issues arise out of the placement of sour gas facilities in and around populated areas? What possible responses are there to each of these issues?

Related to this issue, there is another issue on which we would like a more clarified response. On March 3 the Member for Edmonton-Riverview asked a set of questions on a recent report entitled *Impact of Oil and Gas Activity on Rural Residential Property Values*. He went on to ask:

Given that a recent report entitled *Impact of Oil and Gas Activity on Rural Residential Property Values* says that property values in this area could depreciate by 10 per cent if they're located in the emergency planning zone of sour gas wells, what is this minister doing to ensure that [those people in those particular situations] . . .

And we are referring more specifically to Calgarians.

. . . will not suffer a hit to their property values?

As well, when we look at core business 1, local government services, pages 354 to 356, why has the target level of satisfaction with the local government services division's activities, services, and programs decreased in 2004-2005 and 2005-2006? Again, another question regarding core business 1: why has the target for the

percentage of municipalities meeting the ministry's criteria of financial accountability decreased from 2004 through to 2007? My final question under core business 1: why has the target for the percentage of municipal assessment rolls meeting standards decreased from 2004 through to 2007?

Under core business 2, safety services and fire protection, why has the target for the percentage of accredited municipal entities, corporations, agencies, and delegated administrative organizations administering the Safety Codes Act that achieve a satisfactory rating decreased from 2004 to 2007?

Under core business 3, Emergency Management Alberta, why does the damage assessment team have such a large window of time, 30 days, to arrive on site after receiving a claim? Certainly, I think that in the interests of all Albertans, particularly when we're dealing with emergency management, we would like to see that 30-day window reduced. My second question: why does the target for the cumulative percentage of the municipalities confirmed to have exercised their emergency plans decreased by 60 per cent in 2006-2007.

Under core business 4 shouldn't the government be targeting an increase in all of its performance targets each year, including for the percentage of parties satisfied or neutral regarding the board's services and processes?

As well, referring to the financial statement audits on page 254 of the Auditor General's report, section 2.1, reservations of opinion, the Auditor General goes on to say:

We audited the financial statements of the Ministry for the year ended March 31, 2003. The financial statements are prepared in accordance with the corporate government accounting policies established by the Department of Finance. We had the following two reservations of opinion on the financial statements:

1. The Ministry understates capital assets. Since this problem applies to 17 ministries, we discuss it in the Government of Alberta Annual Report . . .
2. Ministry financial statements contain only the results of operations and net assets of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The financial statements of the delegated administrative organizations . . . and the Safety Codes Council should be included in these financial statements. These organizations require the Minister's approval for revenue-raising, expenditure and resource allocation policies related to their functions.

So I would like the minister to comment on these reservations as put forward by the Auditor General.

I notice on the same page, 254, recommendation 37 provided by the Auditor General.

We recommend that the Ministry of Municipal Affairs not record the acquisition of its assets as grant expense. We further recommend that the Ministry not disburse funds for the development of its systems before any development occurs.

If the minister could please update us on these observations and recommendations by the Auditor General.

In past years the ministry has allocated millions of dollars to the underground petroleum storage tank site remediation program. If the minister could please inform us whether the underground petroleum storage tank site remediation program has been completed. If so, how many sites were remediated? If it has not been completed, how many more sites are there to be remediated? If indeed the program has wrapped up and the final report on the remediation program has been prepared, would he please indicate that to us. If it has not been completed, has additional funding been allocated for this program in 2004 and beyond? If there has, could he indicate how much.

9:00

Under national emergencies, Canada front lines update report 2004. This report talks about a lack of support from the provincial

government for regional emergency preparedness. What is the ministry doing or planning to do to address this issue? Of course, this report, I believe, was just released in March of 2004. The report also talks about a lack of co-ordination between the federal and provincial governments over emergency preparedness jurisdictions and their lack of willingness to respond to regional initiatives. What is this ministry doing to ensure that senior levels of government respond to initiatives that the regions and municipalities propose with regard to emergency preparedness plans?

As well, referring to national emergencies, when referring to funding mechanisms for reforming the joint emergency preparedness program, or JEPP, the report outlines stakeholder concerns that they are neither transparent nor user friendly. Will the minister comment regarding this observation in the report, and will he commit to ensuring that emergency preparedness funding is accessible for our communities? If indeed these issues have been addressed, if he could please update us with any information.

The report outlines how smaller municipalities felt that the preparedness of their communications structures represented a problem for two main reasons. These were that different services – police, fire, ambulance – had incompatible equipment, and a second reason was that they lacked up-to-date communication devices. Overall, these problems were largely due to a lack of funding. If the minister could please indicate what his department is doing to address issues of funding for preparedness communications for smaller municipalities.

The following is a quote from the report:

The regional emergency response structure is basically non-existent, with the exception of a steering committee that is attempting to rationalize emergency preparedness within the region. Success has been elusive due to non-funding at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

If the minister could please comment on what is happening to counter concerns over regional command of communications.

So with those questions, Mr. Chairman, I will take my seat and look for the answers provided by the minister. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you. I am certainly prepared to answer the questions that the member has raised, some very good questions, I might add.

I guess I would start off with the issue relative to the emergency operations centre. Obviously, the member asked a question about tapes. There are no tapes. What they are, actually, are maps of the province of Alberta, and consequently they're an important level of inventory that we use in terms of helping to access where a hospital is, where an emergency centre is, where disaster services are, where pipelines are. All of this information we have on our critical infrastructure through what is an Alberta-made system called the Smart program, which is an incredible, quite sophisticated technology made right here in Alberta. So I want to say to the hon. member that there are no tapes.

I would also like to say regarding privacy, which we in this government take very seriously, that ultimately through our system, which is the Telus geomatics system, which is in the public domain today – that is the system that we are utilizing. It's a very important one that I believe helps our first responders, and those are the people – every single municipality in Alberta has an emergency management plan that they have to follow. It used to be called the disaster services plan. First responders are there, and we want to arm every municipality with the technology through this geomatics system to assist them in making decisions relative to helping and protecting

their citizens and families. So I appreciate the question now by the hon. member relative to that.

Now, if I kept track of all these questions, you talked about municipal interest. It was on the issue of the municipal debenture interest rebate, and I think it's a decrease of about \$1.62 million, which is substantial. But this is really quite a good-news story because this grant subsidizes the interest on certain debenture borrowing from the Alberta Capital Finance Authority made prior to 1985. The reduction in the 2004-05 estimate is due to the high interest rate debentures being repaid by municipalities as their terms end. So, essentially, fewer higher interest debentures requiring a subsidy remain.

This is really a tribute to the good work of our municipal leaders, and despite this budget reduction the municipalities are receiving everything that they are entitled to under the program. The reduction is solely the result of certain debentures that are expiring or being paid off, which ultimately corresponds with the \$1.6 million decrease. So that is actually a real positive in terms of sustainability for our municipalities that the debt is being paid back. I appreciate the hon. member's highlighting that, and I'm sure all the municipal leaders do as well.

The next question is relative to the issue of – if I remember correctly, I was writing on the issue of EMA, Emergency Management Alberta. Now, what's really important is that under these programs we have an increase in the program which is managing provincial emergency programs and supporting municipalities with preparedness for major emergencies and disasters through four key activities regarding mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. The increase in the estimate reflects the operating costs associated with the new EMA operating centre and the expansion of the crisis management program, the Turtle Mountain predictive monitoring system, as I mentioned earlier, and the cost of the negotiated salary settlement. So I want to say that this is, I believe, taxpayers' money being very well used to meet the needs and priorities of Alberta municipalities, and I appreciate the fact that it's being highlighted here as well.

I would also like to say that relative to the issue of the federal government, which the hon. member also talked about, under disaster recovery we have a decrease of about \$6.45 million, which is quite substantial. Essentially, the reason is that the forecast includes one-time expenses for Grimshaw, the Crownsnest Pass fire, and also the '03 northwest Alberta disaster recovery program. You may recall that. Our first responders, Alberta forestry – many people were involved. Of course, the hon. Member for Athabasca-Wabasca's ministry played a key role in terms of fire protection and the water bombing that went on. We did on-site visits, in fact, with the Premier as well. But it's interesting that the funding for these disaster recoveries was approved through supplementary estimates in the '03-04 year, so obviously I'm quite certain that will satisfy the hon. member and the question that he raised.

Regarding the issue of revenue which the hon. member raised, I would like to say that essentially from an internal government transfer perspective, the estimate of \$24 million represents a transfer of funds from the Alberta lottery fund to support the municipal sponsorship program. I thank the hon. Minister of Gaming for that. But I would like to say that that made up about \$12 million with an unconditional municipal grant program also of about \$12 million, which makes up the \$24 million. The funding received for unconditional municipal grants was about \$40 million, and the decrease is primarily due, hon. member, to the transfer of the police assistance component, \$16.5 million, to the Solicitor General. I might also say under disaster services that the revenues reported under the line referring to the disaster recovery program represent cost recoveries only received from the federal government.

Now, there is no budgeted amount as disasters are not projected in an estimate. When you do your budget, you can't say: is there going to be a tornado or is there going to be a fire? We try to use averages in what we do to be able to meet what we refer to as an average year in terms of what is taking place. The forecast for disaster assistance in '03-04 was \$240,000 and in '02-03 it was \$8.44 million that actually took place. So it's important.

9:10

Now, the hon. member did ask about premiums, fees, and licences. I would like to say that the safety services program collects fees for a number of safety services. These include labels sold to agencies under contract with the ministry to provide permit inspection services in nonaccredited municipalities. Of course, automated labelling is through the electronic permitting system. EPS will replace paper labels, and this fee is currently under review. Also, certificates for construction and operation of elevating devices and certificates to private sewage disposal system installers issued upon payment of the annual fee, and costs for inspections are charged on a hourly basis for the inspector, professional services for staff to participate as expert witnesses and code interpreters. Also, labels for manufactured homes, relocatable industrial accommodations, and labels that verify that the trailer complies with the Alberta building code. So these are some of the important points the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry has asked that I touch base with him on.

Regarding the business plan on the stucco – and the hon. member asked about stucco in the House just the other day – and addressing this. I just wanted to assure the member that my wife did verify that I am not a carpenter. She did do that, and I was actually quite disappointed to hear that she actually verified and validated your comments. I would like to say that there is no change regarding the question. There's no change in the code relative to this issue of stucco that the hon. member did bring up.

Now, regarding sour gas the Minister of Energy, the Member for Calgary-Varsity, did indicate that, of course, the Ministry of Energy pertains to deal with sour gas through the EUB. What I am very proud about in our emergency management system is that relative to that, we have a very, very exact protocol that is being used in terms of protecting the Albertans that may be affected. We hope that is never required, but there is a plan again in place relative to the issue of sour gas.

On the level of satisfaction, the hon. member did mention that within his questions, and I can say that I'd just like to take a brief moment to talk about the sustainability and accountability of ministries. Really, the ministry monitors and assists.

Now, I had the pleasure of visiting with the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, and I certainly appreciate his former experience as a reeve in that area. I might say that he's indicated to me that I am speaking too slowly. I'm unfortunately not able to move at the lightning speed of his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. I am very pleased to say that the hon. member is wearing a helmet, but then again sometimes in wearing that helmet you can't hurt steel. Of course, I'm referring to the steel in the motorcycle, not what is taking place there. I would like to say that indeed I appreciate his good counsel relative to a variety of municipal issues in his particular area of Lac La Biche-St. Paul and always appreciate his wisdom that he shares with us.

I would like also to talk about our targets and the terms of our targets that are taking place. I want to say that in terms of level of satisfaction within the local government services division – you know, what I'm very pleased to say is that the level of satisfaction that we're shooting for is over 85 per cent. Of course, in our last actual we were at 100 per cent.

But it's important to say that with the level of satisfaction with the local government services division in enabling and promoting a co-operative and well-managed sector, we calculate the percentage of the units within the local government services that achieved their individual performance targets. I like to break them down from a unit performance perspective, and that unit performance perspective is determined through a satisfaction survey that goes out to our municipal stakeholders. You know, I do believe that if it's not measured, it's not done. I'm very proud to say that that satisfaction clearly indicates those three words which are the theme of my estimates tonight and then some.

I would like to go on regarding the issue of performance that is taking place within our three-year business cycle. It's important to recognize that from a core business perspective relative to an effective and responsive appeal system that is seen as being fair and impartial to all parties, we have strategies regarding key result areas: one, the "timely processing of appeals filed with the Board" to get that high level of satisfaction; two, "high quality, independent processes, decisions and solutions." Of course, that's managing the recruiting program to ensure that the board maintains the required range of professional skills.

I might say that I appreciate all of the recommendations I've received from members of this Assembly who have recommended members for the Municipal Government Board. We just recently had appointments to the board. Many of those members, in fact, are former municipally elected members themselves, which brings, I believe, important competency when it comes to making fair and just decisions in terms of disputes that may in fact take place.

Now, relative to the annual report on capital assets I want to say that this is consistent with our finance policy, but more importantly I want to say that we are following the points that the Auditor General has made. We have complied with and are complying with the Auditor General's recommendations, and I'm very proud to say that we have worked very closely.

Some Hon. Members: Question.

Mr. Boutilier: Now, I see that some hon. members, the hon. member from Strathmore, are asking perhaps to go to the question, but I would like to take this opportunity since I very seldom speak in this Assembly.

Again, I look for quality not quantity, and in doing so, on that quality tonight I want to say that without question our EMA system that we have in place today, working with the federal government, is something that's been recognized across the country. It goes without saying that it's such an important issue.

Regarding new initiatives, Amber Alert is a wonderful example that has taken place. In fact, just recently we had what I believe was a good-news story in terms of the key role that the RCMP and family members played in recovering a girl in the St. Paul area, and what a relief to the family. I want to thank the members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and everyone that was involved: people, Mounties that came in off duty to assist. It says that the system works and works well regarding our early public warning system and the Amber Alert that we use. I know the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul appreciates their work and has acknowledged it here in the House.

Regarding the issue of underground petroleum tanks, as you know, we have covered over 700 of the most severe sites in the entire province. There is no budget implication in this upcoming year, but I want to say that I'm very proud that this is a system that is unmatched, again, anywhere in Canada. I do know that over 700 sites, in fact, were remediated. In terms of the work, the remediation

that took place, the maximum amount that was allowed to an application was \$120,000: \$10,000 for the review, and then the bulk was for the actual work of remediating. We've had some excellent work there, and of course, as I said earlier, I'm very proud of that.

Let me just conclude. I hope I have addressed most of the questions, as I was trying to write as quickly as I could.

Under disaster recovery the budget is \$340,000. This amount seems to be far from adequate when one compares it to the forecasted expenditure of \$6.8 million that took place in '03-04. That covers ongoing programs such as emergency preparedness as well as cost sharing with the federal government. I would like to say that the work that took place in Grimshaw, in Crowsnest Pass, in northwestern Alberta are disaster recovery programs that have worked very well.

Ultimately, at the end of the day we're here to assist our municipalities as the first responders. I want to also compliment them on their excellent disaster services plans that they have put in place.

With that, Mr. Chair, I'll take my seat.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate this opportunity to ask some questions in connection with the Municipal Affairs estimates for the upcoming budget year. I want to talk just about two things. I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry has been very comprehensive in his questioning with respect to the department's budget.

The first issue I want to deal with is the issue that has been raised by the mayor of Calgary with respect to revenue sharing. The mayor of Calgary has been quite vocal, and he's indicated that infrastructure money in Calgary is a critical priority. That city, according to its mayor, has accumulated a \$1 billion, 10-year backlog in road and transportation projects and is vigorously lobbying both the provincial and the federal governments.

[Ms Graham in the chair]

Now, the mayor has indicated that he would like to see a greater proportion of the provincial surplus allocated for capital projects including roads, the C-Train, and other needed infrastructure. He's also critical of the government with respect to the take on education property tax, which he indicates is poised to take \$30 million out of the city of Calgary.

9:20

Now, I know that to a degree the city of Edmonton has been supportive of Calgary's approach, and I know as well that the Premier has fired a couple of shots back at the priorities of the city of Calgary in suggesting that all the capital money or the vast majority of it ought to go into solving that city's difficult transportation problems.

So I'm wondering what the minister's view of this is. I think that all of the individual programs are well and good, and whether or not they go up or down or they get transferred from this department's budget to another department's budget are important questions. But the fundamental question is whether or not municipalities, particularly the largest municipalities or the largest regions, including a number of municipalities, have the ongoing financial capacity to do the job that's expected of them both by the provincial government and by their own citizens.

Some sort of revenue sharing has been touted. Different schemes have been put forward at different times. The mayor of Calgary is suggesting a proportion of the provincial surplus. The Premier has

responded by saying that the province doesn't always have surpluses, so that's not a stable source. That's a reasonable point, but it begs the question whether or not the Premier has another alternative in mind. So I'm curious about that.

Then there's the operating side. It's interesting to know that there was at one time in this province revenue sharing. A proportion of tax revenue under the Social Credit government was allocated to municipal purposes, and that has been ended. It's gone back and forth, Madam Chairman, between more targeted programs – specific grants for policing, specific grants for roads, specific grants for transit, and so on – and a more general approach. The municipalities have generally said that they would like to see uncommitted amounts that they can use for any purpose, but of course whenever the government offers them some very specific grant, they're ready to grab that too.

I'm interested in whether there's a long-term solution. Municipalities, particularly in large urban areas, have very strong demands on them for housing, for low-income programs, preventative social programs, transportation, and particularly I think a priority is the extension of the LRT system as well as roadways in Edmonton and Calgary. So I'd like to know if the minister has anything specifically in mind with respect to this.

At one point – and I think it's still the position of the AUMA – they had urged the government to vacate the property tax altogether. Dr. West, when he was at the end of his time as the minister of – wasn't it Finance? What was his last position here?

Mr. Bonner: I believe you're right.

Mr. Mason: Yes.

I attended a speech that he gave to the AUMA where he indicated that the province was making a commitment to vacate the education property tax over a period of time and leave that for municipalities. Now, the current Minister of Finance has modified that position very considerably. She is saying that no longer will the province limit its total take, but it will freeze the rate, and then of course as assessment rises, the province's take rises with it.

I know and other members know and the hon. minister knows – he's been a mayor – that when property values rise dramatically in a municipality, the municipality normally will offset that by changing the mill rate so that the amount of revenue and people's taxes don't skyrocket as a result of a sudden jump in property tax. I'm not sure that the province quite gets that, you know. Does the province still have a long-term strategy of exiting the property tax altogether and leaving that room for municipalities? I guess, Mr. Minister, that what I'm looking for is in fact some indication as to whether or not the government has a long-term strategy in mind that will give a substantial degree of independence to municipalities to solve both their operating and their infrastructure requirements.

The second point that I want to raise has to do with the ME First program. When this was announced – and I was present when the minister announced it at AUMA – he indicated that a hundred million dollars was going to be allocated over I believe three years, four years to assist municipalities in energy savings and to find cost savings and so on. And that's a good approach.

There are just a couple of problems. The first is that this was money that was a surplus in the Municipal Financing Corporation books that was seized by the Provincial Treasurer, and it was given back, in a way, after intensive lobbying by municipalities in the province. It was given back in a way but not completely. This was money that they, of course, contributed by repaying loans that they had drawn upon from that Municipal Financing Corporation or municipal finance fund.

It's a great idea, you know, the idea that you invest money in energy savings. You reduce your energy and you reduce your energy bill and you use those savings to repay the fund. Except it's not being used to repay the fund, Madam Chairperson. It is going back into general revenues. So over the four-year period the fund of a hundred million dollars will be liquidated and will no longer be available to help municipalities with energy savings.

The suggestion I made – I had the advantage of speaking after the minister at the AUMA – was that we turn it from a ME First fund into a we-first fund and have the payments of municipalities go back into the fund so that it became a permanent revolving fund that would finance on an ongoing basis energy savings on behalf of Alberta municipalities, and it would be there in perpetuity in order to achieve that goal. Energy savings, of course, are not all going to be completely resolved in a three- or four-year time period. There will always be energy savings that are required, that will be beneficial for the citizens and will save an awful lot of money.

I know that this is not entirely within the minister's control. Perhaps if he had his druthers, he'd like to do what I'm suggesting, but then there's always the problem of Treasury Board, and there's always the problem of the Minister of Finance. I don't expect him to be able to just make this policy on his own, but I would like to get his comments on that. I think that in five or six years there are still going to be financial pressures on municipalities, there are still going to be opportunities to reduce spending on energy, and there's still going to be a requirement on the part of the province as a whole to reduce its energy use as climate change heats up and international pressure on Canada and other countries intensifies.

So those, Madam Chairperson, are my two major issues. First of all a comprehensive, systematic, long-term plan for financial independence for municipalities in this province and, secondly, an energy fund that is a revolving and permanent fund in order to allow municipalities to realize cost savings and energy savings over the long haul.

Thank you.

9:30

The Acting Chair: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Yeah. Madam Chair, indeed it's my privilege to respond to some very good questions that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is very aware of as a former alderman himself with the city of Edmonton.

First of all relative to many mayors, not just the mayor of Calgary but most municipal leaders, talking about how they get more money from the province. In fact, at one point I recall the Premier saying that when he was the mayor of Calgary, one of his favourite things was that what you do is that you beat up the province in terms of looking for greater resources. So I think that it's something we all understand.

But one thing that I think citizens have an expectation of in terms of their municipal council no matter where it is in the province of Alberta is that with the resources they have, the question is: what decisions do they make based on the priorities? It's kind of like how I run my home. In fact, right now I'm fixing the roof in my home. Actually, I had to crawl through the attic a couple of months ago because it was leaking. I didn't like doing that, and I have a new roof going on; it's a 25-year roof. So we're fixing it.

Now, that means that we're not going to be able to go ahead and fix some of the other stuff that I had, because the fact is that we try to plan our priorities in the best way we know how with the resources we have. I know that the hon. member would be very familiar with that, that quite simply you can't please everyone as an

elected mayor or alderman when you come in front of council in terms of where the money goes, the resources we have.

So I don't have a short answer to the question other than that we have to strike the right balance. But I think a key for any mayor or elected official in this province is that they have to strike a right balance that reflects what they believe the majority of citizens in the city or the municipality are looking for and that they have to be allocated in a wise decision.

If you're talking about something that you believe that you would do if you had extra money, then, naturally, when the extra money comes, you usually do that with the extra money. Of course, some of the discussion is that you have so many competing priorities that council and mayors and elected officials always struggle with how you try to keep everyone as happy, you know, as possible. That's the challenge, be it the mayor of Calgary or the mayor of any municipality. I know that the hon. member is very familiar with that as a former alderman. Quite simply, I do believe that if you keep everyone happy, the chances are that you're probably not doing your job. I think it's a good reflection. But what we try to do as we run our homes is allocate those resources in the best way possible.

In terms of a long-term plan I feel very comfortable with our minister's committee on roles, responsibilities, and resources. Again, there is no other committee like it in the entire country. So we are trying to be not only looking out over the horizon, but we're looking around the corner past the horizon. We want to be out in front.

I was speaking in Quebec about a year ago in Gatineau, where the president of the FCM, Yves Ducharme – it's his municipality. In fact, they are going to be here in Edmonton. The city of Edmonton is celebrating its 100th anniversary, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities from all across Canada is being hosted right here in Edmonton as they celebrate their 100th anniversary, and of course I'm going to be inviting all members of this Assembly to attend an Alberta night at Fort Edmonton that's coming up at the end of May.

But in speaking there, what I'm very proud of is the recognition by the province of Quebec of the fact that Alberta still has the most permissive Municipal Government Act of any province in Canada, the most permissive. I can say that there is much other work being done to model what the province of Alberta has done. The province of British Columbia is just one example of that.

I want to say that my attitude as minister is that we can always do better no matter what it is. In health or education and certainly within Municipal Affairs, no matter what it is we're doing and even though we're leading, I do believe we can do better and be out in front of everyone else. My commitment to this hon. member and this House is that we will continue to lead and have other provinces and municipalities follow our work.

Now, I want to just say on the very good question on education property tax that in this Assembly Motion 501 by the hon. Member for Wainwright indicated that it is urging the government over the next 10 years to vacate education property tax. In fact, the hon. member mentioned Dr. West, when he froze it at \$1.2 billion. I want to say, as we all know from the Learning Commission on education, that of the \$5 billion that goes into the Minister of Learning's budget for educating our young people, it's important to recognize that education property tax makes up about \$1.4 billion of that.

The issue will be: what will be the alternative to that \$1.4 billion? I don't think that any of us in this room are recognizing that in a growing community like the city of Edmonton, where the hon. member is from, as we have more people moving to the province, we require, in fact, facilities and resources to educate our young people. How we strike that balance is ultimately a challenge that we'll continue to struggle with, but I can say this: I believe we are making progress.

I also believe that there are other alternatives that we can examine. I think that the hon. member can acknowledge that there's not an easy fix to this issue because if we vacate it from one area, then the question is that it still has to come from somewhere else. I'm sure the hon. member will acknowledge that we still want to ensure that the \$1.4 billion is going into educating our youth in the province. The question is where that resource, in fact, comes from.

So there is a motion that's been accepted here. I believe it was unanimous, in fact, so a compliment to every member of this Assembly for working towards eliminating it over the next 10 years. It is something that, obviously, I believe is very important, and I'm influenced by that.

Now, I'm working closely with AUMA and AAMD and C, but it has to be a staged process of moving off the education property tax system. In fact, if you don't take care of your home, if you let your home get rundown and the assessed value ultimately goes down, your reward is that your taxes actually will go down because your assessed value is down.

If we want to think differently, one would think that those who are improving the value of their home and the assessment is going up because they're caring for their home as opposed to someone who is not – should they really be penalized because of the value going up versus the fact that if you have a wooden door versus an aluminum door, you may pay more based on the assessed value of your home? You know, in the hon. member's time in municipal council, these are questions that we always face in municipal and in provincial government, relative to: is education property tax the best way to go?

What I'm hearing from corners of Alberta and in this Assembly and from the hon. members is that there's got to be a better way. So I'm committed to find that better way. I think I have some examples that we continue to work on. It is about striking that right balance based on the challenges we all face. That's what every mayor and councillor has to deal with as well.

Now, just before I take my seat, I can say relative to the mill rate this past year, as you know, hon. member, that it has gone down. It was minimal. I appreciate the Minister of Finance in recognizing that it is still moving in the right direction. I want to just say on the Alberta finance corporation – we talked about ME First, which is important, and I'm very proud of his acknowledgment of that program – that for ME First the \$25 million a year that we're using will be repaid, and it's coming out of the Alberta finance corporation board and its new name, that municipalities fund, that they use. But I want to say this: did you know that just a couple of years ago we were able to return \$137 million to Alberta municipalities from that same fund? Some municipalities, in fact, refunded it to their taxpayers. Other municipalities used it for some of the infrastructure and some of the points that have been made by both the Member for Edmonton-Highlands and the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

The deal is that the revolving fund idea, I believe, is worthy of further examination, and I want to acknowledge that because retrofitting hockey arenas, retrofitting swimming pools is what that money, \$25 million a year, is going to be used for. What I have heard from our municipal leaders in the conference that we both attend and members of this Assembly attend is that they say that they like the idea. But even more important than that is the money being used with new technology, because new technology will play a key role in terms of how we manage our own homes as well as our province and all of our municipal infrastructure.

9:40

Now, if I could give the example, the mayor of Canmore, Mayor Glen Craig, in fact had some students recently that I was reading about whom he was showing energy efficiency. Their town hall is

more energy efficient. It's a wonderful example because the payback in the saving is that they save their money by their operational reduction in costs during the course of the year, so at the end of the five-year or seven-year period they're able to pay back the loan that we give interest-free, and their operating saving is in perpetuity and sustainable.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

So I think these initiatives are very important and have been certainly acknowledged as welcome news relative to the ME First municipal energy program. But five years from now, I want to say, after the \$25 million over the next four years is utilized, I'd like to think that we'll continue to use the resource through the Alberta finance corporation. I thank the Minister of Finance for acknowledging that and getting \$100 million to assist municipalities.

The Chair: Before going any further, Calgary has triumphed in the game 3-2.

After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Municipal Affairs for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and

Equipment/Inventory Purchases \$124,304,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, Mr. Chairman. I move that we rise and report the estimates of Municipal Affairs and seek leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Municipal Affairs: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$124,304,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I now call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 30
Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have two minor amendments to propose to Bill 30. I'd like at this time if the amendment could be distributed and if it could be considered as amendment A1.

As the amendment is being distributed, I'd like to take a few minutes to address the comments and questions that were raised during second reading of Bill 30. The amendments to the Métis Settlements Act contained in Bill 30 are intended to adjust the existing structures and systems for settlement governance to allow for more effective decision-making, provide for greater political stability, and improve the mechanisms in place for accountability to the settlement members.

Mr. Chairman, the hon. Leader of the Opposition, in agreeing with the need to adjust the requirement that Métis Settlements General Council policies be unanimously approved so that six of eight settlements can approve them, asked what the original thinking was in establishing the unanimity requirement. Originally, in the late 1980s the proposal discussed by the settlements and the government was that policies would require approval by only six of the eight settlements. As discussions continued on the finalization of the Métis Settlements Act, settlement representatives expressed concerns about what the future would bring as they moved into a new system of governance with significantly increased powers. As a result, the unanimity requirement was included in the act. Since 1990 the crippling effects of the unanimity requirement have become clear and can no longer be allowed to continue.

Mr. Chairman, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands also raised a few questions regarding the process for developing the bill and the responsibilities and authorities of the minister responsible for the administration of the Métis Settlements Act. I would like to address first the process for developing Bill 30.

The first thing that needs to be understood is that many of the areas that are being amended by Bill 30 have been under discussion for a number of years. The problems associated with the unanimity requirement and the election system at the local level along with the need for adjustments to the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal and the concerns about effective accountability mechanisms, which gave rise to the establishment of the Métis settlements ombudsman, are not new issues. Discussions were held in 1999 regarding most of these matters in an attempt to arrive at a consensus on change. The amendments regarding the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal are largely the result of the report of a joint settlements/Alberta task force.

The idea of a Métis settlements ombudsman was the subject of a report in 2000 by another joint settlements/Alberta committee that talked to members on every settlement who endorsed the need for a mechanism to address concerns about accountability.

When the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development informed the settlements that she intended to propose amendments to the Métis Settlements Act, they were invited to participate. A working group of officials was established, but the settlements withdrew. The minister and I met with settlement leaders more than half a dozen times. The minister ensured that funds were available for the Métis Settlements General Council to consult with the members.

The Métis Settlements General Council arranged meetings on

every settlement, and government officials were present at all the meetings to explain the proposals for amendments and answer questions. I was able to attend five of these meetings. Information regarding the proposed amendments was included in the Métis Settlements General Council's newsletter, that is sent to every household on the settlements. As recently as the end of February the Métis Settlements General Council proposed changes to the amendments, and they were largely accommodated. In short, every reasonable effort was made to seek the views of the settlements.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands also raised a concern regarding the amendments that would give the minister the ability to pass a regulation in areas where the Métis Settlements General Council can make policies. This amendment has been included to ensure that should the Métis Settlements General Council be unable or unwilling to do so, the minister can by regulation put in place policies necessary for effective and accountable governance. Regulations made by the minister are intended to be temporary. They would be enforced for a two-year time frame and would be repealed if the Métis Settlements General Council passed a policy dealing with the subject matter.

A question was raised regarding the process to appoint the chair of the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal, with the suggestion that the minister have more authority over this appointment. Currently the chair of the tribunal is appointed by the minister from a list of nominees submitted by the Métis Settlements General Council. The amendments would establish an independent committee composed of the Métis Settlements General Council and settlement appointees to interview prospective candidates. In effect, the intent of the amendment is to depoliticize the process.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to speak to the minor amendments to Bill 30. I'd like to move these amendments. First, section 47 identified section 13 as one of those to be proclaimed later and left section 7 off the list. Consequently, it is proposed to amend section 47 by striking out "13" and substituting "7".

The second minor amendment is to strike the proposed section 175.2(2). This section deals with the Métis settlements ombudsman and would have provided that the ombudsman and staff could not be compelled to give evidence before a court or in proceedings of a judicial nature. Upon further consideration, it is proposed to strike out section 175.2(2) as its effect would be to prevent the Métis settlements ombudsman and staff from presenting evidence to the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal, which would hinder the tribunal in fulfilling its jurisdiction under section 176 once it is proclaimed.

In conclusion, Bill 30 will provide both the settlements and the government with improved tools to enhance the governance of the settlements. Thank you.

9:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East on amendment A1.

Dr. Nicol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to basically stand and say that these are the kinds of amendments that show that the process of consultation did provide for further input by the Métis communities and the general council and that this is a process that's ongoing, you know, leading up to the eventual self-determination or self-government by the Métis councils in 2006 and that if they are going to make this work, the whole set of amendments have to be put in place. These two amendments to the act will allow for a more operational and a better understanding of what the intent was and fit it with what the council was asking the government to do.

I hope everybody supports these. Thank you.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

[The clauses of Bill 30 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that we rise and report Bill 30, Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004, as amended.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill and reports the following with some amendments: Bill 30. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Concur.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[Motion carried; at 9:54 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, April 28, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/04/28

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. On this day let each of us pray in our own way for all who have been killed or injured in the workplace. Life is precious. When it is lost, all of us are impacted.

In a moment of silent contemplation may we now allow our thoughts to remember those taken before their time, those who have suffered through tragedies and reach out to the families, friends, neighbours, and communities most immediately impacted. May God provide them eternal peace. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

Mr. Tannas: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased today to introduce Mr. Christopher Shyne. Mr. Shyne recently retired as member of the Oldham metropolitan borough council in England, where he was a member from 1992 to 1996 and again from 1999 to 2003. He was also elected as a member of the Greater Manchester county council in England from 1977 to 1981. In addition, from 1999 to 2003 he was the leader of the Tory group.

Mr. Shyne is accompanied here today by his son-in-law Mr. Andy Holt, creative director of Rose Country Communications Ltd. They are seated in your gallery this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you someone who has done a tremendous amount of work with the Alberta Association of Colleges and Technical Institutes. He's a former president of Keyano College in Fort McMurray, and he is someone who is now doing a tremendous job in bringing the colleges and technical schools together. I would ask Doug MacRae to stand and receive the very warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly three members of my department that investigate fish and wildlife offences. They are seated in the members' gallery: Dr. Rick Jobin, Tom Packer, and Richard Lyons, and also my acting executive assistant, Dave England. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise today and introduce 21 bright minds from my constituency. They are from Glenora elementary school, and they are here to tour the Legislature. Accompanying them are their

teachers and parent helpers, which include Mrs. Lynne Spencer, Mrs. Jan Zechel, Mrs. Dawn Haack, Mrs. Karen Cromwell, Mrs. Linda Richards, and Mrs. Heather Klimchuk, who is also the president of the parent council. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly 80 bright, intelligent, enthusiastic students from Northmount elementary school in the constituency of Edmonton-Glengarry. They're accompanied today by teachers Ms Gloria Arsenault, Mr. Terry Butlin, Ms Irene Siedlecki, Ms Charmaine Francis, Mr. Paul Anderson and teacher assistants Karen Lowes and Leslie Yankee. I would ask them now to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

Mr. Ouellette: Mr. Speaker, my group isn't here yet. They're not going to be here until about 2:30, so at that point I'd like to revert to Introduction of Guests.

Thanks.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is my great honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a group of 37 enthusiastic, energetic, and active people. Thirty-seven seniors from central Alberta are here to visit us today to observe their government in action. Their group leader is June Wade, and John Parsons is the tour group operator. I would ask the members of our group from central Alberta to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I have another introduction as well. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to our members Mrs. Elizabeth Lund, the mother of our very distinguished and dedicated Minister of Infrastructure. Mrs. Lund was born in Scotland and came to Canada at the age of three. She has been married to her husband for 65 years – they celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary last month – and they have been working on the family farm, which was established in 1906. Mrs. Lund, welcome, and I think that you should stand and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly once again.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, it just goes to prove how great the influence of central Alberta is on the rest of Alberta and Canada.

Among this group is another example of that, and I'd like to introduce especially Eugene and Loretta Moran, who are also there, and ask them to rise. They are the parents of Charlotte Moran, who is the executive assistant to the Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's certainly a great day to introduce great Albertans, and in that light I would like to introduce to the House and through you to the Assembly Mr. Kamil Umar. Kamil is working in my officer prior to entering law school in the fall. His father is a distinguished professor of political science, his mother has a master's degree in political science, and he's here in the laboratory. So I'd ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Special Olympics Edmonton is a local nonprofit organization whose mandate is to provide opportunities for people with mental disabilities to participate in sport and training programs. As a member of the Kiwanis club I've had occasion to work on Special Olympics, and there can be no more rewarding an afternoon than being at Special Olympics and helping children and adults with mental disabilities achieve in that arena and feel so good about what they're doing.

On March 13 this organization, with the support of the good folks at Capital City Savings, held a fundraising event called Bowl for Special Olympics Edmonton at the Bonnie Doon Bowling Lanes. The event was a resounding success, raising over \$52,000, and I'm proud to note that many of the Legislature staff and members of government caucus who were asked contributed to that fundraising total to the tune of \$750.

We all know that these events are only successful because of the hard work and dedication of the people who organize them and run them. So through you I'd like this Legislative Assembly to welcome and thank Mr. David Armstrong, director of member services and direct banking at Capital City Savings – David has been involved in the Edmonton Special Olympics for over 15 years and has served in virtually every capacity, including chair, vice-chair, treasurer, volunteer co-ordinator, and currently past-chair of the organization – Ms Jacqueline Broverman, community investment adviser for Capital City Savings, who's involved in the organization as well; Ms Louise Suru, who's the office manager for Special Olympics Edmonton; and last but not least, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Lenny Andrichuk. Lenny was this year's chairman for the Capital City Savings Bowl for Special Olympics in Edmonton. In addition to this role, he has also served in a volunteer capacity for many years as a track and field coach with Special Olympics.

I'd ask these four individuals to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome and sincere thank you of the Legislative Assembly for the work that they do to make our community a better place.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and, indeed, to all hon. members of this Assembly a very special constituent of mine who also happens to be the deputy leader of the Alberta Social Credit Party. His name is Alan Cruikshank, and Alan is sitting in the public gallery. I would ask Alan to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Ministerial Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

National Day of Mourning

Mr. Dunford: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. April 28 is our National Day of Mourning for workers who have been killed or injured on the job. One hundred and twenty-seven people died from job-related injuries or illness last year in this province. Someone was injured on the job every three and a half minutes. Even though our workplace safety performance is improving, this is still too many deaths and too many injuries and too many devastated families and friends. Everyone in this province should make it back home to his or her family in good health at the end of their workday.

Last year the Alberta government launched the WorkSafe Alberta initiative in conjunction with labour, employers, and safety associations to make improvement in workplace safety. We've made

substantial progress in this province in reducing the workplace injury rate. However, some industries still increased their injury rate, and the number of work-related fatalities actually increased. That is just unacceptable.

We have to keep the pressure on employers, workers, and the public to keep safety as a front-of-mind issue. We in this Assembly have the privilege and the responsibility of leading societal change. I'm calling upon my fellow members to help lead this change. I would like to ask the members of this House to show that they accept that responsibility, first of all, by remembering injured and fallen workers but also by attending ceremonies that are being held in their communities across this province not only today but through the weekend.

I want to say thank you for honouring and respecting our fallen workers by having observed the moment of silence.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on behalf of the Official Opposition.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One hundred and twenty-seven Albertans died as a result of their work last year. One hundred and twenty-seven families struggle to cope with the unexpected and unnecessary loss of a loved one as a direct result of that person's commitment to provide for their family by going to work. Those families continue to struggle. Sadly, the number of people who died as a result of their work was up last year compared to previous years; 98 people died in 2002 and 106 in 2001.

About half of last year's work-related deaths were attributed to occupational disease. We need to reduce this frightening statistic. We need to reduce health care costs, and we need to improve the health of all Alberta workers.

The Minister of Human Resources and Employment has made some great strides in the effort to reduce workplace incidents. It is clear that what the minister and his department need to do next is initiate a public information campaign for employers and employees to ensure that proper respiratory equipment is supplied and worn on every dangerous job site across this province.

In the last four years the number of workers dying from occupational diseases on an annual basis has unfortunately increased by 70 per cent. That is unacceptable. In order to turn the tide of workplace fatalities, it is necessary to reduce workers' exposure to toxic substances that can slowly and painfully kill that worker over a number of years. The high number of workers killed last year was also due to an increase in the number of people killed in motor vehicle accidents. Albertans need better traffic safety programs to prevent needless deaths that occur on the way to and from work.

On this National Day of Mourning we must reflect on all the lives wasted or ruined by workplace fatalities and accidents. We must remain vigilant and strive to improve conditions for all Alberta workers so that this time next year we can report that fewer workers have died and fewer families have been torn apart.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I would request unanimous consent of the House to respond to the minister's statement.

The Speaker: Hon. members, unanimous consent will be required under the rules that we do have, so should such consent be given? Anyone opposed?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to all members of the Assembly. April 28 is recognized across Canada as the day to mourn victims of workplace accidents. It should as well be a day for the renewal of the pledge to make the workplace safer.

The canary was once the safeguard that miners had against a dangerous gas buildup in the mine. If the canary died, it was a signal to evacuate the mine and quickly. Today's workers are exposed to dangerous substances and dangerous practices at the workplace with no canary to give them advance warning of danger. It is up to government, employers, and unions to work towards the goal of eliminating deaths, accidents, and illnesses caused by inadequate health and safety procedures.

My colleague from Edmonton-Strathcona stood before this Assembly on this very day two years ago with a message that employers cannot be permitted to get away with infractions of health and safety laws and regulations. He insisted that political will must exist to prosecute employers who break the law. I stand here today reiterating this same message. Last year Alberta recorded its highest number of work-related fatalities since 1986. The WCB reported 127 workplace deaths in 2003. This is 127 too many, Mr. Speaker.

Today is the day to again commit ourselves to organize, mobilize, and fight for safe jobs for everyone. Every worker must return home safely at the end of the workday, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Private/Public Partnerships

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government seems committed to privatization no matter what the consequences, but as Albertans are learning, that commitment to ideology can come at taxpayers' expense. Public/private partnerships, or P3s, are no exception. The Alberta Liberals have warned for a long time that building roads, schools, hospitals, and courthouses as P3s means higher financing costs. My questions are to the Premier. Can the Premier tell the Assembly how much the failure of this government's flagship P3, the Calgary courthouse, is going to cost taxpayers given that the government will have to pay for work already done by the private consortium?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the courthouse is not a flagship. It was a proposal that . . . [interjection] It is not a flagship. Had the Liberals been paying attention to what has been happening in this province over the past 20 years or so, they would have found that there are numerous public/private partnerships.

The Twin Atria building in Edmonton, built in the early 1980s, and the Provincial Building in Athabasca, built in the early 1990s, are both examples of successful P3s. Keyano College in Fort McMurray – we have representatives here today – has constructed a new building and leased 60 per cent of it to Suncor for training facilities. Olds College and a local company established a compost testing facility on the Olds College property. It also joined with John Deere, a private company, to construct a building extension. Building use is split between the company and the college.

1:50

Fairview College: a tree nursery was built on land provided by the

college. The college uses the facility as a lab for its students. The town of Fairview provided the water connections. SAIT: the TransAlta epiCentre was built through a partnership between SAIT, TransAlta, and other businesses. The Centre for Rail Training and Technology . . .

Dr. Taft: How do we know these things?

Mr. Klein: How do you know these things, he asks. Mr. Speaker, they only want to research those things that make for a 15-second sound bite. They don't want to research and tell about the successes because it's not in their interests. Their interests are only to be negative. That is the only justification for their existence.

Some Hon. Members: Answer the question.

Dr. Taft: Thank you.

Mr. Speaker . . .

The Speaker: Just a second, hon. member.

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Speaker: Yesterday I received a letter, that I tabled in the House, from the Opposition House Leader which said, you know, that decorum is very important. Today I'm going to repeat again Standing Order 13(4)(b). Now, what does it say? It says:

The Speaker shall preserve order and decorum and shall decide questions of order . . .

(4) When a member is speaking, no person shall . . .

(b) interrupt that member, except to raise a point of order.

Which means that we listen after we've been recognized.

Private/Public Partnerships

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Well, let me try again. What are the liabilities to the taxpayer of the failed Calgary courthouse P3 project?

Mr. Klein: First of all, Mr. Speaker, it has not failed. The project is going ahead, and it will consolidate all the Provincial Court activities – if the opposition is opposed to that, have them stand up and say so – and the activities of the Court of Queen's Bench. We don't know what's going to happen with the Court of Appeal at this particular time. They are safely functioning in the TransCanada PipeLines' building, which, by the way, is a bit of a P3 itself, albeit an expensive one.

But, Mr. Speaker, relative to the question of the ongoing costs which would have to be paid for one way or another, I'll have the Minister of Infrastructure respond.

Relative to the issue of private/public partnerships, I was about to say that the Centre for Rail Training and Technology was built by SAIT in a partnership between Canadian Pacific railways and SAIT to provide training for the railway industry. Now, here's one; this is the Brazeau bridge. It was opened to traffic in September 2002 under a partnership between Alberta Transportation and a local industry. I know of that quite well. Highway 63: another public facility. The government partnered with Suncor to build an access road from highway 63 into the Suncor site near Fort McMurray.

The Deerfoot interchange: now, this is a good one. A \$22 million interchange at Airport Trail and Deerfoot Trail and a connecting

roadway from Deerfoot Trail to the Barlow Trail and the Calgary International Airport were constructed with funds from the Alberta government, the city of Calgary, and the Calgary Airport Authority. An example of a P3.

Long-term care. Mr. Speaker . . .

The Speaker: That's fine, hon. Premier. We've now spent six minutes on these two questions.

The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: Why did this government ignore the evidence from B.C. and Nova Scotia where one of the same private developers involved in the Calgary courthouse project racked up major cost overruns at taxpayer expense?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there are no cost overruns. The project's been scaled back with the concurrence of the developer over the long term, and I will have the hon. Minister of Infrastructure respond relative to the long-term costs associated with this project.

I would like to cite other examples of P3s that have been in this province for many, many years. Of course, the Liberals have deliberately – and I say deliberately – ignored these examples of P3s. I'm alluding to long-term care centres. These have been P3 projects since time immemorial, literally hundreds of millions of dollars. Long-term care centres have been built by the private sector, in some cases costing the government half, less than half, of what they would have cost had we built them ourselves.

The Liberals conveniently ignore these wonderful examples of P3s. Why do they ignore them, Mr. Speaker? I would suggest that they ignore them because they are positive and the Liberals by nature are negative.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Premier's Trip to Fox Harb'r Resort

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday in question period the Premier said about government aircraft: "We want to keep them in the air." The Premier has certainly done a good job of that given that last year alone cabinet flew over 1,100 times on these aircraft. Ontario's cabinet, in comparison, took 282 flights. My questions are to the Premier. Was it this mentality of keeping the planes in the air that led the Premier to take one of the government's planes to the private landing strip at the exclusive Fox Harb'r golf resort in Nova Scotia before the 2002 Premiers' Conference in Halifax?

Mr. Klein: No, Mr. Speaker. There was a meeting there, a gathering, albeit there was a little golf involved. I don't apologize at all. I think there were 40 business leaders from across North America there, and there was some good networking and good discussions.

These people will never be in government, so they don't understand the need to associate with the top decision-makers in North America. The plane was going to Nova Scotia anyway. Big deal. So it stopped twenty minutes prior to the final destination to let me off. Big deal. It's only a big deal to them. Martha and Henry and Mr. and Mrs. Grundy don't give a tinker's darn about this at all. Only the Liberals do.

Only the Liberals do because they don't understand; they won't understand. They won't, nor will they talk about their Liberal cousins in Ottawa, who flip around the country and around the world in their Challenger jets and their A320s. They don't talk about the

Liberals in Quebec, who flip around their province in Challenger jets. They only want to talk about our little turboprop King Air 350, two 200s, and the Dash 8, which is used to haul, ostensibly, firefighters and people who are going down to Calgary to do the land sales, which generate a lot of dollars for the province, Mr. Speaker. But they don't want to talk about those things.

You know, Mr. Speaker, they even went so far as to send the media – or maybe the media went over themselves – to the air hangar to take pictures of the airplane. If they want a picture of the airplane, you know, I'll be glad, hanging on with my arms wide open, to say: take a picture.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the Premier tell us how much taxpayers' money beyond government airplane costs was spent at the Fox Harb'r Resort?

Mr. Klein: I have no idea. I don't think much was spent, Mr. Speaker. There was one night's accommodation. I don't know, but I'm sure that the information is available. But to what advantage? What are the Liberals driving at? That's what I want to know. They have dome disease. They seem to think that this is important. There is no waste of money whatsoever.

2:00

Well, this is interesting. The Liberal government of Ontario has 22 aircraft in their fleet: two King Air 350s used exclusively for executive transport, six Twin Otters used occasionally for executive transport but also for forestry, six turboprop Beavers, two Maule Rockets – I don't know what they are – six helicopters. Saskatchewan, still running a deficit, has six aircraft in their fleet: three King Air 200s, one King Air 350, two Cheyennes. Manitoba has 10.

The Speaker: Hon. Premier, thank you very much. I'm sure we'll get to it on the next one.

The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given the lack of a lobbyist registry in Alberta, can the Premier tell us who was at the meeting at Fox Harb'r and whether he was lobbied by them?

Thank you.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I can't name all 40 people at Fox Harb'r, but the meeting, I can tell you, was hosted by Ron Joyce, who is a well-known Canadian, a member of the Order of Canada, former CEO of Tim Hortons doughnuts, former co-owner of the Calgary Flames. He really has a lot of time and a lot of respect for Alberta because of what we have done in this province. As a matter of fact, he moved from Ontario to Alberta at one time because of the tremendous economic climate we have created in this province. But the Liberals want to ignore that because it's positive.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, in question period the Premier has told the House that others pick up the tab for him when he travels, and that's an interesting policy. To the Premier: can the Premier confirm that his assistant at the time, one Gordon Olsen, used a government credit card to charge about \$2,500 in expenses at Fox Harb'r?

Mr. Klein: I have no idea. Mr. Speaker, if he did, so be it. I don't know what those expenses would be other than for the accommodation. That seems to be awfully expensive for, you know, one or two nights' accommodation. I forget how long it was we were there. We were there at the invitation of Mr. Joyce to join with other business leaders. I understand that other political leaders were invited as well. I can't remember precisely who was there. I know that Mike Harris was there. He was no longer the Premier of Ontario but still a very good friend of mine, although he's not a good friend of these Liberals or the Liberals in Ontario.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that this is all part of doing business. It's all part of doing business, and these people will never ever know. They will never ever know because they are so intent on picking up on the picayune, minor, minor issues and so intent on focusing on the dome. They are fully consumed with dome disease, and they have dome syndrome, to say the least. It's time to get out of here.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that an invitation was extended to the Premier for this exclusive meeting, can he indicate to us what the purpose of the meeting would have been?

Mr. Klein: The purpose of the meeting, as I explained first, was to network, to tell those who don't know about Alberta about the Alberta advantage. You know, I remember that one other person who was there was also the person who bought Tim Hortons. The president and chief executive officer of Wendy's was there. You know what, Mr. Speaker? I remember him arriving in a great big airplane, that stayed there, although that wasn't at taxpayers' expense. But our plane landed, dropped me off. I stayed there. I networked with these business leaders and political leaders.

An Hon. Member: You golfed.

Mr. Klein: And I golfed too. Yes. So what? Big deal. The only people making a big deal out of this are the Liberals. Big deal. You know why they're making a big deal of it? Because they didn't get invited, and they never will get invited.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question: is it government policy that the cost of the aircraft when booked and used by Executive Council members is paid by the Executive Council budget or paid by Infrastructure? Is it billed to Infrastructure?

Mr. Klein: I don't know. That's an interesting question, and it relates to policy or departmental procedure. I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the cost is to Executive Council, so it flows back that way with the exception of some specific trips where the aircraft goes to a destination to pick up a member of Executive Council and then goes to another location. Those are charged back to the department that the minister is responsible for.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Utility Charges

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta consum-

ers are really having a tough time understanding the reasons for yet more additional charges on their utility bills as a result of the ATCO sale to Direct Energy. They do, however, understand the fact that every single time the government makes any move to further deregulate, the consumer pays more. What these extra charges really mean is that thanks to the government's botched deregulation system, Direct Energy will collect enough money in new charges to fully pay its purchase price for ATCO within 26 months. My question is to the Premier. Why are Albertans being charged an equivalent of the purchase price of ATCO to finance a foreign company's takeover of a Canadian utility?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out previously in this House, this was a private deal between two private-enterprise companies.

Relative to the details insofar as the government was concerned, this was reviewed by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, and I'll have the hon. minister respond if he has anything further to add.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member's preamble is, again, so error riddled that it's difficult to make sense out of the subsequent question. Let me pick up from the fact that, yes, the EUB approved a 10-cent a day charge, which is, oh, I don't know, maybe 2 and a half to 3 per cent of the total bill. Secondly, they cannot use those funds for covering their purchase price. The supposition that they'll pay back from collecting these funds is wrong, erroneous, and false.

Mr. Speaker, the other thing we do know – and he can bring any graph, any survey by any socialist organization that he wants to bring to the table – the bottom line is that Albertans have the lowest gas prices in Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Will the Premier explain why, if in fact these extra charges are supposed to make up for the ending of the cross-subsidization that existed between the distribution and retail sections once they've been unbundled, ATCO's distribution charge has not been reduced by the same amount that has been increased for Direct Energy?

Mr. Klein: It's a very involved and complex question. I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that the ATCO price was reduced. Their distribution costs did shrink. They did not shrink to the same amount as what was charged. The difference is about 2 per cent on the bill. The advantages that come from this: not only will Albertans continue to have the lowest priced natural gas rates in Canada, but they'll also start to have many different options on how they're able to purchase these products for their home.

Then what we've found, Mr. Speaker, is that this has led to increased conservation. I know that they pay lip service to conservation, but this government actually pays real attention to conservation. Since the period of 2001 natural gas consumption in the average home has been reduced – and I think this is a tribute to Albertans – by 10 per cent.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. So is the minister telling the House that consumers will have to pay \$86.40 more per year for their gas and electricity in order to have Direct Energy make

more money so that they can conserve their gas and electricity? Is that the purpose of this?

Mr. Smith: No.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Forest Fire Prevention

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently the B.C. government released a provincial review on the 2003 wildfire season. The report outlines steps that need to be taken in the future to reduce wildfires on homes and people's properties. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. While the report focused on what needs to be done in B.C., I understand that Alberta faces many of the same challenges. One of them is management of dangerous forest fuels. What is the minister doing to ensure that Alberta's forest communities are protected from this type of threat?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is a very good question. In Alberta, of course, as you're aware, we take a proactive approach, basically, to protect forest communities and also, of course, Albertans. We feel that early detection is the best way to ensure that we get there on time, and that's done through lookout towers, sometimes air patrol, and other communication systems we use. Early response is another key. For an example, if a fire starts in the evening or late evening, that the bombers can't get at at night, we will have them in the air at about 4:30 in the morning, as long as it's daylight, to hit the fires. So that is the key.

The best way to protect from fires is to ensure that they don't have a place to start. What we do in that area is prescribed burns. We have the FireSmart program, which does work around communities in Alberta to protect homes. We have an education program.

Dr. Taylor: Jasper the Bear?

Mr. Cardinal: Yes. Jasper the Bear.

Forty per cent of the fires are caused by humans. Therefore, we need a good education program, Mr. Speaker. We have fire bans, forest fire closures, and of course we also have over 500 sprinkler systems that, for an example, we used at the Lost Creek fire. Over 45 homes were saved, actually, from the fire when the fire went through the community, and the homes still stood after that. So prevention is the key.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The report also indicates that better recommendations should be taking place with respect to communication, such as with the fire at Lost Creek. What procedures have the government and the department developed to communicate timely and accurate information to Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The staff in the wildfire information branch are to be commended. They do a great job communicating with the media. Of course, the Lost Creek fire, which happened last summer, is again a good example. We responded to over 2,000 visitor inquiries in a day, conducted two media briefings each day...

Dr. Taylor: How many?

Mr. Cardinal: Two.

... maintained 49 community information boards, and of course worked very closely with the local MLA also.

Mr. Masyk: My final question, Mr. Speaker: how prepared is your department for the upcoming wildfire season?

Mr. Cardinal: Well, generally, Mr. Speaker, because this year is not so dry, we've commenced our forest fire season in April of this year. Last year, of course, we started March 1 because it was much drier. So we are well prepared.

Lobbying Government

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, the B.C. lobbyist registry tells us that lobbying or, as the Premier prefers, consulting firms Global Public Affairs, Hill & Knowlton Canada, GPC International, and National Public Relations are also operating in Calgary. The Alberta government encourages organizations and companies to pay for access or events and, indeed, refuses meetings if opposition MLAs are involved. My questions are to the Premier. How has the government allowed this situation to deteriorate to the point where public institutions like NorQuest, who are dependent on government funding, are forced to wine and dine Tory MLAs in order to get a hearing?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, such balderdash and such nonsense. I'm sure that the Minister of Learning has met with officials from NorQuest.

Mr. Hancock: I've met with them.

Mr. Klein: Oh, the hon. Attorney General, Government House Leader. The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness indicates that he has met with NorQuest. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure has indicated. If they properly set up an appointment, just like anyone else they can meet with me. I get lots of requests for meetings. We try to accommodate everyone as best as we possibly can.

If I can revert just for a second to a question asked by the Leader of the Official Opposition, he asked the question: who picked up the \$2,500 tab? I understand that Gordon Olsen used his government credit card but immediately – immediately – reimbursed the government, Mr. Speaker. So to answer the question, it was paid for by the party. By the party. Now, I know that the Liberals can't afford that kind of a bill, never will be able to, but it was paid for by the party and not the taxpayers.

So, Mr. Speaker, this hon. member ought to stand up and apologize for not doing thorough research and trying to mislead the Legislative Assembly and the people of Alberta that this was a taxpayer expense.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. [interjections] Again to the Premier: has the government been lobbied by representatives...

The Speaker: Hon. member, I quoted Standing Order 13(4) with respect to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. I now quote it for all the other members who are now interjecting when the hon. member has the floor.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, you have the floor.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. To the Premier: has the government been lobbied by representatives from Global Public Affairs, Hill & Knowlton Canada, GPC International, or National Public Relations?

Mr. Klein: I have no idea, Mr. Speaker, if we have been lobbied by those organizations or any other organizations. The way it works with the opposition or any organization or any citizen sitting up there: if they want to meet me, if it's a constituency matter, I'm usually available in Calgary on Fridays to deal with matters in my own constituency. If it's a general government matter, I will try to have the individual meet with his or her MLA, opposition or government, or the appropriate minister, and if it's something that can't be resolved, I'll meet with the person. It doesn't matter who lobbies.

I have told people who hire these firms: for God's sake, all you need to do is phone my appointment secretary and set up a meeting. I've said: you don't have to pay to have someone lobby to get a meeting because I'll meet with anyone at any time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Then to the Premier: why doesn't the Premier take the plunge and create a lobbyist registry just like his federal cousin did in the late 1980s?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, if we want a reason, it's that this government is open and transparent, and if you're open and transparent, you don't need to put in a lot of rules, a lot of rules relative to lobbyists' registries. If this hon. member wants to meet with me, send a note to Debby, and I'll meet with her on that issue or any other issue. As a matter of fact, she happens to be my MLA. Maybe I want a meeting with her.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

2:20

Crop Insurance

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the deadline to sign up for crop insurance approaches, some of my constituents have been unhappy with their discussions with the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation about increasing the number of insured acres and subsequently getting reductions in the coverage due to some major adjustments. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What changes have been made to crop insurance programs in regard to increasing insured acres?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Dunvegan is not the only one who is receiving calls on this matter, so in the interest of all members who have producers who are in the process of signing up for crop insurance with the approaching deadline, I would give this general information.

Prior to 2004 under indexing a producer would achieve an index by production. Unfortunately, what has happened in a small number of cases but has happened is that producers will seed a small acreage, perhaps 50 acres of a crop, do that for two years, build up a high index, and then switch to a very high acreage in a subsequent year. It is pretty clearly shown that you cannot maintain that kind of an index when you go from 50 acres to a thousand acres. Mr. Speaker, we've had some problems in that area. We've had to pay some fairly high claims, and the corporation had to look at how to manage this.

Now, I will say to hon. members that if you have this issue and it is a matter of changing from 600 acres of barley to 1,200 acres of

barley this year because of rotation or because of production price changes, I encourage them to deal with those on an individual basis. But, Mr. Speaker, you could in essence have somebody paid out at over a hundred per cent coverage if we did not deal with this issue on moving from a very small acreage to a very large one.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My only supplemental then is: how can our producers be assured that their coverage will be maintained, and basically, you know, how can they adapt to those changes?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it is not an issue under what you would call normal or ordinary conditions, and most producers who insure crops do maintain an index by growing a crop consistently and a similar acreage.

As I said in my previous answer, Mr. Speaker, we want to be fair to producers. We want to reflect that there are times when you will double your acreage in a particular crop, and on an individual basis we will look at that. We will look at the producer's production history, and we will probably adjust that rule, if you wish, or guideline in those instances. But where a producer has put in a small acreage of particularly a specialty crop, built in a high index, and moved from, as I said, 50 to a thousand or 5,000 acres, we will in fact will reduce their coverage on the first percentage of it, and subsequent percentages will follow.

Labour Relations Code

Mr. MacDonald: Yesterday the Premier announced changes to the Labour Relations Code by prohibiting salting and MERFing. MERF funds are workers' pooled savings accounts developed to stabilize wages in a very competitive construction sector. Salting is a labour organizing tactic where union members, after being hired by a non-union contractor, begin a certification drive. My first question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Given that no evidence exists that any union certifications in this province are a result of salting, why are we prohibiting this practice in the Labour Relations Code now?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, the issues surrounding salting and MERFing have been coming into this building now for some period of time. Through a study a couple of years ago we determined that there was no need to make any major changes to the Labour Relations Code but that around issues involving allegations of salting and/or MERFing further discussion would be required. A committee was put together in order to examine those situations. That committee has now provided me with their report. I'm currently reviewing the report, and we're having discussions on the internal process of government as to what to do with the report and with the recommendations, and at an appropriate time we'll make a public announcement.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: what evidence does this government have that indicates that market enhancement recovery fund, or MERF, targeted funds are an unfair trade practice?

Mr. Dunford: There's been quite a bit of discussion about MERF funding and, first of all, Mr. Speaker, as to whether a competition

issue, whether a labour relations issue. Again, I have a report that a committee has provided to me providing some direction. We've had discussions with colleagues inside the government caucus, and we'll continue to discuss until we're ready to publicly release the government response to the report. Until that time, he can continue to speculate however he wants.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: what other changes are now being planned for Alberta's Labour Relations Code?

Mr. Dunford: I sometimes wonder why we bother to answer questions when they don't listen. Perhaps it's a good thing that there's *Hansard*. We can, you know, give it to them again, I guess.

As I explained earlier, there was a situation of examining whether there were changes that should be made to the Labour Relations Code. I put a committee together to see whether or not we should do that. They came back and basically recommended that, no, in most if not all cases the Labour Relations Code in Alberta works very well as, I guess, the rules of how employers and employees will conduct themselves as it relates to labour relations.

We enjoy the best completion rate of all of our collective agreements and negotiations that take place. We have the highest productivity in the nation, indicating again that employers and employees are able to work together at work sites. We do have initiatives around workplace health and safety, which is always kind of an issue. Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, we have the lowest time lost due to strikes in the country.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Government Fees and Charges

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Several years ago I worked with a number of other Albertans in recommending to the government that the fees and charges that are charged by the government for services should be aligned with the cost of delivering that service. My first question is to the Minister of Government Services. Is that principle still operative, and is there any kind of current oversight to see whether that principle is in effect?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, the services that are provided by government to the people of Alberta are through legislation, but more importantly there was a Supreme Court decision called the Eurig decision that actually set out the fact that you absolutely cannot charge a fee that is greater than the services rendered.

In Alberta Government Services we set fees based on the legislation and that decision that governs our fees for all our services. If you take drivers' licences, those rates are set, and they're designed to keep the revenues in line with government spending on motor vehicle initiatives. That would include things like driver education, vehicle safety programs, driver monitoring and enforcement, as well as road safety and maintenance. Those set fees help us to recover those costs of operating not only those services but also our registry and the computer systems that help provide that service to Albertans. So the answer to that question is yes.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you. I have a supplemental to the same minister, and that is: how do we as a provincial government in determining or approving our fees and charges stack up with or

compare to those fees and charges charged for similar services in other jurisdictions?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is a really good question, and it's a question that I get a lot in terms of Albertans wanting to know basically what kind of fee they're charged in terms of other jurisdictions across Canada. Let's just take our new drivers' licences for example. In Alberta the government fee for that is \$55 for a 5-year licence, which is comparable to the rest of Canada. Fees range from \$50 in Ontario and the Yukon to as high as \$125 in Saskatchewan. What you find, say, with drivers' licences: the average range is about \$71 for a driver's licence across Canada. So you compare that to the Alberta fee of \$55, and we're well within the range and we're quite a bit lower than the average.

Now, there are other services that we provide, and we've done some comparisons, and pretty well with all the other services that we provide through Government Services to the people of Alberta, we are in the middle range, around sixth out of the 12 jurisdictions across Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Wildlife Protection

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Sustainable Resource Development has been asked twice this session about government wildlife protection policies. The minister responded that "I know for a fact that we have a good balance at this time." In a report released this week, however, Environmental Defence Canada revealed that Alberta received a failing grade in wildlife protection. My questions are to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. How are you protecting a species at risk such as the grizzly bear when you allow them to be hunted?

Dr. Taylor: Liberals are a species at risk.

Mr. Cardinal: Yes. The Liberals are a species at risk.

Mr. Speaker, the Liberals, of course, would close everything down. That's how they operate. In the government here we don't do that. We take the balanced approach. We have a strong economy, and we will continue having a strong economy. At the same time, we will continue protecting the animals and the resources that are out there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again, to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: why does this government continue to show – and I quote the report – "remarkable willingness to ignore the advice of its own Endangered Species Conservation Committees on whether to protect species"?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, of course, we work very closely with the committee that's in place. In fact, the Member for West Yellowhead chairs one of the committees, and they do make recommendations on an ongoing basis. We've been proactive for over 25 years already in relation to animal protection here in Alberta, and we'll continue doing that.

Specifically on grizzly bear, that the member mentioned, at one time we allowed about 130 hunting licences in one year. We've reduced that to 73 now.

Dr. Taylor: How many?

Mr. Cardinal: Down to 73, a 44 per cent reduction.

In fact, we also removed hunting from the more sensitive areas of southwestern Alberta to northern Alberta, Mr. Speaker. The average taken when we were allowing 130 licences was about 15 animals. We assume that if things go the same way, the maximum animals that will be taken will be 10.

Dr. Taylor: How many?

Mr. Cardinal: Will be 10.

And this member should know that their cousins in B.C. in fact allow the hunting of 200 animals, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member. But first of all, Sergeant-at-Arms, would you kindly deliver to the Minister of Environment an earphone? It seems that the Minister of Environment is having a difficult time hearing.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: well, given that the government allows hunting of species at risk, ignoring the advice of its own committees, can the minister tell us if there is any intention to implement stand-alone legislation and adequate funding to protect our species at risk here in Alberta?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, the most threatening piece of legislation that is in Alberta that we have to deal with right now is the federal endangered species legislation. The legislation is in place; the regulations have not been developed yet. If your opposition is going to play an important role in the economy of Alberta, you'll do the wise thing by advising your cousins in Ottawa that as they unfold the development of new regulations, we participate so that we benefit Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Wainwright.

Calgary Courthouse

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Tory government, with its ideological blinkers firmly in place, wasted two years and who knows how much in taxpayers' dollars pursuing a P3 scheme for the new Calgary court centre. It took a cost overrun of 67 per cent to finally bring the government to its senses. Happily, the government is slowly coming around to the New Democrat opposition's view that it's more economical to use conventional public financing to build capital projects like the court centre. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure. Now that huge cost overruns have forced the government back to square one, will the government abandon this obviously flawed P3 approach and instead build a publicly owned and publicly financed Calgary court centre? If not, why not?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, the preamble is just unbelievable. If people were to believe it, they would be – I know that we're not supposed to use words like "misled," but I don't know any other way to describe it. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that P3s work very well, and the Premier clearly showed today in many examples how well they work.

The member is so wrong as far as saying that there were huge overruns. That is simply not true. But as we worked through the

system and saw what the final cost was going to be – and where the cost was going had nothing to do with the way it was financed – and because of all of the components of the project, we have scaled it back. If he stays tuned, he will find out how it's going to be financed.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister. Given the Premier's refusal to answer this yesterday, I ask again: will the government table in this Assembly project cost estimates for the winning bid from the BPC consortium, project estimates for the two rejected bids, and the results of the so-called dummy bid, and, finally, the process used to evaluate all of these bids? If not, why not?

The Speaker: That's five questions. Take your choice.

Dr. Pannu: One question, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, we are currently in negotiations. Now, I hope that covers all five with one answer.

Dr. Pannu: Let me try again, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Calgary courthouse has been significantly reduced in size in order to avoid the 67 per cent cost overrun, why is the government sticking with a P3 consortium that has a track record of not staying within budget?

Mr. Lund: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that that is extremely offensive language that the gentleman is using. The fact is that the people that worked on that project are very outstanding people, and for him to stand there and make those kinds of comments when he doesn't know the facts – I think that he should stand up and apologize to those people.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that in the whole process we had two outside groups. We have the committee that looks at any alternate financing, and we also had a committee set up that was to look at fairness and openness and accountability. There are very outstanding people on that committee, and they came back and said that it was a fair and open process and everything was above-board.

So for that individual to make those kinds of comments is really offensive, Mr. Speaker.

2:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, 30 seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven, but in the interim might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head:

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Ouellette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through you 65 of the brightest minds from my constituency, and they come from a brand new school in my constituency, the Innisfail middle school. When they were getting their picture taken today, they said that their school was just the greatest. Along with them are their teachers Mr. Grant Klymyk and Mrs. Linda Pederson, along with parents and helpers Mr. Gary Clutton, Mrs. Gloria Beardsworth, Mrs. Cheryl Bilton,

Mrs. Lori Maldaner, Mrs. Roxane Ure, Mrs. Lisa Boyd, Mrs. Tina Wagers, Mrs. Brenda Bennett, Mr. Chris Harper, and Mrs. Wanda Lohman. They're in both galleries, and I'd like them all to rise and have the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Rathgeber: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Miss Jessica Moe. Jessica is a grade 12 student at Ross Sheppard high school in the Edmonton-Calder constituency. Jessica is one of three Alberta recipients of the Canadian merit scholarship foundation prestigious award that provides graduating high school students with up to \$60,000 to pursue postsecondary education. I understand that our colleague the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake will be recognizing these scholarship winners in a few moments. I understand that she's in the members' gallery, and I'd like Jessica to rise and receive the traditional warm reception of this Assembly.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Active Youth

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today during Education Week I rise to recognize the importance of our young Albertans and the importance of exercise and active living.

A healthy mind needs a healthy body to be successful. A well-rounded education both in and out of school involves activity and play. Live Outside the Box is an initiative of our Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation that encourages youth to spend less time in front of the TV and computer and more time being physically active. Programs such as Active8, Schools Come Alive, and Ever Active Schools help students, parents, and teachers to develop active living attitudes in Alberta schools.

Adding more physical activity to your day equals better health, strength, and well-being. I invite everyone to join me and the Minister of Community Development, responsible for active living in Alberta, and the Minister of Learning to encourage more physical activity and play in our schools.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Canadian Merit Foundation Scholarships

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today during Education Week to recognize three outstanding Alberta learners. Allison Keating, Kate Welwood, and Jessica Moe are each recipients of the Canadian merit foundation scholarships. This prestigious scholarship provides graduating high school students with up to \$60,000 to pursue postsecondary education.

Currently Allison is a student at Central Memorial high school in Calgary, Kate is from Cold Lake and attends Grand Centre high school, and Jessica studies at Ross Sheppard high school in Edmonton.

This year 30 national scholars from across Canada were selected from an initial pool of 4,000. These scholars must demonstrate service to the community, character, leadership potential, entrepreneurial energy, and, of course, academic excellence.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that all members of the House will join me

in celebrating our education system and in congratulating Allison, Kate, and Jessica.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Southeast Calgary Hospital

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to recognize the need, the absolute need for a hospital in southeast Calgary. Despite the Premier admitting over five years ago that the next hospital should be built in southeast Calgary, there is still no hospital, and the people of Calgary are still waiting. Despite five years of feet dragging between the Calgary health region and the Alberta government, there is still no hospital, and the people of Calgary are still waiting. Despite the fact that the Alberta government has taken on average over \$2 billion extra in taxpayers' money each year over the past five years, there is still no hospital, and the people of Calgary are still waiting. How much longer must Calgarians wait?

There is no excuse – no excuse – in a rich province like Alberta for a five-year delay in constructing this hospital. An Alberta Liberal government would begin construction on this badly needed hospital immediately. An Alberta Liberal government would provide the funds publicly. It's time this government made good on its commitment to the people of Calgary. It's too late to turn back the clock and reverse five years of stalling, but it's not too late to provide the public funds to build this hospital.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Grant MacEwan Literary Awards

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I truly rise to recognize the winners of the Grant MacEwan author's award and the Grant MacEwan young writer's scholarships, which were awarded on April 17 at the Alberta book awards gala. In recognition of the late Dr. Grant MacEwan these awards commemorate his achievements in literacy excellence and support Alberta's established and emerging writers to further develop their craft.

The 2004 Grant MacEwan author's award of \$25,000 was given to Fred Stenson of Calgary for *Lightning*. The 2004 Grant MacEwan young writer's scholarships of \$2,500 each were presented to Rachelle Delaney of Edmonton for her essay *Student of the Boreal*, to Meghan Masterson of Bragg Creek for her story *Wolfsong Winter*, to Carley Okamura of Edmonton for her story *Matsuhito and His Journey*, and to Wela Quan of Edmonton for her essay *The Economics of Immigration*. Please join me in congratulating these talented Alberta writers.

Dean Lien, Farmers' Advocate

Mr. McFarland: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the retirement of Mr. Dean Lien, the province's Farmers' Advocate. Since 1998 Mr. Lien has been working on behalf of Alberta's farmers, helping them with dispute resolution and sharing with them information about the complex business of farming.

The services of his office are well used. More than 10,000 calls are taken every year. The Farmers' Advocate is an ally for both individual producers and the industry as a whole. Comfortable in both the farmyard and the boardroom, Mr. Lien, a former ag producer and county reeve, has exemplified the skills needed by a first-class Farmers' Advocate: a good ear and a fair mind. Mr. Lien has spent his six years as the Farmers' Advocate working with

farmers on a wide range of issues, from mineral leasing to trespassing.

Mr. Speaker, the agricultural industry has been fortunate to have Dean Lien on its side. We wish him a wonderful, well-deserved retirement.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Perky McCullough

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with pride and pleasure that I rise today to recognize an individual from the Grande Prairie-Smoky riding, one Perky McCullough, who on the 28th of May will be inducted into the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame.

Perky was born in Peace River, moved to Edmonton in 1956, and was a member of the Edmonton city police force, serving as a policewoman. She served with Grande Prairie parks and recreation; was a zone representative for Alberta Amateur Fastball; was president of the Alberta Ladies Curling Association; was northern zone representative for the Alberta Golf Association and chaired the Alberta junior golf championship in 1985; was appointed as a director of Alberta Games Council in '84; served on the Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation, completing a term in '96; served on the Alberta mission staff for the '87 Canada Winter Games; chaired the 1986 Alberta Seniors Games in Grande Prairie; was chairman of the Grande Prairie Amateur Games Society and instituted the first zone 8 Summer Games; was volunteer of the year in '79 and '83; served on the Alberta mission staff for the 1990 Arctic Winter Games; was director of special projects, 1995 Canada Winter Games.

Mr. Speaker, I offer congratulations on the recognition by her peers and thank Perky McCullough from the people of Grande Prairie-Smoky and all of Alberta.

2:50

Worker Safety

Mr. MacDonald: On this National Day of Mourning I would like to rise in recognition of all the employers, workers, unions, government agencies, and other organizations who went out of their way to ensure worker safety. Unfortunately, there isn't a way to measure how many people returned home safely to their families night after night because someone went the extra mile to reduce or eliminate potential hazards in the workplace. As we remember the 127 Albertans who lost their lives due to their work last year, we should all count our blessings, because if not for the actions and ideas of safety-conscious people, it could just as easily have been one of us.

So today I would like to say thank you to the employers who spent the money on safety equipment, to the people who develop and enforce safety regulations, to the employees who abided by the rules of the road and encouraged their peers to do the same, in addition to all the other people who contributed in ways we'll never know. Please continue to strive for zero workplace fatalities. If you save just one life, it is worth all the extra effort.

Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to present a petition signed by 32 people from the Camrose Police Service and another one signed by 226 members from the Alberta Fire Fighters Association petitioning this Assembly to encourage the passage of Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act.

Thank you.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Dr. Taylor: Sorry, Mr. Speaker; I had a little trouble hearing you.

I'm pleased to rise this afternoon to table the appropriate number of copies of two reports. One is entitled Water and Oil: An Overview of the Use of Water for Enhanced Oil Recovery in Alberta. The other is entitled Advisory Committee on Water Use Practice and Policy. These are both good reports, and I recommend them. They are available through MLAs' offices or through our Department of Environment office. I recommend them to Albertans.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today. The first is a letter to the leader of the third party in response to a question he raised regarding the Seniors supplementary estimates.

The second is a letter to the chair of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts in response to questions raised during the March 10 meeting of the committee.

The third is to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre in response to Written Question 50.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table five copies of the Alberta Real Estate Foundation's 2003 highlights. The Alberta Real Estate Foundation initiates and supports all initiatives that enhance the real estate industry, that ultimately benefit the people of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is the Alberta Law Enforcement Review Board's 2002 annual report, being tabled in accordance with section 14 of the Alberta Police Act. This board is the appeal body for complaints concerning police members.

The second document I am tabling is the Victims Programs Status Report for 2002-2003. The annual report shows that nearly \$2 million in grants were provided to 81 victim assistance programs. These programs reported handling more than 30,000 new cases, with over half of those involving assistance to victims of violent crimes.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to table two separate reports. The first report is the results of a survey conducted by Ipsos-Reid for the Royal Bank of Canada and contains many interesting findings regarding the benefits and employee experiences of teleworkers. Now, in order to save on paper, I'm just tabling the highlights of the report, which includes the finding that the overwhelming majority of teleworkers report greatly increased job satisfaction. Interestingly enough, 18 per cent report that they can get by with only one vehicle.

The second report I am tabling is a report called Lemons and Peaches: Comparing Auto Insurance Across Canada. It's from the Fraser Institute, and it makes a very compelling case that if you want to save lives and reduce accidents and road carnage, you absolutely

should not go with government insurance monopolies at all. It also praises Alberta's and Ontario's insurance policies as amongst the best in the nation from a consumer's viewpoint.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first is an article from the April 2004 edition of *Business in Calgary*, and it's titled Charged Up: Empty Government Promises, Cranky Business Owners and the Real Cost of Electricity Deregulation. It's written by D. Grant Black.

The second tabling I have this afternoon is correspondence I have received dated April 16, 2004, and it's in regard to a request for a review of a FOIP application that I made in regard to the KPMG study on the real cost of auto insurance in Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a news release where stakeholders participating in the RTO West Regional Representatives Group, RRG, endorse changing the name of RTO West to Grid West.

Thank you.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Health and Wellness

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Orders the first hour will be dedicated between the minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Joining us in the gallery this afternoon are the following individuals who I think will be familiar to most of the members on the floor of the Legislature: the Deputy Minister of the Department of Health and Wellness, Dr. Roger Palmer; Alexandra Hildebrandt; Peter Hegholz; Charlene Wong; and Elsa Roehr. I'd ask that they stand and please be acknowledged by members of the Assembly.

Mr. Chairman, it's my pleasure to present the Alberta Health and Wellness estimates for 2004-2005. Even outside of the regular budget process this is an especially timely discussion. So much of the talk on health reform centres on affordability and with good reason. A service that we cannot pay for becomes a service that we cannot sustain.

My budget for 2004-2005 shows an increase of 8.4 per cent over the 2003-2004 forecast, and that is consistent with our average annual increase over the last 10 years based on data from the Canadian institute for health economics. Increases like that have been necessary, but they will get harder to manage, and that is because the growth in health funding has outstripped the 4 per cent annual increase in provincial revenues.

The impact is predictable. Ten years ago health care took one-quarter of the provincial budget. Today it is over one-third, and by 2020, with its current trends, it will take over half, 53 per cent, of every dollar that we spend in Alberta. That is just to maintain the system that we have now. Some hon. members might say that that's a good thing.

Past budgets and business plans have accomplished much. The fact is that Alberta has a very good health system. We lead the country in cardiac care, organ and tissue transplantation, and the use of information technology in health care. We made Canadian history with the first ever trilateral agreement with physicians. In no other province are health regions partners in the agreement between a province's physicians and its government.

Two of our nine health regions are among the top 10 in all of Canada. We have a provincial diabetes strategy. We have a response plan in place in the event of a life-threatening pandemic. Our immunization program expands every year, most recently to protect more Albertans from hepatitis A and whooping cough. Our telehealth system leads the country, and now it is expanding to deliver more clinical services to people in rural and remote areas ranging from tele mental health to cardiac monitoring to teleradiology.

3:00

With the focus on what we need to do, it is worth remembering that health reform is already two years old in the province of Alberta. Since the Mazankowski report we've worked across ministries and the health system to launch a province-wide Health Link system, an on-line wait list registry, and an electronic health record that is improving care here at home while it attracts interest from abroad.

The Alberta Medical Association and the health regions worked with us to make history with Canada's first trilateral agreement. For the first time regions are a partner in an agreement between the province's physicians and its government, and we have a model to implement primary care across Alberta.

We restructured our regions. We moved mental health services under regional governance where they can be integrated with front-line health care. On a commitment to primary care Calgary now has linked four psychiatrists and five other mental health professionals with 44 physicians to better meet patients' mental health needs.

Every other region in this province has its own examples of achievement. Chinook launched a new partnership envisioned for service delivery and supportive housing in Picture Butte. Palliser opened a family medicine/maternity clinic in Medicine Hat for the hundreds of women with low-risk pregnancies who do not need a specialist. In the David Thompson region Drumheller became the first community in all of Canada wholly connected to an electronic health record. East Central reconfigured the Camrose rehabilitation services to reduce wait lists and improve outcomes and opened a cardiac rehab program in Wainwright. Aspen launched the first blood-thinning clinic in rural Alberta to help treat conditions like deep-vein thrombosis. Peace Country expanded access to health services by opening a new health centre in partnership with the Grande Prairie Regional College. Northern Lights is expanding access with the new Northwest health centre in High Level. Capital launched six new multidisciplinary clinics to make it easier for specialists to team up with other care providers in the community. Those are just some of the examples, and there are many, many more, and success is attractive.

Alberta is home to the secretariat for the new national patient safety institute and the national secretariat for the Canadian council for organ donation and transplantation.

Over the past few years while Canada has scrambled for scarce

health professionals, we attracted more than 600 physicians from 1999 to 2002 and in a similar period of time over 1,500 registered nurses and 740 licensed practical nurses. They will be joined by the over 12,000 students training for health careers in Alberta today, augmented by over 2,100 postsecondary seats added in the last four years.

Now, despite the anecdotes Albertans remain consistently satisfied with the care that they receive. My ministry's annual results reports show that the number of people who rate the quality of care as good to excellent consistently is in the mid-80 per cent range. We want to keep that satisfaction rating. We want to improve it. Albertans are entitled to receive the best public health care.

Therein lies the crux of the debate on sustainability. Our goal is to sustain our ability to meet the health needs of Albertans; however, sustaining our ability is not the same as sustaining our system. In fact, the system we have now is part of the problem. It must change, and so must we.

No argument is more persuasive than my budget for 2004-2005. This year we will spend \$618 million more on health care. That adds \$1.7 million to health care funding in this province every single day. Over the year health care will take almost \$8 billion. In just the two hours that this committee will use to debate my estimates, the health system will have spent an additional \$1.8 million. Eight billion dollars this year, and the system needs every nickel. We could not afford to spend less and maintain access. We could not afford to spend more and meet other public responsibilities.

Total allocations to the province's health authorities are up \$390 million this year, 8.4 per cent. This includes the increases for specialized care provided centrally to all Albertans as province-wide services. That brings total funding for health authorities to over \$5 billion to pay for nurses and other health workers, for hospitals and other health programs and supports. Even with an 8.4 per cent increase over the last year and the largest regional allocation ever, already several regions have expressed concern over their ability to manage health care delivery. My department is committed to helping the regions work within their budgets, and I am confident that together we will succeed this year. But to continue to do so over the next three years, the system will need to change.

Physicians are paid out of a different portion of the ministry's budget. I commend the Alberta Medical Association and Alberta's physicians on agreeing to a modest 2.9 per cent negotiated increase in fees that comes into effect on October 1. But physician funding is about more than just fees. In these estimates the allocation for physician services totals over \$1.5 billion to pay for not only fees but also benefits, on-call compensation, alternative payment plans, office automation, and primary care reform. That means, taking health authority and physician allocations together, more than 4 out of 5 health care dollars, over 80 per cent of the health care budget, support care delivery in our regions and physicians' offices.

On top of that, we are allocating over one-half a billion dollars to other programs like addiction treatment and prevention through AADAC and allied health services: chiropractors, community physiotherapists, optometrists, and podiatrists. This half billion dollars also includes air and ground ambulance, which I will mention again in a moment.

To complete the look at my estimates, human tissue and blood services will cost a total of \$137 million, up from \$123 million. Prescriptions and other nongroup benefits will cost \$532 million, up from \$456 million. Health protection through vaccines, Aids to Daily Living, and wellness initiatives will cost \$177 million. All but 1.6 per cent of the health budget goes directly to support health care.

It has been suggested that administrative changes alone are the answer to sustainability. With just 1.6 per cent of all health funding

my ministry administers the province's health insurance plan, updates legislation, regulations, and standards, administers the accountability process and measures, and provides information and staff to handle the 1.15 million telephone calls, the 1.14 million written inquiries, the 4,000 e-mails that we received last year, and the more than 126,000 walk-in clients that we serve.

I also point out that Alberta's health authorities spend less than 4 per cent of their budgets on administration. Capital spends in the range of less than 3 per cent. On average, 70 to 80 per cent of health authority budgets is spent on the health workforce, leaving just 20 to 30 per cent for drugs, materials and equipment, operations and maintenance, and other expenses. The challenges that face health care go beyond administrator solutions. They call for fundamental reform of the system itself.

The Health and Wellness budget plan for 2004-05 continues the reform agenda started in 2002 and sets the stage for taking health care where it needs to go. The budget strikes a delicate balance between the urgent need for acute, long-term, and community care and the equally urgent need to change the system. What I have for direct health reform is \$116 million. That is just 1.5 per cent of the entire health budget, but it is almost as much as I will spend on my ministry's entire operations for the year.

Primary care is identified nationally and in Alberta is holding the greatest promise to improve access and co-ordination with other health services. In all, \$20 million is allocated to primary care through Health Link and capacity-building projects and the federal primary health transition fund. Just over \$25 million continues to build the electronic health record to give physicians, hospitals, pharmacists, and medical labs a link to better health care delivery.

Despite the advantages of technology no public service is more people dependent than health care. Twenty million dollars is budgeted for training, and another \$20 million is dedicated to alternative funding plans for academic medicine to fairly compensate physicians for their teaching, research, and clinical work. Another \$13 million will support the transfer of ambulance services from municipal to regional governance, where this sophisticated mobile health care service can be better integrated with other health services. In years 2 and 3 that allocation jumps to \$55 million as health regions begin to take over the funding of the operations of ambulances.

The small budget allocated directly to health reform is not the whole picture. Other reforms will be funded through the existing funds as we work through the strategies listed in my ministry's business plans. The Premier of this province has made a public commitment to sharing the health reform plan with Albertans for their input. Our mission statement confirms my department's commitment to partnership in health care. That includes partnership with Albertans who use and depend on and pay for their health system. Decisions on how people manage their own health and access care make every Albertan a vital partner.

3:10

Recognizing the need for strength in a time of change, my business plan adds leadership as a new core business to the established two core businesses of healthy living and quality health services. A more comprehensive list of strategic priorities identifies the need to strengthen our public health protection and enhance the sustainability. New goals focus on health protection through healthier personal choices and public health protection. Over and above the simple reasons of compassion and avoiding suffering, we know that over time preserving health is less costly than treating illness.

Goal 1, to encourage and support healthy living, looks at the

impact of personal choice and responsibility on health and the health system and how to leverage that untapped resource through education, early intervention, and treatment.

Goal 2 affirms our commitment to well-managed public health in the face of emerging threats like SARS.

Goal 3 directly addresses access through use of technology, primary care, a rural health strategy, and a co-ordinated approach to long-term care.

A new goal 4, to improve health service outcomes, makes sure that accountability is strengthened for quality, system performance, chronic disease management, effectiveness, and response to complaints. The newly expanded and renamed Health Quality Council of Alberta will report directly to Albertans on how well the system is performing. My department will use those findings to do even better. It is entirely intentional that our commitment to improved outcomes comes before the commitment to sustainability.

Goal 5 in my business plan recognizes the need for fundamental change in how we manage and fund health care as well as in how, by whom, and where care is delivered. The 11 strategies are grouped under three headings: System Management, Health Workforce, and Technology. They focus on innovation, flexibility, and collaboration across responsibilities and jurisdictions including with our regional, provincial, national, and federal counterparts and colleagues.

Finally, goal 6 applies the same collaboration, information, and support within the health system to my ministry's own interactions with our government and health system partners, including our staff.

To conclude, Mr. Chairman, this is a business plan that looks at the future and identifies priorities, responsibilities, and actions. This budget is significant in what it empowers our health system to do and what it cannot do. The business plan is evidence that this government is taking a system-wide approach to health reform. The limits of the budget are compelling evidence that we need to be more bold than we have been before. However, the hard policy decisions are for the near future. They are the subject for another debate at another time.

Today I have given you a picture of how the health system will use the \$7.994 billion you will vote on. I've shown you how absolutely necessary this year's increase is for \$618 million. I believe these estimates give us the time and resources to deliver the health system Albertans expect and need now and continue on the recent course of necessary change while we consider and plan for the future.

Mr. Chairman, as has been my practice over most of the last 11 years that I've had the honour of serving as a minister of the Crown, I will entertain as many questions as possible, but it's my intention to of course take notes and respond to inquiries in written format so that we can get through the most number of questions that we can.

Thank you, sir.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank the minister's staff for being here today. I know that they'll get back to us in some detail for those questions that are not fully answered by the minister during this time. As is my habit in this Legislature, I will ask a specific question or a small grouping of questions and ask the minister to answer them during the first hour that's allotted to the opposition.

As the minister can well imagine, I'm very interested in some detail on the health reforms that the government is currently talking about. I see that on page 198 of the estimates there's a line item titled Health Reform. We see this as being a substantial increase this year from a net expense of just over \$46 million last year to \$100 million this year. Other than the very small tidbit of information he

gave us in his preamble, can you tell us what that money is dedicated to that would be outside of those strategies outlined in your business plan, please?

Thank you.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I'll be happy to do that in written format so that I can provide the exact detail of the increase. I can say that, by and large, it is an expansion of some of the reforms that were started as we were replying originally to the recommendations as set out in the Premier's Advisory Council on Health, or the Mazankowski report. I, of course, will be equally interested when the hon. member is perhaps a Member of Parliament that she might be able to provide me some details on their health reform as well.

Ms Carlson: I hope he gets his before I get mine.

I know that when you came in as minister, you were quite keen on turning the kind of sickness model of health care delivery that we have to a wellness model. Is there any detail you can give us on that and how far that's progressing? Do you see that as being an integral part of what's going to roll out over the next year or few years?

Specifically, I'd also like to know: of this \$100 million that's designated for this year, how much is being spent on a communications plan? How much of that will be directed to telling people in the province what you currently believe to be wrong with the system?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I don't have the exact figures for the amount spent on communications, but I can advise the hon. member that we have spent significant sums on programs like the Healthy U campaign. We have spent significant sums on programs for a tobacco reduction strategy. I think that was in the magnitude of some \$12 million. We can report on the results of that effort. There are now some 40,000 fewer smokers in the province of Alberta than there were last year, and I think that is something that ought to be lauded.

In answering the simple question asked about whether we will continue to promote wellness, the answer is: yes, we will. That is a critical reform. What makes me think about it in particular and should make us all acutely aware of this today is that earlier this morning the Minister of Justice and myself and the hon. Member for St. Albert were at the Cross Cancer Institute to announce a capital expansion of some \$5.5 million to meet the needs of that particular facility because Dr. Tony Fields of the Cross Cancer Institute indicated to us that the number of patients that we're having was growing by some 6 per cent a year. Six per cent a year was the increase in the number of visits over the previous year. We've responded in part by adding additional capital resources to this facility but also by increasing their budget in the magnitude of 12 per cent. So we do recognize that this is a growing area.

Dr. Fields would also be able to tell us with some detail that there are many cancers that are preventable through proper exercise, proper diet, avoiding smoking, and so on and so forth. Don't spend too much time in the sun. I think that it would be very important that we indicate to Albertans that they are a partner in their own personal health and hence their health system as well. So we do want to continue with those messages. It will cost money to do so, but those messages about how individuals in Alberta can take responsibility for their own health will continue to be supported by this government.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Minister, and thank you, Mr. Chair-

man. Can you tell us how successful the program has been where people can phone in their complaint or their ailment and get help over the phone as compared to walking into an emergency room or doctor's office?

3:20

Mr. Mar: I do not have the exact figures before me at my fingertips, Mr. Chairman, and I could be corrected, but my recollection is that in the first year of the province-wide Health Link line, there were 800,000 calls. I don't know what that translates into in terms of the number of people who used it. There could have been a number of people who used the system many, many times, but 800,000 calls were made.

In terms of the outcomes, of course, people have to recognize that the Health Link system does not replace emergency rooms and that in many cases in those 800,000 calls people still would have been referred to an emergency room. The people at Health Link would have been able to direct them to the best place possible for them to go and get their emergency service. The Health Link line program, which, for those that are not familiar, provides 24 hours a day telephonic doctor-approved, nurse-delivered advice, has demonstrably reduced the growth of unnecessary visits to emergency rooms, so we would call this a great success.

The final thing that I'll say – and this was an extraordinary thing for me to find out – was that the Health Link line can deliver the service to Albertans in over 100 different languages. I think that it is a fair criticism that our health care system does not always serve all Albertans equitably, and to improve access to people who might not have facility in the English language, I think, was another great success.

The final success that I would say of the Health Link system is that some very, very experienced nurses who otherwise would have retired from the health care system because they cannot meet the physical rigours of practising nursing are now providing their service through Health Link. Therefore, we have expanded the longevity of their professional lives, and I think that that has been a very positive outcome as well.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. Next I'd like to have the minister explain for us, if he would, the extent that you're investigating the use of user fees and graduated user fees for things like increased use of the health care system or attaching user fees to lifestyle choices like those who are smokers or are obese. Can you tell us how much investigation you've done into that and where you stand on that now?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I cannot confirm a government position on this perspective, which I think should be the function of this committee and this Legislature. I can share, however, some personal perspectives that we should examine how we finance the health care system, that there are jurisdictions in other parts of the world where there is a connection between an individual's utilization of the system and what they pay for the system. The hon. member mentioned, for example, risk factors like smoking. Should there be a connection between what an individual pays for the system based on their risk factors? I think that those are legitimate questions to ask. As a government we have not yet drawn any final conclusions on what may or may not make sense.

Overall, Mr. Chairman, I think that there are a couple of principles that have to be front and centre, the first one being that nobody should ever suffer a financial catastrophe as a result of a health care

catastrophe. I think that that is well within the spirit of what Tommy Douglas had in mind when he brought this forward in the House of the Saskatchewan Legislature in 1961, and we agree with that. But in looking at health care systems in other parts of the world, I believe that there are other ways of funding the health care system than simply out of the general revenues of the provincial government. What our final conclusions on that will be has not yet been determined.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. Can you expand for us on just the kinds of options that you're taking a look at? There's of course the private insurance route. There's a direct billing route. There's an incremental cost route. What countries are you looking at? I'm not asking which ones you are going to follow or even highly recommend, but in general which specific styles are you looking at?

Mr. Mar: I think, Mr. Chairman, that there isn't, in the words of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, one particular style that we're looking at. What we are doing, however, is looking at other jurisdictions. Many European jurisdictions, for example, have programs where core services, say, for cancer treatment would be covered by the state, but if you want services that are outside of that core, you pay supplementary health insurance premiums. I think Canadians would be surprised at the wide range of services that are provided within those packages.

So when we look at our budget, of the \$8 billion that we spend, almost one-third is on non Canada Health Act related services. One might make the argument that the most critical of those services are those that fall within the Canada Health Act. Perhaps those should be covered by the province or a government, and anything that is outside of those core services ought to be taken care of through some form of supplementary health insurance. That's one iteration of what could happen. I think that's a proposal that's come forward.

But, again, I acknowledge the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie when she says: I'm not asking for what you are you planning on doing. This is simply a consideration that is on the table.

Ms Carlson: Thank you for that information. When would you anticipate would be the first possible release of a new health reform package by the government?

Mr. Mar: By the end of June of this year.

Ms Carlson: And will we see the release of the Graydon report prior to that date or at all?

Mr. Mar: It will be prior to that date, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Carlson: While we're on reform and fees, I just want to ask: do you anticipate as a part of that reform that you'll be talking about dealing with Alberta health care fees at that time?

Mr. Mar: I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman; I didn't quite catch the last part of that question.

Ms Carlson: It's with regard to the Alberta health care fees. Are you looking at the premiums that we pay? Will that be a part of your reform package?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I think that there have been many

legitimate questions raised here. I think it's a legitimate question to be asking: how will we fund our health care system? It's a legitimate question to ask whether health care premiums should increase. It's an equally legitimate question to ask: should they be eliminated altogether? So both of those considerations are on the table, sir.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the minister's comments, his answers to the questions, and I look forward to the opportunity to ask him a few questions myself.

The first question I have is on the notion that increases in health care spending are normally presented as a percentage of total government expenditures. So it goes from, you know, 40 per cent of total government expenditures to 50 per cent, or whatever the figures may be. I wonder if the minister can comment on the suggestion that as a percentage of the gross domestic product – that is, the total economic output of the province or the country – health care spending has remained relatively constant and that it has been reductions in other government expenditures during the 1990s that contributed to the perception that the proportion going to health care has risen, because health care spending has not been cut as much as other areas.

3:30

Generally, what I want to start with, Mr. Chairman, is the general notion that health care spending is out of control. Maybe the minister could comment on what areas in particular have driven the increases. Have they been able to identify those?

For example, the aging population is certainly one. I think he's touched on that relative to cancer rates and so on. Certainly drug costs, technology, and the distinction between what would be considered a core service and something else. Normally an example of that would be heart surgery or cancer treatment, on the one hand, and cosmetic surgery not related to disfigurement but cosmetic surgery for the enhancement of one's personal appearance, on the other. So I wonder if he can say where the government is looking at drawing the lines in those sorts of things.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the hon. member's questions. I will say this about gross domestic product and expressing health care expenditures as a percentage of GDP. I first give the disclaimer that I'm not well versed in the science of economics, but I can say that gross domestic product is not the same as having money in the bank. You cannot pay out of gross domestic product. We pay out of the revenues that the government of Alberta or any government across Canada would collect from its taxpayers, and the notion that some suggest, that the Alberta provincial government is driving this agenda to suggest that we've got a crisis in health care funding – if that's true, then apparently we've been able to persuade everybody across Canada of exactly the same thing.

The reality is that whether you're a minister of health for the province of Saskatchewan, an NDP government, or Manitoba, an NDP government, or a Liberal government in Ontario or British Columbia, we are all facing the same challenges. Health care spending is outpacing the growth of government revenues in all those provincial governments that I just gave as examples, in fact I'd suggest to you in all 10 provinces and three territories across Canada.

As far as the cost drivers in health care I appreciate this question as well, and I would be happy to forward a copy to the hon. member's office of a report done by the Conference Board of Canada that sets out some of the cost drivers and escalators in the health care

system. He identified one quite capably. When we talk about aging, I think that people understand that as we get older, we tend to use more of the health care system and particularly in the latter parts of our lives. As our population ages so, too, does our utilization and costs associated with health care.

Drugs have gone up an average of 17 per cent in each of the last five years. I think it's a legitimate question to ask: are we spending too much on drugs? It's an equally legitimate question in some cases to ask: are we spending enough on drugs? There are examples where utilization of drugs can actually lower our overall costs of delivery of health care. So we have to look at that issue carefully.

Technology. New services that were not even thought of even 10 years ago are now available that are costlier than what we do now. An example of that would be the Birmingham hip. Ten years ago the Birmingham hip did not exist, and today it does exist, and it is costlier than the standard prosthetic that is covered under the health care system.

Home care is another area that's grown dramatically. Costs in that area have gone up in rough terms about 15 per cent on average over the last five years.

These are all areas that are resulting in health care spending being much greater than the normal rate of inflation and greater than the rate of growth of our population.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the minister's response to those questions.

I would like to ask the minister about the federal contributions. They've given an additional \$228 million, \$200 million of which is coming from the promised payout of the federal government's surplus. This has been declared a one-time payment, and for some reason the department seems to have slotted this under the heading Other.

The total federal contribution, now at \$1,625,112,000, amounts to 20.27 per cent of the Alberta Health and Wellness budget including capital investment. I'm just wondering what the use is of this one-time money. Is the government taking steps to try and ensure that this payout becomes a permanent and ongoing transfer?

I recall – and I'm sure the minister is very much aware of this – that medicare was originally established as a 50-50 cost-shared program. What's his sense of what the federal government's stance is now with respect to meeting its commitments? I know that there were some negotiations a couple of years ago and lots of fanfare about the federal government starting to recognize its responsibility and so on, but I think it's been coming rather slowly.

Does it look like the federal government will be placing any strings on the federal money? Will it be available for just about anything that would be allowed under the principles of medicare, or has the government been pushing them to allow different uses for the money than originally envisaged by the Canada Health Act?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me say that it is very difficult to know exactly where the federal government is right now. I can tell you where the provinces are at. The provinces are at the recognition that there's no credibility in saying that you're interested in a 10-year sustainable program for health with \$2 billion in one-time-only funding. So the provinces and territories continue to push forward on health reform in their own jurisdictions, Alberta included.

Let me give you an example of why it's difficult to know exactly

where the federal government is going. Yesterday the federal Minister of Health spoke before the Standing Committee on Health. I have a copy of the *Hansard* here before me. It's titled Standing Committee on Health, evidence number 12, unedited copy. So this is the equivalent of their Blues.

Following his comments in here and questions that were asked of him and in the media questions that Minister Pettigrew, the federal Minister of Health, answered, this is what he said.

Public administration is the principle, not public ownership. There's a difference between public ownership and public administration.

If . . . provinces want to experiment with the private delivery option, my view is that as long as they respect the single-payer, public payer, we should be examining these efforts. And then compare notes between provinces whether . . . it doesn't work. If it doesn't work, they'll [have to stop]. But if it works, we'll all learn something.

So the federal Minister of Health yesterday stated that they were interested in the possibility of experimenting with private deliverers of services within a single-payer model, meaning that like our Health Care Protection Act you would allow private surgical facilities to be under contract to regional health authorities. Today he completely did a 180-degree turn on that.

3:40

It's obviously very frustrating to know where the federal government stands and its policy in terms of commitments that it might make to money and commitments that it might make to real reform of the health care system. We're accustomed to sometimes having the federal government say one thing and then change its mind and do something else several months later. It's not very often that it happens within a 16-hour period.

Now, as far as the dollars go, the federal contribution of \$2 billion, Alberta's share of that is in the magnitude of \$200 million. Again, what we spend per day is in the magnitude of \$22 million a day. You can see that the federal government's share, its contribution to Alberta of an additional \$200 million doesn't really amount to that much reform. It'll help pay for another eight or 10 days of health care.

The Conference Board of Canada report that I referred you to earlier suggests that some \$5 billion is needed on an annual basis by the provinces just to keep the system as it is now, and that's without trying to put money into improving access or improving quality or expanding services.

So in answering your question – will we continue to press the federal government for a greater contribution? – the answer is yes, we will, but Alberta won't be alone in making that request. We'll be shoulder to shoulder with other provinces who'll be making the same press of the federal government.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for that answer.

I'd like to just touch on another matter which has to do with people's need to access health care in – I'm searching for the right words: a considerable, intense requirement to receive health care services. Just to indicate that about two years ago the New Democrat caucus had a round-table with a number of health experts including people from the health care system and people who were academics and so on. One of the interesting things that we were told is that in terms of dollars the average person consumes about 80 per cent of the health care that they receive in their lifetime in the last year of their life. Now, I don't know if that's absolutely true, but I suspect that there is a very significant element of truth to that statement.

That puts the suggestion that we ought to limit people's access to health care to a certain fixed amount of money in a given year in quite a different light.

I just wonder if the minister could comment on whether or not that aspect has been taken into account. Surely if you're in the last year of your life or the last period of your life and you really need a lot of health care, such a system would quickly break down or, alternatively, create considerable problems, indeed suffering on the part of individuals who needed a large amount of health care as they approached the end of their life. So I wonder if the minister could comment on that.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, this is a very, very difficult issue to deal with, as I think everybody in this Assembly would recognize, and that would be regardless of the political banner that we carry. We don't deal particularly well with end-of-life issues. We know that, for example, the average cost of renal dialysis is somewhere in the range of \$50,000 per person per year. That is very, very costly care. It perhaps yields two responses. There are some that would suggest that perhaps we shouldn't be providing the service. There are others who would suggest, I think perhaps with more public support, that this statistic should focus our attention on the need for trying to avoid the need for dialysis in the first place. I think that most people find that to be a more palatable approach to how you deal with end-of-life issues.

I've heard Dr. Mo Watanabe, a very well-respected physician in the city of Calgary, say that an ideal health care system would promote a long, long, long, healthy life where people would die instantly. They would not die lingering deaths. They would not suffer pain, but they would be healthy right up until the day that they died. That would be an ideal world. We don't live in an ideal world. If the hon. member has any suggestions for how we deal with end-of-life issues, because I think that there is some merit to his idea that there's a large percentage of health care dollars spent in the last year or the last months of life, I'd welcome him to share them with us because I'd be more than happy to entertain them.

Mr. Mason: Just to clarify, Mr. Chairman. The real concern is the notion that in a bid to control health care costs you would somehow place a limit on how much value or money's worth of health care someone could get at the public expense in a given year. So the concept that you consume – and I hate to use that term – 80 per cent of the value of the health care that you use in your entire life in your last year of life would seem to suggest that such a notion would be nonfunctional and not of very much value because it would only kick in in the last, you know, period of your life, and then it would be a tremendous barrier to receiving the care that you need.

Mr. Mar: Perhaps I misunderstood the hon. member's question when he first asked it. If he's suggesting that we are going to entertain a notion that an individual should be entirely responsible for the cost of their health care in the last part of their life, the answer is no. It would offend the original principle that I set out in answering the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie's question when I said that a financial catastrophe should not follow upon a health catastrophe. If an individual is suffering from a terminal disease and incurring a great deal of cost, it would not be our consideration to bankrupt such an individual as a result of their health catastrophe. In any form of patient participation in the financing of the health care system, there have to be limits on the amount that such an individual would contribute to their own services at any stage of their life.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to ask some information on any public/private partnerships that you may be looking at in health services now. Are there specific areas that you're looking at? In the process of making these decisions, are you looking at specific studies or reports that you could make public to us?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, from the perspective of the Minister of Health and Wellness I am more interested in the delivery of health services. As far as an edifice may go for the provision of those services, such as a P3 hospital, that is not really something that I've devoted a great deal of attention to. It's more within the purview of my friend and colleague the Minister of Infrastructure.

I know that there have been some examples of P3s that have been examined in the United Kingdom. Some have worked; some have not worked. Similarly, there have been proposals for P3s by a Conservative government as it then was in the province of Ontario and the current Liberal government in the province of British Columbia. But I'm not intimately familiar with plans that the Minister of Infrastructure may have for P3 hospitals or anything else.

I'm focused on the delivery of the service. How the edifice is paid for and provided for is not really within my scope of expertise.

3:50

Ms Carlson: Mr. Minister, can you tell us how much participation the Premier's new chief of staff will have in leading or participating in the health reforms that we're going to see in the next year?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I can't answer that question on behalf of either the Premier or his chief of staff, Dr. West. My opinion, though, is that a chief of staff is there to facilitate the policy directions of a government. He is not there to create policy; he is there to facilitate it so that the expressions of government policy are seen through.

Ms Carlson: Thank you for that.

Mr. Chairman, I'd now like to ask a little bit about the Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee. We saw that committee last year recommend that Alberta Blue Cross should retain its tax-exempt status, but then instead you chose to take away the Blue Cross tax-exempt status and introduce that payment-in-lieu-of-tax program. My question is: has the minister looked at the potential cost to government as an employer to pay the employee's share of increased Alberta Blue Cross insurance premiums for those government employees now covered by Alberta Blue Cross?

Mr. Mar: There is a cost associated with that, Mr. Chairman. I can say that the reason why that payment in lieu of taxes was put in was so that the private-sector services provided by Alberta Blue Cross would be on a level playing field with other providers of similar types of insurance. With respect to the exact number I will have to get back to the hon. member.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for that. Then can you tell us with regard to this: have you looked at whether the increased Alberta Blue Cross premium will have an effect on negotiations between the government and workers like the APE workers? I would expect that there would be some impact on those negotiations.

Mr. Mar: That may be so, Mr. Chairman, but the amount is relatively small, and I wouldn't expect that that impact would be particularly onerous.

Ms Carlson: Okay. One more. I'll just finish this. Still on the Alberta Blue Cross Review Committee recommendation 5 there is for the minister to negotiate agreements solely with Alberta Blue Cross, as is quoted from the report, "until such time as the Minister deems it would be in the best interests of Albertans to tender the Agreement." When we see this tax-exempt status withdrawn and the requirement is to pay the 2 per cent premium tax, what advantages are there left as you see them?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I can say that the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, who was responsible for this review, would be able to answer this question with a great deal more completeness than I possibly could hope to. I would say to you, hon. member and Mr. Chairman, that the review was done in a very, very thorough way. It did not yield what I thought it would yield. I thought that it would be found that Alberta Blue Cross would not have any advantages in the provision of its services, but it in fact has demonstrated itself to be a very good organization. As a consequence, I've seen no compelling reason at this time to put the work that's done by Alberta Blue Cross out to tender. But, again, the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed would be able to identify those advantages much better than I could ever hope to.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, one final question from me, and it's still on this particular issue. Then is it possible for us to get a list of the people who presented or who were in correspondence with this particular committee so that we have a better feel for what actually happened there?

Mr. Mar: I can take that question under advice, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Just following up on the questions, actually, concerning Blue Cross. I appreciate that the minister wasn't leading that review, so he may not be able to answer, but he may be able to.

One of the disadvantages of a nonprofit group such as Blue Cross is that they're unable to raise capital through an equity issue. They aren't able to issue stocks, for example, to raise capital that way. That means that they always have to borrow money, which adds to their operating costs compared to a for-profit corporation, which can raise capital through issuing shares. Is the minister aware at all if that issue was factored into the decisions of the committee?

Mr. Mar: Not to the best of my recollection of all the discussions that I've had on the subject.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Boy, where to begin? Well, there are some reforms underway through this government on the health care system. One that the minister's very proud of, and maybe in the long run rightly so, is the development of the electronic health records. I don't believe those have been discussed yet today.

I can understand the appeal of this reform and the kind of excitement it generates. At the same time, it makes me nervous, makes me concerned for two or three reasons. One is that it tends to be the case, in my experience, that where an organization leads the process of developing major new electronic applications, they end up paying the costs of the mistakes and the development costs. At times the costs can actually soar unbelievably, and the timelines can stretch out, and all kinds of complications can arise.

I'm also concerned because as I think about the sheer scale of health information generated every day in Alberta through all the visits to the doctors and all the lab tests and all the hospital procedures, I picture an incredibly big, complicated system. Frankly, you know, when I watch a little PC crash when it's overloaded, I worry about: how big is this system going to get? How much is it going to cost? What's the backup provision going to be? Does it all have to be on paper in case the computer goes down? So I have real concerns about the costs of developing the electronic health records, particularly if we're the province leading the way.

Maybe we can spend a few minutes to and fro on this. Has there been some genuine cost-benefit analysis done? Do we have any sense – clear, firm, well-documented sense – of what an electronic health records system will provide as compared to what it will cost?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, this is a difficult question to answer. Let me try and preface it by saying that I share some of his concerns. I believe that when you do embark on a program as large as this, you have to be cautious. We witnessed examples in other jurisdictions right here in Canada where large-scale information technology programs have failed. Notably, I think, in the province of Manitoba, where some \$60 million was spent in that province on IT initiatives that ended up being written off by their Treasury Board.

I think that we've learned from that, and we structure our agreements with our service providers better.

That's not to say that we get it perfect. We don't always have exactly what it is that we need.

4:00

Overall, my focus is on the delivery of better outcomes in health care services. Every time we can use an electronic health record to avoid a drug interaction that will be bad, every time we can avoid an unnecessary diagnostic test, every time we have our pharmacists hooked up with our physicians and our physicians linked up with our laboratories, that is not only cost-effective; it's better patient care as well. If we can use our electronic health system in physicians' offices so that the very best of clinical practice guidelines can be at a physician's fingertips while they are in the examining room with their patient, that will provide better health outcomes.

So I look at it not only from the point of view of cost effectiveness from avoiding unnecessary tests and avoiding bad drug interactions; I also look at it from the point of view of the value that it can provide. As far as being cautious, I agree. We do have to be cautious, and we are being cautious, and as best we can, we've learned from the mistakes of others and endeavoured not to repeat them.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few brief things, Minister, and I would just like to get a sense from you of where we might be at.

As you know, I have an urban city inside a rural riding, 24,000 people living in Airdrie, and we have virtually no health care delivery in Airdrie other than our doctors that are there as well as our paramedics. For a number of years now we have been trying as a community – that would also include health care delivery for Crossfield and the rural area surrounding Airdrie as well as Beiseker, Balzac – to get an indication on when we can anticipate that there might be something that would help us deal with 24-hour emergency care. So the question from my constituents is: when is something going to happen?

I'm wondering, Minister, if you could give us a sense of when the

diagnostic and treatment centre that would service not only the Harvest Hills area of Calgary but would also serve my constituency might be announced or be ready for development. Also, if there's been any consideration at all, in fact, to utilizing the paramedic service in Airdrie, which is an incredible advanced life-support system, as a way of trying to provide some cover-off to people between the hours of, say, midnight and six in the morning prior to the doctors' offices opening. So I'd just be grateful for any ideas you might have on that.

Mr. Mar: This is one of the questions, Mr. Chairman, that often dogs MLAs who are responsible for areas like the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View. I know the minister responsible for Children's Services also has this issue as it relates to people in Strathcona county. Now, in the case of Airdrie it's a population of roughly 10,000 or 12,000 people?

Ms Haley: Twenty-four thousand.

Mr. Mar: Twenty-four thousand people in the overall area. It's a large area. In the Strathcona county area it's probably in the magnitude of 50,000 or 60,000, but the same question persists. What I can say is that there are examples where people in such communities that are just outside of the major cities are able to have their health care needs met.

In Strathcona county there's a clinic that's open after doctors' normal clinic office hours, and we're looking at how that's providing services to people in that area. It's open late at night, and the early indication appears to be that in combination with our Health Link line it's providing very good services to the people in the county of Strathcona.

What I'm hoping is that the good experiences there that are the result of an innovative idea set up by the Capital health authority in the city of Edmonton would be, in fact, learned by the Calgary health region and that a similar or analogous type of program might be exactly what's needed to serve the people in the area of Airdrie. The hon. member and I share a boundary at the Calgary city limit. That kind of service would equally be applicable to the people who live in my riding and right in my own home community of Harvest Hills.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask the minister about his view of the future of a couple of models of health care delivery which are quite similar, but there are important differences. In my constituency of Edmonton-Highlands there exists the Boyle-McCauley health centre, which is a nonprofit, community-based clinic which provides tremendous services to residents of the inner city and has many specialized programs related to their needs, and that includes around substance abuse and HIV. There are a number of programs as well for seniors in the area. It's my belief that this is perhaps one of the most cost-effective and sensitive delivery systems in the entire province.

Another one is the Northeast health centre, which was originally started by the Royal Alexandra hospital, which later became the Capital health authority, and it was based on needs in urban areas. At that time the needs assessment showed that in Edmonton there were no medical specialists whatsoever north of 118th Avenue. This spoke to the need for this type of facility. There were particular needs, including dental, where there were tremendous deficiencies. It's a little different than the Boyle-McCauley health centre. It's operated directly by the health authority. It's bigger. It's 24 hours. It's got an emergency room and so on.

Does the minister see these particular models of health care delivery as worthy of further development and ways in which we can

deliver sensitive, community-based health care in a cost-effective and nonprofit fashion?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister, followed by the Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Mar: The short answer is yes, Mr. Chairman. I note that right in the hon. member's own question he acknowledges that they are two very different models. I think that that's an important acknowledgment to make because as a provincial government we recognize that there may be many different models for the effective delivery of health care and that the nonprofit models as set out at Boyle-McCauley and the one run by the regional health authority, the Northeast clinic, are two examples of services that seem to be provided in a very cost-effective way. Both of those examples have been cited not only by me but by federal Minister of Health Anne McLellan, as she then was, in comments made in other parts of Canada as being the kinds of innovations that we would want to emulate across Canada.

Within Alberta we are starting to learn from these examples. We compare that with primary health care that's delivered through medicentres, which don't appear to be particularly cost-effective by comparison. So we do learn from these comparisons, and we look at what has happened since the time Boyle-McCauley and the Northeast clinic have emerged. There have been other examples here in Alberta of similar types of models. The Crowfoot Centre in Calgary is an example of a different way of looking at primary health care.

Our whole AMA agreement is helping to drive different models of primary care delivery where we might have multiple health care providers working as a team in delivering services, which is exactly what is done in the models that the hon. member identified. In our budget for physicians' services we have \$100 million set aside for physicians to use that money to hire the services of other health care professionals so that they can be encouraged to work in multidisciplinary teams. Now, I know that this is not exactly on point, but I think it's illustrative.

4:10

I often use the example of two doctors that I have, Dr. Wong and Dr. Wong. Leo is my dentist in Calgary. Paul is my physician here in Edmonton. When I go to Leo's office in Calgary, I get my teeth cleaned by a dental hygienist, and nobody ever complains about remunerating Leo's office for services provided by someone other than Leo. In fact, the hygienist might even do a better job than Leo does of cleaning my teeth. By comparison, when I go and see my physician, Paul, we only remunerate Paul's office when Paul performs the service even though I know that my flu vaccination could be competently dealt with by a licensed practical nurse or an RN or a nurse practitioner.

So the purpose of our hundred million dollars for local primary care initiatives is to encourage physicians to group together and pool their money so that they might be able to purchase the services of physiotherapists or chiropractors or licensed practical nurses. The average full-time physician carries a roster of about 2,000 patients, so if you had five doctors pooling together, that would be 10,000 patients times the \$50 per patient that they would be able to get out of this hundred million dollar pool. That would be a half a million dollars collectively that these physicians could use to have the resources to pay for a licensed practical nurse so that that person could do all the flu vaccines for their 10,000 patients.

So we are moving in the direction of encouraging models like the two that you described, and we're putting our money where our mouth is, as well.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise to ask a few questions of the minister as well and comment on the budget. It's obviously an area that my constituents in Calgary-Currie have a great interest in. In fact, we even have an upcoming town hall meeting, which I really appreciate the minister's assistance with.

For the questions I have to ask, I'm not sure if the minister would have all the facts and figures at his fingertips today, so I would certainly be satisfied, if he doesn't, with perhaps answers that could just be provided at a later date. I guess to save a little time today, I'll just ask all those questions, and then if the minister does want to comment, that would be fine.

Now, health care costs and health care spending are obviously very difficult areas for us to try and contain costs in as a society. I mean, part of the difficulty that we have, really, is wrestling with the value of saving a known life versus a statistical life. The usual example given in that regard, of course, is: do we spend millions saving the life of a little girl dying of cancer knowing that the same amount of money invested in guardrails and better roads might in fact save dozens of lives instead? But, of course, one is a known life; the other one is a statistical life. So we have incredibly difficult challenges as a society to wrestle with those very hard emotional choices and trade-offs.

My first question, I guess, to the minister just in regard to, perhaps, some other areas that we might look at in treating some of the causes of these cost drivers in health care as opposed to treating symptoms. I'm wondering if the minister is aware of any studies or evidence to support the notion that doctors may be running more tests than necessary, unnecessary medical tests, because of fear of malpractice lawsuits. If there were evidence to that effect, then perhaps we should be looking at legal reforms as opposed to just spending more money continuing to do tests that perhaps are not providing much benefit. So that'd be my first question.

My second: is it true – and I've seen evidence to the effect – that Canada is now spending more money as a percentage of GDP than any other country except the United States? I'm wondering how Alberta's expenditures as a percentage of GDP, now and projected into the future, stand up to that of, for example, Britain's expenditures or Japan's expenditures as a per cent of GDP.

Another question: is there any evidence to support the notion that – you know, a built bed is a filled bed I think is the cliché – the more you choose to spend, the more you have to spend in future? Sort of like, you know, feeding a growing dragon in that the more you feed it, the more it grows; the more it grows, the hungrier it gets, the more you have to feed it. So by refusing to cap our percentage of GDP expenditures on health, are we creating something similar to the mythical Hydra, that you cut off one head and you get two and so on?

The other question I'd like some information on if possible: is it true that despite all our spending and the spending that the United States is spending, the life expectancy and the health care outcomes are virtually no different than for Britain or Japan or most other developed nations? I mean, how does Canada rate in that regard? How does Alberta rate within Canada in regard to health outcomes as compared to some of these other nations? Is it true that British doctors are apparently performing only half the surgeries that American doctors do per capita yet still have almost equal outcomes? I'm wondering how Alberta rates within Canada in that regard in that similar comparison.

I guess, you know, there's evidence that Japan performs in fact only a tiny fraction of the surgeries that we do and has been criticized for it, even called backward for it. However, it seems that

their health care expenditures are about a third or more less as a percentage of their GDP, and their health care outcomes are the best in the world. So that really starts to beg the question: is there an issue about maybe more surgeries being performed than necessary? Of course, there are epidemiological studies that indicate that 20 per cent and maybe even 50 per cent, as I understand it, of surgeries performed cannot be claimed to have statistically significantly affected the outcomes, meaning that these costly surgeries may have not done much good.

Of course, that brings up, you know, a number of questions around health care outcomes. In fact, what are the iatrogenic complications and maybe negative health outcomes of these surgeries? I understand – and I guess there was some media recently that the minister may be aware of – that there are some committees and that there are in other countries other committees and studies ongoing in regard to iatrogenic complications. I'm wondering if perhaps some of that could be looked into or explained. What are the results, if any, at this point?

I guess that in defence of our current health care system and our expenditures, are the expectations that the public has as to outcomes perhaps too high? Do we ask too much of our health care system? I haven't got the study, but I understand that, actually, mountain climbing is safer than some surgeries are, yet we expect 100 per cent results every time of all surgeries. I mean, people have very, very high expectations of our health care system. Has that been really addressed? Should we perhaps be looking at a little bit of awareness and education of the public into what the risks really are, into what we can expect? You know, is the idea that we can expect perfect results every single time no matter what it costs, especially when to the individual it's free, really a realistic sort of expectation to have on our health care system?

With that, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate all the comments and support from my colleagues as well.

Mr. Mar: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie was right: I don't have all those at my fingertips. But maybe I'll address the issue of expectations first.

People do have high expectations of our health care system, and they should. They should have high expectations of our health care system, but they should have equally high expectations of their own responsibility for their health. When we survey Albertans, the overwhelming majority of Albertans say: I'm in very good or excellent health. Some 90 per cent of Albertans will say: I'm in very good or excellent health. That's the reason why when we say, "You've got to take responsibility for your own health," they don't think that message is being directed at them.

The reality is that the majority of people in this province could be doing a better job with respect to what they eat, their regular exercise. We demand accountability out of physicians, out of nurses, out of our health care regions and appropriately so. We demand accountability out of the people in this Legislature and the people who work in our Department of Health and Wellness and appropriately so. My question is: when will we be asking for accountability of the user of the system? That is a critical question that I think needs to be asked as an important policy point.

4:20

Are doctors running more tests than necessary because of the practice of defensive medicine? I haven't seen any statistics to suggest that, but I can suggest to you anecdotally, based on discussions that I've had with many physicians, that the answer is yes. I think that it speaks to the reason why we need to continue to focus on clinical practice guidelines. I would want individuals who are

using the health care system to have the demonstrably best practice of a treatment protocol used with them. I'm not interested in what Dr. Brown's or Dr. Smith's protocol is. I'm interested in what is the best demonstrated protocol of the treatment of my particular condition.

Are we spending more as a percentage of gross domestic product? I don't know what the answer to that question is, but as in responding to the hon. member from the third party, I think that that's a bit of a red herring. I don't think that the expression of health care expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product is a particularly useful measurement of anything.

On your comment that a bed built is a bed filled, I think that there are other jurisdictions and other health systems in the world where we can show that there are fewer beds per thousand than we have here in Alberta. Even here in Alberta I think that there are examples where the aggressive pursuit of a policy of using designated assisted living, in the Chinook health region, has reduced the real needs for more hospitals to be built in that area. I think that there are things that we can learn right here, from inside the province, where we could be doing a better job.

On the subject of health outcomes you talked about Japan and Great Britain. If we look at the OECD comparisons of health care systems, according to the rankings done by the Conference Board of Canada, Canada is the third highest per capita spender, and we would be among the highest among provinces and territories within Canada. Yet our results as a nation are ranked at about only number 13. Now, we can argue – we can debate whether or not the criteria that were used to rank those nations were proper or not – but we should be motivated at least to find out what is being done with respect to health care delivery in other jurisdictions.

Why does Japan, why does Sweden, why does France get good outcomes that seem to be better than those that we have? There may be some things that are cultural that we ultimately can't compare. I think the diet of people in France and Japan is quite different than the North American diet. It leads us to ask the question: should we be doing something to dissuade North Americans or Albertans from eating the kind of diet that we have here on this continent, or are there other solutions? I think that the inquiry into the outcomes achieved by other jurisdictions compels us to pose important questions as to how we can learn from their experiences and, if applicable, put them in place here in Alberta.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to raise an issue that's extremely pertinent to the budget discussion, which is the entire budget process between the department and the regional health authorities. I know that I had contacts from RHAs across the province last year that even in the third quarter and possibly the fourth quarter but certainly well into the third quarter of last year the RHAs were still waiting for their budgets to be approved. They were getting pretty frustrated because they weren't sure what their plans were. They were expected to live up to delivering services, but the final budget decisions hadn't been made. I assume that eventually those got resolved, but my question to the minister again now is: when will the process of sorting out and finalizing the RHAs' budgets and the minister signing those off be completed in this budget year?

Mr. Mar: The regional health authorities already know as of today what their allocations are going to be in the current budget.

Dr. Taft: So this debate, then, is pretty academic.

I just need to confirm that the minister is stating that he has approved the budgets of the RHAs as of today and that they're finalized. That's what I heard him say.

Mr. Mar: What I've indicated, Mr. Chairman, is that we have advised the regional health authorities what their allocation of resources will be. On average it was 8.5 per cent. In the case of the Cancer Board it was higher; it was 12 per cent. But each entity knows today what they will be allocated. Their responsibility now is to come back with a business plan for how they will spend it and deal with the needs of the people that they serve within their budget envelopes.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks. I'd like to go two or three questions back in the exchange to another of the minister's favourite projects and one that I think is pretty interesting, which is primary care reform. Like the minister, I share his concern that we need to reform the primary care system, and I think the commitment of some extra money to that – \$100 million is a lot of money actually – is a good one.

The one concern I have is that it is, as I understand it, channelled entirely through the physician side of the health care system. In other words, the \$100 million will have to be channelled through individual or groups of local MDs rather than, for example, a group of RNs or nurse practitioners or somebody else coming together and applying for some of this \$100 million. Can the minister confirm or correct me on that view? That's where we'll start.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, for budget purposes it is all coming through the medical services budget. But keep in mind, as I indicated at the outset of my comments, that this is a tripartite agreement with the regional health authorities, the physicians, and the government of Alberta. So the involvement of groups like nurse practitioners or other health care providers who would want to provide primary care would be co-ordinated through the regional health authority. The regional health authority would have to be satisfied that such a local primary care initiative in fact set out appropriate criteria for what such an LPCI would accomplish and that there would be the need for a plan for how that LPCI would provide 24-hour primary health care, what kind of providers it would use, and so on and so forth.

So there will be ample involvement of these other health professionals, other than just physicians, within these LPCIs. But he's right that for budget purposes it does come through the medical services budget.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Just for my clarification, I understand that there are the RHAs, the doctors, and the department involved in this process, but would it be possible – and this is hypothetical; I hope that's allowed here – for a group of nurse practitioners, for example, perhaps going through the RHA, to directly tap into this funding, or would they have to have a medical organization, a doctors' organization, between them and the funding?

Mr. Mar: It would have to be done with the co-operation of a physician group.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Calgary health

region and the Capital health region and perhaps all of them are always looking for new options and opportunities to bring extra revenue into the system. One of the interesting things the Capital health region has done, as I understand it, is to contract with the Workers' Compensation Board to provide joint surgery and other significant surgeries to Workers' Comp clients and bill the Workers' Compensation Board and, as a result, earn a substantial amount of money. I can't remember exactly how much it is, but it's I think quite a few millions of dollars. As far as I know, everybody's pretty happy with the arrangement: Workers' Compensation, the Capital health region, and presumably the patients.

Is the minister aware of a similar kind of initiative at all out of the Calgary health region to try to bring the Workers' Compensation surgical work into the Calgary health region in a similar way to what's done in Edmonton?

4:30

Mr. Mar: Not that I'm aware of, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Taft: Does the minister have a role in encouraging a health region to undertake that sort of initiative? Clearly, the Calgary health region is looking for business opportunities. If there's one involving the WCB that's worked out extremely well in Edmonton, does the minister have a role to say: hey, why don't you folks in these other regions look at the same model?

Mr. Mar: The answer is yes, Mr. Chairman. We do try and facilitate that through regular meetings with regional health authorities, but regional health authorities themselves take the opportunity to meet from time to time. The hon. member may be familiar with the Council of Chairs, which is a council of all of the chairs of regional health authorities throughout the province who meet on a regular basis, and they take the opportunities to share their best practices. I hope that we are able to extend those practices not only to matters as they might relate to revenue generation but also to practices as they might relate, for example, to the safe handling of potassium-containing solutions that may be in a central laboratory in a hospital.

We are meeting regularly. I think that those exchanges do take place. There may be WCB work done in the Calgary health region. If there is, I'll certainly advise the hon. member by correspondence. But that I'm aware of, it hasn't been done thus far, and I don't know what the reason would be or if the circumstances exist for them to be able to take advantage of that.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. There's been a lot of talk here about better health outcomes or sometimes disappointing outcomes in comparison to other developed countries. I'm not sure exactly which outcomes we're talking about, but I think we could also focus a lot more on better inputs. By that, I mean improving the health of the people who go into the health care system or perhaps don't need the health care system because they're healthier. Again, I'm being very generous to the minister today. He's shown some initiative and interest in that and has moved some issues forward in terms of healthy living – tobacco use abatement, I think, is very important – and a number of other issues.

What is the current status of the wellness fund? Is there any hope of that getting established and growing into something that I think the minister might like to see and certainly I would eagerly support?

Mr. Mar: I continue to advocate for it, but there are no plans for it at this time.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. The issue of conflict of interest is one that I've raised quite a number of times in this Assembly and even brought in a private member's bill on the issue, although it didn't get very far. I have a particular concern about this issue in relation to the Calgary health region, but it applies across the board, and I think there's a need in the health care system to directly and courageously address conflict-of-interest issues in the same way that the legal profession has had to address them, the accounting profession and other professions.

Now, I do understand that there have been internal discussions and debates in the Calgary health region on conflict-of-interest policies, and from time to time in the last year those have gone up to the minister's office for signing and approval. I'm not sure, actually, where they stand right now. Maybe the minister can provide some information on that.

I raise this in the context of a budget debate because I'm concerned that until we get the conflict-of-interest lines clearly drawn for the medical profession in general and particularly for physicians in senior and influential positions in regional health authorities, we may be contributing to the cost pressures because we are having people who actually have a vested interest in costs going up.

Has the Calgary health region finalized its conflict-of-interest policy, and has the minister signed that off?

Mr. Mar: I'll have to reply to the hon. Leader of the Opposition by written response to that question.

Dr. Taft: All right.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate, the questioning? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The regional health authority boundaries were changed exactly a year ago, as I recall, and there was inevitably the to and fro around how those boundaries were drawn. There was some question in particular about I think region 7, just north of Edmonton, the very stretched out one. My question is essentially this. Has the department done any work that would indicate whether there's been administrative efficiencies or losses as a result of the change in the regional health authorities? Have those changes made for more efficient health care expenditures or not?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, this is an interesting question in this context. Earlier this week members of the ALS Society came to meet with many members of the Legislative Assembly, and they outlined that one of the key challenges put forward by their group was the differing levels of support for people suffering from ALS throughout the province. They said that when you are on one side of the boundary of a particular health region, you might get one service, and on the other side of the boundary you might get another service.

We can't look at the boundary simply as an academic exercise or simply as one of administrative savings. We also have to look at how it may improve the equity of delivery of services throughout the province. Within larger regions you'll have fewer conflicts between the kinds of services that you might receive. We still want to strive to have a completely seamless health care system whereby an individual with ALS or any other chronic disease would be able to access on an equitable basis, perhaps not an equal basis but an equitable basis, services regardless of where in the province they lived.

So one of the most important outcomes of reducing the number of regional health authorities is that we are starting to make our services more equitable. We've got some work to do, but we are doing a better job as a result of having nine health regions now instead of 17.

Dr. Taft: If the minister has any studies to confirm that, I'd be very interested in any cost-benefit analyses or anything like that, any review going back and saying, "Okay. Are these boundaries right, or can we tweak them a little bit more?" That would be helpful.

I know the question of ambulance services came up earlier this week in question period, and it's certainly one that's come to our caucus a number of times, concerns on how the transfer will be handled and what the plan actually is. It's of great concern to the people right at the front lines understandably. It's a genuinely tough issue; I acknowledge that.

4:40

One of the questions that has come up to us – I think it was raised at least in general in question period a couple of days ago, but I need a clearer answer here from the minister. When ambulance services are turned over to a regional health authority, the concern is that they will then have to compete with heart surgery or pediatrics or everything else for priority on the list of spending. What precautions or safeguards if any is the minister putting on the transfer of ambulance services to ensure that they will get a fair shake, or is that decision being given over to the RHAs in its entirety?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, we'll want to be careful to do this in a proper way, and that's the reason why we're taking one year to make the transition from where we are today to where it is that we want to be. Over that period of time I imagine that municipalities or regional health authorities may make the argument that they want that funding enveloped, that it will be for the dedicated purposes of running ambulances. Certainly, if they make that recommendation to me, I'd give that serious consideration. It seems to me to make sense.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a few questions before we conclude for today. I'd like to ask some questions on the money being spent in primary care, if I can. I refer the minister to page 198 in the estimates, where we see that primary care is receiving quite a large increase, going from \$8 million last year to \$20.5 million in the year 2004-2005. We would like to get a breakdown of what these costs will be and how much of it is going to be directed to the local primary care initiatives established under your agreement with the Alberta Medical Association and regional health authorities.

I would expect some of that detail to come in writing, but can you give us an overview of that at this point?

Mr. Mar: The amount that will go to local primary care initiatives is separate and apart from our other reform funds, and it will be in the amount of \$100 million. As I indicated earlier, it comes through the budget line of the medical services budget, which in aggregate is in the magnitude of \$1.5 billion.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Chairman, are there some focus groups being held right now relative to the local primary care initiatives? If so, can you tell us what the purpose is? How many are you holding, and what will be done with that information?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, there are no focus groups for the purposes

of designing LPCIs, but I can tell you that there are approximately 12 submissions that have been made by groups for entry into LPCIs. Hopefully, we'll be able to have the first of these, if not most of them, up and running by the end of June, but it remains to be seen. I have not personally seen what these letters of intention have expressed yet, but I'm hoping that we'll be able to move this forward early this summer.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. Then are those letters of intention from independent businesses or consulting groups? Can you expand on that? Also, what participation will community groups or individuals have in this, or will there be no way for them to participate?

Mr. Mar: These will come forward from groups of physicians who believe that they can serve their patients better through an LPCI.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. Will there be any review process, then, for members of the community at large or individuals in this?

Mr. Mar: There are none planned, Mr. Chairman.

Ms Carlson: Thank you for that.

Then I'd like to just talk a bit about: nongroup health benefits, also, has seen quite a substantial increase, as we see it, by more than \$77 million. I'm not sure what the nongroup health benefits are. Could you explain that to me and tell me why they're increasing so significantly?

Mr. Mar: I could do that more completely through a written response, but my recollection is that the largest increase in that area is in the area of pharmaceuticals.

Ms Carlson: The largest increase is pharmaceuticals?

Mr. Mar: Yes.

Ms Carlson: So then for people who are accessing benefits, is that what it is? Is it just the increase in cost? Are we seeing an increase in access?

Mr. Mar: I don't have the breakdown between increase in access versus increase in cost. It's something that I could provide to the hon. member.

Ms Carlson: Okay. But essentially you're saying that it's both.

Mr. Mar: Yes.

Ms Carlson: Okay. Good.

Now, can we talk a little bit about West Nile? I know that you're doing some work in conjunction with the Department of Environment here. Everything we hear from the media reports would indicate that the outbreak is expected to be larger this year, perhaps again largest in southern Alberta. Can you give us an update on what your department's doing in that regard?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, we are taking this very seriously, and we are using the very best information that we can from jurisdictions throughout North America that have gone through this outbreak

before. It appears that the progression of the disease is that there's a spike in its occurrence rates, and then it seems to drop. What we're anticipating is one of the spikes, so we've been very, very aggressive in having a larvicide spraying program, that we did not have last year. There was no evidence that there was last year West Nile virus in overwintering mosquitos, so a larvicide program wouldn't have made any difference.

This year there is evidence that overwintering mosquitos do have West Nile virus, so we are spending several million dollars on a spraying program that's being distributed through municipalities. We're focusing our greatest amount of monies on those municipalities in southeastern Alberta where the outbreak of the mosquito that does carry West Nile virus will in fact be present.

We're also being very aggressive in terms of monitoring and working with the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, continuing to monitor animal health, birds, horses. Of course, through our regional health authorities we're looking for evidence of West Nile virus in humans. We're working very closely with the Canadian Blood Services organization. Every blood donor now is being screened. When they're donating blood, they're being screened for the presence of West Nile virus.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, Mr. Chairman, we are working very hard on a public education program to indicate to Albertans that no matter how aggressive we are in spraying mosquitos, we can't get every one of them and that Albertans themselves should be educated about the need to protect themselves, wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants, particularly at hours when mosquitos are feeding, in the morning and in the evening, using, if you don't wear long sleeves, a DEET-based repellent, and that that DEET-based repellent is safe even for children.

Fortunately, most people who get West Nile virus won't suffer serious consequences, but some suffer very serious consequences. Again, the most important thing that we can do is to advise Albertans how to protect themselves. They need to take responsibility for their own health, because no matter how many mosquitos we spray in the adult stage or the larva stage, we can't get them all.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. I'm happy to see that there's going to be an increase in spraying this year, because that is what we had asked for last year. But it looks like to me that in your budget there's a decrease in funding. So what will you not be doing this year with regard to West Nile that you did do last year?

Mr. Mar: Everything that we did last year we'll be doing more of this year, Mr. Chairman. I indicated that the reason why we didn't do larvicide last year was because there was no evidence of West Nile virus in larva stage mosquitoes. This year there is. My recollection is that our program this year would be in the magnitude of \$4 million to \$5 million for spraying. That is new money that we did not spend at all last year. Our public education program, which was aggressive last year, will continue this year. So to the best of my recollection, hon. member, there isn't anything that we did last year that we won't be continuing this year, but in fact we are expanding what we do this year, the larvicide program being the best example.

4:50

Ms Carlson: Okay. But, Mr. Chairman, doesn't the spraying program come out of the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development's budget?

Mr. Mar: My recollection is that the answer is no, Mr. Chairman.

This is new monies that have come from the Department of Health and Wellness.

Ms Carlson: That's good. Thank you for that.

I have just one more question. Like you said, Mr. Minister, some people are severely affected by West Nile, and it's expected that they will have at least short-term if not long-term neurological effects from this disease. What kind of support can we anticipate seeing from your department or some other department to help those people through that time period, specifically with regard to loss of employment?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I can't speak for issues of income support during a loss of employment. That wouldn't be within the purview of the Ministry of Health and Wellness.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. While we're on issues like West Nile, we might as well talk about SARS as well. I know that some of the regions have taken very significant preparatory steps in case there's even a single case of SARS in Alberta. Are there any contingency funds in this budget in anticipation of a SARS outbreak, or would the extra costs of that be borne at the time of the outbreak, if one were to occur?

Mr. Mar: It would be the latter, not the former, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Taft: Changing topics to – actually, I'm going to stay on SARS for a moment. My information, as I said, is that there have been significant preparatory steps taken for SARS both in terms of training of staff, in terms of equipping of staff, and, frankly, in terms of some changing of spaces, ventilation systems, renovations, and things like that. Can the minister give us an indication of what those preparations have cost so far?

Mr. Mar: I don't have the exact figures before me, Mr. Chairman. I should say that this is not a preparation for SARS alone. It's a preparation for any pandemic that may occur, most notably for influenza. We don't know exactly when the next influenza pandemic will occur, but we know that it's coming. So it's in that context that we have an overall plan for dealing with it, which has included capital. There are capital improvements that have occurred in intensive care units that would have separate ventilation systems, as an example. The training that the hon. member mentioned would include training for how to handle a potential SARS virus within your laboratory.

Our regional health authorities have been very, very good in terms of disseminating information on what to look for in the event that SARS arrives in this province. There are some six cases, suspected cases at this point is my latest information from China. I can say that airlines and the federal government have been instituting the kinds of protocols necessary to be aware of what to look for from flights arriving from that place, and we'll be cautious and we'll be vigilant.

I think that one of the great learnings from SARS last year in comparing what happened in Toronto with what happened in Vancouver is that in Toronto, where they don't have a regional health system as we do here in Alberta or as they have in Vancouver, each hospital was left to rediscover this thing on its own. The result was that a secondary and tertiary spread of this disease happened without them really being aware of it. Compare that to the example with the presence of SARS in Vancouver, where because they had a regional system, they were able to disseminate information quickly

and contain the secondary and tertiary spread of that disease. This speaks to the strength of having a regional system. It's something that we've learned from, and we continue to learn from reports by people like Dr. Naylor, who did the review in Ontario following the SARS outbreak.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Currently negotiations are underway between the nurses and the Provincial Health Authorities association on their next contract. They're into arbitration. It's gotten very quiet, and none of us know what the outcome will be, but whatever the outcome is, it's going to have a significant impact on the budget of the health care system. How is the potential outcome of the negotiation of the salary settlements worked into the current budget year?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, regional health authorities in this province have an average increase of 8.4 per cent. We expect them to be able to live within those budgets, and that would include a portion for reasonable increases to nurses and other health care workers.

Dr. Taft: All right. Let's hope that plays out successfully.

The minister talked a few moments ago about the strengths of regionalization, and certainly there are some. As with any organization there are also weaknesses. One of the concerns that comes to me and I'm sure comes to the minister is the challenge of interregion transfers of patients. So somebody from Chinook needs treatment in Calgary and the concern that the patient from Chinook maybe gets a lower priority than the person in Calgary or the concern that billings aren't fairly handled. Either there's double billing or there's inadequate billing or whatever.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

Now, maybe this is getting sorted out. I haven't had these concerns raised to me as much this year as I did the previous year. Maybe it's a function of the larger boundaries. Can the minister comment on the issue of interregion transfers? Is he aware of a better system in place, and how is it working?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I think the hon. member answered his own question in part. I think partly it's because we're getting better at it. It's also partly because there are fewer regions and larger regions. The regions were based upon, as best we could, the service areas where people actually got their health services from, so there would be as a result fewer transfers among and between regions.

Dr. Taft: One of the concerns that hasn't gone away, in fact has gotten worse, is the very, very real sense, especially in Calgary and Edmonton, that there need to be more acute care beds and they're needed urgently and quickly. I listened several minutes ago to the minister indicate that perhaps there are jurisdictions he's aware of in the developed world where there are actually lower acute care bed ratios per population than in Alberta. I'm not aware of them, and I'd be interested to see those. But, certainly, by Canadian standards and by the international standards I've seen, Calgary and Edmonton are absolutely at the lowest levels, the absolute tightest acute care beds supplied for the population.

Both regions have put forward expansion plans. There have been some announcements of approvals over the next – I'm trying to recall – 18 months or two years or something like that. Can the minister fill us in a bit more on exactly how the need for expanded acute care capacity is going to be met in this current year? I understand that it'll involve the Minister of Infrastructure as well, but frankly it's one of the frustrations of Infrastructure existing at all. It feels like on capital questions there are two people in charge when it would be nice to go to one for the answer.

Can the minister tell us what he foresees in this budget year and in the foreseeable future, let's say the next two years? What's going to roll out for Edmonton and Calgary in addressing the acute care bed shortage?

5:00

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, I think that that has been well expanded upon in this Legislature during question period, but if the hon. member would like a list of the billions of dollars that we've got planned in our capital budgets across this province in many areas over the next three years, I'll endeavour to do my best to provide that to him by written response.

In Calgary, as an example, we are moving forward on the Children's hospital, which, if the hon. member has seen the site, is progressing quite nicely.

We will proceed with the south Calgary hospital, but I think that it's important to know that you cannot build such a facility overnight. There's a great deal of planning that needs to be done not only on the capital side but in terms of where you will find the staff to fill such a place. You don't suddenly find thousands and thousands of staff at the snap of a finger either. So the regional health authority is currently planning how it will staff up such a facility as the plans move forward on the building of a south Calgary hospital.

In Edmonton, Mr. Chairman, they're moving forward on a repatriation of beds that currently are administrative offices in facilities throughout the city. This is a good plan. The regional health authority is trying to do what the Calgary regional health authority did some time ago, and that's to move all of their administrative staff into a single place. The Calgary health region did that by moving to Southport, I believe, four or five years ago thereby freeing up space in the facilities that they had at that time. Capital health will be moving forward on that as well.

My recollection is that that is some 50 million dollars, money in that magnitude, to repatriate some 170 beds. That is a much more cost-effective way of doing it than simply building a new facility.

So there are plans for short-term but also long-term needs of residents of both of the metro areas.

The Chair: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Subsequent to that, is the minister aware of any funds either in this budget or, I guess, in the Infrastructure budget to move along the planned ambulatory care centre just immediately west of the University hospital site in Edmonton?

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Mar: I don't recall off the top of my head, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Taft: In many ways I regret that I've focused so much on the traditional aspects of health care delivery – the bricks and mortar, the doctors and nurses – when I think the minister and I both agree that

so much emphasis really needs to be placed on issues like education, issues like poverty, strong communities, diet, exercise, lifestyle, those kinds of issues.

Are there initiatives that will be supported through this budget to encourage a co-operative approach between, say, the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Learning, the Department of Seniors to heighten the awareness of those departments of the health impact of their work? For example, the Department of Learning comes into contact with every child in Alberta by the age of five or so and can reach those kids on health issues immediately. Likewise, at the other end of the age spectrum, the Department of Seniors is in contact with virtually every senior in Alberta in one way or another.

Is there something like an interdepartmental health and wellness task force? Or are there mechanisms through which the departments work together, led by the department of health, to ensure that people in other government departments are thinking: gosh, this policy on kindergarten or this policy on housing or this policy on building codes has a health impact that I'd better think about?

Mr. Mar: The short answer is yes, Mr. Chairman, and I can give you tangible evidence of its success. Take, for example, the Minister of Learning's announcement that we will be moving to daily physical education in our schools. I think that this is a very, very good move and clearly will have an impact upon our acute care system, albeit not one measurable immediately, but it will yield results down the road. I think this is a step in the right direction.

This is where we have great challenges, of course, in health. Many of the things that we will do to improve people's health will not accrue immediate benefits or immediately result in the sustainability of our health care system. But 20 years from now we can have no hope of being able to stop the wave of type 2 diabetics that will accrue to our health care system unless we deal with the rates of obesity and overweight children who are currently in school.

I think that the Minister of Learning made a very cogent and compelling comment when he said that he was shocked, as should we all be shocked, when there are epidemiologists who are suggesting that this may be a generation of young people who will not outlive their parents. That should be shocking. It's for that reason the minister brought forward programs like daily physical education.

That's one of many, many examples, but the short answer to your question is yes.

Dr. Taft: Good. Well, I would encourage all of that and more because I think that's absolutely crucial to the long-term viability of health care and to the wellness of our society.

What will probably be my last question, Mr. Chairman, in light of the hour concerns the wait list registry that was announced about six months ago or so, last October, and was put on the Internet. I visited it a couple of times although not recently.

An Hon. Member: Have you moved up?

Dr. Taft: I haven't moved up because I'm not on there.

The theory is interesting: it allows Albertans to view where they stand and pick and choose where the wait list might be the shortest. My question basically, like so many of my questions, is: has there been a good evaluation of this, or when will the evaluation be done? Is it somewhere in this budget? Will we have some sense of whether this registry is actually reducing waiting lists, and will that evaluation be made public? How might it be conducted?

Mr. Mar: We're not finished with the wait list registry, Mr. Chairman. We hope that by 2006 it won't be just a waiting list registry, it will be a centralized on-line booking system. We are moving towards that.

With respect to whether it will reduce the wait list for a particular individual waiting for a particular service from a particular doctor the answer may be no. If an individual sees that they're waiting for Dr. Brown for a period of 12 months to get a particular procedure done, that individual may decide: I really like Dr. Brown; I don't want anybody else to do my particular procedure. So the wait list for that individual might not change. But if the individual sees that Dr. Smith, who may be located in another hospital or even another town, can do that procedure in six months or maybe even six weeks, that individual may decide: I'm going to see Dr. Smith instead of waiting to see Dr. Brown. As a consequence, they'll have their wait list reduced.

To be able to measure it in global terms is very difficult. It would be the individual experiences of patients waiting for a service who actually decide to change, or they may decide to wait.

I think that even if the person is waiting for Dr. Brown and they see that they're waiting 12 months, there may still be a value in that person seeing the length of that list because they'll recognize that they're not waiting to see a specialist; they're waiting to see this particular person. I think that has some value because they would recognize that if Dr. Brown is just not taking any more people, we can't force them to see people faster and move you up the list.

I think there's value in it. Even if the wait list doesn't change for that particular individual, they'll see that they're waiting for a particular person to do their work, and therefore at least they'll understand why they're waiting. It's not because there's a shortage of specialists; it's because there's a shortage of the time that Dr. Brown has to see people.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

5:10

Dr. Taft: Thanks. I will just stay on this topic with my question. I guess I would say that if I were designing an evaluation of the wait list registry, I'd try to connect with the people who are logging on and using it and see what their experience is and whether they're finding it useful or not. It would be a little tricky to track those people down but certainly not impossible, and it might tell us whether it's serving their needs or not. So many people may be just clicking on and clicking off and not using it or not following through. So I think an evaluation of the wait list registry's probably a good idea.

This really will be my last question, and it's on the wait list registry. I assume this will have to be done in writing. Could the minister just provide us with the number of hits and visits, a log count or a log assessment of the wait list registry? I'm thinking, in fairness to the registry, maybe month by month for the last six months. I assume it's probably building up or something like that. It would be useful for us and I think for all interested Albertans to know the number of visitors, how long they're staying, what they're

using, and I assume there's a tracking system on the web site that will do that.

That's my last question. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Mar: I'll do my best to provide that, sir.

The Deputy Chair: Anybody else wish to participate?

After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Health and Wellness for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$7,994,063,000
Capital Investment	\$24,895,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates for the Department of Health and Wellness and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Health and Wellness: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$7,994,063,000; capital investment, \$24,895,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we'll reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:14 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, April 28, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/04/28

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order. Before we begin this evening, may we receive consent from the committee to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to rise this evening and introduce to you the 159th Brownies pack from the La Perle community – in fact, they also attend La Perle school – their two leaders, Ms Tiffany Conrad and Ms Rachael Raffray; helper Mr. Chris Hewitt; and nine lovely grade 2 young ladies: Erin Onufrichuk, Sarah Jessop, Carrie Jessop, Shy-Lynn Serafinchan, Samantha Bartlett, Cassidy Stilling, Debbie Kenakin, Deanna Carrier, and Madison Porter. Would you all please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Legislature.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Chairman, while I was out in the hallways earlier, I saw a group of army cadets who are obviously on a tour of the Legislature Building. I know from my own experience as a young cadet that civics are part of the things that they learn about, and I'm certain that they've learned about levels of government including the provincial government of Alberta. I say this of the cadet program: it's a program that turns girls and boys into young men and young women. I ask that this group of cadets please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Justice

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm really pleased tonight to be here to present Alberta Justice's 2004-2007 business plan. I'm really, really pleased that the Minister of Health and Wellness introduced the cadets in the members' gallery, because some of my colleagues were believing that that was all Department of Justice staff coming to help answer questions. They were worried that they were all lawyers being paid by the hour. I have assured my colleagues that even those who are up there who are Justice staff and who are lawyers aren't paid by the hour. That's a good thing because the value that they would earn in the private sector in terms of an hourly rate and the number of hours that they work on behalf of the people of Alberta would blow the budget that I'm about to ask for permission to spend.

I'd like to introduce these very hard-working and dedicated civil servants, people who act on behalf of Albertans every day. I'd like to ask for the respect of my colleagues as I do that, because as much as it may be fun to free Oscar Lacombe – and I'm happy to get back to that question later on – I would like to be serious for a moment and I'd like the Member for Edmonton-McClung to be serious for a moment, too, as I introduce members of my executive staff and thank

them for the work that they do on behalf of Albertans. Truly, I have the privilege of working with a very dedicated group of people.

Mr. Chairman, I know they won't be offended if I say that they're but the tip of the iceberg, that working with them and for the Department of Justice and for the people of Alberta are many, many other employees who work in each of the divisions that are represented by their executive heads here today. I've had the opportunity to speak at some of our conferences for various divisions and speak with the staff about how we work towards building safe communities for Albertans and with Albertans. I know that the staff in Alberta Justice is dedicated to that, is very hard working. As I say, if we were paying them by the hour at the private-sector rates, we wouldn't be able to afford it.

Representing the department staff here tonight is Terry Matchett, the deputy minister, who is someone I have the opportunity to work with on I won't say a daily basis because often he has to work for two or three or four weeks at a time before we get together to figure out whether I'm going in the right direction. I'd just like Terry Matchett, the deputy minister, to stand so that people can see you as I introduce you.

Nolan Steed is here as acting assistant deputy minister of the legal services division, and he's here acting on behalf of Peggy Hartman, who's the assistant deputy minister. I can tell you that Peggy Hartman does yeoman service, but Nolan is here, so I'm going to talk about Nolan. Last year we went through considerable work on family law and adult interpersonal relationships and a host of other topics that I could raise. Nolan Steed is one of those people who, whenever I got into trouble or whenever there was an issue that needed to be explained, whenever there was work to be done on those, was able to make it clear, to enter into the discussion, to challenge our thinking, to provide the policy options that we could bring to the political table for discussion and decision. I really can't speak highly enough of Nolan Steed and of all the people that he works with in the legal services division.

The legal services division, Mr. Chairman, provides legal advice to all other departments of government. I'm really proud that we've been able to take on a corporate model where we work with every other department as part of their executive teams to help them identify risks and help them to avoid those risks before they become problems, which is really the sign, I think, of true legal services. It's not, as most people think, accepting the brief after the problem is there and fighting it through the courts. That's not the real challenge of law. The real challenge of law is helping to identify risks ahead of time, helping to find ways to achieve results, knowing what the risks are and knowing what risks you're prepared to accept or deal with. Our legal services division does that and does that so well.

Of course, they also take care of those issues that do go to the constitutional law area or to the aboriginal justice area or to some of the many other areas, because government is a large organization, and from time to time we do have to accept statements of claim and defend on behalf of government. Legal services acts well for us in that area.

We also have tonight Ken Tjosvold, the assistant deputy minister of the criminal justice division. It's Ken's fault that Oscar Lacombe needs to be free, but that's only because he's doing his job very, very well. The people of Alberta can be proud of the fact that we have a criminal justice division, the prosecutors who act on behalf of the people of Alberta in prosecuting crime, who act on a professional basis, make decisions without political interference, without political direction as to when to take cases to court, when to prosecute, in what circumstances there's sufficient evidence to prosecute and achieve a conviction and when it's in the public interest to do so.

We can be very proud of the fact that in Alberta, as in I think most

jurisdictions—I don't want to suggest that any other jurisdictions are not like this—the criminal justice system works very, very well, without political interference or direction. Our direction to the criminal justice system is on the policy level. We ask them to send out a policy directive with respect to how to handle matters, but they make professional judgments, professional decisions in the context of the criminal law, in the context of the laws that they're enforcing, and they do it very, very well on behalf of Albertans.

They also, Mr. Chairman, act in our communities. [interjection] You're a day late and a dollar short on that one. It's already been done.

We have prosecutors who are sitting on community committees across this province—domestic violence committees, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder committees—working with others in the community not just to prosecute alleged criminals and to get jail sentences, not just to take people out of the community in cases of serious and violent crime but to work with others in the community to avoid those problems again before they happen. I'm very proud of the work that the criminal justice division does under the direction of Ken Tjosvold and does so well.

8:10

We have with us Barbara Hookenson, the assistant deputy minister of court services. We managed to steal Ms Hookenson away from Saskatchewan. She's joined us this year—I think it was about January 1—in our court services division. I have to say that she knew what she was coming to, knew what she was getting into. We made sure that she understood that we had ambitious programs going with respect to talking about how we might restructure the courts if that's appropriate after examination but, most importantly, how we make our court services and court services division accessible to the public so that it's understandable, so that people can use it when they have a problem, so that they know how to use the system and where to access it and can do it in a manner which is not too expensive.

Our court services division has to work with the Provincial Court, with the Court of Queen's Bench, and with the Court of Appeal in terms of providing the administration side of it, but they also work in many ways to make sure that people have access to family law information centres, have access to justice in so many other ways. They work with other parts of the department. We're talking about, for example, expanding our mediation programs and moving into other areas so that people only go to court as a last resort, not as a first resort, and so that dispute resolution, which is so important in a civil society, is available to people when they need it and that the tools are available to them.

We also have with us Dan Mercer, assistant deputy minister of the strategic services division. Strategic services is extremely important in the Department of Justice. We still do share—don't we?—with the Solicitor General. Yes. They're nodding. Before the last election the two departments were one. They were split in two, but we share our strategic services division, which means that for the budget process and the business planning process this group of people do yeoman service because they work with two departments to get the work done.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, the budget process takes more than just a month. It's a long-term process. Dan and his staff do excellent work in terms of making sure that we have our business plans and our targets and that we know the direction we're going and that we do the strategic planning we need to do.

With him is Shawkat Sabur, our senior financial officer and executive director of financial services. Shawkat keeps us on budget and makes sure that we know where we're going on the financial

side, works with us. As most people will know, there's never enough money to go around, so you require people who can actually make sure that every dollar that you have is most effectively used. That's Shawkat's job, and he does it very, very well for Albertans.

Then, of course, most of you will know by name, if you don't know his phone number, Manuel da Costa because Manuel heads up as executive director our maintenance enforcement division. Our maintenance enforcement division, sorry to say, generates probably 35 per cent of our mail if not more. It's a division, though, Mr. Chairman, that does yeoman service on behalf of children in Alberta, collecting maintenance on their behalf, both maintenance that's paid on a voluntary basis and, on far too often an occasion, maintenance payments that are not paid voluntarily. Manuel and the staff that work with him have to remind some Albertans of their obligations to their children, their families, and do that, I'm proud to say, very, very well.

Sometimes there have been complaints about how people are treated on the phone, and that's not a surprise because it's a difficult job. When people are being chased for money, they often are not that nice. But I'm happy to say that the maintenance enforcement staff has had excellent training and have responded exceedingly well to our requirement that all Albertans be treated with respect even when we're having to remind them of their obligations to their children.

So I'd like to thank Manuel, particularly, for the good work that's happened. I think it's safe to say that the number of inquiries from MLAs has gone down significantly over the past year or so. Maintenance enforcement is on target with respect to the turnaround time frames. There sometimes have been delays, but we've managed to put more resources into the area to deal with that, and maintenance enforcement is doing very well.

I'd ask all those members—well, I shouldn't yet because we also have Sharon Lepetich. I wouldn't have left you out. Sharon actually has one of the toughest jobs in the department. She works for Terry Matchett and keeps him on track and makes sure that he knows where he's going. I know that there are two or three people in my office that do that for me, and I know how hard they have to work, so I'm sure that Sharon works just as hard in that area. I don't know exactly what Sharon's title is because I'm not really ever good on titles unless they're written down. I'd like all of the members of the Department of Justice staff to please rise, and I would ask you to give them a very, very warm thank you and welcome for the work that they do for Albertans.

Just a reminder, again, that this is but the tip of the iceberg. We have dedicated staff in the department who work day in, day out to make Alberta a safer place for us to raise our families.

I see Betty Ann Hicks is also in the gallery, and I'd be remiss if I didn't ask her to stand. Most of you will know Betty Ann because she's here morning to night, day in, day out. If anybody has a problem, they approach me about it. If I remember to give it to her, she gets it solved. If I don't remember to give it to her, most of my colleagues here know better and go to her directly, and she gets it solved. I just wanted to say publicly how much I appreciate the work that Betty Ann Hicks does in my office to help make my work go very well but more importantly, again, for the people of Alberta because she is the person who channels the Department of Justice work in and through my office. We've had, I think some time ago, well over 10,000 action requests come through our doors and into the department: a phenomenal amount of work that's done.

Mr. Chairman, having said that, I don't know if there's much more to say about the Department of Justice, but I will try to provide a brief overview of the department—and don't anybody yell: too late—because there are so many exciting things to talk about in Justice.

Time won't permit me to provide sufficient detail or to answer all questions, so I'd be more than happy to respond in writing to anything that requires a detailed response or, quite frankly, that I forget the answer to.

Having made that commitment, let me just do a brief overview of the department and where we're going. Mr. Chairman, I'm sure you will wave at me as I move close to the time frame when I'm supposed to quit. Strategic direction, though. The Minister of Environment will really appreciate this because I know how much he appreciates the concept of strategic thinking and strategic direction. Having done the water for life policy, which is one of the finest pieces of policy work in government, I know that he'll appreciate . . .

Dr. Taylor: Justice does an excellent job.

Mr. Hancock: I knew you'd believe that.

Last year the Financial Management Commission, Mr. Chairman, called on the government to clearly articulate a strategic plan for achieving a sustainable economic vision for the province. In February through the Speech from the Throne and the Premier's television address Albertans were provided with a big-picture view, a long-term view of the government's renewed vision and 20-year plan. On March 19 that plan was released to the public, and it was included in the business plans of government that were released.

The 20-year plan lays the groundwork for growth and prosperity for our province in the future, focusing on the four pillars of unleashing innovation, leading in learning, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. Mr. Chairman, it will come as no surprise to colleagues that Alberta Justice and Alberta Solicitor General along with their partners focus primarily on that last pillar: making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit.

One key way that we help to ensure that we work toward making this province the best place to live, work, and visit is through a solid and focused business planning process. You'll notice that along with other government ministries, the format of the Alberta Justice business plan has changed to better reflect strategic priorities and the commission's recommendation of improving the business planning process.

It's with little doubt that governments of today must be more forward looking and policy driven than ever before. As we move into the 2004 to 2007 business cycle, we continue to set our policy-driven course, one that identifies significant opportunities and challenges, one that's guided by best practices and lessons learned, one that helps us to better identify the ministry's strategic priorities while at the same time working to achieve the government's overall strategic plan.

8:20

As I said before, our primary outcome is seeking safe communities. Our strategic business planning and budgeting are all guided and focused by this outcome. Often when speaking to staff in the Department of Justice, I indicate to them that each of us in whatever job we're doing has to be able to answer the question: how does what we do help us to achieve safer communities?

You'll notice that this year our department has an updated mission and vision statement. We believe that these changes better reflect the role the government plays in Alberta and that this will better direct our department to meet Albertans' justice requirements. Our new vision statement, Mr. Chairman: "A fair and safe society supported by a trusted justice system." To support this our new mission statement is:

To protect the rights of all citizens and advance the goals of society by fostering: Safe communities; Access to justice; Respect for the law; Understanding of, and confidence in, the justice system; and the legal foundation for social cohesion and economic prosperity.

This year we've also aligned our core businesses more closely with six goals. Goal 1, "promote safe communities in Alberta," and goal 2, "work with Solicitor General to ensure victims have a more meaningful role in the criminal justice system," are under the core business of prosecutions, \$42.9 million, 15 per cent of our budget.

Mr. Chairman, I could go on and on and on about the goals in our department, and I would like to and I probably will over the course of the evening get into more detail about our goals because we have six goals. We have in those six goals strategic priorities, our strategic priorities being partnerships, families, victims, aboriginal policy initiative, Alberta children and youth initiative, public knowledge, business and policy practices, and organized crime and terrorism.

I am going to be delighted to come back to some of those items the next time I have an opportunity to speak because I'm just so very excited by the work that's done by the Department of Justice and the people in the Department of Justice, those some 4,000 people who work every day to make Alberta a safer place to live.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for the opening remarks from the minister. A special thanks to the staff who come out and join us in the evening. I can certainly see by the minister's remarks his genuine admiration and respect for the staff that support him.

If I might just launch right into the questions, Mr. Minister, I will do that. I will endeavour to give you page numbers that you can refer to, and of course where the detail is beyond instant memory recall, I'm happy to accept the answers in writing.

Generally speaking, what I'm seeing in the Justice budget this year is a minor increase. I think the total spending is up between 8 and 9 per cent overall, and I think that in past years I have called for most of those increases if not all of those increases to support the work that's being done. I think that in this department there are examples of where spending money saves money. We'll come to those later.

Into the detail of it. On page 261 of the estimates book under Ministry Support Services there's a reference under vote 1.0.4 to strategic services, and there's an increase there which is a significant increase.

Some Hon. Members: Free Oscar.

Ms Blakeman: Oh, I really don't like working Wednesday nights. There are all those events that the backbenchers are attending, and the minister is led off by some. It really makes it a special night in here, a very long night.

So directing our attention back. Vote 1.0.4, the strategic services. This budget went from \$6 million to \$7.9 million, a fairly significant increase just given the amount of the budget. Cross-government initiatives I think fall under this vote: freedom of information, information technology. But I'm interested in how the expenses break down under this particular vote. So if I could get a detailed breakdown with numbers attached of what is covered under this particular vote, what programs are covered, and what the allocation of the money is. How does that \$7.9 million break down?

Also on page 261 of the estimates, vote 1.0.6, management information services, there is a decrease. Not a lot of money; I'm

just interested in why. Has something been shifted or dropped or is no longer relevant or moved to a different area? What's happening?

The standing policy committee, which is vote 1.0.8. I'd like to get a detailed breakdown of how that \$98,000 is spent, please. What's salary? The chairperson of that committee gets a salary allocation out of this amount. What's that? Is there a vehicle included with that? What's the allocation for that? How much for the meals that the committee enjoys when they're meeting? How does this all break down, with details, please? I may bring forward an amendment later in the evening around that standing policy committee money.

Moving to page 262. Under Court Services, vote 2.1.1, which is program support services. This is an increase, and I'm looking for details on what the increase is covering.

Also, still on page 262, law libraries have dropped by 11 per cent or so. It's about half a million dollars, and I'm wondering why. Has there been a major change? It was over \$4 million; it's dropping to \$3.5 million. I'm just wondering why there's less money in there. Has something been moved, a program moved or transferred? What's accounting for that drop? I know the minister just launched the A-Link, and it's connected with providing information and researching. So has it been moved out of here and got its own line item, or is that what is accounting for the drop in the money? I'm always concerned when I see money going out of library allocations, so what are the details there?

The Calgary court operations, which is vote 2.2 and the subvotes therein, are up about 5 per cent, and Edmonton Court of Queen's Bench is up significantly more. Provincial Court is down a bit. Can you give me some explanation of what's happening with those increases? The 5.6 per cent could easily be cost of living or something, but it's almost a million dollars for the Edmonton Court of Queen's Bench, so I'm looking for what's happening there. Then the Edmonton Provincial Court is down by it looks like \$368,000. So what's happening there? Then when we get into the regional court operations, they're also up by 11.5 per cent. So if I could get the breakdown of the Edmonton, the Calgary, and the regional court operations and why they are respectively going up or down.

When we look at maintenance enforcement, appearing on page 264 as vote 3.0.5, the equipment and inventory purchases are going down. This may well be my standard question to the minister. He was asking if I'd have it on the record this year. Yes, I will. Where are we at with the implementation of the new computer systems? What's the \$1.4 million covering there under the equipment and inventory purchases? When I look up, I'm seeing a slight increase in the budgeted amount for maintenance, so I'm looking for what's happening there. Are we getting more staff in place?

8:30

While we're on maintenance enforcement, all of the standard questions that I usually have. What is the staff complement there now? How does it break down between the different areas? What is the breakdown of the collection rates? I'm still looking for a collection number that tells me the total amount of court-ordered support in Alberta. What is the total amount that the government is collecting? You can even do that by a monthly breakdown, but at the very least what are we looking at over the year?

So percentage collected against the total ordered, number of active files. Amount of arrears that are to be collected, because that's a figure that doesn't show up because it's not so much an active number. It's not rolling out every single month as a new number into the pot. Those arrears numbers often disappear. So where are we with arrears? How much of the arrears is subrogated to the government, and how much is not subrogated?

Where are we with the computer system, staff, and the office space? There was a problem – now, I'll admit that this was back when I first started about this, so we're probably five or six years back; it could be seven or eight years – where the office space was very cramped, and they'd been in the same place for some time. There was a desire to move them, and I think that did happen. But I'll just cross-check that. [interjections] Oh, yeah, that's right. Okay. That's why I was confused.

So we've actually decreased in the equipment purchases for maintenance enforcement. It was \$1.75 million last year; this year it's \$1.4 million. Is this the final instalment, then, for the upgrading of the equipment and the computer purchases? Where are we at with that? I'm looking for why the decrease and what the \$1.4 million actually represents.

On page 271 we've got the FTEs, and it looks like there are 53 new FTEs. Could I know where these FTEs have been allocated into the different programs that fall under the minister?

Now, I'm going to switch over to the business plan. Looking at page 321, under Crime Trends there's a discussion there of the "rising frequency of criminal activity on the Internet" presenting a threat to public safety. Could I get the minister to expand on that? It does go on later to talk about child exploitation including child pornography and Internet luring. [interjection] I'm sorry. Page 321 of the business plan under Crime Trends. I'd like some detail on what the department feels that they're dealing with here. What exactly are we talking about, and what kind of resources are going to be committed there? Is that where some of the 53 new FTEs are going? Is that where some of the increased funding is going? How does this start to roll out? If it's perceived as something that's affecting what the department is doing, then how? What is the department going to do about it?

On the same page, 321, of the business plan, a little further down under Crime Trends, it's talking about, "Substance abuse and related criminal activities, such as the presence of methamphetamine labs in Alberta, is also cause for concern." What I'm interested in here is: what piece of this is the Department of Justice taking?

Increasingly what I see are cross-ministry initiatives or the same issue turning up in more than one place. In this instance, just yesterday I was debating on the Solicitor General's budget, and a lot of these issues were coming up there, and it's sort of a cross-ministry initiative. But later when I go back and say, "Okay; where are we with this? Update it," or I try and track this down: "Well, it's not this department. Somebody has the lead on it. Well, talk to Health and Wellness. They're really, you know, doing something." Nobody seems to be where the buck stops. Who's the chairperson at the committee? Who's actually responsible for making sure that something is happening.

So specific to this concern about substance abuse and related criminal activities and the presence of these meth labs, what's the piece that the Department of Justice is taking? What's their responsibility? What are they responsible for? If I come back to you in six months and say, "Okay; you said you were doing this piece. Where are we with it?" I want to know what that piece is and, of course, what you're doing with it.

On page 322 of the business plan under Aboriginal Albertans – again, this is a repeat of things I've seen in other budget debates – there's a note that "the Aboriginal population is over-represented at all stages in the criminal justice system, both as victims and offenders." True, and we all know that. Again, what is this department's piece of that? What specifically are they doing to address that overrepresentation? What resources are dedicated to it? What kind of staffpower, staffing time, is dedicated to that? Where does it play into the decision-making of what the department is doing? I'll come

back to the piece around restorative justice and aboriginal concerns.

There's also on page 322 the issue of the single trial court. I know that this is a real interest for this minister. I, in fact, did follow through and used the federal freedom of information to get correspondence between the Minister of Justice and the federal Minister of Justice over this issue of a single trial court. Reading through that, there's an indication of some tension, and I would like to hear from the minister where he feels Alberta is on this. How far along the continuum are we to a single trial court? Are we 50 per cent of the way there? Twenty-five per cent? How far along the continuum are we? Is this still a concept that's being discussed, or have there been more concrete steps taken towards that?

And clarification of what the relationship is and it is expected to be between Alberta's justice system and the federal minister and the federal justice system. How are those two things starting to mesh together? Maybe they're not. Maybe what the minister will tell me is, "No. This is another one of the firewall issues, and we're going to go it alone, and we're well on our way there, and the discussions with the feds don't matter because we're going to go it alone," or whatever. But I'd like to know how far we are into implementation of this particular issue. I know that it's one that's very close to this minister's heart.

8:40

Could I also get an update please, on where we are with the unified family court implementation? This is noting that the public consultations were held in 2000, and there's been subsequent government response. We've had legislation passed in the House. Where are we with it? I'm just looking for an update or a status report, in essence: the resources that are dedicated to it, the number of staff, et cetera.

I'm going to stop there and let the minister respond on the ones that I've set out this far. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. We have a wide range of questions there. I'll do my best to see if I can hit on each of them to the extent that I can, and as I say, where I don't have an answer or don't give an answer, we'll try and respond later. I can't guarantee that we'll give answers to all of them. In some cases the questions were quite detailed, and I know that we don't necessarily maintain the information in the fashion in which the member has requested, but I think we can probably satisfy most of her concerns.

She started with item 1.0.4, strategic services, concerned about the increase in the budget. I can assure the hon. member that in this case the increase in the budget is primarily one of moving the place in which the resources are dealt with. So in the case of strategic services the increase of \$1,882,000 consists of the transfer of \$700,000 from maintenance enforcement with respect to the MIM system, maintenance information management system, and the transfer of \$762,000 from court services and criminal justice with respect to Justice's on-line information network. That's really just a realignment of resources to have strategic services deal with our information and data resources rather than have maintenance enforcement and court services and criminal justice deal with them. So it's really not an increase in the budget, at least not of any magnitude; it's really just a reorganizing to have them in a better place.

That would also answer the question as to why the maintenance enforcement budget, 1.0.6, went down.

With respect to standing policy committees and the detailed breakdown I have no problem with providing a breakdown of

expenses in that area to the extent that that's available. In a general sense, I believe the stipend for the chairman of the standing policy committee is \$15,000 a year. Maybe one of the chairmen of the standing policy committee could just nod if that was accurate. Yeah. I don't know off the top of my head whether or not they have a car potentially. I don't think they do. Yeah. They don't have a car. That was something, I think, that was changed a long time ago.

With respect to the budget for the standing policy committee, the \$98,000, as I say, about \$15,000 of that would go to the stipend for the chair, some would go to maintaining the office, and the rest, presumably, would go to supporting meetings and, as I mentioned, staffing the office. So that's probably most of the budget actually because there would be a full-time staff member allocated to the chair of that committee.

On the court services budget there was a concern about the drop in the library budget, and again I can assure the member that that's just a reorganization. Really, the \$458,000 decrease, or 11.3 per cent, represents \$152,000 due to the transfer of the responsibility for the Bowker library collection to civil law and the remainder due to indirect costs which are allocated to ticket processing. The member will know that we have a dedicated revenue process with respect to – I think it's 16.667 per cent of the revenue that comes in on traffic tickets or other tickets that is retained by the department for the purposes of enforcement because the volume was rising at such a rapid rate that we couldn't really keep up with it and we weren't getting the revenue necessary to put the people in place necessary to do the work. So we figured out how much the processing of traffic tickets was costing.

An Hon. Member: About a year ago.

Mr. Hancock: Yeah, that was last year. We figured out how much the processing of tickets was costing, and we raised the tickets by 20 per cent and then kept 16.667 per cent of the traffic ticket in order to run the system. Then we looked through our system for those costs which could appropriately be allocated to that side, and that's where you see a change here. So, again, it's not a big deal in the budget; it's just really allocating resources in the most appropriate places.

It is an indication of one of the overall issues – and I mentioned that when I was introducing the members of the department's executive team – in that it does take careful shepherding and looking at each of our resources to allow us to be able to do some of the innovative things that we want to do to provide better access to justice and make sure that we deal with those issues.

There was a comment that the courts went up by 5 per cent. In general, it won't surprise the hon. member that a lot of the increases in virtually any part of the department can be firstly looked at as being increases in services, because we have a very manpower-intensive department, particularly in the court services area. One bit of the court services increase that is new and interesting is that we will be doing some pilot projects.

One of the pilot projects, for example, is the introduction of a mediation process. We're hoping to pilot it in Edmonton and Lethbridge. Possibly, if we had the resources, we would pilot it in other areas, and I hope that we can move to get those resources in place early. To me this is a project that doesn't really need piloting. We know that it's going to be successful. We know that it's going to save people time, energy, and money, and we really ought to get at it, but the overall resources don't go up that fast. So it's hard to squeeze out resources to start a new project that we know is going to be successful and save people money but is not going to actually reduce any of our other costs in the system. It's just going to allow us to serve the system and serve the people of Alberta better.

So some of the increase in the court operations – for example, \$361,000 of that \$572,000 – is for pilot projects. I think that the budget for the mediation project is close to a million, a little over a million dollars. That accounts for a lot of the increase in the court services budget really: a few pilot projects.

We're trying some new things that we want to get up and running, and that increase in compensation, not the least of which is an increase in judicial compensation – in fact, if you look at the pilot projects, I think there's \$361,000 in Edmonton court operations and \$208,000 in regional, and I presume that if we add those together, that's \$569,000, which would be a good chunk of the budget that we expect for that pilot project amortized over the portion of the year that's remaining by the time we get it up and running.

Maintenance enforcement, one of our favourite topics. It's exciting. There are some really good things happening in maintenance enforcement. The hon. member asked about the increase in full-time equivalents, and I can say that I think the number is about 33 more staff in maintenance enforcement. We're doing that because we want to dramatically increase the results, not that the results are bad. The results are very, very good. In '02-03 we collected about \$147 million, which is a 78.4 per cent collection rate; in '03-04 it was up to \$153 million, or a 79.6 per cent collection rate. I think that in 2002-2003 it was \$147 million of \$187.4 million that we collected.

So the rates are good, but that means that there's still 20 per cent that's not collected. Now, some of that is not collectable; we understand that. People can't pay, or, you know, they don't have any assets, or they're impossible to find or whatever, but we still believe that there's a lot that can be done. So we've moved up in the maintenance enforcement from 151 employees with a vacancy of 20, because of budgetary reasons and others, to 184 full-time equivalents, fully staffed.

Moving through the training process with the new staff – I don't know. Have we completed the training program of the new staff yet? Almost completed the training on the new staff. I'm getting the high sign from Mr. da Costa, who's ably assisting me with this tonight.

8:50

That new staff will allow us to do a number of things. First of all, it's important that we keep our turnaround times manageable, that files are registered quickly when they're referred to us, that action starts early on files when they come in so that there's not an opportunity for arrears to build up. When we get information about the location of individuals that we need to start collecting from, we need to be able to act on that. Or where there are assets that we need to find, when we get information on that, we need to be able to act quickly. So it's important to have staff available and able to turn those files around quickly.

That sometimes has been a problem, but I have to say that I think the staff in maintenance enforcement has worked very, very well and very, very hard in this area. Sometimes I'd have to say that they've been overworked. The file load has been growing. It's an incredible task, but it's a very, very important one for Alberta's children. I just wanted to cover some of those items.

I know that the hon. member is always interested in what's happening in maintenance enforcement, and I can say – I mean, 48,400 account files of 95,000 clients, clients being both creditors and debtors. Mr. Chairman, more than 63,600 children are assisted by the work of the maintenance enforcement branch. So to provide that kind of service to that number of clients and that volume of work, it's essential for us always to look for new and more efficient and effective ways of conducting business: the 24-hour Internet, telephone access to account information, providing clients with an

account number and an access so that they can get on the Internet or they can get on the telephone line and find out what their status is.

The Help Us Find web page proved to be a very effective tool. As of February 2004, 70 per cent, 45 of the 64 debtors posted, have been located thanks to tips received through the web site. Mr. Chairman, I think that's a great success. I make no apologies for putting pictures up on the web site and asking the people of Alberta and people, quite frankly, around the world, because the web site is accessible to anybody, to help us find those people so that they can be reminded that they have to maintain their responsibility to their children.

Maintenance enforcement has reciprocal enforcement agreements with all other provinces and territories of Canada as well as 25 other jurisdictions including the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Australia. We enforce on behalf of those jurisdictions, and we ask those jurisdictions to enforce on our behalf. Again, that works well, and members will know that we passed new reciprocal enforcement legislation not that long ago – last fall I believe it was or last spring – to assist in making that process easier for Albertans.

The MEP accounts on-line and the MEP info line that I've spoken about allow clients to view payments and account balances, change addresses, provide information. A client satisfaction survey, Mr. Chairman, in the spring of 2003 showed that 73 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the quality of service that they'd received from MEP employees, an increase from the 56 per cent satisfaction rate recorded in 1999. I think that's phenomenal. When you're talking primarily about people who either are not getting their payments on a timely basis or are being asked to make their payments on a timely basis – those are our clients – and we have 73 per cent of respondents who are satisfied, I think that speaks to the quality of the people who are working in maintenance enforcement for Albertans.

The maintenance enforcement program funding increased by \$2.9 million over the 2004-2005 year. This funding will enable us to recruit new collection officers, pursue field investigations to locate debtors, accept payments at Alberta registry offices, pursue other initiatives that improve services for program clients. It will allow us to hire additional staff, as I mentioned, and improve services that promote compliance with court-ordered maintenance and ensure that more support actually reaches Alberta families.

The hon. member asks annually about the progress on the MIM system, the maintenance enforcement computer system that's been redesigned over the course of the last four years, and she's absolutely correct in her surmise that the \$1.4 million that's in the budget this year is the last portion of that project. That project will be in place, up and running this fall. In September all MEP staff will be trained in preparation for MIMS to launch on-line, which is scheduled for October 2004. Hopefully, if I'm so fortunate as to be able to present estimates again next year, the hon. member will not need to ask. She'll know because the information that we're getting from that system will be so valuable to us.

Maintenance enforcement. Just to give you an idea, in the current fiscal year to date each month on average maintenance enforcement has received and disbursed approximately 64,200 payments. Maintenance enforcement received approximately 10,900 correspondence items. The client services centre responded to more than 13,500 calls. The MEP info line received more than 112,400 calls. Internet service and MEP accounts on-line were accessed more than 46,300 times. So, Mr. Chairman, I think it's fair to say that the modest budget that's provided to the Department of Justice and particularly maintenance enforcement does good work for Albertans.

The hon. member asked about office space. As far as I know, we did change office space shortly before I became minister. When I

went over there – and it's too long ago that I made my last visit over there; I'll have to go over there again – we'd just moved into and changed a lot of the space. Space is always an issue. I don't know that I can say that we don't have an issue with space, but I haven't heard of that being a high priority recently, so I think we're probably in good shape there.

The specific information that was requested with respect to arrears: I'll have to leave that and see if there's anything further that I can add in that regard.

With respect to crime trends and the rising incidence of Internet crime the hon. member I'm sure is aware that we have a dedicated prosecutor – I believe it's Steve Bilodeau, who's dedicated to Internet crime prosecution. His job is to work with police in the area of Internet crime to help ensure that we know how to put together the files most appropriately so that we can pursue and achieve convictions. He works with other prosecutors across the province in that same regard – train the trainers, so to speak – to make sure that we have the knowledge base that's necessary.

In the area of Internet crime, Mr. Chairman, I think it's really important for us to recognize what an absolute scourge this is.

Mr. Smith: Scourge?

Mr. Hancock: It's a scourge. It is.

The bottom line, Mr. Chairman, is that we have an Internet which is a very, very valuable tool that we get all sorts of good information on. It can be used for many, many positive things. We're putting a SuperNet across the province so that people can have access to high-speed Internet, can download all sorts of material. But one of the problems with it is that there's a whole lot of material on that Internet that ought not to be downloaded, ought not to be uploaded, ought not to be on the Internet at all.

We're talking about child pornography. We're talking about some of the most disgusting things that you might see. In the past, one hopes, they would have been limited to those squalid bookstores that people could find in perhaps seedier areas of town, and those that wanted to go there could go there and get this seedy stuff. But now it's accessible on the Internet. Of course, if it's child pornography, then we have to really be alert to that, and we have to be able to do something about it.

We need to be able to prosecute. We need to be able to put those files together. We need to co-operate with other jurisdictions. We need to work together to get best practices, and we need to work with people in the IT community. So I was really pleased about a month and a half ago, two months ago, when the president of Microsoft Canada, for example, was in Alberta here in the Legislature and met with the standing policy committee to talk about the Be Web Aware campaign, about how Microsoft, as a company that makes a great deal of money off the Internet, understands that there's a social responsibility that it has to work to keep things like child pornography off the Internet and to reduce the access and to really try and deal with this area of Internet crime.

9:00

The Be Web Aware campaign is so important that I asked each of my colleagues, and I don't know whether I asked the members of the Liberal opposition or the ND opposition, but if I didn't, I should have, and I'll send them a copy of it, to send a letter to each of the schools in their area to let them know about the problem of Internet luring – and I'll quit in just a second here when I finish this sentence, Mr. Chairman, because it's just too important to stop in the middle of, and I'm sure the hon. member won't mind if I just finish this – and the Be Web Aware campaign and the need for us to be

aware that every, every day children across this province, children in this city and all cities across the province, are communicating with others, and those others may not be who they say they are.

They're communicating over the computers, and they're agreeing to meet people. I don't have the statistics right at hand now, but it's a very, very big concern. So when we have in our business plan that "criminal activity on the Internet presents an increasing threat to public safety," Mr. Chairman, it does that, and it does that in spades. We have to be ready for it, and we have to work at it.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Chairman, I'll try to be brief. I notice that there's some advantage to being very interactive with the chair. You get half a minute extra if you really make an appeal for it. I'm very pleased about it, as it's possible to negotiate some time that way.

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to rise and take part in the estimates debate for the Department of Justice, and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General is always forthcoming with information, with some consultation on various initiatives that he undertakes. All of this is appreciated on this side of the House.

Lots of specific questions about the numbers in the budget have already been raised, but one question that has not been addressed – I haven't heard it addressed, but it certainly is on my mind – is with respect to the legal aid line item there. There's an increase in the budget of about \$3 million. Now, I know from previous years that there used to be a concern about the low payment rates to members of the legal community who provided legal aid services, so it's possible that those rates have been adjusted and part of the costs resulting from that adjustment may be reflected in this increased portion of the budget.

The other possible explanation of this may be the larger number of cases in which legal aid is being requested, so that increase in numbers may explain it. I'm just surmising, so if the minister would have more specific answers to what accounts for that increase, I'd appreciate getting some information on that. It's about a 10, 12 per cent increase; closer to 12 per cent. So I just wondered if the minister would kindly shed some light on that, please.

There is another question that I have. There was \$13 million, I guess, transferred from the federal government in terms of funds. I noticed some were here. Are federal transfers targeted to legal aid, or how does the money come? I'm just wondering about that. If the minister would please give me some idea about that.

A couple of other questions here. Motor vehicle accident claims, under expenses, an item that in previous years I've not paid attention to, I must confess. A considerable amount of money in terms of program expenses, about \$27 million. Some comments on that just to tell me what these expenditures entail. Why those expenditures?

Court services, \$117.4 million, is close to \$7 million more. I wonder if court services includes the salaries of judges and justices or not and whether this increase reflects the government's decision with respect to increases to those salaries. If they are included in here, the minister would, I'm sure, like to comment on that. So these are some of the specific questions.

I have a few others. I may as well, to save time, put those questions now to the minister, and he can choose to answer them either now or later. In the business plan, the minister has done a good job of drawing the attention of this House and Albertans to some sobering facts. I'm referring to statements included on pages 321 and 322, significant opportunities and challenges. Looking at page 322, the references made to aboriginal Albertans and their contact with the justice system, I think the reference is made there that "approximately one-third of admissions to custody in Alberta were of Aboriginal descent." Now, does custody mean people who are in provincial prisons, or does it include people who are in remand centres?

My understanding was that up until a couple of years ago the percentage of aboriginal prisoners in provincial jails who had been sentenced was close to 40 per cent. I wonder if the minister would confirm that. Regardless of whether it's one-third or more, it certainly is quite a disturbing statistic. All of us, I know, have concern. It's a persistent number that appears year after year and is a source of concern, I'm sure, to everyone. The minister's reflections on it would be appreciated.

Also, on the community issues at the bottom of the page, "incidence of impaired driving is increasing compared to the rest of Canada." I suppose it's not just an absolute or gross increase. It's an increase per 100,000 or whatever, so it's comparable with other jurisdictions.

There can be a whole number of reasons, I suppose, for it, but does the minister have some idea about why it might be? Is it the proliferation of our access to liquor because of the proliferation of liquor stores across the province? Certainly, in the cities that's much more easily available now than was the case before. Is it just access? Is it consumption or something else that's leading to it? Is it an infestation of irresponsible drinking here in Alberta? If so, why? I'm just wondering if the minister has some thoughts on it that he'll want to share with us. This news, the increase in numbers, certainly is not welcome news. Clearly, all of us would agree.

9:10

Family violence is another issue that the minister brings up under community issues. It continues to be a serious problem. What kind of co-ordinated efforts are underway or is the minister proposing in order to put a dent into that particular challenge or problem?

These are some of the general sorts of observations that I have here. I do want to commend the minister and his department for putting these matters up front and not being either silent about them or pushing them in some sort of little corner where they're less visible for readers or for us to look at.

Now, some questions. I've got about, I think, four or five. I'll put them before the House and the minister, Mr. Chairman, and then let him address them in whatever order he chooses to. The Calgary court centre certainly is being funded by Infrastructure, so there's no direct reflection here in the budget, I guess, on that, but the sole tenants of this new facility will be the court system. Certainly, the concern has been expressed by the judicial and legal community that as a result of scaling back the project in an attempt to stay within the budget, the court facilities will be inadequate to meet the medium to longer term needs of Calgarians. Does the Minister of Justice share this concern?

Does the Minister of Justice agree with some comments made yesterday by the Premier, who attributed the concern about security and other improvements to the court centre project as rather exaggerations, which he attributed to the judges and the legal community? Does he share the Premier's view here that the problem is being overblown by the judicial community? For security areas there's a real problem. I think it's important that we be assured that security will be good. Are the concerns being addressed?

Another related question: what are the operational implications for the court system in light of the fact that there'll be insufficient space within the downsized Calgary court centre to accommodate the Court of Appeal? I know that at one time the minister was very excited about the possibility that every level of court would be housed in the same structure. It seems that because they're scaling back, that won't be the case. So what are the operational implications of that?

Moving on to the next question, about the unified family court. In the business plan the minister makes reference to single-trial

court. I guess in our meeting where the opposition Justice critics were at the table in the minister's office, he did at that time also share information about his desire to move forward with the unified family court. Now, there are obviously underway consultations with the federal government. A question: has the Minister of Justice determined whether any cost savings will be achieved by these initiatives? Within what time frame would these initiatives be put in place? Is there any resistance to this initiative on the part of the minister from any quarters in face of the firewall initiatives that seem to be, once in a while, cropping up in the government circles or in the caucus?

Next set of issues. The Premier and the government ministers have talked about challenging the federal government across a range of hot-button issues. These issues include legal challenges to the single-desk powers of the Canadian Wheat Board, the proposed federal legislation to allow same-sex marriages, and possible challenges to the universality and accessibility principles of the Canada Health Act. How does the Minister of Justice normally budget for such challenges? How does the minister make sure that any such challenges have a reasonable likelihood of success to ensure that money to cover legal and court expenses isn't simply wasted to pursue a political rather than legal agenda? I must confess that the question is sensitive. I can't guarantee that it's not somewhat political in nature, but certainly the whole controversy over these issues is political, so I can't avoid this. I want to be up front with the minister on this.

In the current budget is there an allowance made? I thought there was some on legal services or legal costs, \$7 million extra there. Would the minister indicate if he has allowed for these possible expenditures in the current year's budget?

My question is with regard to the public confidence in the justice system under the performance measures there on page 330, the two categories of "some confidence" and "a lot of confidence." I suppose there's a difference between these two responses, some confidence and a lot of confidence in the justice system. When the categories are collapsed, I guess the number comes to about 80 per cent, 79 per cent, as indicated under the performance measure. Would the minister have a breakdown on the two sets of numbers that have been put together to get the 79 per cent figure? What percentage of Albertans have only some confidence and what percentage of Albertans have a lot of confidence in the justice system? He would appreciate that certainly the confidence of the people of Alberta in the justice system is a cornerstone to their sort of commitment to the rule of law and their trust in the system as such. So I'd like to get the breakdown, if there is one, in order to assess better the degree to which Albertans have some concerns about whether the system really does the work it's supposed to do.

Last question is judicial compensation. Several weeks ago the minister announced that he was not accepting the recommendations of the Judicial Compensation Commission when it comes to salary adjustments of Provincial Court judges. It does raise the question of the whole rationale behind the appointment of the Judicial Compensation Commission if its recommendations are not to be followed. Isn't the minister concerned that any savings in terms of salaries to judges would be temporary should this decision be challenged in the courts?

I'll stop, Mr. Chairman, with those questions and let the minister respond.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you. I think the hon. member does deserve a response to many of those questions. I'll try to move quickly

through them. Legal aid budget was his first question. If I remember correctly, there's about \$3.1 million additional to that budget, and that, as I recall, is a flow-through from a federal contribution. We have a three-year agreement, I think it is, with the federal government with respect to a contribution for legal aid, and I think, subject to somebody nodding at me, that it's about \$3.1 million that the federal government is supposed to contribute this year, which will flow through to the legal aid budget as an investment fund. However, that doesn't speak to the fact that we have increased the legal aid budget over the last number of years in accordance with an agreement which we had with the Law Society and the Legal Aid foundation, and we have increased rates, not as high as some would like but certainly, I think, high enough to ensure that there are quality legal services available.

9:20

There are other exciting things that have been happening on the legal aid side; for example, the family law clinics in Edmonton and Calgary, where I think we're working very, very well at providing family law advice to people who need it from a clinic basis rather than on a certificate basis. I think we're coming close to the end of that original pilot, but my understanding is that it has been well received, it works very well, and it's something that we would want to continue. Quite frankly, I think it provides a model, although it may cause more problems than I'm solving by saying so, if we were able to move forward and look at providing that type of legal aid service in that manner in other areas of the law as well.

Motor vehicle accident claims. The hon. member didn't really ask a question on it other than just to ask for a comment. Yes, we budget about \$27 million. That's a statutory amount, as I recall it, that's put in, not a program amount. We, I think, typically in each year spend about \$23 to \$24 million. It's basically uninsured motorists.

People pay a registration fee – the Minister of Government Services can correct me if I'm wrong – of about \$65 a vehicle, I believe. About \$10 of that is nominally allocated towards the motor vehicle accident claims fund, I believe. I could be wrong on that, but we build the fund. Up until last year the nominal allocation from the motor vehicle fund covered only about \$13 million of the expenditure every year. We did increase the motor vehicle registration last year, and some of that increase is allocated, again nominally because it all really goes through general revenue – we don't have a separate fund any more – towards the concept of paying that motor vehicle accident claims fund. As I said, the motor vehicle accident claim process essentially affords an opportunity for people who are injured in a motor vehicle accident to make a claim against the fund if the person that caused the damage is either unknown or uninsured.

It's an important service to provide. I think there is a limit to compensation in a motor vehicle accident claim of about \$200,000, so it's not a bottomless pit, but it's some compensation for people who can't find who hurt them or if the person who hurt them is not able to pay. Of course, we have then some subrogated claims. In other words, we pay the claim, but then we go and collect from the people who caused the damage if we can find them and if they're in a position to pay. So we do follow up on that.

Court services' \$7 million increase: does that include judges' salaries? Yes, of course it includes judges' salaries for the Provincial Court. Salaries for Queen's Bench and for Court of Appeal are paid by the federal government because they're section 96 judges. Judges of the Provincial Court are paid from this budget, and of course the whole administration of the courts at all three levels is paid from this budget.

We did have the Judicial Compensation Commission for judicial

salaries for the Provincial Court effective April 1, 2003. In the past we've done them on a three-year basis. We've made some changes, and we hope to do them on a four-year basis in the future once we can get the cycles aligned. It's an important process, the whole question of paying judges and how much they should be paid. We have a very, I think, difficult paradigm here that we need to deal with. That is that government has to be accountable to the public for the public's resources. The government has to be able to respond and set priorities in terms of where those resources are allocated. Yet in this one area we have the concept developed through cases to the Supreme Court of Canada of a judicial compensation commission in order to ensure the independence of the judiciary.

It's my personal view only that independence of the judiciary is well maintained at the salary levels that we have now achieved, both at Provincial Court and at Queen's Bench and Court of Appeal. That's not a significant concern any longer, so the main concern now is not, in my humble opinion, the independence of the judiciary but rather whether the judiciary is paid appropriately for the work that they're doing and how we account to the public for the priority in terms of increased resources that are put in that direction as opposed to where else those resources might serve the public. That's the balance that we have to try and achieve.

In this year the Judicial Compensation Commission was appointed and reported in December and then, with some amendments, reported again in January. We had 90 days to respond to that. We looked very thoroughly at the Judicial Compensation Commission's report. They made many determinations, or recommendations, based on their analysis and comparisons with judicial salaries across the country, where they thought federal salaries might go, and the comparisons to salaries in the private sector. But we had to look at that and say with respect: we don't agree. We agreed that there needs to be an increase. The position that we had put on the table, which we thought was a fair position, would have allowed for 3 per cent increases in each year, which would have been similar to what other people in the Alberta economy are achieving and what other people working for the public in Alberta, government staff, are achieving. We thought that was an appropriate determination.

The compensation commission obviously didn't agree with that and came forward with rather more significant increases, and we couldn't in all honesty justify those kinds of increases when you look at the priorities that are available for Albertans and the expenditure of resources of Albertans and the accountability that we have to Albertans for those resources.

However, we did take some direction from the commission in looking at what they determined, what they looked at. So we modified our position in looking at that information and the information that had been received after we had put our position in relative to what the Judicial Compensation and Benefits Commission in Ontario came down with and the positions being put forward by both the judicial side and the government of Canada with respect to the quadrennial commission, and we said: "Well, the last time increases were made was, I believe, 2000. So if you take the 3 per cent concept, that could be 9 per cent in the first year and 3 per cent or so for the second and third year."

That would get provincial court judges into the \$200,000 range, which by any measure is a very decent salary, very comparable to what people might expect in the private sector, and recognizes the fact that when you look at salaries and when you look at how much you need to pay in order to attract competent people, there is no shortage of very competent people who are applying to serve on the Provincial Court or Court of Queen's Bench, for that matter. There's no shortage of people who would like to move to that sort of a challenge and like to make that kind of a contribution in our

society. The salaries are certainly not driving people away. There's nobody quitting because they're not being paid enough. In fact, the evidence at the hearing was such that most people didn't put forward salary as the reason they were going to the bench. They were interested in the challenge. They were interested in providing that type of service. They were interested in a change from what they were doing now.

Also, I guess the other thing which I think is well enunciated in the reasons that we provided with the order in council would suggest that sometimes in looking at the salary ranges and comparing to what lawyers make in the private sector, it may not be appropriate to look at the 75th percentile of all lawyers between 45 and 55 who earn more than \$50,000 and narrow that pool of people that you're comparing to down to that and then say that that's the level at which you should be paying judges, because it ignores the fact that those people, first of all, don't have pensions. They have to contribute to their own pension plan, and there's an analysis in the reasons that we gave to deal with that. It ignores the fact that those people are at the peak of their earning power and likely are going to decline in later years. Of course, once you're appointed to the bench, your salary doesn't decline in later years. It ignores the fact that there are billing and collection and economic implications with respect to private-sector salaries such that while Alberta is in a great position now and people are doing well, that's not always the case. It ignores the fact that some of those people that you're comparing to are actually in mergers and acquisitions in Calgary and are being paid at a very, very high level and are not the regular lawyer.

So there are all sorts of things that we looked at and said: while this process was set up in order to ensure an independent process for determining judicial salaries, this process has achieved that. Salaries are not a problem across this country with respect to judicial compensation. You do have to look and say: how much is enough? You do have to as a government, I think, from time to time stand up and say: "There has to be accountability for the public's resources back to the public. The buck actually stops here. It doesn't stop at the Judicial Compensation Commission."

For those and the other reasons enunciated, the judicial salaries were dealt with in the way that they were. We'll have to accommodate the increase in salary within our budget, and if that doesn't prove doable, we'll have to ask for some money to cover it. Particularly because we're in this year, we'll have to pay for last year as well as this year, so we'll have to deal with that double-up. That's about a \$6 million touch that we'll need to deal with. Of course, we won't want to back away from any of the important and progressive changes that we're making in access to justice in order to accommodate that.

9:30

The hon. member raised a question about aboriginal Albertans and the prevalence of aboriginal Albertans in our jail system. I have to say that while the custody in jails and those areas fall within the Solicitor General's area, certainly we've been doing a lot of things in the Justice area. This may answer some of the questions the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre raised earlier about cultural awareness for prosecutors. Many if not most of our prosecutors have now gone through awareness training.

We have a number of different models of aboriginal courts, not the least of which, of course, is the Tsuu T'ina court and peacemaker system, which will be under review this year because it's been up and running for a few years, but other models as well and initiatives taken by the Provincial Court, by individual judges of the Provincial Court in some areas dealing with First Nations that they either sit on or near in working with people in those communities to deal with some of these issues. This is a very important area.

I went through my first year of university in 1972. One of the first papers I wrote – I think it was the first paper I wrote – was in a sociology class. [interjection] Yes, in 1972. Your hair was probably already grey by then.

In any event, it's a very serious topic. The first paper I wrote was on the overrepresentation of aboriginal people in the justice system, and the numbers were about the same. I believe it was about 36 per cent. It hasn't changed much. We have to do more in that area.

We are co-chairs with the minister of aboriginal affairs in the cross-government initiative on the aboriginal policy framework and aboriginal policy initiatives. I'm very pleased, actually delighted that the aboriginal policy framework came forward, because we initiated that when I was in the ministry of aboriginal affairs. It was one of the things that I felt was very important. One of our cross-government goals was that aboriginal people should have the same socioeconomic status as all other Albertans. We've got a lot of work to do in that area, and Justice is playing its part in that area.

The Member for Edmonton-Centre was asking questions about what specifically is Justice's role and that sort of thing. Fortunately or unfortunately, it doesn't really parcel out that way. I think these are things that we have to work together at in terms of capacity building, in terms of education, in terms of helping people to have the opportunity and the ability to meet the opportunities to have better economic status. Those are all factors in the equation.

But for Justice's part, dealing with people who come into contact with the law and come into contact with trouble in the many ways that we are dealing with it, whether it's the Tsuu T'ina court or whether it's the work that His Honour Judge Bradley was doing in Alexander and other areas in the north, there are many different ways in which we've brought the aboriginal equation into the context.

We have the Justice Policy Advisory Committee, which is the old steering committee from the justice summit. First Nations and Métis people are represented on that committee and provide us with input there. At one point we had started a First Nations advisory committee and a Métis advisory committee. Those didn't take off, but there's now some interest in re-establishing those and getting more directly involved with First Nations and Métis settlements in finding better ways to deal with issues and problems in those communities.

With respect to impaired drivers and the increase in impaired driving, Mr. Chairman, I think it would be folly to say that that's a result of the increased access to liquor. I'm not an expert in the area of what's causing it. I think it's fair to say that our economy is growing at a rapid rate. We have more and more young people coming in. We have a lot more access to dollars. We have a lot more cars on the road. There are all sorts of factors that go into this. The thing that we have to do is to continue the efforts that have been engaged in by many people. We have a cross-ministry initiative with the Solicitor General's department and the Department of Transportation, the three departments working together, to find better ways to deal with impaired driving.

One of the things that we're going to be doing – I mentioned this in December – is that we're looking very strongly at the whole question of how we deal with people who seem to have no respect whatsoever for the law, who break it on an ongoing basis, and how we could perhaps deal with them as dangerous offenders. I made no secret of the fact that I don't believe that conditional sentences should be accorded to impaired drivers who cause death or serious injury for that matter.

I think enforcement is important, being able to make sure that people on our streets know that there's no tolerance for impaired driving, that endangers the lives of people in our community, that makes our community less safe. So we're going to be dealing with that, and we're working very hard on that, as I say, with three ministries focusing in that area.

Family violence is a very, very important subject, so important that the Minister of Children's Services and I chaired a round-table on family violence at the Progressive Conservative convention this weekend. Of course, there have been round-tables hosted across the province which will culminate in a round-table in Calgary, a province-wide one, on I think it's May 7, whatever the Friday is there. That's a very, very important initiative which is being headed up by the Minister of Children's Services, who's got the office on family violence in her portfolio, an area, again, of a cross-ministry initiative where there are nine or 10 ministries participating because it is so important.

We have got to bring out of the closet and into public discussion the damage that's being done by domestic violence in our homes and in our communities. If our goal at Alberta Justice is to have safe communities – and one of those things is that people have to feel safe in their homes – we have to be talking about domestic violence, and then we have to be doing something about it. So I'm glad the hon. member raised that.

We have a partnership in Calgary with the HomeFront project. We have allocated resources to that, and we've encouraged other departments to do that. I'm really pleased that Health and Wellness has put forward money through the mental health budget. Some people don't like the fact that it comes from the mental health budget. I don't care where it comes from as long as we have the resources to provide treatment services to people, to both offenders and victims in the domestic violence program in Calgary, the HomeFront project.

We've got dedicated domestic violence courts in Edmonton and Lethbridge. We're moving ahead, and we're going to be making some exciting announcements in that area in the next week or so with respect to new initiatives that we're taking with respect to the whole violence area.

Calgary courts. I don't know how much time I have left. One minute? I'll come back to that very important topic the next opportunity that I have, as I will to the questions that were raised by yourself and by Edmonton-Centre with respect to the unified family court and the single-trial court process and those all-important topics of court challenges in areas that are important to Albertans such as health care reform, same-sex marriage, universality of health care, and single desk.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to get this chance to participate in the budget estimates debate for the Department of Justice this evening. Certainly, the hon. minister talked earlier regarding I believe it was put this way: the restructuring of the Alberta courts. I am wondering if this is going to be his legacy as Justice minister and how all this restructuring is going to work. I have a number of questions, and I would appreciate answers.

What studies have been completed on behalf of Alberta Justice regarding this notion not of a unified family court but of a unified criminal court? What exactly is the proposal by the hon. minister to unify the courts of this province? Is this, as I said earlier, his own legacy project? How do the Chief Justice of Alberta, the Chief Justice of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench, and the Chief Justice of the Provincial Court feel about this proposed restructuring that you mentioned earlier? Following that, what position would the federal Justice minister have on this issue? Again, how does the Canadian Bar Association feel about the restructuring of the court system in this province? This is specifically on the unified criminal

courts or one-stream court system, whatever is being proposed over there; I'm not so sure.

9:40

The minister was talking about his first study in 1972. What studies has the Canadian Bar Association prepared, if any, in regard to the streamlined court systems, and can that information be provided to us if they do have any studies or any other studies that may exist on this matter? I would love to read them, and I would.

Now, if the criminal courts were united – the hon. minister talked about section 96 judges, and I find that quite odd. Is it correct that if this were to happen, the federal government would be responsible for judicial appointments? If that is correct, why does this government whine and snivel so often about federal interference in their affairs when there's the potential that they would give up the right to appoint some members of the judiciary in this province? I think it's a good idea that various governments appoint members of the judiciary.

Now, in the private/public partnership that is the courthouse in Calgary, is this initiative an indication of this hon. minister's and this government's commitment to this single criminal court or the restructuring of Alberta courts? Is this one of the reasons why we're so gung-ho about these private/public partnerships?

Yesterday the Premier was talking about not only the private/public partnerships and the cost overruns in the courthouse in Calgary but also about the revised plans, Mr. Chairman, of this court in Calgary. Apparently, there was going to be a reduction in some of the security measures, the building integrity was going to be changed, and there was to be an elimination of an 800-seat amphitheatre. The Premier was of the impression that this was for judges when they're sworn in and for their families and for interested members of the public. The Premier stated: there's no need for this. He stated, quote: they can use Government House. This was the Premier of the province yesterday, April 27, with a statement.

That worries me, and it concerns me – and I think it should concern the hon. minister as well – in regard to judicial independence. Public confidence is the foundation of judicial independence, and all judges must remain independent and free of any extraneous influences. For the Premier to make that comment that we could use Government House – it astonished me. I have to question if the Premier understands this principle of judicial independence to make that remark. I would like the minister's thoughts on this.

Now, what steps is this minister taking to ensure that the public remains confident in all levels of our court system and to ensure that they are remaining independent? It was after 1972 that the hon. minister went to law school, but the concept of judicial independence is a very important one, and I'm not going to say anything more on that. Specifically, what steps is this minister taking to ensure that the public remains confident in all levels of our court system?

Also, the faint hope clause. This comes up, and I would like to know if the minister is working with other jurisdictions to initiate some changes to the Criminal Code. Are you having discussions with other jurisdictions? I think the faint hope clause should not be used by some convicted criminals when their time is just about up for those crimes. I'm speaking of charges of sexual exploitation or contact with children. Perhaps murder could be incorporated into this. Are we looking at changing anything? [interjection] Of course, some hon. members over there may want to commit that act of murder on this hon. member. I certainly hope not. I certainly hope that's not what I heard.

Now, Mr. Chairman, that takes care of that series of questions, but another question is: who paid for the high-tech, secure courtroom that was built for the gang trial here in Edmonton last year? What

was the total bill, and which jurisdictions shared portions of that bill?

In his remarks earlier I was pleased to hear that the minister is very concerned about porn and its distribution. The porn industry – many people in this Assembly may not realize this – is larger in the state of California than some of the high-tech enterprises. It's an industry that's worth billions of dollars in North America. People in my community and across the province wanted leadership from this provincial government when there was a discussion about limiting where porn stores could set up.

It was my view that this government tried to pass the buck: it's a municipal issue, or it's this guy's issue, or it's that guy's issue. I was disappointed in that. I heard you tonight talk about porn and its distribution. Well, I want more action from this government on this matter and so do the constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar and so do the people across the province. We just can't say that, oh, it belongs in a seedy area or try to dismiss it in that way. In the next year I would appreciate more leadership from this minister in regard to that.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate getting those questions on the record, and I await the minister's response. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort wanted to ask a question.

Mr. Cao: Yes. Mr. Chairman, now we are in the process of business planning and the budget for the Justice department. The Justice department has done a great job for this province, and the staff of the department has administered the justice and the administration services very well.

The only thing that I have from my constituents is something to do with the pay for the Alberta courts interpreter and translator service. I believe that to administer justice is one thing but also to educate people about the laws of our land. Given that languages are needed to help the message be understood by those involved with the law, the service of interpreters and translators in Alberta courts becomes very important. It's not just a provision of fair, equal access to a trial, but more importantly it's a deterrent, a prevention factor through understanding.

As far as I know, the rate of pay is very low in comparison with the fee rates of other provinces and jurisdictions, such as the RCMP and WCB, who use translators and interpreters. So my constituents asked me to relay a message to the minister and the department to work on this issue, and I hope that in the detailed implementation of the business plan and the detailed budget items your department can look into such an increase in the rate of pay which is fair and equitable.

Thank you.

9:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, and thanks to the minister for allowing me to get a couple of other issues on the record and then turning the rest of the time over to him. I want to talk about two issues just in closing here. One is the funding of sexual assault centres in the province. I'm glad to see that I've got the Minister of Children's Services, the Minister of Justice, the Solicitor General, and the Minister of Health and Wellness all in one place at one time. This is another one of these sort of cross-ministry initiatives that requires everybody's co-operation, yet when I actually try and nail this one down, it's like trying to nail pudding. Nobody actually takes the piece of it that I need them to take.

What I've been looking into recently is that nobody takes responsibility for the operational funding for sexual assault centres in the province, which is a surprise. We all assume that that's done, you know, that the rent and the phone and the staff salary is all paid for, but that's not what's happening. What is happening is that there are a few little bits that are funded, but they're very restrictive pieces.

Yes, the upcoming May 7 round-table on violence is important, and I'm glad I get the opportunity to talk about this in advance of that meeting, but even in watching the run-up to that, sexual assault, the issue of sexual assault, the funding of sexual assault, treatment, and prevention, if that were possible, in Alberta is not a major component. If you read through the books and the workbooks that go along with it, there's a big emphasis on bullying, but occasionally you get "and sexual assault" thrown in after the fact. It's not being regarded as an integral component here.

The Solicitor General is paying for counselling around court appearances, and that's the piece that she's taking, but that doesn't cover a whole series of people that need counselling. For example, adult survivors of child sexual abuse are not in the court system. They're not about to be in the court system, and they can't get counselling paid for through that funding that's being provided by the Solicitor General.

The minister is referring to the report of the victims of crime consultation in his document on page 326, working with the Solicitor General on reviewing it, but I'm also looking for one of the four of you to take the lead on this issue.

Mrs. McClellan: I'll do it.

Ms Blakeman: The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development is offering to do it, and if she would, I would be very happy because then I know it would get done.

There needs to be a look at this and a clear commitment to funding, and whether each department wants to throw the money into a pot and have the minister of agriculture administer it or whether each of you is going to make sure you take enough of a piece that all things are paid for, fine. But there is such a hodge-podge quilting together of funding, and there's a huge hole in the middle of the quilt which is not paid for at all. So that's an issue I wanted on the record, and I'll look to further consultation from those four ministers to come, five including the lead that's being taken by the minister of agriculture.

Finally, I wanted to spend more time than I have talking about the role of mediation and restorative justice in the province. The minister in some cases is way ahead of everybody else, and I encourage him in that. We're using mediation in small claims, which is now called civil mediation. We're looking at it in a restorative justice concept, landlord and tenant disputes, and family mediation at this point.

I have a concern about the funding for the restorative justice centre in Edmonton. Their funding seems to have dried up. There was a commitment in '86 from the then Minister of Justice to take over the funding of that centre. It never quite got allocated and it's never happened. They've been living on seed funding repeatedly from a number of philanthropic foundations and organizations like the Rotary and the Muttart Foundation, and they're just not able and there was no intention and their funding programs are not set up to sustain over the long term that kind of funding. They had to shut down their victim offender mediation program this year. They ran that program from '94 to this year, 2004, and now they've shut it down. So they really are struggling for funding. We know it works, so where is the responsibility to take over and make sure that this can continue to be offered?

The second piece that I want to talk about there is around the funding, the payment allocation for mediators that are involved in this system. As this minister takes the lead on this and we end up with more mediators involved in the justice system—in other words, empowering people to work their own way out of their legal disputes, and that's a good thing. But what's happening is that the amount of money that the minister started out with is really poor. I think it said \$50 allocated for two hours.

There are two problems there. One, the \$50 is way too low for developing and maintaining a profession of mediators, not people that, you know, kind of do this as a sideline but people that are committed to this and are committed to professional upgrading and a profession and all that that entails.

The second part of that is the expectation that somehow this will be resolved in two hours. That is violating one of the basic principles of mediation, which is to stay at it. To look at some sort of closure rate as a success rate, a settlement rate as a measurement, is not a good way to measure because sometimes just getting the parties to understand or come to a point where they agree what the problem is is a huge step forward and will save the legal system a great deal of money.

When we look at what's being offered by mediation, restorative justice services, it can save the justice system so much, especially as we move forward. More people are coming to the courts to resolve. If we can move them off to the side, great. We can save a lot of money, but you need to invest some money here, and the rate that you're offering people is way too low. I'm sorry; I just had to get those two points in.

Thank you to the minister.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice in the three or four minutes left.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, Mr. Chairman. Sadly, only three to four minutes and so many good things to talk about, so much to pick and choose from in terms of the things that are exciting as we go forward into another year with Justice in Alberta and working with all of the stakeholders in our community and all of our community partners and forming partnerships and working with others so that we can promote, as the hon. member was just saying, ways of resolving disputes in our province in a way which is not adjudicated, which determines things at a point of time but is collaborative and empowers people with the tools that they need to solve their own problems and have lasting dispute resolution processes.

The collaborative law processes that are taking place across this province as we speak with family law lawyers making an agreement with their clients up front that they won't go to court, that they'll find an interest-based mediated solution: what a wonderful process. The dispute resolution officers in Calgary and the DROs in Edmonton. Family law lawyers who are donating their time to sit down with families in crisis really to help them come together, come to a resolution, and then if they can't come to a resolution, write up a consent order and take it into the court and get the endorsement of the court so that the solution will continue to hold long term, and helping children across this province in a very substantive way, donating their time. I think we ought to say a thank you to the family law lawyers for donating their time, both in Edmonton and Calgary, to those projects.

So many other ways that members of the community are getting involved in mediation processes or restorative justice processes that are so important, and I think we have to say thank you to the members of the community that are working together with Alberta Justice and other partners in the system to make the communities a safer place.

I would like to launch into a discussion of the Calgary court strategy, but all I'll have time to say is this. We've had 24 years of discussing the needs of the court system in Calgary. I don't think anybody should get excited about the fact that in this last month, when we're trying to get it to a close and get a shovel in the ground, there are some last-minute issues that have come up and that need to be dealt with. Twenty-four years is a long time. We've done yeoman work even in the last five years that I've had the portfolio. We've come to a solution. It's a good solution. We'll build a courthouse that people will be proud of, that the courts will be able to operate in. It will be functional. It will be effective. It will have enough space. The concerns of the court that we're not going to have enough space are not a problem.

10:00

The fact of the matter is that we will build a court facility in Calgary. We will do it right. It will be a good facility, it will be accessible to the public, which is the most important part of it, and it will house the Justice staff who administer the courts in an appropriate way. And, really, if there's one thing I could say about the Calgary court strategy that's more important than any of the others, it's that the people who work in the Department of Justice—the court clerks and the people who provide services across the counter, the people who service the public—will finally have a decent place to work when we get this building built.

Those are the things we should be focusing on. We don't need to be focusing on the question of whether we need to take the Court of Appeal out or leave the Court of Appeal in. That's not quite all that relevant. The Court of Appeal has a great place to sit now and will have a great place to sit for the next eight years. It's a great deal that they've got there. Quite frankly, we're the only province in the whole country where the Court of Appeal has two places to sit. So that's not the issue.

The issue is to get our trial courts together into an appropriate building so that people know where to find them, they have access to the court service staff who help them deal with their problems—the Family Law Information Centre, the associated Justice resources—it's made available to the public, they know where it is, it's an appropriate facility.

We'll do it the right way. We'll be very careful with the public's money when we build it. We'll be very, very concerned about getting the best bang for our buck. We'll look at it, whether it's a P3 or whether it's government built. Quite frankly, we've looked. We'll do it the best way we can. We'll make sure it's effective, and all those other things that people are talking about are not relevant. The most relevant thing is that court staff will be well housed, the public will be well served, they'll know where to find it, and it'll be done in an appropriate manner.

Mr. Chairman, I think that to focus on some of the questions—I mean, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona asked about security. Security is a very important issue, and we will not compromise the security of the court facility. We'll deal with security in an appropriate manner not just in the Calgary court strategy but across the province in the other courthouses. So it's an extremely important subject.

I could go on at length. I know that you don't want me to because the time is up, but I sure wish I had more time to tell the hon. members across who've asked about the Calgary court strategy what an important strategy it is and how well we're going to serve the people of Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I regret that we have to interrupt the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Pursuant to Standing Order 58(4), which provides for not less than two hours of consideration for a

department's proposed estimates, I must now put the question after consideration of the business plan and the proposed estimates for the Department of Justice and Attorney General for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$256,645,000
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The Chair: Shall the estimates be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm glad you recognized me. I have a few more things to say about the Calgary court strategy, but I gather you want me to move that the committee rise and report the estimates of the Department of Justice and Attorney General and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Ms Graham: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Justice and Attorney General: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$256,645,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? Carried.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 30
Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I go into third reading of Bill 30, I'd like at this moment, if I could, to introduce a good friend that is here this evening to witness third reading. He is Mr. Floyd Thompson, chairperson of the Kikino Métis settlement. He's seated in the public gallery, and I'd like all of my colleagues to join me in giving him a great warm welcome.

Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I rise this evening to move third reading of Bill 30, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004.

I have the privilege of representing two of the eight Métis settlements in Alberta. The Elizabeth and Fishing Lake settlements reside within the Bonnyville-Cold Lake constituency. Over the past seven years as an MLA I've had the opportunity of getting to know the Métis leadership and its membership, and I wish to thank them for their patience, hospitality, learning, and friendship.

Mr. Speaker, I also wish to recognize the present Minister of

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development and the two previous ministers of intergovernmental affairs responsible for aboriginal affairs, today's Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and today's Minister of Justice and Attorney General for having allowed me to work on their behalf on numerous committees relating to Métis governance. This has been a great experience that I will forever cherish. I hope that together with the Métis we have been able to make a positive difference as they move forward in their governance and prosperity on their respective settlements.

Many of the amendments in Bill 30 pertain to the structure and role of the Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal. In 1999 I had the pleasure of co-chairing with Mr. Fred Martin a committee which reviewed the MSAT structure and duties. Over the past year I have been involved in the consultation process on the remainder of the amendments. Mr. Speaker, I must be honest. At times it was a very challenging task. However, at the end of the day my heart tells me that the amendments will be for the betterment of individual Métis residing on settlements.

I wish to thank department staff Mr. Thomas Droege and Mr. Cameron Henry for their assistance, knowledge, and wisdom as we moved forward with this legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of the Assembly to support third reading of the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be brief in my comments on Bill 30 in third reading. Thank you for this opportunity to participate in the debate at this stage of the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004.

The Métis people have fought for generations, going back to the time of Louis Riel, for recognition of their collective rights to a land base and to govern themselves within that land base. The November 1990 legislation that led to the establishment of eight Métis settlements with powers similar to those of municipal governments was a significant achievement of the government led by former Premier Don Getty. While the government's motives in meeting the Métis settlements accord were not entirely altruistic given that the Métis in exchange put on hold some legal challenges for a share of resource revenues in northern Alberta, the establishment of the Métis settlements was in fact a significant step forward for the Métis people of this province.

10:10

I have also carefully reviewed the remarks of the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake at second reading and at the committee stage. It's apparent to me that some changes to the governance structure of the Métis settlements are warranted. For example, I understand that the requirement for unanimity of all eight settlements prior to any policy changes at the Métis Settlements Council would be an impediment to effective and timely decision-making.

The Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake indicated in his remarks in committee that consultations with the Métis settlements and the Métis Settlements General Council on Bill 30 have been taking place for a number of years. If this is so, Mr. Speaker, I can only express disappointment that a greater degree of consensus was not achieved with the Métis community prior to these legislative changes being brought forward.

Not long after Bill 30 was introduced, our office began receiving a steady stream of phone calls from representatives from both the Métis Settlements General Council and individual Métis settlements expressing concerns about some of the amendments being made. More importantly, however, the concerns are about the adequacy or lack thereof of the consultation process that was undertaken to bring these amendments about.

As a legislator, Mr. Speaker, I would have preferred a greater degree of consensus among those from the Métis community prior to making changes to the legislation that formed the basis for the self-governance. I would have similar concerns if amendments were being made to the governance powers of municipalities, for example, despite the opposition of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association.

I'm aware that the amendments to Bill 30 approved yesterday evening go some way to addressing some of the identified concerns. Nevertheless, this has not entirely alleviated my concern that by giving third and final reading of Bill 30 in the absence of a greater degree of consensus within the Métis community, we may be opening ourselves to problems down the road.

In conclusion, I can only urge the government to continue working hard to achieve this consensus prior to the changes in Bill 30 being proclaimed. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, and thanks for the opportunity to speak in third reading on Bill 30, the Metis Settlements Amendment Act, 2004. This is one of these bills that is a real struggle because it's not perfect. It's not addressing the concerns that have been brought forward by differing sides. Certainly, some people have written to the Liberal opposition indicating that they felt that there wasn't enough consultation or that they weren't included in the consultation, and that's a great concern for us. In this party that kind of dialogue is very important, and if we could possibly afford the time to work to a consensus-based agreement, that would be the ultimate.

The struggle for us is that we need to move forward. We need to see some move off of this sort of stasis. So it's one of those questions of half a glass is better than none or half a loaf is better than none, or is it? It's always that struggle. How long before we can get back to this and get what we want or, more to the point, get what the organizations want out of this. But when we look back and we're building on legislation from '89 and '99 and we're now five years later, are we going to make everybody wait another five years? I don't think so.

At this point we are willing to support this bill going forward. We recognize that it is not perfect. It is not what everyone wanted, but we believe that it's best at this point to pass the bill and to get that forward movement happening. We do charge the government to continue to work on this issue, and that's what's really needed here: to go at it with an open heart and an open mind and ears working in proportion to the mouth. At this point that's our position on it, and we're willing to support the bill in third reading.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake to close debate at third reading.

Mr. Ducharme: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 30 read a third time]

head:

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 28

Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal

of pleasure to rise and move second reading of Bill 28, the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004.

This bill expands the mandate of the act by allowing feeder pigs to be included under the act, allowing Alberta's hog producers to take advantage of Alberta's successful feeder association structure.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that many of the hon. members are unaware of Alberta's thriving feeder associations. In fact, Alberta's cattle and sheep producers have been availing themselves of this successful program for the past 66 years. Alberta currently has 61 associations with more than 7,500 active members.

Feeder associations work by allowing members of the association to purchase cattle and sheep for growing and finishing. Financial institutions lend money to feeder associations, which then in turn contract the livestock out to local producers, who feed and sell them. All of the loans to feeder associations are partially guaranteed by the province, often giving members a more competitive interest rate on contracts. The program also allows producers the ability to purchase animals at a much lower capital investment and utilize Alberta's abundant forage crops.

Alberta's successful feeder association program works directly with smaller producers who may not have the equity to acquire loans from banks to purchase animals. Mr. Speaker, this program directly benefits Alberta's family farms and small producers.

But why hogs, and why now? Simply put, Mr. Speaker, the hog industry has changed in the past few years. Previously all of the raising of the animals was done on one farm. Now Alberta's hog industry operates much like the cattle industry. Weanlings, or young hogs, are sold to a finishing operation, which raises them until they reach a slaughter weight.

It's appropriate that hog producers are allowed to access the same successful feeder association structure. It will make it easier for them to add value to farm feed grains and increase the competitiveness of Alberta's hog industry. I know that discussions are ongoing with Alberta producers and our present feeder associations to determine how hog producers will fit within the current program and what regulations need to be amended to reflect changes to our dynamic agricultural industry.

Mr. Speaker, allowing hog producers to take advantage of Alberta's successful feeder association structure will help our agricultural producers prosper. The hog industry is the second-largest feeding sector after cattle. Adding feeder hogs to the feeder association program is a positive move and will help to promote their growth and also help to add stability to their sector.

I urge every member to give this amendment their full support. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciated those comments from the hon. Member for Dunvegan. Certainly, I have a few questions in regard to Bill 28. I was looking through this year's government and lottery fund estimates to determine the exact cost of the operation of these feeder associations, and that would be my first question: what exactly is this costing us today? I thought I saw the sum of \$52 million in the budget estimates, but surely it cannot be that much.

10:20

However, when we're looking at this bill and we're contemplating adding hog producers to the feeder associations, I would like to know: how will this affect hog producers with regard to the CAIS program, or the Canadian agricultural income stabilization program?

I want further details on why we need this. What is the rationale for doing this? Certainly, fewer people are buying feeder pigs and feeder cattle. Most operations are farrow to finish. So we need more

explanation on this, please, hon. member. What is the expected number of producers who will be affected under these hog feeder associations?

Certainly, if those questions can be answered in detail in a satisfactory manner, hon. members on this side of the Assembly will contemplate full support of Bill 28.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise to speak to Bill 28 in its second reading. I'm looking at the news release of April 1, 2004, which is about the amendment that this bill is proposing to the Feeder Associations Guarantee Act. The amendment that's being sought by way of this bill proposes to of course expand the definition of cattle to include feeder pigs. Previously the act only covered cattle and sheep.

The question of who will be impacted by the bill – a number of people, a number of hog producers – is a good one. I think we need to know the scope of the effect this amendment will have and how it will increase the opportunity for a substantial number of producers of hogs in this province to add value to their activities when financial institutions are allowed to lend money to them as they presently do to those who raise cattle and sheep.

It's been pointed out at least to me that feeder associations have tracking mechanisms that they use to verify which cattle they've financed. Even with this safeguard in place, a recent story, I think out of Red Deer, described how either alleged fraud or fraud was committed through the financing of phantom cattle. From what we have determined so far, no such tracking mechanism exists for hogs in the province.

So the questions I have are about: what kind of assurances or guarantees are there that this system will not lead to similar problems, particularly in the absence of the fact that there's no tracking system? If my information is correct, then I think that's a legitimate concern that we must address before we pass this bill. I'm raising this as a question. I'm sure the hon. member will have some satisfactory response to the concern that I just expressed.

The other thing is that if there's no tracking system in place, then what's the time frame for the implementation of this amendment to the existing act? We'd need some time within which to put in place the safeguards so that the funds go where they're intended and are properly used.

There also are, of course, some environmental concerns with respect to hog production in the province. Much of the hog production is, as far as I know, dominated by a few large corporations or packing plants. This is unlike the case with beef production, according to my understanding. There is a definite oligopoly in place here in the case of hog production, with Maple Leaf being the largest player, I think, in the game. If that is the case, wouldn't this bill simply strengthen the monopoly position of this one big player to the detriment of a few other smaller producers?

The environmental consequences of this kind of concentrated hog farm are a concern that's well known in this province. Many communities across this province have had serious concerns about the impact on their environments, neighbourhoods, their quality of water, and the land around them where these concentrated operations are presently located. So that, to me, is also an important concern, and I think that although the amendment itself doesn't address that issue, if the amendment is passed by way of this Bill 28, it could lead to increased production of hogs and could exacerbate the environmental problems that many communities across this province are

very much concerned about already. Exacerbation of this difficulty is simply going to heighten those concerns even further.

So while we debate this bill, the environmental side of the equation needs to be addressed, and that's why, Mr. Speaker, I think it's appropriate to raise this matter in this second reading stage of the debate with respect to this bill, which otherwise seems to seek only a minor change. There are some important issues that are begged by the increased pork production which I'm assuming, if this amendment is made, will further result from this change. So the need to address what cautionary measures need to be taken in conjunction with this change in the legislation I think is a legitimate one.

So I raise some of these concerns at this stage, and hopefully these matters will be addressed as we proceed with this debate in this stage of the reading and perhaps later on. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

10:30

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan to close debate.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Members from the opposition are asking some very legitimate questions, certainly those on cost of this addition to the feeder association, the numbers of producers impacted, as well as the tracking mechanism for hogs and the time frame for implementation. If I heard them right, those are the issues that they brought up, as well as some environmental concerns. I would suggest that I would bring those responses at committee. So at this stage I would call for the question.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 28 read a second time]

Bill 29

Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to stand and move second reading of Bill 29, the Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will amend the current act to allow the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation to make loans or execute guarantees in excess of \$2 million to businesses with two or more investors. The current act restricts the dollar amount lent to specific businesses to \$2 million regardless of how many investors are involved in a project. The limit will still stay at \$2 million, but it will allow a \$2 million amount to be loaned to more than one person in the same operation.

This act is being amended to allow Ag Financial Services to facilitate investment in larger value-added projects as well as to lend support to investment vehicles such as new generation co-ops. The act will still mandate that all loans and guarantees continue to satisfy all of the requirements set out in the regulations regarding eligibility and all of the normal lending criteria established by Ag Financial Services. The risk to the lender, Mr. Speaker, will not be increased.

I urge all members of this Legislature to give this bill their full support. Mr. Speaker, I would adjourn debate on Bill 29.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:33 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, April 29, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/04/29

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. From our forests and parkland to our prairies and mountains comes the call of our land. From our farmsteads, towns, and cities comes the call of our people that as legislators of this province we act with responsibility and sensitivity. Grant us the wisdom to meet such challenges. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly 35 students, two teachers, and one parent from the Grassland school. They are seated in the members' gallery this afternoon. Also, we have one special student, an exchange student from Australia, to whom I would say: we'll give you a special welcome. I would let them rise now and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, it is indeed an honour to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly on behalf of my colleague the Minister of Community Development 11 staff from his department who are involved in the preservation and protection of our provincial parks and protected areas. They are joined today by parks planners who work on protected areas, regulations, and policies, and I'd ask that they stand as I name them. They are Bill Richards, Doug Bowes, Scott Jones, Ken Sloman, Travis Sjøvold, Avelyn Nicol, Dawn Carr and also parks visitors services staff Michael McCready, Mary Fitl, and Stephanie Yuill and, of course, a parks biologist, because you can't do without them, Ksenija Vujoovic, who works on the Alberta Natural Heritage Information Centre, which is the province's biodiversity database. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask that they receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very honoured today to have four people from Rocky Mountain House in my constituency and especially to have the new president of the Alberta Society of Engineering Technologists. So I would ask Scott and Yvonne Turner and their children Calum and Brenna to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is really a good pleasure today to introduce to you and through you the Vauxhall elementary school. There are 34 students, three teachers, five parents. I think it's really remarkable that this is the 13th year in a row that they have managed to bring the kids to see the Legislative Assembly. Mr. Terry Olfert has been with them as long as I can

remember, helping them out. There's Mrs. Trina Mantler-Friesen, a brand new teacher on staff, who grew up in Coaldale. There's Mrs. Lori-Jo Plotzki along with parents Mr. Pete Pepneck, Mr. Bill Sowinski, Mr. Ed Palmer, Mrs. Joanne Enns, Mrs. Jan Tolton. Two of the students are wearing Calgary Flames jerseys, and I think they're going to be more interested in watching a game tonight than, maybe, paying attention to their moms and dads and the teachers. But welcome – it's been a long trip – and have a great day. Would you please rise.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly 69 visitors from Spruce Grove. These students attend Millgrove elementary school. The residents of Spruce Grove value education, and these kids are a reflection of that. They are a great, enthusiastic, bright, and energetic group of kids. The staff and parents are to be commended on the great job they do at Millgrove.

The students are accompanied by teachers Mr. Randy Williams and Mrs. Deb Schellenberger and parent helpers Mr. Ken Richards, Mr. Gary Wagner, Mrs. Val Coates, Mrs. Karen Whyte. They are seated, I believe, in the members' gallery, and I would ask that they rise and be granted the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly some special women celebrating a 50-year anniversary of their graduation from the Royal Alex School of Nursing.

My aunt Enid Blake was a member of this 1954 class. They have honoured her in their remembrance of her. She died many years ago now, but her friendships with her classmates live on. I would like to introduce some members of the class, and my colleague from Edmonton-Glengarry will also be introducing members.

This is the class of 1954, the second class, and I'd ask you to rise as I say your name: her special friend Jean Davidson, Maxine Thomson, Grace Penrice, Joyce Primeau, all from Edmonton; Audrey Willmer from Red Deer; Edna Steffens from Sunnyside, Washington; and Barbara Ritchie from Toronto. Please give them a warm welcome to the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It also gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly some other members of the 1954 Royal Alexandra School of Nursing. They are seated in the public gallery, and I would like to introduce them: Margaret Shea, Minot, whose grandfather was A.J. Robertson, the leader of the Conservative Party in the province here in 1905; Kathy Riddell from St. Albert – her father's uncle Frank Walker was a Liberal member in 1905 – Dorothy Engen from Eastend, Saskatchewan; Shirley Caldwell, all the way from Nashville, Tennessee; Ann Champion from Edmonton; and Hugh Algar. Mr. Speaker, with your permission I'd ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly today two guests who are well known to most of us. First, Doug Graham, who is the Progressive Conservative Party's new president, voted in by party delegates at last weekend's AGM in Banff. Doug is an Albertan who is outstanding in many ways: professionally as a lawyer, as a husband and father, as a community volunteer, and as a dedicated member of the PC Party for 20 years. I have to say that I've been fortunate to have his support on the Calgary-West board for many years. Now party members will benefit from Doug's broad experience and leadership, especially as we move into an election year. I would also like to introduce my second guest, Marilyn Haley, the very capable executive director of PC Alberta. As they are both standing, I would now ask all members of this Assembly to give them the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Legislative Assembly another important guest that we have seated in the members' gallery, a guest that I have had the pleasure of actually introducing before but in another capacity because, like the senior Progressive Conservative Association, there is another organization that has recently had a change in its presidents. It's my pleasure to introduce to the members someone who previously was the vice-president of the Progressive Conservative Youth and now is serving that great organization as its president. A long-time Alberta resident, an individual who has just completed his master's degree at the University of Alberta, I know he will do an outstanding job in his capacity as president and leader of PC Youth. I would ask Mr. David McColl to rise and receive the usual warm welcome of members of the House.

head: 1:40

Ministerial Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Calgary Flames

Mr. Norris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As everyone knows, it's springtime in Alberta, and with spring comes playoff hockey. Last year at this time I rose to talk about the beloved Edmonton Oilers. This year I don't have that option, so I rise to talk about the remarkable Calgary Flames.

Mr. Speaker, the Calgary Flames' playoff presence makes a number of important impacts in Alberta. It speaks to a vibrant economy. I'm told by my colleague from Calgary that there are no available Flames jerseys left for sale in Edmonton, if you wanted to buy one. It speaks for great inputs into small business, particularly those in the hospitality sector. It is a true showcase of Alberta. I'm told by my department that some 24 million Americans and Canadians tuned in the other night to see the Calgary Flames defeat the Detroit Red Wings, obviously great advertising for this glorious province and the absolutely beautiful city of Calgary.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to suggest to Edmonton MLAs and others who have supported the Oilers with a great vengeance that we now recognize that our true hope lies in the Calgary Flames and we refer to them now as Alberta's team. To that end I would like to offer on behalf of all government members both north and south to Ken King, the general manager; Coach Sutter; the ownership group; and his team who have put so much effort into getting Calgary back into the playoffs: we all support you, we all wish you well, and we hope that things go extremely well.

One other comment, Mr. Speaker, that I have to make: Flames in six. Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a proud Edmontonian I was rooting for the Oilers all the way, but now only one Alberta team has a shot at the 2004 Stanley Cup, so as a proud Albertan I hear myself chanting: go, Flames, go.

The friendly rivalry between Alberta's major cities has been put aside as many Edmontonians cheer on the Calgary Flames as they do their best to return the cup to western Canada. In a gritty, hard-fought win over the Detroit Red Wings on Tuesday the Flames showed that speed, determination, and teamwork gets the job done. Let's hope that this speed, determination, and teamwork never burn out on Calgary's Flames.

The Flames have been propelled to victory by the support of Albertans watching them with pride, and we would be remiss not to recognize the fans because it is their support that helps spirit the team to victory. Flames fans have made the Saddledome a formidable place for any opposing team this season. Calgary supporters truly feel that they are valued by their team, and the Flames always respond with 60 minutes and sometimes more of spirited effort every game.

The Flames rely on the determination of their players and their fans to stay alive in the playoffs. The small-market team does not have the salary base of rivals like the Detroit Red Wings. Flames players have proven that they are talented, and even the Detroit coach admits that talent is the heart of the Flames team. The Flames have proven that you can't buy a cup with money. It takes team effort to get you there.

The Flames' roster is well oiled. Team captain Jarome Iginla was born in Edmonton. Defenceman Mike Commodore hails from Fort Saskatchewan. Let's hope that tonight they can continue making all Albertans proud with their performance, and let all of Alberta stand behind the team because they are Alberta's Flames for the rest of this year's playoffs. Let's hope the Flames can extinguish the Red Wings. May the red light behind the Detroit goal burn bright red often and not be lost in the sea of red.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I suspect, hon. member, that if unanimous request were asked for, it would be provided, so I'm anticipating that. Would that be fine, to recognize . . .

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I almost wish that it had been withheld today, but nevertheless I will do my duty.

Mr. Speaker, the Calgary Flames are ruining some good jokes here in Edmonton. No longer can Edmontonians confidently tell how you spell "dynasty" in Calgary: o-n-e. No longer can we chuckle about the first sign of spring in Calgary: not robins, but the Flames on the golf course. These jokes, enjoyed for years by countless Edmontonians, no longer have meaning. They have been ruined by the outstanding performance of the Calgary Flames Hockey Club in this season. But ample compensation has been forthcoming. The great hockey, the outstanding performance in the series against the Vancouver Canucks, and the chance to cheer on an Alberta team all the way to the Stanley Cup are more than sufficient recompense.

I'm sure I speak for almost all Edmontonians in wishing the best of luck to the Calgary Flames in bringing the Stanley Cup back to Alberta.

head:

Oral Question Period

Municipal Funding

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, for the past decade Alberta's municipalities have borne much of the brunt of this government's deficit-cutting policies. They've had to make do with less, increase user fees and property taxes, and curtail services. After all this the Premier belittles their contributions by saying, quote, I didn't hear any municipality offer to take up their share of the deficit, end quote. My questions are to the Premier. How can the Premier say that municipalities have not carried their weight when they had almost \$400 million cut from their budgets between 1992 and 2002?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, my earlier remarks were not meant to imply that municipalities weren't part of the work to pay off the deficit in the 1990s. I know they experienced cutbacks, just as every sector of this province did. It was applied equally. But what unnerved me, I guess, and what bothered me was the mayor of Calgary saying that automatically 20 per cent of any surplus should go to municipalities. Well, it wasn't automatic that 20 per cent of any deficit went to municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, I would remind the hon. member – he wasn't around then, but he was in government at that particular time – that we were going through some very tough times, '93, '94, '95. We had a structural deficit of \$3.4 billion annually that had accumulated into a debt of \$23 billion. We had to take some very strong and sometimes innovative actions to get that deficit off our back and to start paying down the debt.

One of the things that we did and municipalities did not do is that we immediately rolled back all salaries, including those of MLAs, by 5 per cent. We did a number of things to eliminate that deficit. All of them, of course, weren't on the backs of municipalities. We targeted every sector of government, including ourselves.

So when municipalities talk about an automatic 20 per cent of any surplus, I'm saying: will they automatically take 20 per cent of any deficit?

Dr. Taft: Can the Premier tell us how many millions of dollars the province saved and put towards the deficit by downloading provincial responsibilities onto municipalities?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I guess the fundamental question is: are the Liberals now ashamed and are they now criticizing this government for doing what no other Canadian government had done at that particular time, and that is to eliminate the deficit? Are they now criticizing this government for doing what the people told us they wanted us to do?

You know, had the Liberals been the government – and they came closer than ever in 1993 – I'm sure that we would still be swimming in a sea of red ink. These Liberals over here are saying that deficits are the Canadian way: we love deficits; have a deficit. That's the way they operate, and that's the way they want us to operate. Well, we aren't going to do that.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When will this government contribute its fair share of the \$3 billion surplus to all those municipi-

palities who did in fact contribute their fair share to eliminating the deficit and reducing the debt?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, it was in conjunction with municipalities that we worked out a different funding formula for transportation. They get a percentage now of the gas tax. The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has struck, I think, a very worthwhile, fruitful relationship with the AUMA, AAMD and C. We negotiate with municipalities relative to funding and funding formulas. We try to discuss these things in a rational manner. I was only responding to things that I heard in the media and through the media, and normally that's not the way that municipalities negotiate, and normally that's not the way the government negotiates with municipalities.

I know that that's the way the Liberals negotiate because the news media is their only negotiating power. They're quite content to simply fall into the trap – well, not fall into the trap, because they love it – and follow the fundamental premises of journalism, which are the five Cs of controversy, confusion, chaos, conflict, and confrontation. That's the way they operate, and that's the way they will continue to operate.

Government Aircraft

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Infrastructure revealed that on some flights using the government's air fleet, costs "are charged back to the department that the minister is responsible for." It appears that these costs are in addition to the over \$4 million it costs Executive Council per year to operate, maintain, and fly the government's air fleet. To the Premier: how much higher than \$4 million is the actual cost per year of the government's air fleet?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't have that answer. Perhaps I'll defer to the Provincial Treasurer.

I'm wondering, you know, and I was contemplating yesterday: where are they coming from? What do they want us to do? The media are going to be asking the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition: what is their end point? What do they want? Perhaps the hon. leader can stand up and tell me. Do they want us to park all the planes? Do they want us to sell them all off? Do they want us to use them only to go to Small Town, Alberta? I have no idea.

Mr. Speaker, I would remind the hon. member that opposition members are entitled to use those aircraft, and there is complete disclosure. The manifests are available. Obviously, they're getting the information through FOIP and simply asking for the manifests. I have a manifest here dated 11-19-98, and it shows the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, the hon. Minister of Energy, the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, Gary Severtson, a former member of this Legislature, Gary Dickson, a former Liberal member of this Legislature representing Calgary-Buffalo, all going to the Grey Cup. I mean, that was public. It's wide open.

So I'm just asking the hon. member: to what end is he asking these questions? What does he want? Maybe I can provide him with an answer. What he is doing is creating an environment of suspicion and, as I said, feeding into the fundamental principles of journalism, those five Cs of controversy, confusion, chaos, conflict, confrontation, and so on. But he has never stood up and said: here's the agenda; here's what we want to do. Maybe he'll be honest for a change, stand up, and say precisely what he wants.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. How much of this government's travel and communications budget, which has skyrocketed by 47 per cent to

\$131 million in just the past five years, is spent on keeping the government's air fleet in the air?

Mr. Klein: Well, again, I go: what is the end? What does he want? Does he want me to stop using the aircraft? Does he want the hon. Minister of Infrastructure, the Minister of Seniors? Does he want opposition members to stop using aircraft?

Mr. Speaker, relative to the figures, they're all available for examination by the opposition members, and ministers are available to answer questions relative to expenditures for communications and for air travel and for expense. There's the Public Accounts procedure where they can ask more questions. But what is the end? What is he leading up to? I'm curious.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Well, the information isn't as available as the Premier says. Why won't this government be accountable – be accountable – to Alberta taxpayers and permit anyone to make copies of flight information as well as releasing the Premier's past travel itineraries? What are they hiding?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, if you ask for it, you will receive. I'd be glad to table this. This is a manifest from 1998. These are made available all the time.

But to what end? You know, whether I'm flying alone or flying with my wife or whether there are eight people on the King Air or six people on the 200, whether we're going to Oyen or to Toronto, I mean, to what end is he asking these questions? I'm perplexed, especially since the airplanes have been around since the 1970s.

Now, we did scale down; we sold our helicopters. Considering our fleet, outside of British Columbia, it's far smaller than most fleets in most provinces. What is the problem? Especially since we aren't flitting around like their federal cousins in Challenger jets and A320s fitted out like a living room. We don't use military people to act as stewards and stewardesses, flight attendants, and we aren't spending millions and millions and millions and millions of dollars on airplanes like the federal government.

Dr. Taft: Well, we don't know.

Mr. Klein: Well, they do know. They've alluded to what the feds post on their web site. Well, Mr. Speaker, you can get this information. All the hon. member needs to do is ask for it.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Premier's Travel

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, yesterday in response to questions about taking a government aircraft to an exclusive golf course in Nova Scotia the Premier said, "Big deal." Well, Mr. Premier, it is a big deal to Albertans when they see the government abusing their tax dollars. To the Premier: can the Premier make it clear? Was the Fox Harb'r trip government business, or was it PC Party business?

Mr. Klein: Well, that's an interesting question. You know, he didn't need a researcher to dig up the question because the same question was asked yesterday by a member of the media.

Mr. Speaker, I considered it to be government business, but if the party paid for it, that's fine too. So what? And that's what I say again.

Mr. Speaker, I stopped there at the invitation of Ron Joyce, a well-known businessperson in Canada, the former CEO of Tim Hortons, a former co-owner of the Calgary Flames, a member of the Order of Canada, who brought together about 40 business leaders from throughout North America. He invited me down to do a little golfing and to do a little networking with some of these people and said: this is a good opportunity for you to tell some of the biggest players in America about the Alberta advantage.

As it turned out, the party picked up the tab for Fox Harb'r, but I would have considered it a government expense. If the party picked it up, all that much better. I don't know what he's complaining about other than that their party, being as bankrupt as it is, could never afford it.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is puzzling. Is it government policy to allow the PC Party to pay for government business?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't care. He can pay for my trips, if he wants, out of his own pocket. If it saves the taxpayers' dollars, who cares?

Mr. Speaker, I'm not getting a lot of cards and letters, notwithstanding the fact that he's trying to make this an issue. I'm getting no phone calls, no mail on this particular issue because people, good-thinking Albertans, understand, you know, the need to travel, the need to meet people, the need to influence especially those people who can . . .

Mr. Bonner: Lower your handicap?

Mr. Klein: Fine. That, too, if a golf game goes along with it. Are you telling me that no members over there, none of them, golf or participate on the golf course? If none of them golf, then stand up and say so. If you have never ever been on the golf course and have never discussed business on the golf course, stand up and say so, because I'll challenge you. You'll be telling a big fib if you stand up and say that you've never done that. It's all right for them to do it, but it's not all right for me to do it. I mean, do I see a double standard here?

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Can the Premier, in the spirit of openness that he's suggesting here, tell Albertans how many times he has used their tax dollars or perhaps their tax deductible political contributions to help fund other golfing trips or other vacations?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that is absolutely none of his business. Absolutely none of his business. How I use party money, how I use my own money is none of his business whatsoever. He should be ashamed for asking that question. Will this hon. member stand up and tell me how much of his own money he spends on anything? I don't question him about, you know, his government pension with the university and the salary he gets, but they seem to take the liberty of questioning us on everything when they're as guilty as sin on most things. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, for instance, spent \$10,000 last year to travel around a constituency that you could spit across.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Health Care Reform

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans have every right to be cynical about this government's latest phony fight with Ottawa over health care. It's pretty clear that the federal Liberals, despite yesterday's backtracking, are onside with the Tory government in wanting to expand private, for-profit delivery in the public health care system. This position of the Martin Liberals nicely dovetails with that of the federal Conservatives under Stephen Harper, leaving only the New Democrats opposed to the agenda of creeping privatization and two-tiered health care. To the Premier: why has the government delayed the release of its two-tiered health care proposals until after the likely date of the next federal election if not to protect the political hides of their federal Conservative cousins?

Mr. Klein: To protect the hides of the federal Conservative cousins? Well, the federal Conservatives, like the provincial Liberals, do not develop policy. It's the federal Liberals that develop policy. So we're not doing anything to protect anyone's hide.

We're doing health reform and undertaking health reform initiatives to protect the health system so that it will be there for our children and our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren in future years. That's why we're doing it, Mr. Speaker. We aren't paying any attention nor do we quite frankly care what the feds do or what the federal Conservatives do or don't do. We will participate with them on matters that will achieve efficiencies in the health system nationally, but relative to our responsibilities we will proceed with our health reforms with or without a federal election.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this government is hiding its two-tiered health care plan to avoid creating political troubles for the federal Conservatives during the federal election, can the Premier please confirm that one of the proposals in this government's health care package is to delist some services and force Albertans to buy supplementary private insurance to cover them?

Mr. Klein: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, he's trying to draw us into that 15-second sound bite that is so appealing to the provincial Liberals and the provincial NDs. I'm not going to be drawn into that.

Mr. Speaker, all of our health reforms will be brought together in a package. We hope to have that package tabled by the end of June, at which time it will be discussed by caucus. Then it will go out for public consultation. I can see then, for the first time in a long time, both the Liberals and the NDs hitting the road at great taxpayer expense, racking up mileage, to lambaste the report and try to influence the way the public, the ordinary Albertan, reacts to that report. Just watch them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans are wondering what it is about the province's two-tiered health care plan that this Tory government wants to keep hidden from Albertans and Canadians until after the upcoming federal election is safely out of the way.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I'm interested to know what the hon. member means by two-tiered. You know, there are some across Canada, including NDs, who say: well, the system is now two tiered. It's two tiered to the extent that people with money can go to the United States, but I'm not going to get into that.

Mr. Speaker, we're interested in reform to achieve sustainability,

and this will include a multitude of things, hopefully. I've said that perhaps there may be some interpretations of what we do that might or maybe might not be in contravention of the principles of the Canada Health Act. That remains to be seen.

Mr. Speaker, I would advise the hon. member to wait and see, and when the report in its entirety comes out, when that report along with the Mazankowski report and the plan comes out in its entirety, then he can get all excited about it and all itchy and all tingly and say, "Oh, boy, is this ever good stuff," and then start to travel the province to tell the people, as I suspect he will do, how bad we are. And you know what? I hope that he does, because they will finally get to see the great Raj Pannu for what he actually is: a nothing.

The Speaker: Well, we do have a rule about names. I will suggest to the Premier that he should recant that and not mention names.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

2:10 Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Every day my constituency office and those of some of my colleagues receive calls from people who are struggling to make ends meet on \$850 a month that they receive through the assured income for the severely handicapped, which is better known as AISH. They have to cover rising costs in utilities, housing, and groceries on an income that has been fixed since 1999. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Alberta is \$665 a month. My question is to the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment. How can you justify giving most AISH recipients what amounts to less than minimum wage?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dunford: Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. The AISH income that we provide of \$850 a month is meant, really, to cover basic needs. I'll grant the hon. member that it's not a lot but still one of the most generous programs of its kind that is available in Canada.

Even though, as he indicates, there has been no increase in the AISH income support levels since 1999, we've actually increased the AISH budget by more than \$120 million over that particular period. Now, most of that, of course, is due to growth, but also we are experiencing what anyone else is that has to pay for medical costs, and this has been a dramatic increase. In 1999 the number that we were spending on medical costs for AISH recipients was \$63 million. This past year that had risen to \$118 million. It's an increase of 87 per cent.

Now, obviously, we just cannot stand here and do nothing about this, so we've provided for an AISH review to come up this fall, and these are some of the issues that we're going to have to deal with.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. How can families afford to live on such little income?

Mr. Dunford: The first thing, I think, to understand is that of the 32,000 Albertans that we have covered by the AISH program, about 90 per cent are single without any dependants. So we need to bring in the context here that, of course, they are just supporting themselves.

The other thing that we have to remember – and of course it

applies to other support programs as well but particularly to AISH – is that they get a health benefits card that provides them comprehensive health coverage. So we're looking at premium-free Alberta health care. We're looking at prescription drugs, dental and optical services, emergency ambulance, and, if they happen to be diabetic, then essential diabetic supplies. The value of this, of course, will vary by unique individual, but really what we're looking at, Mr. Speaker, is an average of \$300 a month.

So we have the income, we have the medical support, and as a matter of fact many AISH clients actually have additional income as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister. If they are only earning \$850, what do you suggest I say to my AISH constituents?

Mr. Dunford: Well, I get the calls as well as any other member here in the House. You know, we have started to keep track again of how people do make ends meet. We're told that some folks have started to move into shared accommodation, and we try to accommodate that. Certainly, my hon. colleague in Seniors has been working very, very hard on affordable housing throughout the province. Of course, some of them, because they want to contribute, have gone into part-time jobs. Others, of course, perhaps like many of us here, have quit smoking, all of these kinds of choices. There are resources in the community that are available. It's not just the provincial government that tries to help out low-income Albertans. AISH clients would certainly fall into this area.

Again, if the person is capable of taking on work, they can earn up to \$1,332 through employment before they would lose their AISH benefits.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Electricity Pricing

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Instead of leading the charge on consumer protection, this government is falling far, far behind other jurisdictions. Recently the Montana Public Service Commission began investigating whether the state's consumers lost millions in the electricity market manipulations that plagued the west in 2000 and 2001. Of the 14 companies under investigation seven are able to operate in Alberta. My first question is to the Premier. Will the Premier park his plane in the hangar long enough to commit to conducting an independent public investigation into the possible manipulation of Alberta's electricity market in 2000 and 2001?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, the preamble and the reference to the plane is completely uncalled for. The plane is parked right now. I think it is, but it should be flying because the worst thing you can do for an airplane – as I understand, it's like a boat – is to park it. The best thing you can do is to park a Liberal. Airplanes are built to fly, not to be parked.

Mr. Speaker, relative to the situation in Montana and what they are doing there, that is entirely up to that state. The Alberta system is working. I can say this before I have the hon. minister respond: clear rules are in place and are continually being examined to ensure a fair and efficient market.

With respect to the Montana situation I'll have the hon. Minister of Energy respond.

The Speaker: Well, the Montana situation has no jurisdiction in this House.

Proceed.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: without an independent public investigation, how can Albertans be sure they weren't ripped off in this electricity deregulation boondoggle that your government caused?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the hon. member – he either has a very short memory, or he prefers not to remember or prefers for political reasons not to mention the investigation into similar allegations that was undertaken in the year 2000 relative to market manipulation. That issue was investigated. I don't know by whom. I think it was consumer affairs. If it wasn't, it was by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, or the EUB. The ruling was that there was no clear evidence that Alberta consumers ever bore any costs arising from market manipulation.

So, Mr. Speaker, for this hon. member to stand up and imply that there has never been an investigation is, to say the least, misleading. Like so many other statements that come from the Liberals that are misleading, I would ask him once again to stand up and apologize to Albertans for trying to mislead them.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: when will this government finally stand up for consumers and initiate an investigation into electricity price manipulation in this province in the years 2000 and 2001? What are you afraid of?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I already said that in late 2000 allegations were investigated and that there was no clear evidence that Alberta consumers have borne any costs arising from market manipulation. I would add that the market surveillance administrator has always had the authority to take action against unfair market practices.

2:20

Now, I would suggest that if this hon. member has any evidence of market manipulation other than innuendo – and they're so good at innuendo. They're so good at standing up and implying something is wrong without stating it, but through innuendo they imply it. Will this hon. member commit to the media that there is something wrong? Will he commit to the media that, yes, there is something wrong and that he is going to demand that the market surveillance administrator investigate? He has not, Mr. Speaker. He has not.

I have not received a copy of a letter. The public certainly haven't been informed of any official request by this member or any other member to have an investigation launched, but if he has evidence of market manipulation, then take that evidence to the market surveillance administrator and let him investigate it. I suspect that he doesn't have any evidence at all, and he is simply using vicious innuendo to create suspicion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Home-schooling Regulations

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Home-schooling is becoming a popular and effective means to educate Alberta's children. In fact, nearly 10,000 students in Alberta are educated using this method. However, proposed home-schooling regulations appear to threaten the flexibility and the individual model on which home-schooling is based. My questions are for the

Minister of Learning. Is the minister contemplating standardized testing for home-schoolers?

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much for that excellent question. We have gone through our regulations, and as the hon. member knows and you know, Mr. Speaker, every one of our regulations is sunsetted. After the sunset has passed, it is time to review the regulations, and consequently what we are doing now is reviewing our home-schooling regulations as per the sunset clause.

When it comes directly to testing, Mr. Speaker, there is testing that is available for the home students. About 20 per cent of the home students right now take our provincial achievement tests. About 80 per cent take another form of learning evaluation. What has been put out in the discussion paper about home schooling is to have more and more students take the provincial achievement tests.

Mr. Speaker, I can only speak as a parent, but if I were a parent who was home-schooling my children, I would want to know how they stack up against other students around the province. Are they actually learning? What is occurring? Are they learning the objectives of our education system?

Mr. Speaker, we will be looking at all of the regulations. Is there going to be anything that absolutely forces these home-schoolers to take achievement testing? There is nothing like that. There will be recommendations, though, that will allow them to take it. We'll talk to them about how they possibly could get a higher percentage of their people taking it so that, quite frankly, we can find out exactly what is happening with the curriculum of the home-schoolers that are out there right now.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: is the minister contemplating making home-schoolers follow some sort of modified standard curriculum?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, in a perfect world I would certainly like the home-schoolers to follow a standardized curriculum so that we know exactly what is being taught out there, but a lot of the home-schoolers do an extremely good job in what are called, again, learning objectives. So there is no contemplation of forcing home-schoolers to follow the standardized curriculum.

We are working together with the home-schoolers to ensure the goals of this ministry and my personal goals, which are to ensure that every student receives an excellent education in Alberta, whether it's in the home-schooling system, whether it's in the private system, whether it's in public system.

I think we need to take a very serious look at all of these issues. But are we going to mess around, so to speak, with the home-schooling system? No, we're not. We have a good system in place. However, again, as I stated with regard to the regulation, because of the sunset clause we are obliged to look at it. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, if we can improve it to help home-schoolers, we certainly will.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rathgeber: Thank you. Finally, what input will home-schoolers have before these regulations become finalized?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, there have been consultations that have been out there with the home-schoolers. There have been the home-school groups talked to. In talking to my MLA colleagues around the Assembly, there have been a number of home-schoolers that have

contacted their MLAs about specific issues, and I would certainly encourage the home-schoolers to do that.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I met with one group of home-schoolers two days ago, and I suggested that I sit down with all the home-schoolers and actually have a very frank conversation about how we in Alberta Learning can help the home-schoolers to ensure that they get the best education possible. I think that that's in all of our interests, and we will be doing that. Presently we're aiming for around the first or second week in September to do that, purely from a logistical point of view. I strongly feel that it's important.

Mr. Speaker, just to finish, what I would say is that all the recommendations on the regulations will come back to me, and the hon. member will subsequently see them before any changes are done. But, again, I really, really must emphasize that the reason for this is a sunset clause, and it's to help home-schoolers to make things better if at all possible.

Calgary Courthouse

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, this week the Premier tried to lay the blame for cost overruns on the proposed P3 Calgary courthouse on excessive demands from the judges. However, the judges have denied any such demands, and now even a spokesperson for the Premier's office admits that the Premier got it wrong. My question is to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Can the minister please explain why there's such poor communication between the judiciary and the government on the issue of the Calgary courthouse?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't believe that there is poor communication between the judiciary and the government on the issue of the courthouse. We've had communications going back 25 years with respect to the Calgary courthouse strategy. In the last five years, since I've been minister, we've had numerous meetings on the Calgary courthouse strategy.

Now, I will indicate this. The Court of Queen's Bench and the Court of Appeal about last February or March decided that they didn't wish to participate in the focus groups and the consultations for reasons of their own, and I wouldn't want to paraphrase their reasons for the House. Essentially, they withdrew from the process, but they were always welcome to come in.

However, the Provincial Court participated all the way through the process, right through to now, and they're still participating, and about two months ago the Court of Queen's Bench and the Court of Appeal withdrew just before we dealt with the request for a proposal, which was, quite frankly, untimely. Nonetheless, the process proceeded and proceeded well and proceeded with good input from the other courts. Justice had the requirements that each of the courts had put together. We amassed those, put them together, and created the requirements that we then provided to Infrastructure in terms of what we thought was defensible in terms of public spending, was appropriate in terms of housing the courts, and appropriate in terms of access to justice for Calgarians and people in southern Alberta.

So I don't believe that we had any problem with respect to the communication. I don't believe we had any lack of understanding with respect to what the courts' desires were, nor did they have any lack of understanding of what we thought was appropriate. There were certainly disagreements, and there always will be disagreements between what they think is appropriate and what we think is inappropriate. But it's an interactive process, a consultative process, and they've been involved all along the way. So I don't think there's any lack of communication other than the fact that for a period of time they chose to withdraw from the process.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: is it the minister's understanding that that is why the Premier was confused between a consultant's recommendation that the building be built airplane-proof versus the judges' request for a safe working space?

Mr. Hancock: You know, it's only the Liberals who would expect that the Premier would know every detail of a process that's been going on for 25 years. In fact, there are a number of issues that were raised that suggested that there were additional costs to the process and to the building, and some of the examples that were used in various meetings, appropriately or inappropriately, as to what might have caused extra costs to be in the process were some of the security features in terms of overbuilding the building for collapse status in case of a threat by bomb or airplane or whatever, bullet-proof glass in appropriate places. Those were mentioned as items which added additional costs to the building over and above what you might expect for a normal building built to normal standards in downtown Calgary.

If the Premier chose to use those as examples of what caused the cost of the building to be higher than a normal building, that's entirely understandable. The question of where those came from can be misconstrued or misunderstood by anybody. But only the member opposite would expect that the Premier would know every detail of where every item in a building came from.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

2:30

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My next question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. How much money will the Alberta government have to pay to the private developer in order to abandon the current P3 model for the Calgary courthouse? How much money will we owe?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, in the process that we are currently going through, we are using the same builder, the same people as far as the operations are concerned; we're using the same architects. So the work that has already been done on the project will in the main part still be used. Yes, there will have to be some additional work done as far as the things that we have taken out that we believe will not adversely affect the function of the new courthouse, but certainly the majority of the work that has already been done will be used in the new courthouse.

Teachers' Pension Payout

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, when discussing public-sector wage settlements, a lot of attention is always paid to the percentage increase in annual salaries, but I'm curious about the impact of wage increases on total pension payouts. My questions are for the Minister of Learning. Could the minister tell us what would be the approximate total value expected of an average teacher's pension plan in Alberta given current life expectancies? In other words, how much do we expect the average teacher to earn in retirement, total payout?

The Speaker: The minister has this information?

Dr. Oberg: I'll try, Mr. Speaker. I will try my best.

Mr. Speaker, the teachers' pension plan is based on 1.4 per cent per year for the first \$38,000 of a teacher's salary, which is I believe something to do with the federal taxation system. It then is 2 per cent per year of the next amount of their particular salary. A teachers' average salary right now after nine years' experience is

roughly \$70,000. If we use the average retirement age of 55, which would be 30 years plus 55 equals 85, which is the magic number when it comes to the pension plan, the amount of dollars that a teacher would receive assuming that they live for 25 years is roughly \$875,000.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lord: Thank you. My second question, again for the same minister: what would be the approximate financial impact of last year's wage settlement on the total value of an average teacher's pension payout if any?

Dr. Oberg: Again, Mr. Speaker, I certainly will give the hon. member all of the actual figures, and I'm just speaking from the top of my head as I say this.

First of all, the teachers' pension plan is based on the best five years of a teacher's work experience. So if we saw a 14 per cent increase, which is what the wage settlement was two years ago, what you're going to see in rough increase value amount is about an extra \$150,000 over a 25-year life expectancy, keeping in mind, Mr. Speaker, as I say this that there are a lot of variables in there. The length of life, when they retire: all of these things are also involved in that calculation.

Mr. Lord: My final question for the same minister: given that a 15 per cent pay increase is a very different amount of money for someone earning, say, \$100,000 a year than it is for someone earning \$40,000 a year, for example, and that it may be viewed as inequitable on that basis, has there been any thought given to reverting to an equal dollar amount of raise versus an equal percentage amount of raise when negotiating wage settlements?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, the largest factor in this question, quite simply, is that we don't negotiate. It is up to the teachers and the School Boards Association as to what negotiation takes place. I will say, though, in direct response to that question that in the arbitration settlement there were actually two years taken off the payment grid, which would in effect do exactly what the hon. member has said.

I really feel that for sake of brevity the best answer to this question is purely that the school boards and the teachers have the ability to negotiate and have the ability to do what they see is fit.

Highway 3

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, today wildlife and environment experts are meeting in the Crowsnest Pass to discuss the highway 3 functional planning study. However, residents only heard of this meeting through word of mouth, and numerous requests by residents to attend have been denied despite the fact that a preliminary decision is anticipated to be reached as early as June of this year. To the Minister of Transportation: why are residents not allowed to attend the meeting even as observers?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, part of the process is that we hire consultants to carry out the functional plan for the highway. The reason we're back at this whole thing is at the request of the elected council of Crowsnest, and as a result we're going through this whole process of public consultation again. If there is some meeting that somebody somehow feels that they haven't been given proper access to or notice of, we'll certainly look into it. I just can't keep track of all of these hearings that occur in the province of Alberta on a daily basis.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that the consultants for the socioeconomic studies haven't been chosen yet and the environmental studies won't be completed until September, how can a preliminary decision be made as early as June 1?

Mr. Stelmach: Purely speculative on behalf of the member. Really there are so many different groups that will be delivering evidence and information. Perhaps part of the first step will be June, but I'm not aware of any closure date in terms of June 30.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: are these studies simply a smokescreen to ensure that the northern route is chosen, which would facilitate future coal bed methane development that is anticipated to take place in the Crowsnest Pass?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, it's the first time I've heard this speculation on behalf of the member. We're there, as I said before, because there was a genuine request by the mayor to review again the first study that was done in terms of where the location of highway 3 should be, and that's why we're going through this process again.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of four members for Members' Statements, but in the interim might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you eight visitors from the Good Samaritan Society facility in Spruce Grove. They are a great group of seniors and also very positive advocates for other residents in Spruce Grove. They are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask that they either wave or rise as they can and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the House a few guests that I have here. Two of them are my children, Samantha Beck, who is working on genetics research at UBC, and my son James Beck, who is in fourth-year physics, though he talks about running off and joining a motorcycle gang, and their two friends, Kelly Davidson and Kenan Jallad. If they would rise and accept the warm welcome of the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a distinct pleasure today to introduce four very special guests that are seated in the members' gallery: Angelina, who is in grade 9 and who attends St. Rose junior high school; her sisters Sarah and Christina in grade 6 and grade 3 respectively at St. Paul elementary; their beautiful mother, Marissa, who is a gourmet cook and just happens to be the wife of our assistant deputy minister in Children's Services, Bill Meade. I'd ask the Assembly to honour their presence here today as the girls learn about the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have the honour of introducing to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly the chief and council of Sucker Creek. They're here to discuss the flooding of Sucker Creek First Nation. They're seated in the members' gallery. I'd ask that they all stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: 2:40

Members' Statements

Beef Industry

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, on March 26 of this year the U.S. Department of Agriculture provided the results of its bovine spongiform encephalopathy investigation. The report made some recommendations to help prevent BSE in the future but also commented on the current state of the North American cattle industry.

The report made it quite clear that the "first case of BSE in the United States cannot be considered in isolation from the whole cattle production system in North America." This is a recognition of what we have been saying all along. We are a truly integrated cattle market and industry on this continent. The beef industry is perhaps one of the most integrated industries in the entire North American economy.

The report also recommended that a "BSE task force, which includes governmental and non governmental stakeholders" be established to ensure that policies are developed and implemented in a consistent and scientifically valid manner. It is a relief to know that the USDA was reading the weekly report of the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, as he proposed such a task force last year when the single case of BSE was found in Alberta.

The report also recommends that mechanical tissue processing methods should be banned from use thereby decreasing the risk even further of contamination by BSE-infected animals. Of interest to many, no doubt, is the recommendation that all specified risk material be excluded from all animal feed, including pet food.

The report spells out quite clearly that the "feed ban that is currently in place is insufficient to prevent exposure of cattle to the BSE agent." The report is available on the USDA web site for all to view. We should seriously consider these recommendations in Canada.

There is another matter that we in North America should be examining as well, and that is a North American integrated cattle identification system. Serious concerns were expressed about the United States' ability to effectively trace all animals that had come in contact with the index cow from last December. We should continue to urge the federal government to start talks on developing such a system with the U.S. and the Mexicans immediately.

Let us make some real changes to protect our food supply and enhance confidence in our beef industry.

Thank you.

Municipal Funding

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, Alberta is among the leading provinces in economic growth with its economy expected to grow by 4.1 per cent in 2004. With this growth comes increasing responsibility for municipalities, who are charged with providing many essential services to Albertans. The quality of these services is crucial to Albertans as they act as indicators of our quality of life here in the province.

With service and infrastructure needs increasing and costs going up, municipal revenue simply isn't enough to close the gap even with major cost-cutting measures in place and limited tax increases. Combined with other factors such as the mad cow scare and the rising cost of natural gas, it is abundantly clear that municipal budgets are not financially equipped to deal with the rising cost of operations.

Municipalities require provincial support now more than ever if they are to adequately fulfill the responsibilities that have been handed down to them. Provincial support must come not only in the form of councils and consultations with municipalities on roles and responsibilities but, more importantly, in the form of stable and reliable funding in the form of general purpose grants and grants for specific projects. Municipalities have long dealt with the issue of instability of provincial grants. Grants that are announced and then retracted deny municipalities the stability they need to survive and to plan.

With the provincial government's recent reported surplus in the neighbourhood of \$3 billion municipalities feel stronger than ever that the province should be contributing more to municipal budgets. The Alberta Liberal caucus believes that municipalities need stable, equitable, and predictable funding. We also believe that provincial funding for municipalities must be based on a clear statement of principles, roles, and responsibilities. The provincial government must take a stronger leadership role in addressing the problems that municipalities in Alberta are currently facing. It must provide the necessary funding to ensure that all Albertans, no matter where they live in the province, are ensured of a high quality of life. Most importantly, it must realize that its strong municipalities are the key to sustainable growth in this province and that by choking off funding to them, we are stunting our own long-term growth.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Armenian Genocide

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This year on April 18 we remembered the slaughter of over 6 million Jews, Poles, and others. On April 24 of every year we remember another slaughter: the massacre of over 1 and a half million Armenian men, women, and children. World recognition of the Armenian genocide is a monumental step towards eliminating future genocide. As long as nations in the world continue to accept alterations to the facts of history that moderate the suffering and the horror that actually happened, we will face future systematic annihilations of entire cultures. Just as the human monster Adolf Hitler said, "Who remembers the Armenian genocide?" and then counted on denial and apathy to alter history and proceeded to terminate the lives of over 6 million people, so will others.

On May 13, 2002, the Canadian Senate, by an overwhelming vote of 39 to 1, adopted a motion to recognize the Armenian genocide. Motion 44 was sponsored by Senator Shirley Maheu and seconded by Senator Raymond C. Setlakwe. On April 21, 2004, the Canadian House of Commons voted 153 to 68 to support the motion declaring the events of 90 years ago as genocide despite a request from the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs not to aggravate our NATO ally Turkey.

It is with great appreciation that I personally thank our federal government for having the courage to do what is right. I extend special thanks to our two Senators and especially to Sarkis Assadourian, MP, Brampton Centre, Ontario, for having the courage and tenacity to carry this motion through the Senate and the House

of Commons despite many challenges. An entire generation of Canadians with Armenian heritage, including my family, can now overcome the wounds of the past and the agony of denial. However, it will be a long time before this world of ours accepts the humanity, the dignity, and the rights of all people.

On April 21, 2004, the government of Canada took one giant step towards preventing future genocides, and should anyone ask who remembers the Armenian genocide, Canadians can now stand up and say: we remember.

Canadian Citizenship Rights

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, as Canadian and Alberta citizens we are blessed with and maybe even take for granted sometimes citizenship rights that are the envy of many nations worldwide and even have some that have been almost unknown in world history. Unfortunately, recent events in Ottawa and elsewhere seem to be undermining some of our national pride and confidence and support for these rights. Many feel that these rights are being abused by some and maybe even being used against us by those who would actively work to undermine our nation and our very way of life but still demand to benefit from our national generosity in the meantime.

Every citizen has equal rights, whether they have done anything to earn them or not or whether they are doing anything to protect them or not, because, after all, isn't that the definition of a right? This controversy has caused some to question the value of these rights, whether or not they should be tempered with less idealism and more pragmatism and whether they should just be granted so freely and permanently to almost anyone based on simple trust alone. It seems unfortunate that our trust is sometimes misplaced.

The question I and many others are therefore asking is: what can and should be done about it when it occurs? Under what circumstances could someone ever lose some rights, such as the right to vote if in prison, for example, or even lose a Canadian citizenship once gained? Should that ever be considered? It seems that as a society we've grumbled but never really done anything definitive to answer such a question. I am therefore concerned that public support for hard-fought rights may be further eroded if we don't seek those answers.

As one suggestion I propose we look at amending our Bill of Rights to become a bill of rights and responsibilities instead, starting with the Alberta Bill of Rights, perhaps creating a sliding scale of rights that you may expect based upon your upholding some minimum responsibility requirements first, such as not breaking our laws or taking up arms against our country.

I recognize that I might be questioning motherhood and apple pie, but the fact remains that having any citizen rights at all is a very fragile and expensive asset indeed. Rights are never achieved without fights nor kept without being carefully guarded. It's a new century, Mr. Speaker. Let's start it on the right and responsible path.

Thank you.

head: 2:50

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands to present a petition signed by 105 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to "return to a regulated electricity system, reduce power bills and develop a program to assist Albertans in improving energy efficiency."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday the Deputy Government House Leader will move that written questions appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

I'd also like to give notice that on Monday the Deputy Government House Leader will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64, 66, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 88, 89, 90, 91 to 105, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114 to 123 inclusive, 128, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 197, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, and 205.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table two letters. The first is from Robert Swanson, a resident of Edmonton-Strathcona who expresses deep concern at the prospect of further privatization of health care and the delisting of services.

The second letter, Mr. Speaker, is from Ms Suzanne Lawrence, a registered nurse from Canmore, and she also expresses her worry about the cost of privatized health care and the negative impact that the Premier's proposed health care reform could have on an already overworked health care staff.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Projected Government Business

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to Standing Order 7(5) I would ask that the government please share the projected government business for the week of May 3 to May 6, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, May 3, at 9 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders for second reading Bill Pr. 4, Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 29, Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004; in Committee of the Whole Bill Pr. 4; Bill 27, Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 28, Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 29, Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004; and for third reading Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 25, School Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 26, Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004. Just for the information of the House I'm expecting that we will start actually with Bill 25 in third reading.

On Tuesday, May 4, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders we'll continue to be in Committee of Supply, day 20 of 24, the designated department being Human Resources and Employment; time permitting, Committee of the Whole on bills 27, 28, and 29 and third readings of Bill Pr. 4, bills 22, 25, and 26 and as per the Order Paper. On Tuesday, May 4, at 8 p.m. under Government Bills

and Orders in Committee of Supply, day 21 of 24 with the estimates of the Department of Gaming and, time permitting, Committee of the Whole on bills 27, 28, and 29 and third readings on Bill Pr. 4 and bills 22, 25, and 26.

On Wednesday, May 5, 2004, under Government Bills and Orders continuing in Committee of Supply on day 22 of 24 with the designated department being Infrastructure and, time permitting, Committee of the Whole on the bills on the Order Paper and third readings on the bills remaining on the Order Paper. On Wednesday evening, May 5, at 8 p.m. under Government Bills and Orders in Committee of Supply, day 23 of 24, the estimates of Executive Council and, time permitting, in committee and third readings as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, May 6, in the afternoon under Government Bills and Orders continuing Committee of Supply, day 24 of 24, with the Department of Seniors designated.

Thereafter, we would anticipate asking for unanimous consent to revert to Introduction of Bills as is the normal course of the House to introduce the appropriation bill coming out of Committee of Supply and, time permitting, Committee of the Whole and third readings as per the Order Paper.

The Speaker: Hon. members, on this day in a year in the first part of the 20th century, year undefined, the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly was born. Tomorrow on this day in the first part of the 20th century the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills arrived in the world.

Now, hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, your colleague moved during question period with respect to a proposed point of order, but I think that with the reprimand given to the Premier about using your name in the Legislative Assembly, that probably dealt with the matter.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, there is no point of order.

Speaker's Ruling

Referring to Members by Name

The Speaker: Well, I suspected there wouldn't be because if an individual name is mentioned in the Legislative Assembly, that provides more coverage for the member than just mentioning his constituency. However, just let me remind all members once again.

There's a television program, a British sitcom, called *Keeping Up Appearances*. I don't know if anybody's seen it. It's a wonderful, funny program. The main character in the program spells her last name B-u-c-k-e-t. Most people pronounce it "Bucket." She insists that it be pronounced "Bouquet."

Now, some members have difficulty pronouncing certain people's names in this Assembly. We see it all the time in the introduction of visitors and guests. So to avoid this difficulty for certain members, the tradition throughout all of parliamentary history is that you never mention the individual's name. With a name like "Bouquet" or "Bucket" you can understand that because there are other names that might be similar that have different interpretations of pronunciation which may just give the opposite ring and allow scandalous situations to develop among all the little children in the province of Alberta. So that's the reason.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Energy

The Deputy Chair: As per our standing order the first hour will be dedicated between the hon. minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister of Energy.

3:00

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I can't tell you the amount of relief that I have when addressing this House that I was not blessed with the family surname of Mr. Fuchs.

Having said that, let me move along to address the estimates for the Department of Energy. Mr. Chairman, if I can start by introducing the members from the department who are here today to watch and be able to assist members of the Assembly who have questions. With respect to the estimates, if we can shine light on or provide immediate answers, we certainly will.

Mr. Chairman, if I could just note the presence of Ken Smith, the Deputy Minister of Energy; Mr. David Breakwell, the assistant deputy minister of electricity and gas; Mr. Don Keech, the assistant deputy minister of forestry and mineral development; Mr. Mike Ekelund, the assistant deputy minister of oil development; Mr. Joe Miller, executive director of policy and planning; Ms Katherine Braun, senior manager, gas in Alberta markets, electricity; Mr. Bob Taylor, special adviser, oil development; Mr. Mike Boyd, senior manager, policy and planning; Mr. Douglas Borland, manager, mineral development; Ms Donna McColl, assistant director, communications; and from the Energy and Utilities Board Mr. John Giesbrecht. These individuals are here from the department and from the EUB and are more than pleased to help answer any questions.

I just thought I'd open with some cursory or preliminary opening remarks, and then I know that members will be keen to engage in a lively question and answer session to proceed through to – it must be 5:15? It can't conclude any earlier?

The Deputy Chair: It can.

Mr. Smith: Oh, it can conclude earlier. It can conclude earlier than 5:15.

Mr. Chairman, we're very proud of this department as it relates to protecting this resource for all Albertans and collecting the economic rents, the royalties. It has a rich and a great history. I'm very pleased to be a part of it. I feel very privileged to represent it as its minister.

Without using more time in the House than is absolutely necessary, Mr. Chairman, I'm more than pleased to entertain questions. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to get an opportunity to discuss Alberta Energy's budget estimates this year. Certainly, as the minister is very fond of reminding all Albertans, it is a vital department. It is a department that is in charge of ensuring that Albertans get full benefit from the natural resources that we are blessed with in this province.

The Department of Energy this year is requesting a total budget of over \$113 million for operating expenses and equipment/inventory purchases. Our research indicates that the ministry was \$13 million over budget last year. Comparing the 2004 budget to the 2003 budget, there's a 3.5 per cent spending increase this year.

Whenever one looks at the department, it's quite an operation. We've got the EUB. We have certainly, when you look at the operational overview, such a wide range of very important activities. You look at conventional oil, you look at synthetic crude oil, and you look at natural gas, electricity, coal and mineral development. One would only think that in the near future there will be a separate department to hopefully ensure that the development of the coal bed methane resource goes on in an environmentally sound and economically viable manner.

We can't overlook the importance of coal bed methane development, and I'm certain there are very devoted, dedicated public employees employed in the Department of Energy to ensure that this happens. How long before we see 10 per cent of our total natural gas production coming from coal bed methane? Well, that's up to the minister to tell us.

There are so many issues with this department. I think we'll start, Mr. Chairman, with questions for the hon. minister in regard to the intentions of the department with the Regional Transmission Organization West, which has now become Grid West. This announcement was made near the end of last month after the hon. minister and the Premier returned from New Mexico indicating that, yes, we are going to have an integrated electricity market.

I have this to ask the minister: what cost-benefit analysis has been done to indicate that consumers in this province will as a result of this integration have lower power bills? What exactly is going on with this Grid West? Will the minister make all presentations by either Department of Energy officials or representatives from the Alberta Power Pool public? This is perhaps one of the most important initiatives going on in this province at this time. Consumers, those who pay electricity bills, whether they're residential, commercial, or industrial consumers, deserve an answer, and they deserve to be informed.

Now, with the transfer of assets that's going to be finalized on the 4th of May, the transfer of the retail assets from ATCO to Direct Energy, it's astonishing that this sale is actually going to increase gas customers' bills in some cases between \$40 and \$45 annually. It's another hit for energy consumers that they just can't afford. What is the difference between sharing the proceeds of the sale of the Viking-Kinsella gas field, which was also owned by ATCO, and this sale with Direct Energy?

3:10

Why are not at least part of the proceeds, if not all of them, being shared with the consumers who over the years have through their utility bills paid for some, if not all, of the infrastructure that ATCO has for distribution of gas to customers? Now those retail accounts, that information, is being sold, and surely consumers have been responsible for at least, Mr. Chairman, a portion of that. So why is there no sharing of the proceeds in this sale and in the past with Viking-Kinsella there has been?

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

I believe that this employee or this contract employee, Mr. Kellan Fluckiger, who was involved with former governor Gray Davis in California as an energy adviser, has been hired or contracted or whatever by the Department of Energy. I believe he's the business unit manager under electricity. I think that's the title. That position may have been vacant when the last annual report came out. What are the details of this adviser? He certainly has a long history with electricity in California and I believe, previous to that, in Arizona and is, there's no doubt, a very qualified individual with a great deal of experience. Has he been hired here, really, to manage rolling

blackouts if we do have any, because certainly that would be part of his job in California? What exactly are the details surrounding this gentleman's contract here in this province?

Now, I'm very disappointed that the minister isn't going to unplug electricity deregulation. I'm very disappointed that he's persistent in his refusal to do so. Perhaps there would be a light, a ray of hope, a beam shining on the minister in Calgary-Varsity some evening, and he would be urged to go to the Internet and look at liberalopposition.com and see our policy. Competition for electricity belongs at the generation level; it does not belong at the retail level. If we're going to have competition, it belongs at the generation level.

We have to recognize once and for all that electricity is not a commodity. It's not a commodity, like some hon. members on the Conservative side insist. It's an essential service. The sooner we unplug deregulation, admit that it was a mistake, and recognize that electricity is an essential service, the better off we will be. I can't imagine, for instance, the Saddledome tonight. What would happen if the lights went out?

Mr. Hancock: They won't go out.

Mr. MacDonald: The Minister of Justice is assuring me that the power won't go out, and I certainly hope that it never goes out. I really do. The consequences of this would be enormous. We don't have a system that works as well as the previous system.

Is the minister or is the department considering organizing a referendum around electricity exports or further integration to the Pacific Northwest grid? Certainly, the Minister of Justice would be aware of the referendum that was held in 1948, the last time the province sought direction directly from the people on what they wanted with the electricity generation, distribution, and transmission system. That's a novel idea for this government.

We have all these stakeholder consultations. We have all these reports and committees that have been struck. I can count at least 14. I'm sure the hon. minister knows of many more, and perhaps he would save us the time of FOIPing them by just tabling them. I think he would be tabling documents for a considerable time because energy deregulation is a well-documented ideological experiment in North America, and it doesn't work.

Now, later on we'll get a chance to talk about coal bed methane, but I do have some concerns about the directions that are currently occurring in the department, and that is in regard to EUB hearings. How are interveners to get information to participate in the hearings when the minister refuses to make it public?

I'm talking about ministerial orders. Yes. One specific ministerial order deals with approval of professional and other costs in regard to the Utilities Consumer Advocate. This would be going back to December of 2003. I was naive, and I thought that all ministerial orders were public documents. I was fortunate that I finally got a copy of this.

Does the minister not consider that to be in a way undermining the confidence of the whole regulatory process when individuals cannot get access to this important, vital information before they go to a regulatory hearing? I know that I hear all the time about this government being very proud of its open, transparent policies. Well, why wouldn't documents like that in particular be public? I'm not satisfied that the current process works to instill confidence in the EUB.

Now, also the whole system of rate riders, that have been paid off with the exception of some of them in Calgary. At one time probably two, two-and-a-half years ago the government even denied that these rate riders were there. But they were there, and eventually people paid them off. These are for the costs of electricity that

couldn't be charged on people's bills in the run-up to and during the last election.

How can consumers be confident that the calculation of those rate riders and the amount owing is accurate? Does the minister know of any cases where consumers have taken retailers to court because of inaccuracies in the calculation of those rate riders? I have certainly received complaints. I haven't had time to look into it yet, but I've had people suggest to me and point out that those calculations have not been accurate. I'm asking the minister what sort of information he has in regard to this matter. I'd be delighted and anxious to hear exactly how many complaints the minister has heard.

I have a few other questions at this time, and perhaps it would an opportunity for the minister to respond, but from the Alberta Energy business plan, 2004 through to 2007, on pages 165 to 185 of the budget, we're looking at the top of page 166: the EUB's "operations are jointly funded by the Crown (37%) and by industry (63%)." Previously the funding was 20 per cent from the Crown to 80 per cent from industry. Why did the minister make this conscious decision to shift the funding formula? Is this an attempt by the government to reclaim control of the EUB from industry?

Further along on page 169, strategic priority 5, the department will focus on "ensuring right of access of resource developers to . . . First Nation 'traditional use' lands." How does the department intend at this time to go about doing this?

3:20

On the next page, page 170, the department will "regularly review Alberta's royalty regime," especially that of the oil sands and coal bed methane. In addition, the department will "work with leaseholders affected by" the bitumen versus the gas issue "in the Athabasca area . . . to find fair and equitable solutions." Again, in the interests of openness and transparency will the minister make this review public, and will the review include royalty tax credits and royalty reduction programs?

How many oil sands projects are currently paying the full 25 per cent royalty? How many oil sands projects does the minister expect will begin paying the full 25 per cent royalty this year? Is the government considering increasing the 1 per cent royalty on new oil sands projects? And this has been in the news lately: what is the current status of the royalty agreement between the government and Suncor?

I'm certainly not satisfied from the questions we asked earlier this week in regard to this matter, and perhaps the minister has had a chance to talk with others in the industry since then and can update not only this hon. member but members of the House in regard to this matter.

Now, the whole issue of royalties is ongoing, and so is the gentleman that is going from Red Deer to Edmonton, Mr. Chairman. It is amazing that as we sit here and stand here and discuss the energy estimates and we're having this discussion on royalties and whether we're getting enough money and how the whole system works – does it need to be improved? – we have a student from Red Deer, as I understand it, Mr. Andy Davies, who is rolling a barrel from Red Deer to Edmonton. I don't know whether it's full. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry calculates its weight at over 400 pounds if it's a full barrel of crude oil. I don't know whether he's accurate. I don't know if he intends to get to the Assembly with it or not. He's protesting our royalty structure, I believe.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Much of what the member has asked refers to subjects outside of the estimates, but being

inclusive, being transparent, being accountable, being open, they're all subject to the litmus test of estimates, and we'll proceed ahead with that. I'll try to take them in chronological order, and I'm going to do the most difficult thing in the world, Mr. Chairman: I'm actually going to try to follow his line of logic. So if I can do that, then it will indeed be a mental flex day.

I think the first part I heard from the member was on coal bed methane. Coal bed methane, as everyone knows, is a potentially critical resource to increase natural gas supplies in the province of Alberta. We have a great deal of experience with natural gas, as anybody knows. Methane by definition is natural gas, so it's treated as such. It has a royalty structure associated with it, and it has some changes from traditional conventional development. The most salient change is of course that you need more wells per section than what you would with conventional gas.

We're very fortunate in Alberta in that most of our coal bed methane is extracted without any disposal of fresh water. There are more than adequate rules to deal with the disposal of fresh water. It is illegal in Alberta to dispose of fresh water. It's also the EUB regulation that you must case, or provide steel around, any hole that's drilled into an aquifer deposit. I know that because I used to place casing in the hole down through the Milk River formation in the Taber area.

Coal bed methane has been subject to extensive consultation over seven communities in Alberta. I think that there is extremely positive dialogue taking place between the people who own land, the people who live in the area where coal bed methane is to be extracted, and those who are going to help develop the resource and also between the regulator and the department from a policy perspective.

He then moved to transmission and talked about Grid West and, I believe, the signing of the protocol. When the Premier and I were attending the Western Governors' Association that dealt with the energy summit, actually I heard Governor Bill Richardson turn to the Premier – Governor Bill Richardson, a four-time Nobel peace prize nominated Democrat – and say: would you accompany me in my helicopter to the governor's mansion? He uses a helicopter every day to get back and forth from work. It's interesting that we didn't hear any questions about that. He turned to the Premier and said: because you're the most important person here.

It was a reflection from a former Secretary of Energy for the United States government that realized the tremendous importance of Alberta to the U.S. energy solution: the fact that we supply over 20 per cent of their energy requirements; the fact that if you converted every molecule of natural gas to air conditioning, we would cool one out of seven and a half homes in the United States. This relationship is important, this relationship will continue, and we need to develop this relationship.

Part of the energy reservoir in Alberta is electricity. Part of the resounding problem in electricity has been – oh, I guess I'd call it a Liberal lack of attention to transmission networks. This Liberal lack of attention over the last 25, 30 years has resulted in a transmission patchwork design that's not efficient to the consumer or to the producer of power. Part of that is to build on bilateral relationships to facilitate the movement of power in crisis conditions.

Also, on the electricity front the member referred to the transfer of assets from ATCO to Direct. He knows full well that the decision by the EUB, which is a public decision, public hearings, where we have no record of his attendance at any of those events, covered completely why the decision was made as such, why the change in price on the natural gas side of about 10 cents a day, and the fact that it has no bearing on electrical prices, and the fact that these prices in fact could not exist if people enter into contracts.

I struggle with the understanding the member has of this important and complex piece when he's quoted in the paper as saying that the Alberta grid was one toaster short of a blackout. You know, when I was in the oil and gas business, we had comments like that too: that you were one brick short of a load or that you were drilling three stands off the bottom or that you weren't the sharpest pencil in the box or that you weren't the brightest lightbulb burning, those kinds of definitions.

3:30

So as to being one toaster short of a blackout, you look back to see who made that kind of comment, and it indicates a very superficial understanding of a very complex network that, not surprisingly, Mr. Chairman, has not blacked out once, has delivered solid electrical power to this marketplace from 1998 to 2004. This is going to continue because of the structure of this market.

I would suggest to you, Mr. Chairman, that the only thing worse than being a Liberal in Alberta when it comes to electricity is to be a Liberal in Ontario, because that province is struggling with a very immense electrical issue today. I feel a great deal of sympathy for them, particularly because of their current administration. Much sympathy flows from that decision. Secondly, in the last blackout, that was caused by the kind of dithering that the chief ditherer talked about, that blackout cost \$2 billion to small business. That money is never recoverable. That type of blackout is enough money to build generation to supply another city in Alberta the size of the city of Calgary. It's immense.

I have a friend, having lived in Ontario, who is in a small area, the birthplace of Larry Robinson, a great hockey player. It's called Metcalfe, Ontario. He runs the Metcalfe Variety and Food Store. It's a small family business. His name is Mike Campbell, a good friend of mine. He came out to see the Calgary Flames in the first playoff game, which I thought was very good of him. He told me at that time that he was spending \$30,000 to put in a standby generator to keep his coolers running at the time when the power blacks out, because he fully expects a blackout this summer, this spring, as temperatures warm up in that area. I have not had one call about people buying a generator. I have not had anybody phone me and say: we need to buy our own power standby.

Mr. Chairman, we have withstood the onslaught of empty criticism, of slanderous talk. Abraham Lincoln once said that truth is the vindication of slander, and I would submit to you that the truth of an operating power grid with ample generating capacity and the lowest wholesale rates in Canada is evidence that we have an electricity policy that is good, that is effective and is going to be here for the long term. The only thing that gets unplugged will probably be www.liberal.com. But I digress.

Mr. Chairman, the comments on Mr. Kellan Fluckiger, on a third-party agreement. The members know full well how to obtain that information. He is the manager of the electrical business unit and, as he said, is very qualified, indeed as we expect from all our business unit leaders. We expect that high performance, and that's why we generated a North American wide search to find this individual.

The member also knows that there are ample studies out reflective of the price: the IPPSA study, the Seabron Adamson study. There's information out that supports the deregulated model of electricity as it sits today. I would point him to those studies, openly and widely available. I would even suggest that maybe Mr. Evan Bahry, who is the executive director of IPPSA, would be more than pleased to make a presentation to a seven-member caucus – or to a five-member caucus, I guess, because a couple are running Liberal federally now – to get a really strong look at that analysis and to see how private

generation has impacted on price. I know he'd be more than willing to spend time with the five members.

Mr. Chairman, the discussion on the funding to the EUB. We continue to move up that funding because we believe it's important, and it's an objective of this government to return to 50-50 funding. The EUB is an independent body, as they have shown by their decisions certainly since the time I've been minister. I think that 50-50 funding is in place.

If the member is at all concerned about the viability of a deregulated electricity market, I could only direct him to two hard spots: one is the premium that Fortis recently paid to purchase the Aquila assets – that premium was about \$120 million over the original price – and, secondly, the \$90 million that Direct paid. You know, these are hard-cash dollars injected into a market that shows market confidence, market growth, and it's really the best place to put your dollars in Canada from an investment perspective.

He talked about oil sands royalties. Let me briefly say that the oil sands royalty regulation, which I remember discussing last year in estimates, continues to be clarified. The decision with respect to Suncor and the declaration that Firebag is to be treated as a new project and not as an expansion project is one that's the result of much discussion, many meetings with Suncor, and also brings clarity to the oil sands royalty regulation. It is not – and I must repeat: not – a change in policy. It is a reaffirmation of the existing policy. Nothing has changed. All this does is provide further clarity to the oil sands players, who are participating in some 52 projects in the oil sands today.

We continue to work with Suncor. We continue to look at Suncor with respect. As a matter of fact, was the member there last night at the Suncor reception prior to Suncor's annual general meeting, which is being held today in the great city of Edmonton? I think it's always important, if you're having an annual meeting, to have it in an area where you can focus attention on that company, have some media attention. I thought: you know, this is probably the best hockey-free area in Alberta to do that right now. So I'm glad that they're here in Edmonton.

I must say that one of my comments to the crowd at Suncor last night was that in 1995 I was the Minister of Economic Development, that Alberta had a \$21 billion debt, and they were difficult times. We were moving out of deficit financing. At that time Mr. Rick George, the president and CEO of the company, made the decision to move his head office from Toronto to Calgary. I sent Mr. George an Alberta advantage T-shirt. Now, the value of that T-shirt was \$8, but the value of Suncor moving to Calgary was priceless.

Mr. Chairman, Suncor has continued to develop the resource from the point of 67,000 barrels a day to well over 200,000 barrels a day today. They're an important partner in oil sands development, and they will continue to be a partner with the Alberta government. We will continue to work with them with respect but also remembering fairness and the fact that we are the custodian for royalty collection for the people of Alberta and that the royalty program is designed at 1 per cent of gross revenue while investment is being encouraged and until investment is paid out and then reverting to 25 per cent of revenue minus cost. That will continue. We will be working with the industry and the investment community to ensure that there is clarity surrounding that direction.

Mr. Chairman, I think that covers for the most part the comments from the member, and I will sit and continue to attentively listen to further comments.

3:40

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, I listened with a great deal of interest to the hon. minister. I'm pleased to see, finally, a change in colour in the hon. minister. The solid rose pink shirt is certainly an indication that the minister is changing direction and the Tory blue is fading, and next year it'll be a bright red shirt. He's in transition.

Now, he spoke briefly about the transmission policy, and we all know the change in policy that has happened as a result of this minister's decree not in this Legislative Assembly but in a ballroom in Banff last year, where we transferred full costs of any new transmission lines to consumers. The EUB in the past had ruled: let's have generators pay for half and then consumers pay for roughly half. That was a compromise situation everyone could live with.

But when the minister makes these changes, it reduces investor confidence. If electricity deregulation needs any further reductions in investor confidence, I don't know what they would be, but that was certainly it. Whenever you have the lack of a long-term planning process, which has occurred in this province because of electricity deregulation – the players didn't know what the rules were going to be; they weren't going to put their money down – this is why we have deficiencies in our transmission system. It has nothing to do with anything other than that it is the fault of electricity deregulation.

The hon. minister even went on. I believe the New Democrats were mentioned, and certainly the Liberals were mentioned. Mr. Chairman, if he can tell a story, then so can I. Now, I would remind not only the minister but all members of this House of this definition. A New Democrat is a blind man in a dark cellar at midnight looking for a black cat that isn't there. He is distinguished from the Liberal in that the Liberal finds the cat. He is also distinguished from the Progressive Conservative, who smuggles in a cat in his overcoat pocket and emerges to brag in triumph. Well, the Conservatives can brag all they want about electricity deregulation, but it is simply not working.

Now, it's the Progressive Conservatives in Ontario who were defeated for a number of reasons, but certainly one of them was their mishandling of the file on electricity deregulation, this stop/start proposal they had. To blame it on another government is wrong. This ideology that has resulted in electricity deregulation is a faulty ideology. It doesn't matter whether it's Ontario, Alberta, California, New York state, Pennsylvania, Oregon, or Nevada. Certainly, Montana, which we discussed earlier in question period, Mr. Chairman, has had significant issues, and they're trying to deal with them.

In regard to the whole issue of royalties, I don't think we can dismiss it as casually as this minister would like to do. We talked about it last year, but, yes, it continues to be a problem. It's a significant problem, and that's reflected in the initiative taken by the young man from Red Deer, who is rolling this barrel to Edmonton in protest of our royalty structures or at least to bring attention to the whole issue of our royalty structures.

There are many significant issues around royalties. The Auditor General has some issues, and we're going to discuss these. I don't expect the hon. minister to listen to this side of the House because that would be an historic first if he did, but perhaps he would listen to the Auditor General.

Now, I wonder if the young man in Red Deer is aware of this. Under the current gas cost allowance industry can apply all applicable natural gas costs on a corporate basis prior to paying royalties.

Now, this is what the Auditor General has to say, and the Auditor General deals in detail, and this is the annual report of the Auditor

General of our province, 2002-2003. Systems audits: timely program reviews and measure program effectiveness.

- 1.1 The Department needs to assess whether its royalty reduction programs are achieving their intended objectives . . .
- 1.2 The Department needs to identify the objectives of the Alberta Royalty Tax Credit program and develop measures to determine the effectiveness of this program . . .
- 1.3 The Department should [also] improve the communication of its needs for assurance on well and production data to the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board . . . and evaluate the extent of audit work done by the EUB in relation to the Department's needs.

Now, let's have a look at this. The Auditor General states that the ministry received \$7.4 billion in revenue. There was the nonrenewable resource revenue, the freehold mineral rights tax, industry levies and licences, and other revenue.

There have been some recommendations made here not only for the attention of the hon. minister but for the attention of all members. The first recommendation is, "We recommend that the Department of Energy assess whether the royalty reduction programs are achieving their intended objectives."

Here are some of the findings.

Mr. Smith: Royalties are up.

Mr. MacDonald: Royalties are up because the price of natural gas is up.

Now, the findings are this: four programs need to be reviewed, according to the Auditor General and his staff. "The low productivity and reactivated well programs have not been reviewed since their inception in 1992." The price of petroleum has certainly increased. "The Department has not finalized," the Auditor General adds, "its 1999 reviews of the horizontal re-entry and deep gas holiday programs."

Here's another recommendation, and this is in regard to the Alberta royalty tax credit program, recommendation 11 on page 96. "We recommend that the Department of Energy document and communicate the objectives of the Alberta Royalty Tax Credit program and develop measures to assess whether the program is meeting its objectives." The background on this, Mr. Chairman:

The Alberta Royalty Tax Credit program refunds a portion of the royalties paid to the Province. The refund is available to individuals and corporations to a maximum of \$2 million of eligible royalties. The total credits in the 2003 fiscal year were \$83 million.

Is that good enough? Do we need to have a look at this?

Now, we can go further in the recommendation, and the Auditor General states:

We found that

- although various reviews have discussed the objectives of the [Alberta Royalty Tax Credit], there is no formal documentation or communication of the program objectives
- the Department has not developed measures to assess whether the objectives of the program [have been] achieved.

Are we doing everything to ensure that as this young man from Red Deer rolls his barrel from Red Deer to Edmonton, his generation is getting maximum benefit from the royalties that are a result of our natural gas and oil exploration? If not, perhaps we should have a look at this, and perhaps we should dedicate the extra revenue that we would get from this into the Alberta heritage savings trust fund for the rainy day that, unfortunately, will come sometime for this young Albertan. We would be very wise, we would be very prudent to set aside as much revenue from our resources as possible for future generations.

3:50

Now, another recommendation from the Auditor General on well and production data:

We recommend that the Department of Energy

- improve the communication of its needs for assurance on well and production data to the EUB.
- evaluate the extent of audit work done on well and production data by the EUB in relation to its needs.

We've got to take the Auditor General seriously, and hopefully next year, next September or October, whenever the Auditor General's report comes out, these recommendations will have been dealt with. This is not good enough. It's not good enough for this generation nor future generations in this province. We have to ensure that we're getting maximum benefit from these resources.

The minister also talked about seven Liberals becoming five Liberals. Well, if the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie goes to Ottawa, she's going to have specific instructions to deal with some matters that this government is negligent in dealing with, and those are getting our fair share of royalties and perhaps natural gas liquids from the north.

We have to have a good process. We can't simply talk about building a firewall around this province, like some Conservative politicians. We have to share our technology with the territories in the north that are developing their resources. The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie would be a good advocate for this province. As the natural gas liquids are coming from the north, perhaps she could advocate that we have some for Fort Saskatchewan, we have some for Joffre to run the petrochemical . . . [interjections]

Chair's Ruling Decorum

The Chair: Hon. members. Hon. members, Edmonton-Castle Downs and others, we're on the estimates of the Minister of Energy, not in the business of speculating on all kinds of other possibilities and propositions that may be around at this time of year or later. So let's stick with this, and remember, all hon. members, that you will have a chance to speak to these estimates later. The hour will be up at 4 o'clock – it started at 3 – and we will have other people.

But right now, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Debate Continued

Mr. MacDonald: There is an issue surrounding an affordable, accessible supply of ethane for our petrochemical industry, and this government has been negligent in ensuring that there's a long-term supply. Now, perhaps the minister is going to stand up and say: well, we're going to take a process and establish an upgrader in Edmonton, and we're going to use bitumen from the north as a source of feedstock for our petrochemical industry in Fort Saskatchewan. But in the meantime, we need to show some real leadership and we need to be negotiating with the northern territories, with the Northwest Territories and with the Yukon Territory, and ensure that as those natural gas liquids are developed and coming through this province, if our own industry needs access to them, we'll have them.

I'm certain that if the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie goes to Ottawa, she will stand up and speak out on behalf of that vital industry in this province. This government, in my view, has been negligent in protecting ethane.

Now, not only do we have development in the Norman Wells area, the Mackenzie Delta, but also in the Cameron Hills, in the Yukon, and we have to ensure that we have an adequate supply. It's a very, very important issue. We need to show leadership on it, and talking about taking our marbles and going home and building firewalls is

not going to work to anyone's advantage. I'm sorry; that's not going to work.

Now, will the government also be introducing, while we're on the issue of royalties, a new royalty regime to deal with nonconventional gas like coal bed methane? This is a big issue. We're not getting a chance to discuss it, probably, in the time allotted this afternoon. If so, will this royalty regime be retroactive for current coal bed methane leases?

How does this government intend to solve the dispute between bitumen leaseholders and natural gas leaseholders in the Fort McMurray area? How much financial compensation is the government currently providing natural gas leaseholders in the disputed areas? How much does the government forecast it will have to provide in total compensation?

With those questions, Mr. Chairman, I will cede the floor to the hon. minister and other members who want to participate.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Where to start, where to start. It's kind of like going back to question period, you know, where you have to correct all the errors, falsehoods, and erroneous preambles to actually get to the question, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to start this time maybe from back to front instead of going from front to back, particularly because he was pumped up about sending the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to Ottawa to the point where it was advocating for our resources, ensuring that we get our fair share.

Well, you know, isn't that just like a Liberal? Who owns the resources? They're owned right here. They're not owned in Ottawa. It's that kind of Liberal attitude that got us into the national energy program, buddy, and I'll tell you what: there are people in here who lost their jobs, went bankrupt, lost their homes, lost their businesses, and it's that very attitude that started it. So if anybody's going to Ottawa, buddy, I hope it's you.

If you look at the Alberta royalty tax credit, it was established in defence of what Pierre Trudeau and John Turner did when they tried to disallow deductibility of our royalty payments. I would direct the member to go back in time, about two years from his present state, go back to 1930, 1931 and the work of John Brownlee, Premier Brownlee, the seven years that he spent to ensure that these resources belong to the people of Alberta and will be protected by the people of Alberta.

But I digress. Mr. Chairman, I'm the type of Conservative that would really believe in free trade, the free trade that's made this province great, the free trade that's moved this product. We are so blessed to have this much resource beside the world's largest customer, this seamless network of hundreds of thousands of kilometres of pipe that moves into the United States. So as a free trader and a Conservative I'm more interested in breaking down walls, not building walls. I think that we can continue to break down the walls, whether they exist between a territory and a province or whether they exist between another country, another state and this province.

In fact, I met with Premier Handley in Albuquerque. He was there as well last week, and we did talk about how best to organize the proper and appropriate movement of natural gas from the Mackenzie Delta through to Alberta so that we could maximize the capacity of the Alberta natural gas hub, the most salient trading hub in the world, and also to ensure that the producers get an appropriate benefit from shipping that gas on that pipeline. I think that we can come to a very, very good solution. I've got to commend the government of the Northwest Territories for their forward thinking, their stance on devolution of royalties and also congratulate them on

soon becoming the world's third-largest producer of diamonds, by the way.

4:00

Mr. Chairman, the next one back, or his next to last – that would be his penultimate point – was on the petrochemical industry. Now, that member should know because of his experience in the oil patch that we have the world's largest ethane cracker located in the fair constituency, the Conservative-represented constituency of Lacombe-Stettler, whose member is listening intently to estimates. That cracker – the removal of the machinery and equipment tax in 1995 hastened the construction of that – combined with the natural supply of ethane here in this province, combined with transportation efficiencies has resulted in a thriving petrochemical industry, an industry that has been supported time in and time out by the Premier of this province, who has said that natural gas moving through Alberta will be processed; the liquids will be processed. There are compelling commercial alternatives to use Alberta as a gas-processing hub.

That will continue, but we're prepared to build on those strong building blocks by taking new technological steps into the oil sands working in partnership with the Alberta Chamber of Resources to see if there are additional feedstock opportunities from the oil sands. Already the oil sands sends down propane into Redwater, where there's a propane fractionation plant. So we know that we have that opportunity.

We also see the oil sands as an opportunity to continue on clean-burning coal technology as they respond to the challenges in using steam and generating steam and what input they're going to use to generate that steam.

Mr. Chairman, what he doesn't mention, as is always the case with this fella, is that the petrochemical industry is in a price-cycle bottom, and in fact nobody in the petrochemical business is making money. We are not short of ethane in this marketplace, and as the cycle changes and as the demand changes, we will be there. We will continue to respond to the needs of our petrochemical industry.

Now, Mr. Chairman, he did go back and talk about royalty and royalty structure, and of course, again, if you do the macropicture and if you look at the last four years of royalties and add them up, you'll realize that they're equal to the previous 10 combined. For the last three years the number one export in Canada has been energy, the number one investment product in Canada has been the oil and gas industry, and the number one province that is the recipient of that investment is Alberta. That is macroeconomic proof that the royalty system works and that citizens and investors and those who apply for the extraction of this great resource benefit from the same.

Mr. Chairman, we continue to monitor our royalty index. We have two world-wide organizations that spend a great deal of time evaluating the fairness of our royalty system and in fact its contemporary value.

I would turn the hon. member to *The Armet Report*. I'm sure he subscribes; most people in the know are recipients of it. I don't know if I have the copyright authority to table this; it does have copyright to it. It does talk very candidly about a royalty structure for the future.

It's always a fond Liberal stunt to say that we're exploiting all our resources and leaving nothing for tomorrow. Well, let's talk about tomorrow for just a second, Mr. Chairman, and let's assume that the inflation rate is a modest 1 per cent. We get through to 2020, which is not far from now. Your golf game will be even better than it is today, all the projects in the oil sands are paid out, and outside external forecasters are estimating that we're producing 3 million

barrels a day by that time, 3 million barrels a day at roughly \$60 Canadian a barrel for light synthetic crude oil at the refinery gate.

Let's take \$10 off for the spread between heavy oil and light, and that takes us down to \$50. Let's assume that there's been no change in operating costs, and operating costs are \$12 a barrel. That gets us down to \$38. And let's assume that we get 25 per cent revenue minus costs, as the oil sands royalty regulation has affirmed. That gives us about \$9.50 a barrel. Let's multiply 3 million barrels a day by \$9.50, and everybody knows the answer to that on the Conservative side of the House. That's about \$30 million a day. If we take the \$30 million a day and apply it to a 30-day month, that's \$900 million in a month. Twelve months of the year times – I know you're with me – \$900 million comes out to \$10.8 billion, roughly \$11 billion. Mr. Chairman, \$11 billion is real money in anybody's lexicon.

That's the architecture that we have tried to put in place for the future of Albertans so that they can indeed have the opportunity to see roads built, infrastructure, education, highways. In fact, government's job is to create the wealth that allows us to build the tools that allow the private sector to build wealth, and we can do that through the oil sands. We will continue to work hard with our partners, the Auditor General, the companies that are there, and I know that we're going to be able to see hard, substantive results in our lifetime. This is not a long-term dream.

I think I've covered most of the fact, half the fiction, and some of the politics, so I'll sit down now, Mr. Chairman.

Oh, I'm sorry. I do have to return to electricity for just a moment to talk about transmission. The member knows full well the story on it, and we'll have to just take the time up to correct the record. We did not change a decision by the EUB. We reaffirmed the existing policy where consumers pay for transmission.

We must remember that there are business consumers; there are residential consumers. Insofar as the 15 per cent of the marketplace which is residential consumers, the price that they pay for the transmission is that percentage piece. Mr. Chairman, I would ask the member to look back, and if he looks at it and he says, "The generators would pay 15 per cent; where would the generators get their money from?" Well, the generators sell into the grid. They sell at a particular price. Consumers purchase the power. The power is then consumed, and the consumer pays the bill. Do you not think that would include transmission? I would think so. It's an easy economic tenet to follow, and of course we'll continue to help the member whenever we can.

Of course, I must finish with the comment about the rose shirt and the move to red. I'm not in transition; I'm in season.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'll be brief because other hon. members have expressed an interest in participating in the debate. The hon. minister was talking about fact and fiction and politics, and while there are some things that certainly need to be corrected, the minister's sense of history is, to say the least . . .

Mr. Smith: Excellent.

Mr. MacDonald: He may maintain that it's excellent, but perhaps he should table his history mark from Notre Dame College for all to see.

Mr. Smith: Point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. member has a point of order.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Smith: It would be under Standing Order 23(i), imputing false motives. In fact, Mr. Chairman, I had an honours mark at Notre Dame College. Notre Dame College is in fact noted for its scholarly excellence, and I think he is actually attacking the integrity and the viability of that great residential institution and would ask him to withdraw that remark.

4:10

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar on the purported point of interest, point of order.

Mr. MacDonald: Point of interest? Yes, Mr. Chairman, I believe it is a point of interest, not a point of order. If the hon. minister would allow me to continue . . .

The Chair: It's the chair that does that.

Mr. MacDonald: Perhaps he wouldn't be as sensitive to my remarks. They're in no way – any way, shape, or form – to do with Notre Dame College.

The Chair: As I Freudianly slipped, I think it was a point of interest, clarification, and not a point of order.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Debate Continued

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Now, in regard to the transfer of the natural resources to the control of this province, for the minister's benefit and for the benefit of all those assembled here this afternoon, it was a Liberal government under Mackenzie King that allowed this to happen.

Certainly, there was a Conservative government in power under Arthur Meighen, a long-serving Conservative Prime Minister: had the chance, didn't make the transfer. But after the election, when the federal Liberals were returned to power, in conjunction with the U.S.A. this transfer to the province occurred. This transfer to the province provided all the remaining Crown rights in land and resources with certain exceptions, Mr. Chairman, such as Indian reserves, national parks, and the like but subject to all the leases and licences already granted.

So it was a Liberal government in Ottawa that transferred these rights to Alberta, not a Conservative government. A Conservative government had an opportunity, but they did nothing.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you. I was glad to hear about the department's plans with regard to enhanced oil and gas recovery through CO₂. I was also glad to hear about ongoing reviews of royalties to ensure that Albertans are getting their fair share.

One thing I didn't hear from the minister – and maybe he can comment – is what our plans are with regard to the precious mines and minerals opportunities that we may be overlooking in Alberta or maybe not overlooking. I've heard from some of my constituents that are involved in the diamond and gold junior mining companies that we have great opportunities here in Alberta yet hear very little about it in our Legislature.

We'd just like some comments on that.

Mr. Smith: Well, I'd like to commend the Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne for his interest, not only today but in the past, in mineral development, particularly diamonds. He has ably been able to provide information to the House and to the standing policy committee and to this government on a diamond strategy, on mineral development.

One of the parts about diamonds particularly, Mr. Chairman, is that it's similar to the movie business. Each province, each jurisdiction, has its own form of subsidy. What we need to do is to continue to look at competing with other jurisdictions for a superincentive to write off their exploration expense. They do have the opportunity to participate in flow-through shares in the normal course of exploration in this province. We are assisting them by putting more money into the mapping function. I think that will assist them. We hope to see continued mineral development just as we see continued coal development in this great province.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to ask the minister for an update on what his department is doing in terms of climate change and who you're working with: bureaucrats, industry, other levels of government.

Mr. Smith: Tomorrow, Mr. Chairman, we will announce four projects on CO₂ sequestration. We are to the best of my knowledge the only jurisdiction in the land that is actually doing something substantive with respect to CO₂ management. I'm sorry; I had an advance copy of the press release, but I don't have it with me now. We think that that's an important piece. We also want to work on some royalty innovation that would facilitate, not only enhance, the oil recovery but also work on behalf of further development of carbon dioxide management.

We also, Mr. Chairman, continue to work with the Clean Air Strategic Alliance for Alberta, Climate Change Central, Voluntary Challenge program, all the partnerships that are designed to work in co-operation with the private sector where we could get co-operation by collaboration as opposed to regulation for reduction. I think that that is shown and is shown across Canada as being an outstanding practice.

The other part is of course the oil sands technology, driven both by price and the social desire to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We're seeing continued progress on the front in reducing the use of steam as a driver in both steam-assisted gravity drainage as well as some of the other projects up there. Some of that new technology by companies like Petrobank, a toe-to-heel air compression format – that technology is being tested in the lab. Of course, OPTI raised in excess of a billion dollars to partner with Nexon to reduce gas consumption in the oil sands. Devon is working actively with propane – it's called vapex – to be used as a solvent for diluting the bitumen.

So, Mr. Chairman, there is a great amount of activity that is driven not only by economic drivers but also a social desire to reduce greenhouse gases. The long-term prediction I've seen is from a percentage of output. I've seen reductions somewhere in the neighbourhood of 33 to 45 per cent in the oil sands.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wonder if the minister could expand on what he means by royalty innovation. What is that going to look like for this province?

Mr. Smith: We're not entirely sure at this point because we haven't finished moving it through the process, but what it's primarily envisioned to do, Mr. Chairman, is lever about tenfold investment from the private sector and, in fact, from the federal government to move on ways of developing our enhanced oil recovery industry.

We believe that we can use a number of factors: one, federal participation, because I think that it's time they put their money where their mouth is. And they have. I've got to commend Minister Efford's efforts for his contribution in the carbon sequestration program. That has been positive. Secondly, I want to commend the University of Calgary for the creation of the international institute for energy, environment, and the economy, that will address these issues; thirdly, Mr. Len Bolger and the Alberta Energy Research Institute for the work that they have done, particularly on the paper Spudding Innovation, that talks about another Alberta waiting to be discovered.

In fact, we're waiting for technology that can create another Alberta in terms of flushing out the final 50 per cent of oil in our conventional oil wells, finishing the last 30 to 50 per cent of natural gas extraction that sits in existing reservoirs. I think that we maxed out our production at 1.3 million barrels a day in 1973, and we've declined from there. That still means that there's an incredible amount of oil waiting for new technology. If we can lever that and we can lever that on a 10 to 1 basis, I think that there is exceedingly clear and compelling evidence that Albertans would benefit not only from the investment, the jobs created around it but also from the royalties associated with it.

4:20

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My next question is with regard to the trading of CO₂ credits. What's your position on that, and what dollar figure do you think they might be pegged at eventually?

Mr. Smith: All I know is that we have a written agreement between the industry and the federal government that the price of carbon shall not exceed \$15 and that the oil and gas industry will not be burdened with more than 15 per cent of all the emissions in Canada.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to spend a few moments now talking about orphan wells. I see in your budget this year that you're predicting a reduction in orphan well abandonment activities. That wouldn't necessarily coincide with what we're seeing or hearing, so could you explain why that's happening and where the program is at this stage?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Chairman, the orphan well program is one that is collected and supervised through the Energy and Utilities Board but is, in fact, private-sector money that is raised through a levy. It's my understanding that the well program is functioning. I think that there are some accounting issues about taking the money out of the EUB and then putting it directly to work in the orphan well fund. Mr. Geisbrecht is here from the EUB. I see him scribbling intently, so we will provide you with written information on that.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and to the minister. I appreciate his comments and answers today, and I look

forward to asking him a few questions. I want to start with a basic question, and that is: how do you define success when it comes to energy deregulation? I would assume that key factors might include price, reliability of supply. Choice is another one.

I guess my concern here is that we have seen a significant increase in price. It's true that rate riders have come off, but they were merely paying back the power companies for basically selling electricity at below their cost before the last election. So people had to pay those prices. They just spread it over the next couple of years. Those have come off, and that's a fair comment, but Alberta's position in price relative to other provinces has also increased quite a bit. So we have higher prices, and I don't think that there's really any doubt about that.

Also, if we look at the issue of choice for the average consumer – I'm talking about homeowners, small business, farms, that sort of thing – we don't really have a wide range of choice. The entrance of Direct Energy, which is going on right now, basically is having a company from offshore buy up an existing company, so they don't add to the mix in terms of choice. Of course, there's really the question of how you define choice. Is it just, you know, you buy the same electrons from a different company, but they restructure the extra payments in a slightly different way? What does choice really mean in the government's mind? Can we expect more entrance to the market, and will that bring the price down even to what it was before deregulation?

The issue, I guess, of consumer protection is an interesting one and not directly under the minister. I understand that the advocate reports to the Minister of Government Services, but really I think there is some question about what kinds of things these companies are allowed to do. Certainly, Direct Energy has a very bad record. It was voted one of the worst retailers in Britain and was convicted of falsifying people's names in Ontario, and I understand that there are a number of convictions in a number of American states as well. So it's not really the cleanest or the most savoury in terms of its reputation for dealing with consumers.

The question of debt is another one that the minister brings up, and I'd like to deal with that a little bit. The minister talks about public debt in other places. Now, other provinces, of course, have publicly owned power and utility companies, and Alberta has a mixed system. The majority of it is privately owned, but of course Edmonton Power, which is now EPCOR, and Enmax, which is the city of Calgary electrical system, are publicly owned although not owned by the provincial government but, rather, by municipalities.

So it seems to me, Mr. Chairman, that all utilities use debt to finance the capital projects, and then the ratepayers support the debt, and they repay the debt. This is true whether or not it's a publicly owned or a privately owned company. We were able to demonstrate that, in fact, in Alberta the private utilities have a very large debt. Now, it's not as large as Manitoba's. Manitoba has quite a bit bigger debt because of the massive hydroelectric projects that they've been involved in.

The question, really, for the minister is: how is the debt here different from the debt there? I guess I take issue with the characterization that taxpayers are, quote, on the hook for this money, when in fact it is the ratepayers of the utilities that are actually on the hook for the debt in Alberta and in other provinces and in public systems and in private. So that, I guess, is a question I have.

I would like to hear the minister's view on what electricity prices for consumers are likely to be, if there are projections that the ministry has for a year out, two years out, and so on.

Another aspect, Mr. Chairman, that I'd like to ask the minister about is the progress on implementing recommendations in the Bolger report. I'd like a bit of an update with respect to that as well.

So with those questions, Mr. Chairman, I'll take my seat and anxiously await the minister's replies.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Chairman, I would direct the member to pages 179 to I believe it's 186, where it talks about a fair and responsible regulatory framework for the energy and utility sectors, industry compliance with energy and utility regulatory requirements. It has our performance measures, and it has targets from last year, how we did, and what, basically, we're measuring.

I think, also, that from a consumer perspective, success is defined as not being in the position of other jurisdictions such as Ontario – as you can see, they're in crisis state; there's no question – not being saddled with \$357 million worth of added debt from the Manitoba hydro operations, that were a result of the drought as well as other factors.

4:30

I think it's very clear that anybody who's walked into a bank to purchase a business or to look for a loan will find that they'll say: what do you owe? If you say, "I have signed to pay off the debt on bringing all the new light bulbs into my house," that registers on your balance sheet as a liability. However, if a government comes in and puts all those lights in or a third party comes in and puts all those lights in and then charges you rent on those lights or a fee on those lights, you are not responsible for the debt; that other party is.

Mr. Chairman, not only from the creative and wonderful accounting that Crown corporations have brought to Canada but the astonishing debt load, the mismanagement, the bad decisions, the lack of market forces – all I have to do is direct the member to a great New Democratic Party adventure in British Columbia when they decided that B.C. Hydro was the right organization to build a huge dam in Pakistan. In fact, members of the New Democratic Party were accused of buying shares in that entity and being in a conflict of interest. But, you see, you couldn't get through the cloak, the camouflage of New Democratic accounting in order to move into an examination of that. I think that fiasco probably got docked with the B.C. Ferries adventure of the last New Democratic administration there.

So, you know, electricity and market restructuring in this province is in full sail, Mr. Chairman. We have evidence from the private sector, that third party, that shows prices would be where they're at now had it been a regulated model. I know there is no other jurisdiction – no other jurisdiction – that has the mix of environmentally conscious power, environmentally sensitive power, and power generation that this great province has. In fact, to the right of me sits the Minister of Infrastructure in this session, and that minister is a signatory on North America's largest green power contract.

Now, to me success is no blackouts, reasonably priced power, ample generation, good billing practices, presence of a robust wholesale and business marketplace, green power additions to the point where we're the largest wind power producer in Canada. Those look like pretty good indicators of success to me. You know, Mr. Chairman, they're a long time coming. This has been a work-in-progress that's reached over six or seven years.

There are organizations in Grande Prairie that are going to heat buildings and fire electricity through the use of biomass. You don't see wood-burning teepees in the pulp and paper industry any more in this province. Mr. Chairman, there's even an organization in Lloydminster, the beautiful border city, that crushes canola. With the price of natural gas as a feedstock they were looking at a cogeneration machine that would feed canola and natural gas into the system, and then you use what is most economically opportune. So, in other words, marginal cost became very important to people around the province.

You know, Mr. Chairman, the one other thing of having a true price signal – not cloaked, not camouflaged, not darkened by New Democratic accounting – is the fact that people conserve. I noted from figures that I saw from TransAlta Utilities that Albertans actually use 7 per cent less electricity in their homes than they did when we started competitive market restructuring, that combined with a 10 per cent reduction in natural gas usage. All the right signals.

I applaud the Member for Edmonton-Highlands for continuing to watch this unfold and continuing to look at it with a fair and unbiased eye, and when he sees the very company that he was a part of, EPCOR, now being recognized for its leadership, its innovation, its contribution to the city, its pricing to consumers, he has to be proud of this. He has to be proud of the way this has evolved.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. You know, that rekindled my zest for this Chamber this afternoon.

It's interesting. You know, this minister is taking his lead from his Premier and from other members of the government in his manner of answering questions. When you're put on the spot about what you're doing and people are asking you to be accountable, what does the government do? What does the Premier do? What did this minister just do? He starts pointing fingers at other places, whether it's trying to divert attention from the Premier's flights to the A320 that the federal government has or whether it's trying to divert attention from the high electricity prices that we're saddled with under deregulation and trying to point fingers at some long-past B.C. government.

You know, if we responded in the same vein, if the opposition acted the same way that the government does, we'd be pointing out things like a Conservative government in Saskatchewan that is largely still in jail because they were a bunch of crooks. We could extrapolate that to say by implication, as the minister just tried to do, that all Conservatives are crooks and probably should be in jail and that these guys just haven't been caught yet.

But we aren't saying that, Mr. Chairman, not at all. We're trying to hold the government accountable and ask it specifically about what it's doing in Alberta. That's its responsibility. It's not really its responsibility to think about past NDP governments somewhere else or the federal government but what this government is doing and how is it answering for its performance in this Assembly.

I guess maybe I'm going to have to answer my own questions today, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to have to answer my own questions. How is electricity deregulation doing? Well, we have electricity prices that are, you know, 40 to 60 per cent higher than before deregulation. Alberta used to be one of the lowest in the mid-range of electricity prices before deregulation. We now have the highest electricity prices in the entire country, and this is directly related to deregulation by this government.

In terms of the term "deregulation" itself, Mr. Chairman, it's a complete misnomer. One of the first things I did after being elected was to ask our research staff to give me all the bills and regulations that existed before deregulation occurred, because I heard the minister and previous ministers talk about, you know: we're going to simplify the process; we're going to streamline it, deregulate it, make it more efficient, and save a lot of money. So guess what? There were actually three documents, and if you stack them up, they're a stack of paper that is about six inches to eight inches thick. That's quite a bit of paper, but that was for the regulated system.

Then I asked for all of the bills, all of the laws, the regulations, and so on to govern the new streamlined deregulated electricity

system. Guess what, Mr. Chairman? It took two pages – that is, the pages that work in our Chamber – to carry all of the documents governing the new regulated system, and it's been added to since.

So the amount of bureaucracy, the different boards and management bodies that have been put in place to keep an eye on the transmission system and all of these things and all of the regulations, all of the people, the bureaucrats that are trying to run the system and make competition work in a natural monopoly is enormous, and it's multiplied manyfold. The bureaucracy has grown; the costs have grown.

I'll remind hon. members that just before the last provincial election there was a dramatic spike in electricity prices – a dramatic spike – much higher than we've seen since. I remember that Dr. West was leaving that portfolio about that time, and the current Minister of Sustainable Resource Development was thrown into the breach to try and solve this very difficult problem. He struggled with it, and we were changing ministers there for a while very quickly.

What did they do? Well, they put a cap on what the power companies could sell electricity to the people for, and this turned out to be way less than the power companies paid for it in the first place because they'd gone through all these auctions. People remember these auctions where, you know, you had to trade power. You couldn't sell your own power to people. You had to buy somebody else's, and they had to buy yours. You had this series of auctions that were a complete failure even by that government's own standards.

4:40

What did they do? The power companies went crazy because now they were going to take big losses, and they were promised that this system was going to work for them. They went after the government, comparing the government's strategy to the national energy program of the federal Liberal government, that the minister has referred to. Then the government allowed the power companies to get that money back by spreading it over the next couple of years. So we had rate riders, and thank goodness those are gone because they were a major irritant and just a clear political move to ensure that there were low power prices just before the election but not after, because we all had to pay for it after.

The government then imposed some other programs, and if you combine the natural gas programs and the electricity programs together, the various subsidy programs before the last election, the total value was \$4.2 billion. If you add the increased costs to that that consumers have paid since, it's another \$4 billion or \$5 billion, Mr. Chairman. So the total cost of electricity deregulation since its inception in this province is probably close to \$6 billion, because half of the \$4.2 billion was for electricity, half was from gas, so that's about \$2 billion plus another \$4 billion in increased costs since deregulation. So the increased cost to the Alberta economy of this failed experiment has been about \$6 billion and counting.

Then there's the question of choice because consumers have not benefited by greater choice as a result of this. The government has desperately tried to get some foreign companies to come in, but all they've done is displaced Canadian-owned companies. The level of choice is minimal, and you're buying basically the same electrons from a different company. Consumer choice is in many cases nonexistent, and competition is certainly nowhere to be seen. So, Mr. Chairman, electricity deregulation has to be judged, from the consumer's point of view, to be a dramatic failure.

I do want to indicate that I am quite proud of EPCOR as a city-owned corporation. It's been very successful, and it of course supports deregulation because now it operates just like a private company where profit is the motive, and they're very excited about

deregulation because they can make buckets and buckets of money at the consumer's expense just as if they were a private company. So it's not the kind of company that I had in mind when I was on city council. It's just a private company that happens to be owned by a city, and I think there are advantages financially to the city, of course, but otherwise it's not the kind of corporation or approach to electricity that I would like to see.

I would like to remind the hon. minister that I was never on the board of EPCOR, but while I was on council, we did appoint the board members, and one of the board members that we appointed for a couple of terms was Peter Elzinga, who, of course, we know just stepped down as the Premier's chief of staff. You know, when the Premier kept thinking that I was a member of the board, I could just kick myself that I could never remember that Peter Elzinga, who worked in his office, was actually really on the board of EPCOR. I wish I had remembered that long before now.

But he did a good job for EPCOR, and certainly his connection with the government was beneficial because there was a lot of discrimination on the part of the provincial government against EPCOR because it was publicly owned, and we know that it does drive some members of this government completely mad to think about a publicly owned company outcompeting private companies. You know, it's just not in their frame of reference. They can't even imagine such a thing would be possible, Mr. Chairman, but there you go.

So I did want to just reiterate a question to the minister in a completely nonpartisan fashion because I think he missed it in his zeal, his trip down memory lane to the B.C. NDP government. You know, how fast ferries got in there, I don't know. I would like to ask the minister again how the progress is coming on implementing the recommendations of the Bolger committee.

Mr. Smith: Very well, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Lund: From bad to worse.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure just said that it's going from bad to worse. Well, that could describe the P3 system that's trying to build a courthouse in Calgary.

Mr. Lund: Well, it's still a P3.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, isn't it. Pity, pity, pity.

Now, Mr. Chairman, why doesn't this government encourage more coal-generated electricity, considering it's much cheaper than natural gas-generated electricity? And if we're going to encourage coal-generated electricity, what plans are being made – I heard them discussed briefly earlier – in regard to the capture and compression of the flue gas stream and using that as a source of CO₂ for enhanced oil recovery? What exactly are the minister's plans in regard to that?

Also, on page 174 the performance measure chart indicates that only 37 per cent of Albertans know the role of energy and mineral resources in Alberta's economy and only 60 per cent of Albertans think the government is doing a good or very good job of providing energy information. What is the minister doing to improve these paltry figures?

Again, on page 174-175 the department in the budget is committed to establishing a competitive market framework for electricity and natural gas. Considering that energy deregulation has been, as calculated by the hon. member from Edmonton-Highlands, an \$8

billion boondoggle, why is this government still clinging to such a huge public policy mistake?

In the time that we have, Mr. Chairman, when will Albertans start seeing the \$3 million industry-funded pro energy deregulation propaganda campaign? Are you holding on to this propaganda campaign until just before the election?

Again – I didn't receive a satisfactory answer – once and for all: what is this government's precise position on joining the Grid West or the Regional Transmission Organization West?

And, certainly, for the benefit of the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster, what exactly are you planning for the rural electrification associations? It's quite interesting that they've sort of been moved from the Department of Energy to the protection of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. I suspect – and citizens do as well – that this government is planning to dismantle the REAs and the gas co-ops as well. So, you know, I believe this will be the second fiscal year that they've been moved under the protection of the minister of agriculture, and I would like an explanation of that.

4:50

The electricity exports. We talked about those briefly before.

Now, on page 180 the EUB will "ensure energy and utility hearings are . . . open to broad public participation." I have had the opportunity of attending some of those regulatory hearings, just as I have had some public meetings on electricity deregulation, and the meetings on electricity deregulation haven't been government friendly. Will the government commit to allowing all consumer groups to participate in EUB utility hearings and not just its own Utilities Consumer Advocate?

On page 181, the EUB will address public safety concerns by continuing to incorporate "the recommendations of the Provincial Advisory Committee on Public Safety and Sour Gas." When will the government abolish the drilling of critical sour gas wells near populated areas? Why does the EUB spend money on granting hearings to applications that should be dismissed from the onset; for example, Compton Petroleum's application to drill six critical sour gas wells that could affect over 300,000 Calgarians?

On page 182, the EUB will "ensure accurate, comprehensive and current information," and it is going to be "readily available to stakeholders." Why are stakeholders not allowed to review all EUB applications on its web site?

Now, the financial overview of the department from the Energy estimates. I have some questions. Why was the ministry spending allowed to run \$13 million over budget last year? What were the causes for this overexpenditure? It had nothing to do with communicating that totally dysfunctional electricity deregulation propaganda campaign. I can only imagine what the communication strategies are on that. If electricity deregulation were a movie, it would be a horror movie.

Mr. Mason: A horror movie?

Mr. MacDonald: It would be a horror movie. Yes.

Mr. Mason: Night of the living dead.

Mr. MacDonald: A lot of it would be shot in the darkness, hon. member.

What steps are the minister taking to ensure that these cost overruns do not happen again this year? Why is the department only budgeting for \$191 million when it spent \$198 million last year? Why does the government predict a reduction in orphan well

abandonment activities considering that there are so many maturing oil fields in this province?

Mr. Smith: She asked that already.

Mr. Mason: But did you answer?

Ms Carlson: Yeah. He didn't answer.

Mr. MacDonald: I'm told that you have failed to answer that question, so I thought I would . . . [interjection] He's going to give this answer in writing? Okay.

Now, on page 113 the Minister of Energy has the dubious distinction not only of having a lot of airplane flights – he's certainly a frequent flyer, Mr. Chairman; he's a busy man – but the highest communication budget at over \$990,000, trying to sell a defective product, which is electricity deregulation. Why doesn't the minister save some tax dollars by quitting trying to sell Albertans a defective product that they clearly do not want?

Earlier this afternoon I tried to encourage the minister to finally accept the fact that electricity is an essential service. It is not a commodity. We could save a few dollars here, and this is a government, in my view, that needs to save a few dollars.

Also, will the minister provide a complete breakdown of the communications budget?

Here on page 117, where you're talking about expected revenue and expense, why is the ministry expecting to take in only \$5 billion in resource revenue, 35 per cent less than the \$7.8 billion it raked in last year? Who is responsible for these estimates? Is it the Department of Finance, or is it the Department of Energy?

In a department that stresses deregulation, why has the cost of energy regulation increased by \$16 million, or 17 per cent, since the fiscal year 2002-2003?

The Department of Energy will – I see on page 122 – increase its full-time equivalent employment by 12 to 556. The EUB will increase its full-time equivalents or employees by 18, to 818.

Now, going back to the former tenure of Dr. West – I never looked this year, and I might have to – regrettable staff turnover was an item.

Mr. Smith: It's going to be an item in Edmonton-Highlands in the next election – or in Edmonton-Gold Bar, sorry.

Mr. MacDonald: It's going to be an item in Edmonton-Highlands in the next election.

There are a lot of fine people working for the EUB, and many of them after they were let go were hired by private enterprise for probably a lot more than what they were getting at the EUB. There seemed to be a problem there with the EUB recruiting replacements.

Now, this is not the first time that this has happened after Dr. West has been involved in a department. Hopefully, we've seen the end of that. The only place I would encourage Dr. West to look now is at the size of his cabinet. Let's leave the EUB alone; let's leave the public service alone. Let's, perhaps, shrink the size of the cabinet.

Mr. Smith: The only thing Dr. West is intent on shrinking is right over there.

Mr. MacDonald: Our seats are going to be reduced if Dr. West has his way. That's interesting.

Mr. Mason: Well, now you've got it on the record, hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: That's the purpose.

An Hon. Member: The NDs could go up.

Mr. MacDonald: You would hope. Yeah. You would hope.

The EUB has had a great deal of difficulty getting over that period of turmoil in its staffing. Is this the reason we've had to hire 30 additional full-time employees? Certainly, with the increase in activity in the oil patch I, for one, couldn't find fault with that because we need people to ensure that the development continues in an orderly fashion.

We have some questions that, unfortunately, weren't answered from last year, and they are these, Mr. Chairman. What are the Department of Energy's responsibilities in the implementation of the government's action plan on climate change? Why isn't there a performance measure to measure consumer satisfaction with the implementation of deregulation? How many energy retailers does Alberta need before prices decrease substantially? Is there any money allocated to a consumer education program about buying electricity from a retailer, and if not, why not? This is something we had proposed. The minister has got that confused with a propaganda campaign.

There are also other issues that, certainly, we need to deal with.

The issue surrounding water. The minister is not distinguishing between fresh or potable water and produced water as a result of coal bed methane production. What measures are being considered to get rid of the produced water as a result of coal bed methane production?

5:00

The minister in his own report – and certainly I hope he's had a chance to read this. This would be good reading on an airplane, so I can only assume that the minister has had a chance to read it. The potential water disposal and diversion strategies for coal bed methane: no two coal beds are the same in the province. No two coal bed methane basins are the same. So we can't assume that produced water is going to be the same from every well. We can't assume that the chemical composition of that water, whatever is in it, arsenic or beryllium or mercury, that any of those elements that may be present in the water would also be present in a coal bed methane bed that is, let's say, 30 kilometres west of Sylvan Lake.

So what exactly are we doing about produced water? Are we going to use that as a dedicated source for enhanced oil recovery? What are we also going to do with the studies that I'm sure are being done? They're not public, to this member's knowledge.

As coal bed methane production increases, what exactly is happening to the water table? Is the water table going down? Is it staying the same? What sort of tests are we doing on that? I see the minister shaking his head, but I think this is very, very important. With every test well we have in production right now, we should have adjacent to it a well to check the water table to see what effect, if any, this is having on the water table. If this is being done, please provide the information not only to the Energy critic but to the landowners, who are very interested in this throughout the province.

Thank you.

Mr. Smith: I would like to provide answers, Mr. Chairman, as well as to continue to separate fact from fiction. Oh, where to start? Where to start? Such a task. You know, just when you think you've heard it all from the Member for Edmonton-Highlands, in comes his cleanup batter, the member from Edmonton-Gold Brick. I've got to tell you that when the Member for Edmonton-Highlands was speaking, it was getting so thin that I thought I heard the sound of the automatic pumps kicking in. It's indeed thin gruel to shovel.

There is no Grid West. There is no RTO West. So there's in fact nothing to join, Mr. Chairman. The member knows full well the story about consumer reputation at the board. There's been lots of work on that.

The member turned his attention from his concept of gas to sour gas, and sour gas is one of the great success stories in Alberta. Over 30 per cent of our natural gas is derived from sour gas deposits. When we say sour gas, Mr. Chairman, we mean gas that has the presence of hydrogen sulphide in it, and at that time you have to find a process that separates the hydrogen from the sulphur.

In fact, we've created at the University of Calgary, where the Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy is, the Alberta Sulphur Research Institute. That institute is known worldwide for its ability to attack difficult issues with respect to sour gas and to be able to remove the sulphur from the gas, condition the gas, and get it ready for your furnace. Without the great work of that sulphur institute over the years, we would have lost billions – billions – of dollars of royalty revenues, Mr. Chairman. So this is a good time to congratulate those scientists who work at the Alberta sulphur institute, housed actually in the former Imperial Oil Building, which is close to the University of Calgary, which is now owned by the University of Calgary and will subsequently house the sulphur institute as well as other energy-related chairs.

The member can go back to the minutes from many EUB inquiries as well as to a concentrated study on sour gas recommendations, some 87 recommendations from the EUB and a joint stakeholder committee to manage sour gas in Alberta. That program has accelerated ahead, and it's a success. Recommendations in the 60s, 70s levels are now being implemented. One of the major stakeholders, a noted veterinarian from Rocky Mountain House, has indicated that she was extremely pleased by the response the government had in the management of sour gas at the EUB level. We have reduced flaring by 56 per cent. We have reduced venting. There is no jurisdiction more competent to handle sour gas than the Alberta industry and the Alberta regulator.

Mr. Chairman, the fact is that sour gas does not endanger 300,000 people. The fact is that the mere policy of ignition would hold those individuals safe. It is a tribute, I think, to the EUB and to those who are applying for sour gas licences of the care and handling that they have in detailed emergency response plans. The member's rhetoric belies his experience in the oil patch. He's actually much more knowledgeable than he lets on or shows, and he knows full well how competent members are with respect to sour gas in this province.

With respect to his discussion with consumers and the EUB, he knows full well that there are consumer intercessions, that there are lots and ample opportunities for the consumer to be heard. There's the Consumers' Association of Alberta. There are singular interventions. There's, of course, the good work being done by the utilities advocate, that is housed in the Department of Government Services.

About everything being placed on the web site. I don't know if everything is, but the member should know that there were well over 54,000 applications for licences and permits at the EUB last year and that he should be able to get the information he needs from the EUB.

While we're on the subject of the EUB, I just want to refer back to his question on the orphaned well funds because I think it's an important piece to cover here so that he won't be burdened by having to read even more in a written reply. Of course, they're wrong, as usual. The orphaned well fund is not being reduced. In fact, it is being increased \$1.9 million from calendar year 2003 to calendar year 2004 and a further \$100,000 from '04 to '05. The program levy: in 2003, \$8 million; in 2004, \$9.9 million; in 2005, \$10 million. The fiscal year '03-04 has captured two calendar year levies, Mr. Chairman, of \$8 million and \$9.9 million, for a total of \$17.9 million.

He knows full well that these orphaned wells are funded by industry and managed by the EUB in terms of the money, and it has worked. It has worked better than any other program in any known oil-producing jurisdiction in the world. So instead of being critical, I think he should be applaudatory, Mr. Chairman.

He knows full well that each sour gas well application is evaluated separately, assessed on its own risk, weighed on its own merit, and cannot be, as he would so injure the royalty structure of Alberta to be, summarily dismissed.

I do want to comment briefly on the \$13 million that the member talked about. That \$13 million, Mr. Chairman, is a flow through to reflect the increase in the orphan abandonment dollars paid by industry. It reflects two FTEs' – not 20, not 50, not 100 – increase due to the Energy and Utilities Board's workload, that has increased.

5:10

Of course, we have to remember, Mr. Chairman, as I said earlier – if he had only been listening, it would've been so much more helpful – that we have in the last four years collected royalties equal to the previous 10 combined. That's a combination of price and activity. So when you do the work to license, let's say, 8,000 wells and then you do the work to license 20,000 wells, you could use a couple of extra people. That incremental workload – they must be wonderful people because they can move from 8,000 wells to 20,000 wells. I think it's a good story and reflects the increased activity in this province.

I also think that that activity is a reflection of investor and industry confidence in a very strong and competent royalty structure. So we can dismiss, I think, with fact any concerns expressed by the member with respect to the royalty structure.

I think that the communication budget is well known to the member, and he's fully aware that that's applied to the public information work that has been done with respect to a new competitive market. In many cases previous to it he's asked for it; then he complains about money being spent on it; then he wants to know when more is going to be spent, but then it's not information, but it's propaganda. So we'll just continue on, Mr. Chairman, with a good program. Any further program with respect to consumer information will be carried on by the Minister of Government Services.

With respect to his comments on produced water and for some reason wanting to double the amount of coal bed methane drilling, I think that in the only two instances where they thought they were going to apply for a freshwater well, it turned into saline or brackish water. That water was then reinjected back into the formation. We have not had to deal with water disposal in a coal bed methane well to date of the some thousand that have been drilled.

The Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Energy, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5) which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report not later than 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the question after consideration of the business plan and the proposed estimates of the Department of Energy for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and

Equipment/Inventory Purchases

\$113,833,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Energy: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchase, \$113,833,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on Monday.

[Motion carried; at 5:16 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, May 3, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/05/03

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. Guide us so that we may use the privilege given to us as elected Members of the Legislative Assembly. Give us the strength to labour diligently, the courage to think and speak with clarity and conviction and without prejudice or pride. Amen.

Hon. members and to all the people in the galleries, let's all participate now in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Maurice Lorieau. Please participate in the language of your choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Mr. Lorieau is from Calgary, so we appreciate him coming today. Thank you very much.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it is a distinct pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly His Excellency Graham Kelly, high commissioner for New Zealand. He is seated in your gallery and is accompanied by his wife, Mrs. Janette Kelly. The high commissioner has had an opportunity to visit with a number of my colleagues in the Legislature, including I believe yourself, where you had an opportunity to discuss Canadian Parliamentary Association days.

We have a number of links with New Zealand, and we have much in common. We, of course, have our ties to the Commonwealth. We share a history of British parliamentary democracy. As a member of the Cairns group of agricultural exporting countries, New Zealand is a strong Alberta ally in supporting increased liberalization of world agricultural trade. Our educational institutions in Alberta and New Zealand are enjoying student and staff exchanges. Mr. Speaker, many, many opportunities abound for us to continue our relationship in trade, cultural, and educational opportunities. Certainly, I enjoyed the opportunity to discuss that with the high commissioner.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask that our honoured guest, along with his wife, please rise and receive the very traditional warm welcome of our House.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, today I have the privilege of introducing to you and through you to members of the Assembly two school groups from the Ponoka-Rimbey constituency. First of all, I wish to introduce 48 students and three teachers from the Bluffton school. The teachers are Mrs. Sharon Johnston, Mrs. Connie Jensen, and Mr. Nolan Krauss. Please rise. I would ask that you give them the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Also, Mr. Speaker, from the Rimbey elementary school we have a group of 27 students and three leaders plus helpers and one nurse. The teachers are Walter Johnson, Val Warren, and Kathy Turner. Parent helpers are Guy Beaulieu, Karen Weisgerber, and Ila Lyster. Grace Johnson is a nurse supervisor with the group. I would ask that they stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you a number of people who work with the Department of Health and Wellness, specifically in the population health strategies area. Helen Legg has been our lead on diabetes in the Alberta diabetes strategy. Sherri Wilson is our project manager on the Healthy U campaign. Fern Miller has an area of expertise in mental health. Irene Mazurenko has an area of expertise in perinatal health. Finally, Annette Lemire is responsible for areas of child health and children and youth with complex needs. I had the opportunity to take a photograph and meet with these fine women, part of our civil service, earlier this afternoon, and I would ask that they rise and please receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it is the greatest pleasure of mine to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 17 students from Coronation school, which is located in Coronation, Alberta, my hometown. They're accompanied today by their teacher and a friend and neighbour of mine, Mr. Dan Kinakin, as well as by parent helpers who are also friends and neighbours of mine: Mr. Mark Zimmer, Ms. Colleen Rush, Mrs. Hilda Gardner, Mrs. Lisa Plenhert, Wanda Merchant, and Wendy Glazier. I'd ask that they rise and please receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to stand and introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly my summer student, Mr. Peter Davis. Peter is the son of Mr. Jack Davis, who is a well-known figure in this Legislature. Peter is in his fourth year of communications at Mount Royal College and will be a great addition to our staff over the summer. I'd like to ask Peter to stand – he is seated in the members' gallery – and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a friend of long standing, Dr. Baldev Abbi. Dr. Abbi is a lifelong educator and a psychologist. He taught in Alberta schools for 18 years and then worked in the department of psychology at the University of Alberta for several years following his school teaching. Dr. Abbi is seated in the public gallery, and I would ask him to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Louis and Ruth Maria Adria, who represent the Elder Advocates of Alberta and are here to

observe the proceedings of this House. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I want to ask Louis and Ruth Maria to please rise and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Emergency Hospital Services

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. New information from the Capital health region shows that emergency rooms in the Edmonton area are under siege. The Liberal opposition has learned that on some nights as many as 90 to 100 people in Edmonton area emergency rooms are assessed and waiting to be admitted to hospital beds, more people than in this entire Assembly. An Alberta Liberal government would never have allowed this to happen. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that Capital health has indicated that 350 beds are needed immediately – immediately – to alleviate its bed crisis, why has the government only committed to adding 170?

1:40

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the Capital health region treats approximately 370,000 people in emergency rooms throughout the year. Patients are all assessed in emergency, and any patient with a life-threatening illness or injury receives treatment immediately. So this is a very important point to note: that people are not waiting hours to be treated. They may wait to have a bed assigned to them if it is determined that they require one.

We know, of course, that the population of the province is growing. We know that there are a higher number of visits to emergency rooms here than, say, in the Calgary health region. We are putting forward \$41 million in our capital plan to repatriate some 170 beds that exist in hospitals throughout the Capital region, space that is now being freed up because of the consolidation of administrative space in a central location, which is a step that the Calgary health authority took some number of years ago. Mr. Speaker, we are working with the Capital health authority to meet the real needs.

The Health Link line has reduced the number of unnecessary emergency visits each year by thousands. It takes 800,000 calls a year. We know that that's helping, but we also know that in moving these 170 beds forward, it's not simply a matter of snapping your fingers and having all those beds and all the staff that is required to fill them. It requires careful planning on an ongoing basis to make sure that you not only open beds but that you actually have people who can staff those beds and look after the needs. It's not simply a capital decision.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. How does the minister explain that in Alberta, the wealthiest province in Canada, Edmonton and Calgary have some of the lowest acute care bed ratios for their population in the entire country?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we have led this country in terms of the kinds of innovations that we have. We put enormous amounts of effort into things like designated assisted living, into long-term care. We make sure that acute care hospitals are reserved for those people who have the most urgent needs. But there are other ways of dealing with people in our health care system than hospitals. I want the hon. member to understand that health care does not equal hospital care. There are many different facets of health care.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, it's difficult to compare our province to other provinces when the average age of our population is generally younger than most other parts of the country; our needs are different. This kind of simple analysis does not lend itself to good policy direction.

Dr. Taft: Well, will the minister commit here and now to providing the 700 new beds that the Capital health region needs for the Edmonton area?

Mr. Mar: Over time, Mr. Speaker, certainly, we'll be looking at the real needs expressed by not only the Capital health region but health regions throughout the province. I think that it is important to know – and the hon. Minister of Infrastructure may wish to supplement – that we are investing billions of dollars into health care over the next five years. We have a significant plan, but again capital decisions are not the only part in the planning for the delivery of health care. We also have to deal with the real and legitimate needs of operating costs associated with such facilities.

Government Aircraft

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, before the Liberal opposition started asking questions about the government's air fleet, the Minister of Infrastructure said, "Those manifests are all available to the public, and they can be viewed at any time." But since 10 a.m. Friday the government's infamous code of silence has been imposed. For this government democracy seems an inconvenience. To the Minister of Infrastructure: what is the government hiding?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, we're hiding absolutely nothing. As a matter of fact, what was available before the Liberals started asking questions about the aircraft flight is still available. They're available over at the department. If those aren't good enough, then the Liberals and others can use the FOIP process, and then they can get a hard copy of the logs that they're requesting. There's nothing to hide. As a matter of fact, I would challenge the member: why doesn't he ask for a year, FOIP a year, then compare that with what has been available all the time and see if there are any discrepancies? I trust that there won't be.

Dr. Taft: Can the minister explain why on this last Friday flight manifests suddenly became subject to the costly and bureaucratic freedom of information act when the day before they were available to anyone at any time?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, that's very easy to respond to. All of a sudden we became overburdened with requests. The media started asking. The Liberals asked, and the Liberals, to put this in context, wanted to send over five researchers – we only have the capacity to handle two at a time – and they wanted to look at all of the manifests for over 10 years. The fact is there are some 1,200 manifests a year, and they wanted to go over 10 years, so that's about 12,000 manifests that they were wanting to look at.

If you break it down – and I don't know what they're looking for – I suspect that they couldn't do more than 60 an hour. That's one a minute. With the amount of information that's on those, I suspect that that's all they could handle. If you worked that out, Mr. Speaker, that's over 200 hours – 200 hours – that we would have to provide staff so that they could look at these manifests, and that's just for one request.

There were a number of other requests, Mr. Speaker, so we just simply couldn't handle those kinds of requests, and 200 hours at,

say, four hours a day – we've got to remember that we've got staff that are assigned other duties. They're not just assigned to babysit the Liberals. So if you take four hours a day, that's some 50 days. They can get it even faster through FOIP.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Was it the minister who gave the order to classify this information, or, if it wasn't, could he tell us who it was?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, once again, we are not classifying the information. They can get that information through FOIP, and I would urge them to do it.

Mr. Speaker, he commented about the cost, but I find that very interesting. They get a large sum of money for research. If they want to spend it that way, they're welcome to it. But why should we in the department spend a large amount of taxpayers' dollars in order to satisfy their witch hunt?

Dr. Taft: To the Minister of Finance: given that Executive Council and Infrastructure alone spent \$6 million on air travel last year, how much do all the other ministries spend?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has had almost a daily occasion to be able to access that information through Committee of Supply to the ministries as they come forward, and I suggest that you direct it to each minister.

Dr. Taft: To the Minister of Government Services: did the government consult the Privacy Commissioner before arbitrarily blocking access to flight information behind the freedom of information act?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, there is a provision in the FOIP Act. When the process is properly followed, if applicants have felt that they have not been served properly by the departments that they're requesting information from, they have an opportunity to go to the Information and Privacy Commissioner and ask for a decision on the activities they have requested. That is part of the FOIP Act, and it is there for the use of any applicant who doesn't feel that they have been properly served by the process.

1:50

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: when will the government stop stonewalling its democratic duty and simply post information about flights on a web site so that all Albertans can see how their tax dollars are being spent?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, the Department of Government Services is responsible for the overall Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. For that act, as it's depicted amongst the various departments in this government, every single solitary department has a FOIP co-ordinator. They are trained by our department folks, and they follow the process that is outlined in the act.

The Minister of Infrastructure has stood in this House and has recommended that anyone wanting to get access to the summaries can do that. That's the decision that has been made, and the process is there. That process is set out in the FOIP Act, and that department is familiar with that process, and we ask that those folks that have been asked to follow that process do so.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Beef Recovery Strategy

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Since the first case of BSE was found in Alberta, this government has adopted a strategy of simply hoping for the border to be reopened rather than working to offset the disastrous consequences BSE has inflicted upon ranchers. After the second BSE case was traced back to Alberta, the government promised it would not be caught off guard again and would develop a plan for the beef industry in the event that the border did not open soon. Eleven months later that so-called plan B, released Friday, contained few specifics and no hope for ranchers that the government might protect them against packer monopolies if the U.S. market remains closed. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Why has the minister reneged on her promise to produce a real contingency plan and instead has just produced a vague document that promises yet another plan sometime down the road?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that the maybe deputy leader of the third party knows more about the beef industry than the some 65 people from the industry that sat around the table and drafted this document.

I would like to put on the record just a few names of the drafting team of this document that he holds in such low regard: Arno Doerksen, chairman, Alberta Beef Producers; Jeff Warrack, past chair of the Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association; Willie Van Solkema, Canadian business manager, Cargill Foods; Bob Kalef, president and CEO, Centennial Foods; Gary Sargent, general manager, Alberta Beef Producers; Brad McLeod, meat committee, Alberta Food Processors Association; Glenn Brand, director of marketing, Beef Information Centre; Colin Campbell, senior marketing and trade officer, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Then, Mr. Speaker, we do have Dale Engstrom, Rick Frederickson, Darcy Willis, Jackson Gardner, and Alan Ford from AAFRD.

The majority of the people that made up this report, which I think is a fine document that actually talks about the issue, that actually puts it into context, that actually talks about a vision for the industry and guiding principles and strategic priorities, and goes into themes – Mr. Speaker, I know you want to give him an opportunity to ask the next question, and I'd be happy to go over the rest of the document in the answer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would ask the minister: just how long will the border have to remain closed – and we all hope that it doesn't remain closed – before this government will take concrete action to regulate the monopolistic practices of the American owned and controlled beef-packing industry in this province?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the one thing that this government and this minister will continue to do is work with the industry and listen to the industry. We'll continue to talk about the issues that are around the unfortunate continued closure. However, we're fairly optimistic that this situation will resolve itself in the near future, especially after the federal minister of agriculture, the Prime Minister, the U.S. Director of Agriculture, and the President of the United States had a conversation about this issue last week, and the American President, Mr. Bush, made it very clear that it is his desire and his government's desire and the industry's desire to see this solved as quickly as possible.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that the government's Republican cousins in the United States may in fact be in serious trouble in this

election and may not in fact be back after November, what will the government do if the border does not reopen?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's a part of the family of cousins that I hadn't really thought of, you know, being related to.

Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to the document. While it may not be what the learned member across the way wants, it is what the industry players – and I go back and repeat that there were 65 persons from the industry, from all aspects of the value chain that prepared this document and talked about market access and how to achieve it. There is a strategy in that. It includes harmonization of the end users. It talks about the theme of consumer confidence and the safety and quality of beef and a strategy to deal with that.

Building capacity is about packing plants' capability and advantage within the value chain. That is about recognizing that we do need additional capacity even if the border does open, Mr. Speaker. What we really need the border open for is to create some arbitrage and some price determination in the marketplace.

Then if you continue on in the document, which is extensive – and I know that we don't have a lot of time – it does talk about short-term considerations. I would point the hon. member to page 10, and it is: "Border remains closed to live animals." Slowly I will read it: (a) situation, (b) consequence, (c) responses and possible actions. Just read those sections.

The Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Deputy Premier would be able to file the document a little later.

The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Natural Gas Royalty Rates

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For low natural gas prices and low oil prices the royalty rate return to Albertans is low. This is to allow the companies to recover their costs of exploration and development. However, at a price of about \$3 per gigajoule, which is much less than the current \$7 per gigajoule, for the price of natural gas that is, the royalty rate for natural gas flattens out. After about \$3 per gigajoule the rate is a constant 30 per cent no matter how high the price goes up. Since the companies are protected at lower prices, it seems that Albertans as the owners of the resource should receive higher royalty rates as the prices rise. Could the Minister of Energy explain why that's not the case?

Mr. Smith: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, it's a very good question. In fact, I think that when the price-sensitive royalty model was first constructed, the contemplation of \$4, \$5, \$6, \$7, \$8, \$9 gas was something that was extraordinarily infrequent. From that perspective perhaps it is a good message to examine that royalty structure.

From the perspective of royalties being structured so that they attract investment – and we all know that no job is created without adequate investment – this royalty structure in Alberta is such that it reflects the types of gas pools that we have throughout Alberta. Alberta is characterized by a bountiful amount of gas but in difficult-to-find areas and with greater geological differences than what is usually encountered. So with that, Mr. Speaker, came the royalty structure that encouraged the private sector to find new and creative ways to find gas in this province. The second thing was, of course, that all that data is kept for a year at the EUB and then made public. So that has allowed us to have a very successful private sector.

2:00

Now, let me just briefly, Mr. Speaker, talk about: for every dollar the price of oil increases, the royalty change is about \$65 million.

For every 10 cents increase in the price of natural gas, Alberta collects a further \$105 million in royalty. So what we do know is that we have a royalty structure that reflects some low productivity, high finding costs, and it's created the biggest bonanza of drilling in the history of Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We often hear of much higher royalty rates paid to other jurisdictions. How does Alberta's royalty share compare to the royalty share of, say, Norway or Alaska?

Mr. Smith: Well, the royalty discussion is always one that continues on an ongoing basis. For example, developing the oil sands created another opportunity to have even a different type of royalty structure, so we put the generic royalty regime in place. That's resulted in a great deal of investment, Mr. Speaker, and we're seeing the resulting payback starting to accrue to Albertans, particularly in this high price environment.

Now, as companies throughout the world look for competitive ways to place their capital, they also look for the people who have the expertise to benchmark the toughness or the competitiveness of the royalty regime. We use a couple of groups. Dr. Pedro van Meurs and Daniel Johnston are internationally recognized petroleum experts. They rate Alberta as one of the toughest fiscal regimes in the world in terms of the high share of nonrenewable resource revenue received by government: continuing to do a good job, Mr. Speaker, continuing to be competitive.

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, could the minister explain how Alberta's royalty rates compare to those of our adjacent provinces?

Mr. Mason: How about Norway?

Mr. Smith: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, not only has this member mentioned adjacent provinces, but a member of the third party chipped in, "How about Norway?" Well, Norway doesn't deliver some 7 billion to 9 billion dollars in transfer payments to another jurisdiction each year. This government does. These Albertans, through the prosperity of oil and gas exploration and oil and gas economic grants, participate in Confederation to the tune of 7 billion to 9 billion Canadian dollars per year.

Is our royalty regime competitive? It's being copied, it's being imitated, and it's being duplicated by British Columbia and by Saskatchewan. As well, we continue to support the efforts of the Northwest Territories and Nova Scotia and Newfoundland to have their own royalty structure independent of the federal government.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

Automobile Insurance Reforms

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2002, the latest year that statistics were available, bodily injury claims and adjustment expenses incurred totalled \$725 million here in Alberta. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. What percentage of the total bodily injury claim costs will be eliminated in Alberta with the \$4,000 cap on pain and suffering damage?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, what I can tell the hon. member is that the changes to automobile insurance that have been put in place and

are moving forward for implementation this summer in the province of Alberta will see roughly \$200 million come out of the premium side of the equation, and that will be in the form of returns back, savings for Albertans. That's being accomplished in good part by the cap that is going on plus the revamping of the structure. It's there to give Albertans an accessible and affordable automobile insurance package. The exact percentage: I don't have that number with me, but we can get it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that there were 19,190 claims in 2002 for bodily injury in Alberta, private passenger, how many of these claims would now be included in the \$4,000 cap on pain and suffering?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, that would be something to anticipate, and I can't give him that number, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: if we're going to see roughly \$200 million in savings, if that is part of the percentage of the total loss costs, how will this be affected for total loss costs for all auto insurance coverages combined when we change in Alberta and go to the \$4,000 cap on pain and suffering? Where will the \$200 million come in?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the structure that we're bringing forward deals with the compulsory automobile insurance that we require through law in this province, so when the hon. member talks about all automobile insurance being covered under this change, we're looking at the compulsory automobile insurance in the province, which is the PL/PD that has to be in place for every person that operates a motorized vehicle in the province.

Now, as we move into the new structure, we anticipate that \$200 million will come out of the system on the premium side, and of course then that is offset by a balancing on the benefit. Clearly, the cap should deal with the claims and actually be beneficial for people, because part of the process will be to get people into treatment as quickly as possible and try and get them back to a healthy position as quickly as possible without going through a long process of debate between insurance companies and lawyers, et cetera.

We expect that this will be beneficial all the way around for the consumer of automobile insurance and that it will come into effect this summer. To give you an idea of what will be and what is as we go through this, I think you'll see the benefits to Albertans quite clearly.

It has been a very long process, Mr. Speaker, to get to this point of implementation, and we're almost there. I hope that the hon. member will bear with us as we go through these next six weeks of finalizing regulations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Repeat Impaired Driving Offences

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In memory of loved ones lost to drunk drivers, 90 white crosses were carried through the streets of Edmonton yesterday. The 90 crosses represent the number of Albertans killed each year in drunk driving accidents. In some of these incidents the driver had previously had multiple convictions for impaired driving, which proves that more needs to be done to deal with repeat offenders. My question today is to the Minister of

Justice. Can the minister tell the House what his ministry is doing to get these killers off our roads?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The issue of impaired driving is one that we take very, very seriously. I've had the opportunity to work with the Minister of Transportation and with the Solicitor General with respect to finding better ways to deal with not just traffic safety, not just impaired driving but also with people who have numerous convictions for impaired driving. It's very, very important. As the hon. member has indicated, 90 people each year are killed by impaired driving. It's criminal. It has to be treated as criminal. It may even be worse than some of the other criminal activity which hurts or kills people in our communities, because people ought to feel safe on our streets, and they don't even see it coming.

Our prosecutors have been instructed to monitor those high-profile cases closely. We've appointed a specific prosecutor to monitor the situation and to work with other prosecutors across the province to identify cases where there have been multiple convictions.

If a person has been identified as a chronic drunk driver, we will now be attempting to secure the maximum protection for society by seeking substantial sentences including dangerous offender and long-term offender status. This is important, Mr. Speaker, because long-term and dangerous offender designations carry some of the most severe consequences in the Criminal Code. These designations will help us to take people out of the community who are not learning their lessons about the safety of the community.

It's important to understand that applications for long-term and dangerous offender status can only be used in the most serious of cases. It would involve a repeat impaired driver who's been convicted of an offence that has caused death or bodily harm and where it's been established that the communities would not otherwise be adequately protected from the offender.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the minister's answer, do we have to wait until somebody is hurt or injured or killed before we can take action against these people?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, in terms of the long-term offender or dangerous offender status, there does have to be a conviction for a crime which involves a serious injury or death, so impaired driving causing death or impaired driving causing serious injury. However, it doesn't stop there. We will be toughening up on all repeat drunk driving offences, such as seeking more serious penalties for repeat drunken drivers, even those who do not fit the criteria for long-term or dangerous offender status.

We'll be working with police services to identify and effectively prosecute chronic drunk drivers and make sure that those prosecutions are better co-ordinated, emphasizing in court the section of the Criminal Code that requires a sentencing judge to consider severe alcohol impairment as an aggravating factor in sentencing.

We'll be continuing, Mr. Speaker, with the efforts that we have taken – Alberta has taken a leadership position in conjunction with British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and more provinces are getting on board all the time – to have the Criminal Code sections with respect to conditional sentences changed so that conditional sentences cannot be used in areas of serious and violent crime, including impaired driving causing death and serious injury.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Midwifery Services

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Midwives could help ease the pressure of physician shortages caused for a number of communities that don't have a practising obstetrician. This government's failure to pay midwives to deliver babies is forcing midwives to return to nursing or leave the province. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. In recognition of International Midwives Day could the minister explain why this government won't publicly fund midwifery, as some other provinces already do?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, it's true that midwives can provide an important service. Regrettably, there are not that many of them. There are on my last count I believe 17 midwives in the province. There are a number of them that are working within regional health authorities, that are working in collaboration and co-operation with physicians.

We recognize that midwives are competent to deal with low-risk births and that it makes some sense to involve them. We think, Mr. Speaker, that through our local primary care initiatives, where physicians are provided certain amounts of money to hire other health care professionals to work within a local primary care team, there may be an opportunity for midwives and other health professionals to be practising much more within the scope of their practice.

We have not yet seen any of the LPCIs come forward – it would be premature to expect them to – but over time, Mr. Speaker, I think that midwives, like many other health professionals, will be able to demonstrate the value of what they can provide to a multidisciplinary team in providing primary health care, including matters related to the competencies that exist within the profession of being a midwife.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. To the same minister: why must midwives pay the first \$5,000 of their liability insurance before the government steps in while physicians must only pay the first \$1,000?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I can correct myself at some later juncture if I'm incorrect, but to the best of my recollection we cover approximately \$10,000, in round numbers, per midwife for their professional liability insurance. I think that that is a significant contribution on the part of the provincial government.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: well, given that 10 years ago we had 150 midwives – now we're down to 17 – the government has had a working group on funding midwives, which reported a year ago, and there have been numerous pilot projects that have and continue to be run, why does the government continue to delay, deny, and defer? What's the problem?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I refer the hon. member to review the Blues of my first response to her initial question, and that is that we are providing an opportunity for all health professionals to work to the much fuller scope of their practices and their competencies. We recognize what competencies are within the profession of midwifery, and we think that through our local primary care initiatives there will be opportunities for midwives to practise in that area if that's what they choose.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Crossborder Sale of Prescription Drugs

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents and friends are increasingly concerned about crossborder Internet sales of Canadian drug supplies to the United States. A research organization, the Pharmacy Alliance for Canadians, estimates that Alberta is leading Canada with the highest growth rate, 216 per cent, of Internet sales of pharmaceutical products to Americans. The Alliance represents local companies such as Canada Safeway, Shoppers Drug Mart, and London Drugs. They say that the increase in crossborder pharmacy sales is already causing prescription drug shortages at the pharmacy level in some provinces such as Manitoba, where crossborder drug sales first began. In fact, 79 per cent of pharmacists there report drug shortages. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Are crossborder drug sales affecting the supply of prescription drugs in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir, the sale of prescription drugs by Canadian distance pharmacies to American consumers has been occurring for some time. By last count I've been advised that there are some 100 such distance pharmacies operating within Canada that quite likely are selling pharmaceuticals to American customers. The largest number of such distance pharmacies, I'm advised, are in the province of Manitoba.

While the Pharmacy Alliance for Canadians does report that some drugs are in short supply, we do not have any information to support that claim here in the province of Alberta. We are continuing to monitor it, Mr. Speaker. My department informs me, again, that there's no evidence that crossborder sales of prescription drugs are resulting in a shortage of such drugs being available to Albertans, nor is there any evidence to suggest that prices are increasing as a result of this activity going on.

Ms Kryczka: My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Given that the alliance does believe that recent prescription drug prices are directly due to the rising crossborder drug business, does the minister have a plan to protect Albertans from prescription drug shortages and drug price inflation?

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that there has been a recognition of this issue not only by the Department of Health and Wellness here in the province of Alberta but really across Canada. I think it would be important to recognize that even if an individual province within this country were to take action against distance pharmacies or Internet drug sales, as they're sometimes referred to, really all that would do would be to move the industry to another province.

Last December, I can advise this House, all provincial and territorial deputy ministers of health identified Internet pharmacy sales as a potential issue. This province is participating in a Canada-wide review to assess the scope and impact of distance pharmacy or Internet pharmacy sales on public health drug supplies. We'll continue to work provincially with our own Alberta College of Pharmacists and other stakeholders to monitor this issue.

We will take whatever steps are necessary in the event that there is a legitimate issue as alleged by the Pharmacy Alliance, but again, Mr. Speaker, there is no such evidence available at this time.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Postsecondary Tuition Fees

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The president of the students' union at the University of Alberta has taken issue . . . [A loud thumping sound was heard]

Dr. Taylor: I can hear your heart, Don.

Dr. Massey: At least I have one.

The Speaker: Hon. member, there seems to be something malfunctioning with the system that we have.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The president of the students' union at the University of Alberta has taken issue with the answers given in this House by the Minister of Learning with respect to tuition. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Why did the minister characterize the CPI plus 2 per cent tuition solution as the students' choice when what they really wanted was a tuition freeze?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, the CPI plus 2 came in at discussions with the students' unions. It was suggested and recommended by one of the presidents of a students' union in Alberta. It was not the students' union from the U of A.

2:20

Dr. Massey: To the same minister: why did the minister tell the House that "student debt in Alberta has consistently gone down" when student debt has increased substantially during the 1990s?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, student debt has been going down. What we've seen is that with the increasing amount of student loans, the increasing loan grants that are given to the students presently in Alberta, with the full student loan they will have approximately \$5,000 to pay back on a loan limit of \$11,600.

Dr. Massey: Again to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why does the minister persist in the myth that there's a 30 per cent cap on tuition when as soon as an institution hits the 30 per cent, that cap disappears?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, in Alberta right now the main universities are sitting at – approximately 24 to 25 per cent of the expenses is now tuition. They have the ability to go to 30 per cent. They raise their tuition by approximately \$275 to \$280 per year in a prescribed formula that is included in the legislation. Once they reach 30 per cent, the increase to tuition is not as much as it is now.

We currently have approximately three or four institutions around the province who have hit 30 per cent, and the reason they have hit 30 per cent, Mr. Speaker, is because they have decreased expenses. It's very simple. It's a very simple numerator/denominator issue, and the expenses have gone down.

The University of Lethbridge, for example, is sitting at I believe \$4,100 for tuition, which is significantly lower than the \$4,400 or \$4,500 at the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta. Because of the tuition policy they were not allowed to increase their tuition and indeed had to freeze it because of that 30 per cent policy. So what you see, Mr. Speaker, is that despite the fact that they're at 30 per cent, their tuition is still substantially lower than any place else.

The Lethbridge Community College had frozen their tuition for three years, which put their tuition considerably lower than any place else. Why did this occur? This occurred simply because they're being very efficient in what they do. They're lowering their expenses. Their expenses are increasing at a lower rate than any other institution in Alberta. Those are the kinds of practices, Mr. Speaker, that we should encourage, and indeed we do. They still have the ability to increase once they hit 30 per cent. They can go to a cost of living plus 2.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Wainwright.

Direct Energy

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The more the fine print of the ATCO/Direct Energy deal is examined, the motive becomes obvious that this is a bad deal designed to rip off ATCO's 1 million natural gas and electricity customers. Direct Energy isn't even doing its own billing but is contracting these services back to an ATCO subsidiary called ATCO I-Tek. Yet thanks to this government's wrong-headed deregulation policy, Direct Energy gets to pick the pockets of ATCO's gas and electricity customers to the tune of \$42 million a year. My question is to the Minister of Government Services. Why are the minister and his toothless Utilities Consumer Advocate failing to protect Albertans by allowing this \$42 million a year rip-off of gas and electricity customers?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, this whole issue of the ATCO and Direct sale came up well before the Utilities Consumer Advocate was put in place. The Utilities Consumer Advocate opened up its doors in November of 2003, and over that time we have been dealing with intervention policies with the EUB, which was part of our mandate in the first place. This whole deal with ATCO and Direct came up well before the advocate's office was put in place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that ATCO I-Tek has announced that it's creating 180 new positions to carry out the Direct Energy contract, why are ATCO's gas and electricity customers being asked to pay for the additional private-sector bureaucracy that's been created as a result of the Direct Energy deal?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just want to make a comment about the role of the advocate. One of his key duties is to provide representation on consumer issues in front of the EUB. The other thing is that the advocate is also there to help consumers help themselves, and the other thing that the advocate does is make sure that if a consumer has difficulty with a company in terms of paying a bill, whether the information that is on the bill is accurate, or correct, or there needs to be an understanding of the information that is on the bill, he will act on behalf of that consumer to make the company's customer service more responsive to the needs of the consumer.

In this particular case, ATCO and Direct have struck an arrangement by which they make sure that their customer service will perform on behalf of the consumers, and if consumers have difficulty understanding that process, they can call the consumer advocate.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister take

advantage of the opportunity afforded by Direct Energy's appearance before a Tory standing committee meeting this afternoon to ask them some tough questions about why Albertans are \$42 million worse off as a result of this obviously flawed deal?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, the consumer advocate of this province is a very hard-working, knowledgeable individual who is very dedicated to the job . . . [interjection] Yes, that's right. He is an individual with the utmost integrity, and he does not shirk any of his duties. I am quite upset by the line of questioning. This is twice in this Assembly that the hon. member has called my consumer advocate, my deputy minister, toothless. He is anything but toothless.

He is acting on behalf of consumers of this province in many, many ways, and it's a very, very effective tool for consumers in this province. He attends all of the meetings that he can possibly attend all across this province and in this building, and that deputy minister, consumer advocate, attends those kinds of meetings because those are the stakeholders that he deals with. He takes that responsibility very, very carefully, and he goes to all of the meetings that they go to and works very, very closely with Direct and ATCO as well as all other companies in the province. Our advocate is anything but toothless.

The Minister of Energy may want to add to that.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, it's always a pleasure to rise and correct the third party's errors, and some of those errors are important to correct.

The EUB has ruled categorically that all start-up costs must remain with the shareholder, meaning that these costs cannot be passed on to the electricity and the natural gas consumer. This member knows exactly what the EUB ruled on. He knows that the EUB has said: no recovery of the \$90 million. What they have said is that 10 cents a day is added to the natural gas bill so that other call centres' billing operations can be put in place and the way to purchase natural gas in Alberta can lead to further efficiencies and better competition. The electricity customers of ATCO do not pay a nickel more.

In conclusion, had this company not contracted with ATCO, not created these 200 new jobs, he'd have been the first guy to stand up and say: they're off-shoring; they're outsourcing; jobs are leaving Alberta. Jobs are staying in Alberta. You should support this. Come on.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Second-language Instruction

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Learning has indicated that it will become mandatory for every student in grade 4 through grade 9 in 2005 and 2006 to learn a second language. Many of my constituents have called to express appreciation for such a plan but have serious concerns about the implementation and logistics of such a policy. My first question to the Minister of Learning: where will small rural and remote schools who already have challenges finding and retaining qualified staff such as speech pathologists and math 9 teachers find the resources to set up video conferencing or hire a second-language teacher to deliver such a policy?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, included in the implementation plan for second languages is the whole idea of expanding the number of teachers that have second-language skills. So, first of all, what we have done is we've put in bursaries and scholarships to the universi-

ties. I've also included second languages in what are called the KSAs, which list the knowledge, skills, and attributes that students are required to have when they graduate from the universities with a teaching degree.

2:30

Directly to answer the hon. member's question, we are looking at ways to ensure that there are video conferencing suites in every school in Alberta. We are very close to putting out RFPs to that effect. We have established standards to ensure that they're there. So, Mr. Speaker, I certainly see the day very soon when there will be video conferencing suites in every school.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question, my first supplemental: how will home-schooled students in rural and remote schools receive such services?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, one of the ways that students have been learning second languages for a long time is over computers. If, for example, the home-schoolers choose to home-school their children, there will be courses that are available over the Internet. Of course, it is going to require that they have a computer though, and that's something that they're going to have to do.

Mr. Griffiths: My final supplemental, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: what will be removed from an already full curriculum to make room for this mandatory second-language instruction?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, currently there's about 15 per cent of the curriculum that is not spoken for. There is 85 per cent that has all the social studies, language, mathematics, art, and music, things like that, so there's about 15 per cent open. Our estimates are that second languages will take about 95 hours a year, or roughly 30 minutes a day, so there is the 10 per cent there. There is time available for that.

One of the other areas that we're looking at is the relationship between second languages and English language arts. Certainly, there is a very intimate relationship between learning another language and learning language arts. So we're taking a look at that.

Quite simply, Mr. Speaker, that's one of the reasons why it isn't going in this September. We have the curriculums in place, but there is going to have to be some study, and there is room in the curriculum for this. It's a matter of how we do it and how we do it in the best possible fashion.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven members to participate.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Louis and Ruth Maria Adria

Mr. Yankowsky: Mr. Speaker, I rise to recognize Louis and Ruth Maria Adria, who established Elder Advocates of Alberta in the early 1990s. A scripture verse that appears on all their letters, posters, and research states: "Rise in the presence of the aged, and honour the face of the old man." Leviticus 19:32. Indeed, this is what Louis and Ruth Maria are doing as they continue to advocate for a very vulnerable segment of our society, the frail elderly.

The Adrias' mission is to bring mercy and compassion to our sick

and helpless elderly and bring public awareness to the situation frail elderly sometimes find themselves in. Sometimes they are criticized for the length and extent of their zeal, and sometimes they get into trouble for their tactics, but, Mr. Speaker, they cannot be criticized and indeed should be commended for their heart and their dedication to a cause which is very important. May we all rise in the presence of the aged.

God bless you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Floyd McLennan

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize Mr. Floyd McLennan, who passed away on April 24, 2004. Floyd was the mayor of Grande Cache until his passing, and he was a personal friend of mine for over 20 years. Floyd, a true friend, a true champion of Grande Cache, served as councillor since 1982 and as its mayor since 1990. As mayor Floyd always put the needs of the community ahead of his own, and you could see that by the time and commitment he devoted to the community projects and programs. He was an avid supporter of the Royal Canadian Legion, the Grande Cache Golf and Country Club, and seniors organizations, and he was always willing to participate in various charity fundraisers. He was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the seniors' complex in Grande Cache, which should be starting construction this year.

The town and all who knew Floyd will miss him, his wise counsel, his keen sense of wit. The community and I offer our heartfelt condolences to Gudrun, Stuart, Shauna, Scott, and their families.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Edmonton Folk Music Festival

Mr. MacDonald: I rise to recognize the 25th anniversary of the Edmonton Folk Music Festival. The folk festival began in 1980 in Gold Bar park as the vision of Don Whelan. With his vision and the energy of 300 volunteers this event has grown and matured into one of the world's leading folk festivals. The four-day festival now makes its home in Gallagher park. The park is a wonderful outdoor venue, offering a natural amphitheatre in pristine parkland with an outstanding view of the beautiful Edmonton skyline.

Today over 1,800 volunteers work very hard in many capacities to ensure the smooth operation of this vast undertaking. The values of the folk festival include: to provide a quality, diverse music program that is accessible to all, to develop Alberta artists, and to increase the awareness of folk music. Every year this festival showcases some of the world's best musicians, including outstanding Canadian talent. The folk festival offers a mosaic of music delivered in the finest tradition of Celtic, bluegrass, blues, gospel, roots, world beat, and country music for the enjoyment of all.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

International Business Round-table

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday morning in Calgary the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations organized a session where the Alberta government briefed foreign diplomatic corps from all over the world about Alberta. These diplomats were very appreciative and pointed out that Alberta is the only jurisdiction that does such a briefing.

In the afternoon the diplomatic corps were invited to join the Alberta international business round-table discussion. This round-

table was organized by the Ministry of Economic Development, chaired by the Minister of Economic Development and co-chaired by myself and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. To this round-table we invited over 30 immigrants who are in business and have cultural connections in other countries. The idea is to include them and get them involved in international business development for Alberta. New Canadian citizens bring with them valuable hidden assets; that is, their personal connections in other countries. I believe that Alberta needs to capitalize on this networking asset in our global economic development and competition.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

St. Albert Saints Hockey Team

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to recognize all that the St. Albert Saints hockey team did for our community of St. Albert. The owners, organizers, supporters, volunteers, and players themselves have given us entertainment for our sporting fans, economic encouragement for our businesses and service industry, joy to the families who billeted out-of-town players, and, of course, pride and provincial sporting identity for all our citizens.

As the Member of this Legislative Assembly for the constituency of St. Albert I wish to express my personal thanks to our exciting St. Albert Saints and my sorrow in seeing the club leave my community. To the Saints, formerly known as the St. Albert Saints, you have been a great and exciting organization in our community. I wish you well in your new home facility in Spruce Grove. Thanks for the memories.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

May Day

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. May 1 commemorates the historic struggle of working people throughout the world. The holiday began in the 1880s in the United States with the fight for an eight-hour workday. In 1884 the Federation of Organized Trades and Labour Unions passed a resolution stating that eight hours should constitute a legal day's work from and after May 1, 1886. During a strike to achieve this goal, police attacked workers from the McCormick harvester company, killing six. We must recognize and commemorate May Day not only for its historical significance but also as a time to organize around issues of vital importance to working people today.

On May 1 working people and their families marched down Whyte Avenue to celebrate May Day and to kick off the May Week Labour Arts Festival. This festival brings together the labour movement and artists to celebrate the contribution of workers to our economy, culture, and society.

I salute the labour movement in Alberta and its continuing efforts to win a better life for working people.

2:40

Irene Besse

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, today I rise to recognize an outstanding Calgarian for spearheading a major fundraising drive for the Children's hospital in Calgary-Currie. It's just one of dozens of such projects for this incredible lady who has also just finished a \$4.6 million project to provide 90 new Steinway pianos to the University of Calgary.

Her name is Irene Besse. She is a household name in Calgary and even internationally, and in fact her name is in many households on pianos purchased from Irene Besse Keyboards, widely recognized as

the best equipped, organized, and designed business and performance facility of its kind in North America.

Winner of so many awards I can't even begin to list them all, she's an Alberta woman entrepreneur of the year lifetime achievement award winner, a Pinnacle winner, a woman of vision winner, was featured on the Women's Television Network. It just goes on and on. Sports organist for the Calgary Flames, the Cannons, the Stampede, first organist in the world to provide live organ music at the Winter Olympics figure skating and hockey, she started the tradition which continues to this day.

I was fortunate, indeed, to work with Irene to bring back the carillon bells in downtown Calgary, Mr. Speaker, so I understand completely why she won the award for best in sheer positive energy at the SabreTEC best in business awards.

Congratulations, Irene, and keep up all that incredible work.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am presenting a petition signed by 120 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to "urge the Government of Alberta to return to a regulated electricity system, reduce power bills, and develop a program to assist Albertans in improving energy efficiency."

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development I'd like to table Alberta Beef – Focus on the Future that she referenced in her answer today.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got three tablings today. The first one is an ATCO/Direct Energy joint news release dated April 29, 2004, regarding their long-term contract.

The second tabling, Mr. Speaker, is a letter dated April 29, 2004, to the government by Colleen Smith of the triparish peace and justice ministry, written on behalf of over 14,000 parishioners, asking the government of Alberta to increase the minimum wage so that people working on it can make a living wage.

The third tabling, Mr. Speaker, is another letter, dated April 27, again addressed to the government, by Aline McMillan, chair, social justice ministry of St. Agnes, St. Anthony, and St. Thomas More Roman Catholic churches. This letter is written on behalf of, again, more than 14,000 parishioners who are asking the Premier and the government to recognize the dignity of work and raise the minimum wage.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm rising to table a copy of the May Week Labour Arts Festival event calendar. From April 28 to May 9 Edmontonians will be taking part in film viewings, poetry readings, and other activities to celebrate the numerous contributions and sacrifices made every day by working people.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is from constituent Colleen Babiuk-Ilkiw, outlining her mother's journey in trying to beat cancer, including her battle for a diagnosis and battle for treatment.

The second tabling is from a second constituent, Diane Oxenford, asking why the provincial government is ignoring the original historic site of Rosedale flats and asking for consideration to improve the entrance to the capital city and the front garden of the Legislature, that being Queen Elizabeth Park Road, Waltherdale bridge, the Terrace Building, and the Rosedale industrial site.

Thank you.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Mar, Minister of Health and Wellness: pursuant to the Public Health Act, Public Health Appeal Board annual report 2003.

head: **Statement by the Speaker**

Calendar of Special Events

The Speaker: Hon. members, now that we've arrived in the month of May, let me just advise of the following commemorative days and weeks that are available in the month of May. May is Cystic Fibrosis Month, Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month, Medic-Alert Month, Huntington Disease Awareness Month, Hearing Awareness Month, Speech and Hearing Awareness Month, Motorcycle and Bicycle Safety Awareness Month, Asian Pacific Heritage Month, Red Shield Appeal Month, Child Find's Green Ribbon of Hope campaign, Light the Way Home campaign.

Now, various weeks or days within the month of May. April 1 to May 30 are Girl Guides sandwich cookie weeks. April 19 to May 19 is National Physiotherapy Month. May 1 to May 7 is National Summer Safety Week. May 2 to 8 is North American Occupational Safety and Health Week. May 2 to May 8 is Drinking Water Week. May 2 to May 8 is also National Forest Week, as it is the International Composting Awareness Week, as it is Emergency Preparedness Week. May 2 to May 11 is Information Technology Week.

Today, May 3, is World Press Freedom Day. May 3 to May 9 is Mental Health Week. May 3 to May 9 is National Hospice Palliative Care Week. May 3 to May 9 is Respect for Law Week. May 4, tomorrow, is World Asthma Day. May 7 to 9 are multiple sclerosis carnation campaign days. May 8 is the World Red Cross Day. May 8 is also the Non-Violence Optimist Day. May 8 to May 15 is Alberta Crime Prevention Week.

May 9 is Mother's Day. May 9 to May 15 is National Police Week. May 10 to May 16 is National Nursing Week, as it is also National Mining Week. May 12 is International Nurses Day. May 12 is also Canada Health Day. May 15 is International Day of Families.

May 16 to May 22 is National Immunization Week, as it is Intergenerational Week, as it is Emergency Medical Services Awareness Week, as it is National Dog Bite Prevention Week. May 17 is also World Telecommunication Day. International Museums Day is on May 18.

May 21 to May 27 is National Road Safety Week. May 22 to May 28 is Safe Boating Week. May 22 is Raise the Flag Day, as it also is International Day for Biological Diversity. May 24 is Victoria Day. May 25 is National Missing Children's Day. May 25 to May 28 is Aboriginal Awareness Week. May 25 to June 1 is Week of Solidarity with the Peoples of Non-Self-Governing Territories.

May 29 is schizophrenia Walk for Hope day. May 30 is World Partnership Walk day. May 30 to June 5 is Canadian Environment Week, as it also is National Access Awareness Week, as it also is National Sun Awareness Week. May 31 is the World No-Tobacco Day.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, April 29, it's now my pleasure to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

head: **Motions for Returns**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been given on Thursday, April 29, or perhaps earlier, it's my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 40, 41, 42, 44 through 49, 52, 53, 55 through 62, 64, 66, 69 through 83, 88 through 105, 108 through 123, 128, 134 through 143, 146 through 160, 162, 164 through 168, 174 through 180, 183 through 189, 197, and 200 through 205.

[Motion carried]

The Clerk Assistant: Motion for a Return 40, Ms Carlson.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

2:50

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, there seems to be a malfunctioning going on at some of the desks. Would the hon. member mind moving to perhaps the place where the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry is.

Mr. Smith: Come on over. Move to the right. One more.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No, this is far enough right for me. Thanks, fellas.

Business Credit Card Statements for Environment Department

M40. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Environment.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've already indicated previously but I'll indicate it again that there are likely going to be a number of similarly worded motions for returns which at this stage

are not required to be accepted, so we will be rejecting them because they have in fact been, for the most part at least, covered by MR 24 as amended, which in fact opened up all of the issues of business credit card statements for the year in question that were issued to deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, and so on within the government of Alberta. So that will affect all ministries, and as such MR 40 is going to be rejected on that basis since it is perfunctory in nature at this stage.

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I disagree with the Government House Leader that it is perfunctory at this point. The reason that the opposition submits the same question for a number of different ministries is that history has taught us to do this.

In the past where we asked for aggregate amounts, we would get a response that did not allow us to do accurate comparisons ministry to ministry, for example, because we just weren't given information that allowed us to do that kind of comparison. So history taught us to put in a question for each ministry.

Despite having had Motion for a Return 24 passed, we are not getting the information that we sought. We are missing a level of detail that allows the Official Opposition to be accurate in what it does with that information. I've heard the members of the government complain in the past that, you know, we were unfairly extrapolating, that we were moving the numbers around unfairly, that we weren't giving an accurate portrayal of things, and frankly – what's the computer phrase? – garbage in, garbage out. If we're not given good information to begin with, it's very difficult for us to do a good job coming back out again.

We have requested the information from the Department of Environment because we would like to see that information. There are a couple of problems that we had with Motion for a Return 24, and they carry themselves forward into Motion for a Return 40. That is, we asked for the monthly business credit card statements, actually a copy of the statement. What we're going to be given is a retyping, a statement of credit card expenses, which is a difference.

There's been no explanation that we've received for why that difference is given, why the need to retype what's on those credit card statements. Is there something being omitted there? We don't know that, and that may cause us problems in the future when people say: well, you should have known. Well, how? We weren't given the original documentation, which is what we were seeking here.

The other change that happened here is it doesn't allow us to understand where we didn't get the same information from a department. So, for example, the Department of Environment submits, and they give information into the aggregate for the deputy minister but no assistant deputy ministers. Why? Well, they didn't have credit card expenses. But we're not given that information in the aggregate, so we now will be doing inaccurate comparisons, or we could be put in that position. We're not given the detail when it comes through that tells us that we didn't get exactly the same format, a grid if you will, from all departments.

I would urge, even given Motion for a Return 24, that the members of the House understand the difference in the level of detail that the Official Opposition has asked for and what is now being given in, sort of, much vaguer terms, the information diffused out and the detail removed. I would urge all members of the House to vote in favour of Motion for a Return 40.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I listened to what the deputy House leader had to say last week about Motion for a Return 24 and all the information that went on and then the subsequent denial of information that we had requested. I specifically wanted the information in detail from the particular departments that I'm asking for, and I am not satisfied that it has been denied.

I also would urge all members to vote for the information requested.

[Motion for a Return 40 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Economic Development Department

M41. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Economic Development.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Motion for a Return 41 I'm going to indicate on behalf of the Minister of Economic Development that here again, given the MR 24 amendment, MR 41 now becomes redundant, so we will be rejecting MR 41. But in doing that, as I indicated in the previous discussion on MR 40, which I did on behalf of the hon. Minister of Environment, I want to make a couple of comments just briefly, if I could, to address some of the concerns that have just been expressed.

I believe the Opposition House Leader indicated something about: all they're going to get is a retyped version or whatever. In fact, according to MR 24 as amended, they will be receiving "a statement of all credit card expenses . . . incurred by" and the amendment goes on. So that should provide the information that I hope they are looking for, and it will provide it in a consistent, similar sort of grid basis. At least that's my understanding, and that's what we've asked for to be done.

The only thing wrong with trying to provide copies of the actual credit card statements as requested in the original motions – and there are many of them here – is that, of course, you'd have to provide the credit card numbers and specific names and so on. I think what the members opposite are more interested in are probably the amounts and what the categories are, and that's what MR 24 as amended attempts to incorporate and address.

I hope that that will not lead to any inaccurate conclusions on the part of the opposition as the Opposition House Leader indicated. I hope that it in fact helps out somehow.

On that basis, again, Mr. Speaker, Motion for a Return 41 has its explanation, really, contained in the amendment for Motion for a Return 24. Therefore, I am suggesting on behalf of the Minister of Economic Development that we reject MR 41.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Speaking to MR 41, there are some additional points that I'd like to raise around the reference back to Motion for a Return 24.

The minister and I met and had long discussions, and the result of that was an agreement on one motion for a return, and that was 23. I gave a number of reasons and concerns in that meeting about why we wanted the level of detail that we were asking for.

3:00

Here's another example, Mr. Speaker. From the original motion

to the amended Motion for a Return 24, it changed "issued to" – credit card statements issued to certain individuals – to "incurred by," and there's a difference there. The difference is that they would only be providing the information from these credit card statements that was incurred by the individual whose name the card was in. So if we had expenses that were incurred by someone else but paid for on that credit card, we would not be getting the information that's there.

I believe that that was the reason for the change in the wording, to make sure that we didn't get that information or that it was excluded from what was being offered to us. That's why I objected to it at the time, and it's why I continue to object to it: because once again we will not understand, where we've been given equivalent information between departments, whether we got every deputy minister, every ADM and we can cross-reference between them. No, we are not able to do that.

In addition, we had asked for monthly credit card statements. We were looking for the tracking around the times of year: were expenditures higher in certain times, lower in certain times, connected to certain events that happened throughout the year, connected to travel, before or after? That was why we were asking for it on a monthly basis. Now, the amended motion is simply giving us a statement of all credit card expenses for the fiscal year. So we've lost that monthly breakdown. We've lost the ability to compare between times of year, between events, that sort of thing. So again there's a level of detail that we have requested that we are not getting, and we also cannot tell who contributed information in what category and who didn't.

Now, I've heard the Deputy Government House Leader say that, well, we're going to get it on a grid. If that's true, then that will be helpful. If we're able to see specifically where we did not get information in a consistent way from every department, then that's helpful to us.

I know as well that particularly on these ones where we were asking for the credit card statements themselves that are government credit card statements, we're not asking for these people's personal credit card statements. Let's be, you know, absolutely careful about that. What we're asking for are those credit cards that are issued to them to be used in the course of their duties as a government employee. So all expenses on there, one presumes, should be incurred as a result of their duties.

I know that there was some concern expressed that, well, they didn't want to be hung out to dry on the famous orange juice problem. My point is that that's the argument for detail, because the confusion around the – whatever it was – \$27 glass of orange juice was in fact \$27 for three jugs of orange juice. But the second bit of detail didn't come with the first bit of detail, and that's how mistakes are made, Mr. Speaker. That's why we're asking for the level of detail that we're asking for, so that we don't make those kinds of mistakes, so that we don't subject anyone to unnecessary embarrassment or unnecessary scrutiny. The scrutiny that resulted from that orange juice, that \$27 orange juice, has lasted for months.

If you want to avoid that kind of scrutiny, give the information, complete details, up front, and there isn't a problem. As soon as people think that there's something being hidden, they're going to start to dig. Right now there's the Sierra Madre waiting over there, and that's why there's been such interest evoked in the community and from Albertans and from the media around these expenses.

So I urge all members to vote in favour of Motion for a Return 41 for the reasons I've stated.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, would like people to vote in favour of this particular motion. It's for the Department of Economic Development, and that is somewhat distinct from other departments because this is really the marketing arm of the government. The way to benchmark and monitor their success or lack thereof is very much through this kind of expense reporting. For us to get an aggregate as is outlined in Motion for a Return 24 is not nearly as helpful as getting the detail requested in the original motion, particularly for this department.

Once again this is a case of the government having said, "Ask for it this way, and you shall receive," and then finding a way to deny access to the information.

With this particular motion, I would urge all members to vote for it.

[Motion for a Return 41 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Sustainable Resource Development Department

M42. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister and all assistant deputy ministers for the Department of Sustainable Resource Development.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, with Motion for a Return 42 this one also needs to be rejected because effectively it is covered, for the most part at least, under Motion 24 as amended.

In stating that, I just want to comment briefly with respect to some of the comments we've just heard from members opposite. It's true that the Opposition House Leader and I did meet for about an hour and a half or an hour and 40 minutes a couple of weeks back. I will be making a correction to something I indicated on page 1030 when we get to motions for returns that are affected by the amended Motion 34.

In any event, during that meeting we did have a very frank and very open discussion, and I thought that some progress had been made. I think that I had indicated and I will indicate again that all of these expenses and so on, regardless of whom they are incurred by, are very carefully and thoroughly reviewed not only by internal processes but also by the Auditor General. I always assumed that opposition members were interested in getting their hands on what the actual expenses were in the various areas, and that's what MR 24 as amended should be able to provide.

There may also be other processes and procedures that any member of the House might wish to pursue should they want additional information thereafter. Nonetheless, that is the process, and that process does respect the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which I know members here are very familiar with.

I should just point out, Mr. Speaker, that in fact government always has the option to accept an MR or to reject an MR or to accept it as amended. In every case those decisions, I know, are arrived at after considerable consideration to try and provide all the information as requested. It's just that from time to time when you see the constant repetition with all 23 or 24 Executive Council departments, you can amalgamate the information in a presentable way that allows whatever we're able to flow out and save the House a considerable amount of time by not having to go through a debate such as we're going through now on each one individually.

That having been said, I'm well aware that the members opposite

are not asking for personal, residential if you will, credit cards from the deputy ministers and so on that are cited in this particular MR 42, but the fact is that personal names do appear on these statements and so do personal account numbers on behalf of government. That was the point I was trying to make earlier.

The two final comments I would make are again with respect to the jugs of orange juice. I don't know. I suppose you could be here for a whole year trying to provide all of that level of scrutiny, because you'd be getting into who drank a whole glass and who drank half a glass and how many pots of coffee were ordered. I mean, it just gets a little bit silly after a while, I think people would agree.

The point is to provide as accurate and as comprehensive information as possible, and that's what this amended Motion 24 is going to do. It applies also in this case to Motion for a Return 42. Therefore, there's no need for us to accept 42.

To the final speaker from the opposition: it doesn't matter, hon. member, you know, whether it's Economic Development or any other ministry. We try to apply the same standards right across the board.

So we'll be looking to reject MR 42.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you for the opportunity to join the debate on this. I think that it's important that it be understood that we're not questioning the integrity of employees here. We're not interested in that, and I don't think that it should be cast in that light. We actually did not ask for names. We asked for positions. Since we didn't ask for the names or the credit card numbers, I still don't see why the statements can't be taken, block out the number, block out the name, write on it "deputy minister" or "unit leader" or whatever they are, and provide it. That's what we asked for. It's giving us a level of detail that we think would have been helpful. The government has committed itself to significantly more work than it needed to had it just done what we'd asked for. They're now retyping it.

3:10

Secondly, we'd asked for monthly statements; we're getting a statement by the year. Again we lose the opportunity to watch for an ebb and flow of expenses and to connect them to particular events across the year. Once again, it was changed from credit cards "issued to" certain positions to expenses "incurred by" certain positions. Very different from what we're talking about. Again, it excludes expenses that were in fact on a credit card not specifically incurred by the individual whose name it is. So there's missing information there. I think that the argument is that whenever we are spending taxpayers' money, Albertans should be able to review that expenditure of money. We very clearly were looking for personal and travel expenses.

Around what the Deputy Government House Leader calls the constant repetition, the fact of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, that those motions that were put forward were ruled out of order because the government has substantially changed the information that we were looking for. It does not expressly deal with the detail that was requested. Giving general statements in aggregate does not satisfy the intent of the original.

We would have been very happy if the government had given us exactly what we'd asked for. We would have been happy to group all ministries together at that point. But they were not willing to do that, and they altered what we were asking for – and I've given you some detail of how it was altered – and then tried to group it all together. That, in fact, was ruled out of order by Parliamentary

Counsel. I mean, to try and put it out there that somehow the opposition was not willing to group these – in fact, we were very willing to group them if we got the information that we requested. We're not willing to wipe these off the books when we didn't get the information that we requested.

When the Deputy Government House Leader is talking about accurate and comprehensive information and isn't that what we want: yes, and we asked for a certain level of detail, and that's what we'll continue to pursue.

So for those reasons among others already stated, I would ask for support for Motion for a Return 42. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Deputy Government House Leader talked about constant repetition. Since these motions have been introduced and I've been standing up to ask for the information for the departments that I'm responsible for as the critic, what I have heard is the constant deniability of this government to be open and transparent in any remarkable sense. We have heard constantly the Deputy Government House Leader hiding behind the freedom of information act. That act was never designed to hide behind. It was designed to afford information to the people of the province in terms of how their government was being run and how they were spending their money.

When he talked about these statements coming forward with personal names and personal account numbers, well, really, Mr. Speaker, we know how well their whiteout pen works on anything else that they give us, and we would hope that the smallest amount of work involved in processing this is to white out those personal factors rather than completely aggregate and retype them. How much time is the government wasting by doing that?

I have to say that this is the end of the ministries that I'm asking for how they spent their money. I think that that's a justifiable request. I think that it's one that is laughable in the reasons that we have seen the government come forward with in terms of denying access.

I would ask all members to please support this motion for a return.

[Motion for a Return 42 lost]

East Central Health Authority

M44. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the East Central health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am compelled to reject Motion for a Return 44. The reason is that in the year 2002-2003 we had 17 health regions, not nine. Therefore, I cannot provide the requested information for the restructured East Central health authority for the 2002-2003 fiscal year, nor can I provide information broken down by contractor as requested. The ministry does not require information to be reported by contractor, so these data are not included in the financial statements.

However, Mr. Speaker, this fall after the financial statements for the nine health regions are audited, I will be able to provide the total dollars spent on information technology services by each of these regions.

This will be the basis for my rejection of a number of the motions for returns to follow subsequently, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to conclude the debate?

[Motion for a Return 44 lost]

Acute Care Beds

M45. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a breakdown of the number of acute care beds per 1,000 people for each regional health authority.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the government is prepared to accept Motion for a Return 45.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to conclude the debate.

Dr. Massey: Yes. I'd like to thank the minister for supplying that information, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 45 carried]

Public Affairs Bureau

M46. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number of staff in the Public Affairs Bureau broken down by job title, job description, salary, and bonus range for each position.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Motion for a Return 46 I would refer members of the House back to MR 34 as amended, wherein the original Motion for a Return 34 cited virtually the same type of information pertaining to salary and bonus ranges and so on specific to the Department of Energy. We thought it would speed the process up here in the House if we were to bring in an amendment to MR 34 and then just reference it as we go through other similarly related motions for returns, such as we're doing starting now with Motion for a Return 46.

In any case, the amended Motion 34 simply opened up the bonus question to apply to employees within the government of Alberta listed by department for the fiscal year in question, and it goes on. So in this case, Mr. Speaker, Motion for a Return 46, again, finds itself redundant in the light and background of amended Motion for a Return 34. Therefore, we can in fact reject Motion for a Return 46 because that information, by and large, will be provided for under MR 34 as amended.

That having been said, I would just like to indicate, Mr. Speaker, that the salary ranges for the Alberta public service are available on the personnel administration office web site, I'm told. The breakdown of performance bonuses, as I indicated, will be provided under the amended Motion for a Return 34 to augment that.

So, on that basis, we're able to reject MR 46, before us now.

3:20

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Speaking to MR 46, I noticed that the Deputy Government House Leader referenced Motion for a Return 34, and during the discussion of Motion for a

Return 34 on April 26, as recorded in *Hansard* on page 1030, I think that the Deputy Government House Leader hornswoggled us, Mr. Speaker. Yes, indeed, he did. He put it out that in fact I had agreed to this amendment, and I most definitely had not.

What we have here are a number of differences in the way the amendment comes out.

Let me start out by saying that, once again, if the government wanted to speed up this process, they could have done it like the autobahn if they had been willing to provide the information that was requested without amending it and diffusing the information that was being provided and then trying to have all similar motions grouped together. If they had been willing to provide the information, we would have happily grouped things, and we would have been out of here weeks ago.

But the government's insistence on changing the information that's being given and controlling the information and, as I have shown already, Mr. Speaker, diluting the information being provided and in some cases completely cutting out information that has been requested has now resulted in the process before us. So, as usual, complete control in the hands of the government, and this is the way they have chosen to go at this.

What are the changes that are problematic in Motion for a Return 34 which end up being reflected in Motion for a Return 46? Well, first of all, we asked for the amount of each bonus, not an aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to all employees. We asked for the amount of each bonus, and we asked for it for senior officials, for each position, not all employees in a department. Again, I'll point out that we're not asking for people's names. We don't want that. We're not interested in people's names; we're interested in the position. Staff change; people come and go. We're interested in what the position is being offered a bonus for.

Now, another thing was changed here. We were asking for the position and the amount paid to each official and the number of employees who received a bonus within that range. What we get is a range of bonus dollar amounts. Well, that's not the exact amount. That's certainly not what we asked for. So what we're likely to get from this is rather than a listing of all of the senior officials and the bonuses that were given to them in a given year is a range which says, "Well, between" – and I'm guessing here – "\$8,000 and \$15,000 in this fiscal year." And how many people got it? Three hundred. Well, that gives us very little useful information. The level of detail that we were seeking has simply been erased from our request here.

It does not clarify. It in fact creates confusion. I'm beginning to think that the government is deliberately creating this confusion. Over and over and over again the same arguments are presented which diffuse the amount of information that is being provided to the opposition and to all Albertans.

So I think that having that clarified, all members of the Assembly would want to support MR 46, particularly because it's around the Public Affairs Bureau, which is of intense interest to many Albertans these days, and support the information requested under MR 46.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to close the debate.

Dr. Massey: Yes. I think it's abundantly clear, Mr. Speaker, that what is being done is that the information that's being requested is being masked, and it really is going to be produced in a form that is of little use, and I think that that's unfortunate.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 46 lost]

Aspen Regional Health Authority

M47. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Aspen regional health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am compelled to reject this motion for a return, being Motion 47, for the same reasons outlined earlier in responding to Motion for a Return 44.

[Motion for a Return 47 lost]

Capital Health Authority

M48. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Capital health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Motion for a Return 48 I am again forced to reject this motion for the same reasons outlined in my response to Motion for a Return 44.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I'd just like to argue with the minister a bit there because my understanding is that there were no changes in the Capital health authority, and the earlier reasoning that the minister gave for not providing the information was that he'd not collected it in the form in which we were asking for it. He was saying that we were now down to nine and that we were asking for the old version of 17 or whichever way round that goes. My understanding is that there were no changes to the boundaries of the Capital health authority, so that should not stand.

I would argue that this motion for a return should in fact be accepted, particularly in light of the minister's argument, which in fact supports the acceptance of this motion for a return.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there in fact were changes to . . .

The Speaker: I think, hon. Minister of Health and Wellness, that I was out of order there. I should have recognized the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Did you rise too?

Mr. Hancock: Not if he's going to be able to rise. I just thought that he couldn't.

The Speaker: No, he's unfortunately not able to rise.

Mr. Hancock: The only reason I was rising, Mr. Speaker, was because I thought that the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness was not able to any longer.

I was going to make the same point, that there were significant

changes to the boundaries of the Capital health authority, including moving all of the area west of the city including Stony Plain and other areas into the Capital health authority. So the same reasons that were given by the minister earlier are still extant with respect to this motion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods? Okay.

[Motion for a Return 48 lost]

Anglo-Canadian Clinics

M49. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing any and all contracts and memoranda of understanding between the Calgary health region and Anglo-Canadian Clinics regarding the transfer of any doctors, nurses, licensed practical nurses, technicians, or any other employees of the Calgary health region to the United Kingdom.

Mr. Mar: The government will accept Motion for a Return 49.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Just again to thank the minister for the information. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 49 carried]

3:30

Executive Council IT Contracts

M52. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for the Executive Council.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Motion for a Return 52 I think we need to refer back to Motion for a Return 16 as amended. We'll probably notice there that one specific department had been cited for providing this information. I believe it was the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Motion for a Return 16 was amended to withdraw specific reference to one ministry, and it was amended to open it up to all ministers and departments in the government of Alberta regarding the provision of current information technology services contract tendering policy, process, et cetera.

Motion for a Return 52 can be rejected on the basis that MR 16 as amended will provide precisely the information that's being asked for in MR 52. So MR 52 becomes totally redundant and not necessary since it's accommodated effectively under MR16 as amended.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I believe, Mr. Speaker, that this may be an example of where other similar ministries could have in fact been grouped in as long as the information is exactly the same. MR 52 reads: "the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for the Executive Council." MR 16 is: "the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for ministers and departments in the government of Alberta."

I think, in fact, that if this would have provided each and every

ministry, then we probably could've grouped all of these and gone on, in which case I wonder why the minister didn't ask for the grouping, but if it's meant to come out that we would just get one policy for everybody across, then it's not the same thing at all. Otherwise, we certainly would've been willing to consider grouping.

Thanks very much.

[Motion for a Return 52 lost]

Electronic Health Records

M53. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total costs associated with the establishment of electronic health records for each regional health authority broken down by costs associated with implementation, dissemination of information, equipment costs, and conversion of hard-copy records to electronic format.

Ms Blakeman: This is following with a particular theme brought forward by my colleague on a number of occasions. We have a concern that what's happening around access to information and electronic health information records may in fact be walking us into a huge outlay of money. We wish to start examining whether in fact that may be the case, and that's why we've asked for this particular information, and I hope that we're successful in encouraging the minister to provide it.

I encourage all members of the Assembly to vote in support of MR 53. Thank you.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the government will be rejecting Motion for a Return 53. The information requested is not broken down in the manner in which it is requested.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to close the debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I regret that that's not available in the way that we've asked for it. If this information does come up again or even if it doesn't, perhaps the minister would be so kind as to provide us with some helpful hints on how the information is available so that we could request it in the proper format the next time out.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 53 lost]

Palliser Regional Health Authority IT Contracts

M55. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Palliser health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government will be rejecting Motion for a Return 55 for the same reasons set out in my response to Motion for a Return 44.

[Motion for a Return 55 lost]

Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development IT Contracts

M56. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on behalf of the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. The motion before us, MR 56, is again one where we can refer back to a previously amended motion, and that would be Motion for a Return 10, which, in fact, when it was debated – and as I recall, it was quite a lengthy debate. It was determined then that the intent of the motion here before us today was actually reflected back when Motion for a Return 10 was discussed.

Motion for a Return 10, incidentally, dealt specifically with one ministry only – as I recall, it was the Ministry of Health and Wellness – where specific information was requested regarding contracts for information technology services, and the provision of a listing of vendors was also requested for a specific fiscal year. Here before us is Motion for a Return 56, and it does exactly the same thing except that in this case it refers to the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

So what we did when we accepted Motion for a Return 10 is we simply withdrew the reference to one specific ministry, and we reworded MR 10 to the following.

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the government of Alberta on contracts for information technology services and a listing of vendors providing these services for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

That having been said, Mr. Speaker, Motion for a Return 56 can and should fall away because effectively it is covered by Motion for a Return 10 as amended, which will provide all the information about contracts for IT services as well as a list of the vendors who provided them for the year in question. As such, Motion for a Return 56 is redundant and not necessary, and the government is prepared to reject MR 56 on that basis.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I very much disagree with the Deputy Government House Leader that this motion is redundant and that the intent is reflected here. In fact, it's not reflected here at all, and this, in fact, was the motion upon which all others floundered and foundered, depending on whether you're a sailor or not, because the intent of the information was altered so dramatically from what was requested to what's being delivered. So this is not redundant, and the intent has not been addressed.

What we asked for was the total amount of contracts on information technology services broken down by company and the total dollars of the contract. What we get is the total amount spent on the contracts and a listing of vendors. Those two things are so far away from being the same thing that they might as well be summer and winter; they are so far apart.

So this motion is not redundant. Contrary to what the Deputy Government House Leader would like people to believe, it simply is not the case.

3:40

Again, the Official Opposition is seeking detail for a reason, so that we can make better decisions and do better work. When the government provides us with information that is vague, it's diffused, it's diluted, it's masked, or it's simply omitted – and we don't know that it was omitted, so we can't do a reasonable comparison – they just cause problems for themselves. They do create things like the \$27 glass of orange juice, which none of us want to see and none of us enjoyed.

So if you want to see accurate information, give accurate information, but don't try and diffuse it as in what's being done here with this referral back to Motion for a Return 10. I would urge all members to support . . .

An Hon. Member: What motion are we talking about?

Ms Blakeman: Motion for a Return 56, please. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 56 lost]

Peace Country Health Authority IT Contracts

M57. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Peace Country health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is rejecting Motion for a Return 57 for the reasons outlined in my response to Motion for a Return 44.

[Motion for a Return 57 lost]

Single Trial Court

M58. Ms Blakeman moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all reports or documents dealing with the consultation process with Albertans over the creation of a single trial court.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm proposing to move an amendment to Motion for a Return 58. I believe the amendment has been circulated. That amendment would amend Motion for a Return 58 by adding "public" before "reports" and striking out "documents" and substituting "consultation papers" so that the motion for a return would read as follows.

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all public reports and consultation papers dealing with the consultation process with Albertans over the creation of a single trial court.

Quite frankly, I anticipate the hon. member opposite saying, "By making that amendment, it means that we won't be getting the stuff we want to get" and all that sort of stuff. I don't really care whether they reject the motion or accept the amended motion. I can tell the hon. member that I'm quite happy to give her all the information that I can give her about the consultation process with the single trial court. There is nothing secret about it; it is a public consultation process. But the way the motion is worded in terms of "all reports or documents" might put me into conflict with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act with respect to the release

of certain documents where there might be a privacy concern because it's written by a particular member of the public that hasn't given permission and all those sorts of things.

In proposing the amendment, what I'm trying to do, Mr. Speaker, is to accommodate the desire of the member opposite to have access to all the documents relative to the single trial court consultation. I'm happy to meet with her at any time to talk about one of my favourite topics, to give her whatever information I can give her. In fact, I have some information ready to send to her about the consultation documents, et cetera. It's just that the nature of the wording of the motion for a return that's on the table could put me in a position where I could get into difficulty with the law, and I wouldn't want to do that.

Ms Blakeman: No. I would imagine that as Attorney General you wouldn't want to put yourself in a position of conflict with the law.

It does seem a little odd to be agreeing to give me any public record. Well, yes, because they're public, I could probably get them from somewhere else. But I understand what the minister is saying, and in good faith I'm believing him when he tells me that he's going to give me everything he can possibly give me.

Given his remarks, I would add that if he feels that there's something that given the wording of this particular amendment he can't accommodate that he has available and would be willing to share with me, then would he please indicate that in some form of written communication with me? I will find a way to request it some other way.

I also understand that there is an interim report at this point, which perhaps is not public. Maybe that's one of the documents that I could get access to if it's not already a public document. I believe at this point – and I have no reason to believe otherwise – that the minister is acting in good faith in trying to give me the information that I'm seeking at a level of detail that I'm seeking.

I will support the amendment as proposed by the minister. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 58 as amended carried]

David Thompson Regional Health Authority IT Contracts

M59. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the David Thompson regional health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking to Motion for a Return 59, I am forced to reject this motion for the same reasons outlined earlier in my response to Motion for a Return 44.

[Motion for a Return 59 lost]

Department of Human Resources and Employment IT Contracts

M60. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount spent by the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is again another case where one particular ministry is cited. In this case, it's the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment, but in fact the essence of this particular MR does go back to the very first one in the series, so to speak, which was Motion for a Return 10, and that one specifically dealt with the Ministry of Health and Wellness. When we were debating Motion for a Return 10, we did approve an amendment that simply withdrew the reference to one specific ministry and in its place substituted the entire government of Alberta.

Information regarding technology services and a listing of all the vendors and so on will be provided under Motion for a Return 10 as amended. Therefore, Motion for a Return 60 is redundant in that regard. So we are able to reject Motion for a Return 60 on that basis.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 60 lost]

3:50 Department of Government Services IT Contracts

M61. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Government Services on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Dr. Massey: I think it's clear, Mr. Speaker, that the intent is to have information about each of the departments and not have it masked by being amalgamated. So I don't think we can call this redundant with the motion the government has proposed. What they had passed is something quite different from what the Official Opposition has requested.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, here we have one specific ministry being asked to provide information. It's the Ministry of Government Services in this case. The motion before dealt with the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment. We'll go back again to the amendment that was proposed for Motion for a Return 10, which was the Ministry of Health and Wellness, and in fact the bulk of the information, I'm sure, requested here under MR 61 will be provided for and dealt with under the amended Motion for a Return 10. So for the same reasons as I just enunciated regarding MR 60, we are able to reject MR 61 on the same basis.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to conclude debate.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. I think that's unfortunate. The information that we're asking for won't be provided should this motion fail, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 61 lost]

Department of Energy IT Contracts

M62. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Energy on contracts

for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again the motion for a return that's before us now cites one particular ministry – in this case, it's the Ministry of Energy – and it ties back directly to Motion for a Return 10, which as amended will provide the information regarding contracts for information technology services, and it will provide a listing of vendors who provide those services for the year in question.

So on the basis of what I've indicated regarding MR 60 and 61 and now 62 and previously MR 10 as amended, we are able to reject MR 62.

Thank you.

Dr. Massey: Again, that rejection, Mr. Speaker, is denying the opposition the information that we've asked for.

[Motion for a Return 62 lost]

Calgary Regional Health Authority IT Contracts

M64. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Calgary health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm forced to reject Motion for a Return 64 for the reasons outlined in my earlier response to Motion for a Return 44.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to conclude debate.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can understand the reasons the minister has given, that there have been changes in the authorities and in the reporting procedure. I'm not sure that there isn't another way to get that information, but I thank him for his response.

[Motion for a Return 64 lost]

Department of Human Resources and Employment Bonuses

M66. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the Ministry and Department of Human Resources and Employment over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by the position of and amount paid to each official.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, back when we were discussing Motion for a Return 46, I had intended, as I had indicated and telegraphed a little earlier, that I wanted to make a comment regarding the lead, so to speak, motion that had been

introduced back on April 26 regarding the issue of bonuses and so on because during the discussion on MR 34, which in a moment I'll tie in with MR 46, the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods had in fact gotten up to speak right after me and had indicated that he hadn't "been in contact with the House leader for the opposition" and so on. So he was wondering essentially whether or not the Opposition House Leader had actually agreed to amendment 34. I, in the spirit of the moment, had indicated "agreed with reluctance," and of course that is not the case.

In fact, the agreement that emanated at the end of an hour and forty minute discussion between me and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre was really quite specific to certain motions and concerns that were expressed, something between motions 19 and 23. It was on those that she agreed with reluctance to that particular agreement.

But we did talk about a number of other things that we hoped would help speed up the process but at the same time allow for the provision of as much information as possibly could be provided regarding a number of written questions and motions for returns and at the same time would alleviate the House of burdensome paperwork regarding each one and at the same time – I'm talking about the MR amendments or the written question amendments – would also help speed things up so that we could move on to the important private member's bills, which I hope we will be able to do at some point again later today as we have done on two previous Mondays.

So I do apologize to the Member for Edmonton-Centre for that and also to the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods. It was not my intention to – I forget the word she used: hornswoggle or something. That was certainly not the case, and I would like to correct the record in that regard.

That having been said, Mr. Speaker, Motion 34 as amended certainly does apply here to Motion for a Return 66. I think I have already indicated previously that under MR 34 as amended we will be providing a breakdown regarding bonuses awarded to government employees listed by department for the fiscal year in question and broken down by the range of bonus dollar amounts and so on.

So on that basis, MR 66 can be rejected since MR 34 as amended, I think, captures the spirit of what is being requested.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on Motion for a Return 66.

4:00

Ms Blakeman: We're in an interesting tug-of-war here. The government very much wants to control the information, hold back the information that they're releasing, and of course the opposition is seeking all the information that they can possibly get.

You know, I'm a fan of mysteries, Mr. Speaker, and I'm much reminded of the little Belgian detective with the impressive little grey cells. He always gently explains to people that, you know: you can't withhold the information from me; give me all the information, and I'll sort out the stuff that I don't need from it and be able to take what it is that I'm really seeking. When people try and, for whatever their personal reasons are, hold back the information and only sort of dole out a little bit at a time, that's when great confusion and terrible dramas and heaving bodices and fainting gentlemen and all kinds of things pursue from the mystery.

If I'm allowed to bring that analogy in, Mr. Speaker, I think that part of what we have going here this afternoon is the opposition's seeking of the complete details from which we can then see a story, and we will happily not use the information that is not useful for us. For example, I earlier talked about, you know, we wouldn't be interested in what the actual credit card number is – you're free to block it out or black it out or white it out or whatever colour the

government wants to use there – and the personal names. We were interested in the positions and exactly what came out on the statement at that level of detail. That's the position that we're facing again here with 66 and the reference back to the bonuses, which refers back to Motion for a Return 34.

Again, we're asking for: what bonus did each position get? What we're being offered is a range of bonuses, a total amount of bonuses granted by a department, and then the total number of employees that get it. So we're not getting the positions that are getting the bonus. We're not getting the detail of what position got what amount of money and in what department. So once again we can't compare across the board between deputy minister and deputy minister and ADM and ADM and executive director and executive director. We can't.

We've been given information in a way that is deliberately, I'm assuming, being diffused and diluted and masked so that we can't figure that out. That just causes people to go: "Well, then, why? Why are they not giving us the information?" People's minds go: what are they hiding? I encourage the government to help themselves by giving the information, and that would stop the great curiosity about: what's being held back? What's being set aside? Why aren't they willing to give this information?

So I encourage people to vote in favour of Motion for a Return 66. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 66 lost]

Department of Government Services Bonuses

M69. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the Ministry and Department of Government Services over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by the position of and amount paid to each official.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to address Motion for a Return 69. We will be rejecting this one because the essence of it is contained in Motion for a Return 34 as amended back on April 26.

I just want to make a comment. I know there's been a lot of discussion and comments made regarding: "Why don't you just give us the actual credit card statement and so on? Just block out what you don't want us to have." We've been down this road before, Mr. Speaker. Whenever you try to provide information and you have to block certain things out, you can't win on that one. Then you get accused of blocking stuff out. Members opposite or whoever's asking for that information complain that you're blocking out information without telling them what you're blocking out, so what's the point in providing that stuff if you're going to be blocking it out anyway? It's one of those arguments that you just can't really win no matter what you try to do.

On the basis of the fact that MR 34 as amended will provide information regarding bonuses listed by department for the fiscal year in question, we are able to reject Motion for a Return 69 as being redundant in that regard. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to conclude debate.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I find that unfortunate for a

couple of reasons. One, I hear comments about: why do you want the information? That quite astounds me. We're the Official Opposition. It's our job to seek information and to monitor government spending, and that's exactly what these motions for returns are about.

As to the level of detail it's no different than what the minister asked for when he was on this side of the House. So I find the arguments that are being used quite astounding. It's unfortunate that this is rejected.

[Motion for a Return 69 lost]

Department of Seniors IT Contracts

M70. Ms Blakeman moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Seniors on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Ms Blakeman: What we're seeking here is information on a level of detail that tells us: what was the amount of money spent on information technology services? How much was allocated or how much was contracted with for each company? What was the company? How much money did they get? Next company: how much money did they get? At the bottom, the total line, how much money was spent on information technology services for the department?

We would like to be able to look at and compare all of the different ministries because we are beginning to believe that there is an extraordinary amount of money being spent here, and we want to start looking at whether there are comparisons and considerations that we should be making as the Official Opposition.

Anticipating that the minister or the Deputy Government House Leader is going to get up and refer us back to Motion for a Return 10, that in fact is not giving us the information that we're seeking. It's giving different information and, I would argue, probably not in a useful or as useful a format or level of detail, because this is providing a list of the vendor services. Well, you know, how do we tell whether ABC got as much as HYJ or whatever? We can't. We just get a listing of vendors, and then we get a total amount that's been spent on information technology services. They're not linked together in any way, and exactly what we were seeking was that linkage. I hope that the government doesn't do that, but that has been their pattern this far.

So I would encourage all members to accept MR 70 as it appears on the Order Paper. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise here again to point out that in MR 70 we're basically citing one individual ministry, that being the Ministry of Seniors in this case. Earlier and I think earlier this afternoon as well we had indicated in the House that MR 10 as amended withdrew the name of one specific ministry, which at that time was Health and Wellness, and opened it up so that all government of Alberta departments would be covered in the provision of information about contracts on IT services and include the provision of a list of vendors who provided those services for the fiscal year in question. On the basis of previous explanations that I've made that tie back to MR 10 as amended, we are able to reject Motion for a Return 70 since it is already covered for the most part at least under MR 10 as amended. So we can reject Motion for a Return 70 on that basis.

[Motion for a Return 70 lost]

**4:10 Department of Justice and Attorney General
IT Contracts**

M71. Ms Blakeman moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Justice and Attorney General on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Ms Blakeman: Now, anticipating what the Deputy Government House Leader is going to say, he's going to be referencing back to Motion for a Return 10. You know what? In having read this again, it's worse than I thought, Mr. Speaker, because what we're getting there is the total dollar amount spent by the government of Alberta. Like, it doesn't even give us the amount by department, which is what the Deputy Government House Leader would like us all to believe, that somehow this is supplying us with the information that we've requested and giving it to us by each department. No, it isn't.

We're going to get two numbers here. One is the total amount spent by the government of Alberta, and the second is a listing of all vendors for every single department, government of Alberta, and, one is presuming, all of their Crown agencies. So this is deliberately giving us obfuscated material so that we can't do any of the work that we're seeking to do and we have no level of detail at all.

You know, I hope that they don't bring forward and refer to that other motion, because it really is absolutely almost the antithesis of what I'm asking for. On one hand, we've got detail; on the other hand, we've got no detail: two documents that we're going to get. I hope that the government will understand that we're seeking that level of detail and not some other totally different information, which is what they seem intent on providing.

It just makes people ask: what are you hiding? That's not a good thing, and I want to help the government out here so that they don't get accused of that. So come on; give us the information. Thanks.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the information regarding contracts for information technology services and a listing of all the vendors who provide it for the year will be forthcoming pursuant to MR 10 as amended. That impacts MR 71, which is before us now, so we can obviously reject MR 71.

I should point out that there are other processes and procedures that can be followed to access information. We've talked at great length about FOIP and how it might apply, but there's also Public Accounts, and there are individual ministry debates that occur. There are various ways that this kind of information can be asked for or requested, and I don't see any reason why some members don't follow that particular route.

In any event, since the essence of MR 71 is already covered off in the amended MR 10, we are able to reject MR 71 on that basis. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have to say that the Deputy Government House Leader just makes me so angry when he goes off on that kind of a rant that I have to get up and speak to it. In fact, if we can get the ministers to appear at Public Accounts – and you can only get a small number of them each year, about a third of them – they don't give you the level of detail that you're asking for. We're dealing with the prior year then, not the current year under discussion, so it's old information at that stage. I have never in all my

years on Public Accounts, which were numerous, been able to get that level of information from a minister.

If we make a FOIP request, it's either outrightly denied or we get a bunch of white pages without any information on them, or the cost associated with recovering a small amount of information is outrageously expensive. Whenever possible this government has done a superb job of denying us information at every possible opportunity. Repeatedly, when we ask for the information in a FOIP request or when we ask for the information in question period or when we ask for the information in Public Accounts, this government says: "Well, why don't you ask for the information in motions for returns or written questions? That's more properly asked for in that manner."

Well, here we are, Mr. Speaker, and that's why we have literally hundreds of these questions here at this particular time. We listened to this government, and we believed that maybe just once they'd give us the information. But what do we get? The royal runaround one more time.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to conclude debate.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Thank you and my thanks to my colleague from Edmonton-Ellerslie for covering off a number of points that I was going to raise. She's exactly right, and I'll just raise a couple of additional ones in reaction to remarks that the Deputy Government House Leader has made here.

In the Public Accounts Committee, as she noted, we're seeing eight or nine ministers a year, so that means that every three years we would actually see all of them. Of course, you can only question the year that's under consideration, so by the time you get three years later to the minister that you really wanted to ask, you've probably moved out of the year that had the information you wanted. So that's one way that we get stymied.

The other thing is that of course it's an all-party committee, and there's a back and forth between opposition members and government members asking questions. So these days on average there are about five questions that the opposition is getting on the record during the Public Accounts Committee. Well, we've today gone through far more than five, so actually if we were granted the information, we would be getting more information here because we would be processing through it faster. We get about five questions per session with eight or nine ministries in Public Accounts. So you can see that that's not a heck of a lot of information that we're able to get.

The Deputy Government House Leader concluded his remarks by saying: well, you know, this motion has been covered off by Motion for a Return 10. It most certainly has not. They are offering to give us two things: the total dollar amount spent by the government of Alberta, which is not the ministry. That is why we asked for each and every ministry, because in some cases in the past a minister will give us the information and the next one won't, but at least we got some information. What we're getting here is nothing.

We're going to get one aggregate number of the total amount of information technology service contracts for the entire government. It's not broken down by department. It's not giving any additional information or level of detail that we requested. One number. Plus we're getting a list of vendors. Well, those two things are most definitively not what we asked for. For the Deputy Government House Leader to say that this has been covered off is fanciful at best, and I can't think of a word to describe what it is at worst.

I urge all members to support the original motion for a return that I moved.

[Motion for a Return 71 lost]

Department of Gaming IT Contracts

M72. Ms Blakeman moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Gaming on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, this is getting very interesting. Here we are as a government trying to give information, and there they are trying to reject what we're prepared to give and then criticize what might be forthcoming before you even know what you're going to get. I just don't understand that. Why don't you wait until you see what you get and then make the criticisms and observations that you might want to make? To me that would make a little more sense. However, let's wait and see what you get. Maybe some of your comments will be valid; I don't know.

What I would like to correct, though, are the comments that the Opposition House Leader made about what I said about the information that would be provided. I think that if you check *Hansard*, I never said that you would be getting exactly, word for word, what it is that the original thing had intended. I think that I probably said that you'd be getting the essence of the information or you'd be getting stuff that's covered by the spirit of the amendment or words to that effect. So please check that for yourself, hon. Opposition House Leader.

4:20

Now, with respect to Motion for a Return 72, which again can be rejected because MR 10 as amended covers the gist of what has been requested, we are going to therefore recommend that it be denied at this point, and I think the arguments have already been made on the record as to why. Again, we're trying to move this process along not only from the point of view of using the House's valuable time as efficiently as possible but also in the spirit of providing as much information as can be provided without violating some of the laws and procedures and, in particular, the FOIP Act, which was passed by this House.

So, on that basis, we're going to recommend rejecting MR 72 since the gist of it is included under MR 10 as amended. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre to conclude debate.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. Well, bitter experience and long history have shown us that we should not be hopeful about waiting to see what we get. That's certainly been the experience here on the opposition side since 1993 in trying to wait for information from the government. So, you know, I take what the Deputy Government House Leader says, but history and experience show exactly the opposite.

I guess if he wanted things to move along, then perhaps if his comments weren't quite so provoking of debate, it might move along a little faster, but when he keeps saying things like "it's been covered off" when it hasn't been, he's going to get comment back. So maybe his colleagues might want to advise him to restrict his comments to things that are a little less incendiary to the members over here.

I hope that members will not take the advice of the Deputy Government House Leader and will in fact vote in support of MR 72. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 72 lost]

Department of Community Development IT Contracts

M73. Ms Blakeman moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Community Development on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Ministry of Community Development is of course part of government, so it is covered under MR 10 as amended, which talks about having the entire government of Alberta reflected in the information provided. So Community Development will be included there.

On the basis as outlined earlier in this House and earlier today in particular regarding MR 10 as amended, I can tell you that MR 73 can also be rejected since the information requested will ostensibly be provided for through MR 10 as amended.

On that basis, I would recommend that MR 73 be rejected at this time. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 73 lost]

Horse Racing Industry

M75. Ms Blakeman moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing any and all accounting statements in the possession of the government regarding the use of monies by Horse Racing Alberta collected and distributed for the racing industry renewal in Alberta.

Ms Blakeman: The genesis behind this question was that as we started to look at a comparison, we found that there were different ways of accounting and of explaining expenditures between the department, the horse racing initiative, ARC. In order to get clarification, we're looking for all of these accounting statements so that we can figure out what exactly is going on.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I urge the Assembly to reject this MR. The government's role with regard to horse racing and Horse Racing Alberta is to ensure accountability in relation to the funds received by Horse Racing Alberta through the racing industry renewal initiative. It's up to Horse Racing Alberta to determine how best to spend those monies that they have earned through the initiative, the objectives being the revitalization of the horse racing industry in the province and the continued employment of thousands of Albertans in the agricultural sector.

In the past, annual reports of the Alberta Racing Corporation were tabled in the House to provide Albertans with an account of how that organization spent its funds. This practice continues under the Horse Racing Alberta Act, which requires the annual report of Horse Racing Alberta to be tabled each year.

Mr. Speaker, more detailed accounting information relating to Horse Racing Alberta is in the possession of the Alberta government. However, this information is commercial information of a third party, was provided in confidence to representatives of the government who sit as nonvoting members of the Horse Racing Alberta board of directors, and disclosure of such information could reasonably be expected to be harmful to the competitive or negotiating position of the third party and result in undue financial loss. As such, I'm not at liberty to satisfy the member's request.

If the member opposite would like access to any information that is not reflected in the Horse Racing Alberta annual report, the member may contact Horse Racing Alberta directly or follow the process contained in the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

[Motion for a Return 75 lost]

Northern Lights Regional Health Authority IT Contracts

M78. Ms Blakeman moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Northern Lights regional health authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, government will be rejecting Motion for a Return 78 for the same reasons given earlier for Motion for a Return 44.

[Motion for a Return 78 lost]

Community Development Minister's Travel to India

M79. Ms Blakeman moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all activities, meetings, and events the Minister of Community Development partook in during his trip to India between January 11, 2004, and January 21, 2004, inclusive broken down by his itinerary for each day.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This one refers to the ministry I'm privileged to serve. The dates are not quite correct, but I think I understand what is being requested here, and I have no problem providing that to the best of my ability. I think, in fact, that the hon. member would probably want things from the date that I actually arrived in India, which was January 9, but I won't bother amending it. I'll just provide whatever I can and include the dates that are here.

I'll accept this particular question as it is. Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 79 carried]

4:30 Assistance with Utility Bills for Seniors

M80. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number of seniors who applied to the Ministry and Department of Seniors for financial assistance due to rising utility bills in fiscal year 2002-2003 broken down by how many were given assistance and the range of amounts each received.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to amend this motion to read:

That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number of seniors who applied to the Ministry and Department of Seniors for financial assistance due to rising utility bills in 2003 broken down by how many were given assistance and the range of amounts each received.

The reason for the amendment, Mr. Speaker, is simply that the request as it's printed would break it up into two fiscal years, and the actual assistance was given during the calendar year. We'd like to give complete information. That's what the amendment would do.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Edmonton-Centre assures us that this is a good amendment and she's in favour of it, and we appreciate the information being provided.

[Motion for a Return 80 as amended carried]

Government Advertising Budget

M81. Dr. Massey moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total television, radio, billboard, and print media advertising budget broken down by each advertising campaign for each ministry and the Public Affairs Bureau for fiscal years 2001-2002, 2002-2003, and 2003-2004.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to respond to MR 81 with an amendment on behalf of the Premier's office. In fact, the amendment I believe was circulated to the Opposition House Leader prior to 11 a.m. on I think it was Monday, April 26. I should probably be going back at least one Monday. Normally it's the day of the debate, but I think we have to go back to April 26. In any case, it's been shared in accordance with the rules.

I'd just like to move an amendment, so MR 81 would read as follows: "That an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total advertising costs incurred by government departments broken down by each department for the fiscal years 2001-2002 and 2002-2003."

Just a couple of other quick comments, Mr. Speaker. All that we've done is really just tightened up the wording here a little, but they'll get all the costs that have been incurred broken down by each department as requested. Unfortunately, 2003-2004 figures – I'm not sure, but I don't think they're available yet. I don't think they've all been compiled, which is why '03-04 has been withdrawn. So that's my understanding in any case.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I would move the acceptance of the amendment as it affects MR 81. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods on the amendment.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In speaking against the amendment, I think the second provision, (b) striking out "budget, broken down by each advertising campaign for each Ministry and the Public Affairs Bureau," and substituting "costs incurred by Government Departments, broken down by each department," really emasculates the motion. I think it's unfortunate because in judging government policy and the efforts that the government is going to in terms of promoting that policy, (b) really is at the heart of the matter. I think it's very unfortunate that this kind of amendment has been brought forward.

Thank you.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods to conclude debate.

Dr. Massey: Well, yes. The information that was asked for, Mr. Speaker, is information that Albertans should expect to have readily available. The very fact that the government spends money on advertising and promoting its policies is I think something that bears closer scrutiny.

I think that there was a time – I remember from being a municipal politician – when spending money in that manner, spending tax dollars in that manner, was certainly frowned upon. There were some huge issues that came before the school board when it would have been nice to go out and try to present one view of the issue to the public. We always resisted that because the appropriateness of spending any money in that way, I think, was questioned.

This government has gone far down the road from even questioning it, and we see a minimum of over \$4 million in the budget being spent on advertising campaigns, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. I think that it's unfortunate that the kind of transparency and clarity that the government often touts doesn't seem to extend to their advertising campaigns.

[Motion for a Return 81 as amended carried]

Watershed Stewardship Groups

M82. Mr. Mason moved on behalf of Dr. Pannu that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the Department of Environment's mandate for watershed stewardship groups, WSGs, and any other documents indicating the timeline for establishing WSGs, their terms of reference, criteria for membership, the process of becoming a member, what recruitment efforts will be undertaken, and on what basis funding will be provided to these WSGs.

Mr. Mason: If I may just speak to that, Mr. Speaker. We've asked for this information so that we can better understand the Department of Environment's water for life strategy and how it's going to be working in individual areas and with these groups. We're asking for the timeline for their establishment and terms of reference and how people become members. Who becomes members? As well, the funding. I think that these are all issues of interest to all members of the House, or should be.

I would urge hon. members to support the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that the member is correct. It is the case that this motion for a return does provide for some questions regarding the provision of information that would be of interest to all Albertans. Unfortunately, the motion is just slightly premature, I'm told by the Minister of Environment, hon. member. It's just a little bit premature at this time, so on behalf of the Minister of Environment I'm having to reject it because of that prematurity.

The reason that it's premature is because the Department of Environment has not yet established any of these stewardship groups, but the Minister of Environment did encourage me to indicate to you that, perhaps, if you wouldn't mind asking this question a little later – my understanding is that they won't be done within the next 30 days, so if you could come back with the question a little later or just send him a letter asking for what you're looking for, I'm sure he'll do his best to respond.

4:40

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands to conclude debate.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, I would be pleased to renew the question in a month or so if I had any reason to believe I would be here.

Mrs. Nelson: Where are you going?

Mr. Mason: Well, I don't think any of us will be here in a month, Madam Provincial Treasurer, because I think we've only got a couple of weeks to go. So I guess that if the work is not done, it's not done, but perhaps the motion will have the benefit of encouraging the minister in these areas to proceed expeditiously since these are important areas.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 82 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: It's my understanding that another motion is coming forward at this time.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Maybe, Mr. Speaker, we'll delay it by a couple more minutes.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

M83. Mr. Mason moved on behalf of Dr. Pannu that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of any documents from the Department of Human Resources and Employment for the fiscal years 2001-02, 2002-03, and April 1, 2003, to February 24, 2004, indicating the terms of reference for any review of the assured income for the severely handicapped program, the membership of the committee undertaking such a review, and a list of the groups and individuals who were consulted.

Mr. Mason: We are interested in the review that we understand is being undertaken by this ministry, and we are interested, of course, in the assured income support for the severely handicapped. It is a critical issue that the minister has indicated in the past needed to be reviewed.

We would be encouraging all members of the Assembly to vote for this so that we may understand what the terms of reference for this program are and just who is doing it and what the consultation is.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I want to notify the House that we would reject this motion for a return. The reason is that we have not commenced a formal review of the assured income for the severely handicapped program. The AISH Act requires the program to be reviewed every five years, and the next review must commence by September 30 of 2004.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands to conclude debate.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I would think that the minister needs, I guess, to deal with these questions. I believe that the AISH program cries out for such a review and that when the minister does undertake such a review, the information

which we are asking for ought to be part of the initial release of the program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 83 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise and request unanimous consent to revert to private member's business in the Committee of the Whole.

Thank you.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'll call the Committee of the Whole to order.

**Bill 203
Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes
Amendment Act, 2004**

The Chair: Are there any further comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was asked to just comment briefly in committee about some of the amendments which I understand were actually passed, so I won't speak to the amendments themselves but speak to what we now have as the bill. When Bill 203 came forward, it had in it sections relative to the Family Law Act and sections relative to the existing Domestic Relations Act. The purport of the bill is to allow the splitting of Canada pension plan credits, but when drafting the bill, the sections were included with respect to each of those two acts which purported to suggest that an agreement was binding if there was not valuable consideration and would be invalid if it was done by fraud, duress, undue influence, or if one of the parties lacked mental capacity.

Now, the problem with including those items in the bill is that those are already covered by common law. If any of those things exist, the agreement could be voided in any event, but by putting them in the bill, it then raises the question about other agreements in those particular acts. So the Department of Justice lawyers suggested that those amendments were surplusage to the actual intent of the bill and should be removed because by not removing them, we would cause problems with the remaining acts, the Domestic Relations Act and the Family Law Act. That's why I requested that those amendments be brought forward and passed, so that if this bill in fact were passed, it could be proclaimed if necessary and be effective. Otherwise, we would not be wanting to move ahead with proclamation until we changed the rest of the act so that the laws of interpretation wouldn't confuse matters further.

I wanted just to put on the record that the Department of Justice was recommending that if this private bill is passed, it be passed with amendments to take those sections out, as has now been done, and to take those sections out not to decrease the protection of the individual but rather in recognition of the fact that the individuals are already protected and that by putting these sections into the

Family Law Act and the Domestic Relations Act, we would actually be perhaps endangering other protections that people already have with respect to other agreements in the act.

I hope that that clarifies the purpose for the amendment and makes it easier for people to support the bill.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

4:50

Ms Kryczka: Yes. My thanks to everyone for their involvement in preparation and debate on discussion of Bill 203. Mr. Chairman, I would now like to close.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to speak in committee to this bill.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Carlson: Okay. Thank you for the clarification on that amendment. That helps clarify what we had discussed and debated last week.

I have to say that I'm still not in favour of this bill as it stands for all of the reasons that I outlined last week. I still believe that these are not always fair negotiations that people are involved in when a marriage breaks up and assets are divided and that we need to ensure always that it's the protection of the weakest party in the negotiating that the law sets out, to ensure that they have every right and every facility available to them to protect themselves and their families. I don't believe that this bill does that, Mr. Chairman, so I will not be supporting it.

Ms Kryczka: Question, please.

[The clauses of Bill 203 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

**Bill 204
Blood Samples Act**

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much. It's an honour to bring into debate in Committee of the Whole Bill 204. I have been actively promoting the concepts proposed by Bill 204 for nearly a year. Since June 2003 I have had the pleasure of meeting dozens of firefighters, police officers, and health professionals to discuss the merits of this bill and areas for improvement. The support for this legislation has been tremendous and unanimous among all affected, Mr. Chairman.

As discussed in second reading, section 4 of Bill 204 creates a framework for the very rare instance when someone refuses to provide a blood sample after exchanging bodily fluids with a health or emergency worker defined in section 4(2)(a). Not providing a

blood sample causes significant mental and physical stress for the infected workers. The mental distress extends beyond the infected persons to their family, friends, and co-workers, Mr. Chairman. The physical side effects are due to the noxious drugs that the infected officer must take for months.

The current system fails workers who are exposed to someone's bodily fluids through the course of their duties. I think the vast majority of Albertans, Mr. Chairman, would agree that some mechanism should be in place forcing a person to give a blood sample. The goal of section 4 is to make sure that no one can torment people who work in professions that protect communities and save lives and that health information cannot be used for other purposes at all.

This bill also, Mr. Chairman, will cover good Samaritans who voluntarily expose themselves in saving the lives of others in whatever situation may occur.

There are a number of people who oppose issuing a court order for a blood sample as proposed in section 4(8). The goal is to help emergency workers, as you know, Mr. Chairman, and the bill is written in such a manner that the information cannot and will not be used for any other purposes than that as intended in the bill.

Mr. Chairman, the opposition to this bill has been meek at best. As you may have found through the tablings in the House, the support has been rather vast, and as such I would encourage all members of this Assembly to support this bill and pass it into third reading.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to speak to this bill at committee, and I have a number of questions. I have taken the opportunity between this time and the time of second reading on the bill, when I spoke against it, to consult with the police association of Alberta and the union representing correctional officers in provincial facilities and have had an opportunity to discuss their concerns with respect to this issue. I think that it's assisted me to have perhaps a more balanced view in connection with that bill.

It's a difficult one. It's a bit of a conundrum, actually, because we have a situation where people's civil liberties are infringed, and that can be done, I think, in a democratic society under very specific circumstances. For me this is not a clear issue. There are a number of aspects to it.

Now, someone who is in a position of believing that they may have received an infection as a result of dealing with another party during perhaps an arrest or moving people around within a correctional facility or calling at a fire or an accident, all those things – there's no doubt in my mind that this creates tremendous strain on the individuals. This is what I heard from talking to the different people while I was consulting on the bill. They told me very clearly that they were aware of concerns that have been raised by others; that is to say that someone might be infectious but not be testing positively to a test. A test might give some false relief. I'm told that these matters are explained carefully to them.

Another thing, Mr. Chairman, that I learned was that sometimes suspects in the case of an arrest will spit on an officer and then use that as a bargaining chip: "I'll give you the information about my status relative to being infected in some way if you are willing to negotiate on the charges," or something like this. This was quite a revelation to me, that this is apparently becoming a fairly common tactic among people who are arrested. That is a very serious concern.

Now, balancing that, Mr. Chairman, are concerns that have been raised with me by other organizations that there may in fact be only particular categories of people who are targeted for this mandatory testing, and those are the poorest sections of society, aboriginal people, and people who may be considered to be what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs described as lifestyle. That is a really serious concern for many in our community, that people who might be gay, people who might be native, people who might be living on the street would be the ones that would be subjected to this kind of situation. So that is a difficulty.

I was pleased to contribute toward the unanimous consent so that this bill could be dealt with. [A cell phone rang] I'm still struggling with the bill and some of the concepts, but I do believe that it was only fair that this bill ought to receive consideration by the Assembly. I'm sure, Mr. Chairman, that by the time third reading comes around, I will have resolved all of the various issues in my own mind. I find it a very difficult bill to deal with because of the very strong conflicting and legitimate concerns on both sides.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5:00

The Chair: Hon. members, we are not allowed – hon. minister, I think you're included in this – to take or send phone calls in the Chamber.

The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is my pleasure to rise this afternoon and continue debate on Bill 204. I think that it is a great bill, and it should be considered very seriously by all members of the Assembly.

Even though the bill is a positive step in the right direction, Mr. Chairman, it does raise a couple of questions. My questions stem from the good Samaritans and their role with confidentiality. If a good Samaritan can request a forced blood sample under section 4(2)(a), how does the rest of the act apply in the area of confidentiality? What I mean is that section 5 states:

Except as expressly authorized by this Act, no person shall disclose to any other person the name of or any other information that will or is likely to identify a person in respect of whom an application, order or physician report is made under this Act.

What I understand with this is that if a good Samaritan – for instance, a regular person who helps out someone in need – requests a blood sample of the person helped, that good Samaritan cannot share this information with anyone.

However, if he or she does, does that mean that that person is subject to the same penalties outlined in section 9 under the title Offence and Penalty? If it is the case that a good Samaritan can be penalized for disclosing information, then I think that this would solve some of the concerns that Albertans may have about giving their blood. I'm not completely sure whether or not section 9 applies to just those who refuse to give blood or if that would also apply to an individual who contravenes section 5.

As well, does section 9 also apply to emergency personnel? If an emergency worker is proven to have disclosed information as it relates to this bill, does that mean that they can be fined upwards of \$5,000? I hope, Mr. Chairman, that the answer to the question is yes, because there must be mechanisms in place to ensure that the privacy of individuals is protected as best we can. If a person is asked to give a blood sample, they need to have the peace of mind for themselves that this information will not be going public.

I think that the way we ensure this is by punishing those who do disclose that information. In fact, the argument can and should be made that we consider making the punishment for disclosing the information more severe than refusing to give a blood sample. That

might help encourage those who are asked for blood to give without opposition.

I do realize that health care workers, police officers, and other emergency personnel are governed by other legislation, but do those pieces of legislation cover this sort of situation?

Personally, I think that this bill is an extremely good idea, and we should all consider the benefits that it will have for the people of Alberta. Through a lot of the discussions that we've had in second reading, the term good Samaritan has been used a number of times, yet it seems to only be implied in section 4(2)(a)(i). Will this cause us future problems? I don't know, Mr. Chairman. It is for that reason that I raise the hypothetical situation of the good Samaritan helping a fallen soul on the street. I know that when I read the bill, I understand that it would mean those people who stop to help who aren't the trained professionals; i.e., helping a fallen soul in the street. Could the sponsor please clarify this for me and for the House?

I think that this bill has a lot of positive aspects to it, and I would encourage all the members present to consult with their constituents and to support the bill. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As the Member for Edmonton-Highlands indicated, it is a difficult bill not with respect to its intent, certainly. I think that all support the intent of the bill, but for the protection of those workers – peace officers and police officers and firefighters, emergency workers or good Samaritans – there can be no question about wanting to do everything we can to ensure their safety.

The problem comes, of course, with the essence of the bill, and that's the questions that are raised about individual rights and the broader rights of the greater community. I think that it's been indicated in the House that the Privacy Commissioner has indicated that any proposed measure that would infringe on privacy has to meet four tests, and the Privacy Commissioner was very critical of the federal legislation that was proposed in this same area. In his arguments against the federal statute he used the four tests, and I think they're the basis for the questioning that's gone on in the House and elsewhere with respect to Bill 204.

The first test, of course, is necessity. Is the bill really necessary? Does the bill do what it purports to do? The magnitude of the problem has been questioned. I think that the information given was that there have been two probable cases of occupational transmission of HIV in Canada and only one confirmed case and that, in fact, those cases wouldn't have been covered by the bill that's before us. So there's some question about the necessity or, in particular, the nature of the bill that's in front of us, and that's related to effectiveness.

The Privacy Commissioner's second test for a bill such as the one in front of us is: is the bill effective? Of course, the questioning of Bill 204 is the timing that it would take to get an order and carry out testing and then the fact that the results wouldn't be conclusive. The Privacy Commissioner pointed out that a negative result doesn't necessarily mean that the source person isn't infected. That's of great concern, that there is a window of incubation before the virus is detected and, particularly if the object is a knife, that there could be more than one person's blood on the weapon. So is it effective, I guess, is a critical question for the workers that are going to be affected by this legislation. They'll want legislation in place that is truly effective in dealing with the problem that they face.

The third test that the Privacy Commissioner put forward was: how much of an invasion of privacy is this? That's of course an area

where the objections to the bill are most strongly voiced. According to the Privacy Commissioner, mandatory blood testing is a massive and unprecedented invasion of privacy. It's that privacy issue, Mr. Chairman, that I think those in government charged with bringing forth legislation have to be keenly aware of and very sensitive to anything that undermines or takes away a person's right to privacy. I think that it has to be embarked on with the most serious of consideration. Again, this does take away the privacy of individuals that are suspected of having contaminated blood.

5:10

The fourth test is: are there less invasive alternatives? The case has been made for voluntary consent, and I'm not sure that I agree with that. Given the kind of circumstances that would seem to surround these kinds of incidents, even though the track record has been fairly good in getting voluntary consent, that's of little comfort to those individuals who find themselves in the situations where consent isn't given. So the substitution of voluntary consent I don't believe is a solution to the problem. It has to be considered. As I said, voluntary consent is not something that I think I could endorse.

A bigger issue, of course, is that the tests may not be effective, and that would be tragic if we went to all of the effort of having legislation passed and giving those workers the assurance that somehow or other they're going to be protected, and in fact no protection was there for them. The fact of the matter is that police and emergency workers would still need to take drug cocktails following an incident, whether there was mandatory testing or not, just to prevent HIV or hepatitis because they have reason to believe that a person whose body fluids they have come in contact with is infected. If there's contact, they automatically have to go on the cocktail.

Even if there's a negative result of the test, that doesn't mean that the person that they suspect of having infected them is really free of infection because of the incubation period that those viruses require. So the concern that workers would be protected when in fact they're going to end up having to take . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, under Standing Order 4(2), "if at 5:15 p.m. on Monday, the Assembly is in Committee of the Whole and the business of the committee is not concluded, the committee shall rise and report immediately."

Dr. Massey: I had concluded my remarks, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Oh, sorry. Okay.

Some Hon. Members: Question.

The Chair: There isn't a question. We've already moved one. This one now must report progress.

Are there any further requests to speak on this? Are you ready for the question then?

All right. We have for our consideration Bill 204, Blood Samples Act, as moved . . . The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Yeah. I was going to speak, but I guess it's 5:15 now.

The Chair: When the question has been called, that's the trigger for anybody to get up, but once we're into it, then it's a little late. And we're into it.

[The clauses of Bill 204 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Chairman, I move that we rise and report bills 203 and 204.

Thank you.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Loughheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 204. The committee reports the following with some amendments: Bill 203. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 206
Alberta Wheat and Barley
Test Market Amendment Act, 2004**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's truly an honour for me to be able to rise today and speak to Bill 206.

Before I begin my remarks, I'd like to once again acknowledge the Alberta . . . I'm going to move it, Mr. Speaker, I promise, as I get into it here. I would like to acknowledge the Alberta farmers. I've taken on this fight on behalf of them. This has been a burning one for them.

I would like to move second reading, Mr. Speaker, of Bill 206 to get us started.

Mr. Speaker, when you meet face to face with someone who has gone to jail over the most simple of economic rights, the right to sell the product they've created to whomever they choose, you begin to understand just what a commitment many of them have made to this cause. I would say to this province and to this country that my commitment to this cause takes great inspiration from the commitment of the farmers who've gone to jail or who've been fined. It is my hope that this entire Assembly rallies behind this bill in a show of support for our farmers and for their freedom to have a choice.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the farmers who have been penalized, I certainly, again, will move Bill 206 on second reading, the Alberta Wheat and Barley Test Market Amendment Act, 2004.

This act, if passed, would do the following. First, it gives our government the ability to set a date. If the federal government and the Canadian Wheat Board have not agreed to set up a 10-year trial market in Alberta for wheat and barley by this date, then our

government would have the ability to set up a 10-year trial market with or without the federal government's approval.

What's more, Mr. Speaker, this bill gives our farmers the hope they deserve after carrying on this fight for as long as they have. I think it is important that we go into the history of this bill so that we might be able to get a sense of why we are taking this step today.

In 2002 this House passed Bill 207, the Alberta Wheat and Barley Test Market Act. That bill was an olive branch to our federal government. It took the dreams and aspirations of farmers and built them into a goodwill act toward the federal government and the Canadian Wheat Board. The bill was simple. It mandated and showed governmental support for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development as she worked towards providing choice for Alberta's farmers. It did so by using the lesson that many of us learned when we were young: if you want to do something, prove that you can handle the pressure and do it well. That's all the farmers wanted. They wanted the chance to show that they could do just as well on the open market as if they had to sell their wheat and barley to the Canadian Wheat Board.

The members of this Assembly know quite well that our farmers can farm as well as anybody and can make it on their own in the free market. We have faith in them, we have faith in their abilities, and we understand that the free market is the best marketplace for any commodity.

The Canadian Wheat Board, on the other hand, wasn't so sure, so we offered a compromise: allow our farmers to market their grain privately for the next 10 years, and if they aren't succeeding, review the decision after the 10 years. If farmers are doing well, then allow them to continue to market their grain freely and get rid of the Canadian Wheat Board monopoly, but if they choose to use the Wheat Board, use it.

5:20

Mr. Speaker, it was my belief when I introduced Bill 207 and when it got passed in the Assembly that finally we were getting somewhere. Unfortunately, I think I was wrong. The federal government has not responded to anything around Bill 207. They have not respected the wishes of Alberta wheat and barley farmers.

Sixty-eight per cent of barley farmers wanted the option of selling their product on the open market. Sixty-four per cent of wheat growers in Alberta wanted the option of selling their wheat on the open market. These were studies done in '95 and '97. More recently we have 81 per cent of Alberta farmers and 75 per cent of farmers across the prairies simply wanting a choice. Didn't say: get rid of the Wheat Board. Simply want a choice. They want the option, Mr. Speaker, but apparently the Wheat Board doesn't think that they're capable of handling it.

As I said at the outset, Bill 206 gives this government the opportunity to set a date by which we will establish a wheat and barley test market on our own should the federal government refuse to negotiate in good faith. Bill 206 also gives the government the ability to make regulations for the selling of wheat to whomever a farmer chooses. Mr. Speaker, I believe having the choice of whoever they want to sell to is really what the farmers are looking for.

I know this is a controversial bill. Some are going to argue against this bill. They'll raise concerns that it is unconstitutional, which I disagree with, and that the federal government has the right to control our wheat and barley farmers. This group has the federal government on their side, and this group may be right, but it's time we took up this fight, Mr. Speaker.

We've constantly been forced to fight the federal government, and our farmers have always had to go to the courts alone only to be

turned down. But I believe a government-to-government fight is what we need to get to to make sure that we know where this stands in Confederation. When you look back to the BNA Act, no government signed on to the Wheat Board as the sole marketer. We have at least 50 per cent of the right to be able to market our agricultural products any way we choose or allow our farmers to do that.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's time that we created a law and forced the federal government to fight us. Let's see what they've got. Let's see if they, by the end of a court fight, feel the same way as they do today or if it's been opening up enough that there's actually a push across Canada to allow for an open-ended choice in marketing.

Others will argue, as the opposition party and third party have, that the Canadian Wheat Board does a good job on marketing from a single desk so we should leave things as they are. Mr. Speaker, that's just simply not true. There is about 25 per cent of wheat and barley farmers who are onside, and I do acknowledge that. But when you compare the prices, whenever we've had a chance, farmers have never even come close to getting the prices that they were able to.

When the farmers crossed the border a few years ago and then were arrested accordingly, what happened was that they were getting 50 per cent more on the American side of the border than they could get from the Wheat Board on the Canadian side of the border on that particular day. A 50 per cent commission, Mr. Speaker, is completely out of line. If that's administration and fees, it's ridiculous. For any broker in the brokerage industry the 3 per cent range is a good commission, 1 per cent if it's a big order. If they're taking that kind of money, there's no way the farmers could ever be getting the proper price for their grains when they sold them.

I'd certainly put forward some questions to our opposition in regard to this. Why are they opposed to marketing choice? What have you got against allowing the farmer to go alone if he wants to? Are you concerned for the farmer? The farmer wants a choice. He doesn't want to be told how to market his wheat or barley.

Are you concerned about the well-being of other farmers whose

price may fall due to the competition? Well, the free market has worked extremely well in oats and canola and other non-board grains. We've seen very, very great success for our farmers in those areas, and many farmers have been moving away from the board grains because they can make more money by being in the other grains.

Those farmers who argue against free marketing must remember that nobody is taking away the Wheat Board. It will be there for the farmers who feel confident in using it, and this government has no designs on getting rid of it. We are cognizant of the fact that many Albertans use and enjoy the services, and we are not aiming to take those services away.

Mr. Speaker, I don't ever want to see the day when this government is forced to set a date for the establishment of this trial market. I want to see the day when the Canadian Wheat Board, or at least the federal government, agreeably relinquishes the monopoly and allows us to do this. I want to see a day when the federal government and the provincial government work together to create the 10-year test market. Then I want to see the day when our farmers show the politicians in Ottawa and the Canadian Wheat Board just how successful they will be when allowed to market their own grains.

I urge all members to support this legislation. Let's show the Canadian Wheat Board and the federal government that we stand behind our farmers here in Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to adjourn debate on this bill at this time.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we call it 5:30 and that we adjourn until 8 o'clock this evening.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:26 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, May 3, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 04/05/03

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Legal Drinking Age

508. Mr. McFarland moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to raise the legal drinking age in Alberta to 19, as is the current requirement in the neighbouring provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise in the Assembly tonight and to begin discussion and debate on Motion 508 and the potential increase of Alberta's legal drinking age to 19 years of age.

Before I begin, Mr. Speaker, I did want to acknowledge that earlier this evening I did have the opportunity to speak with many of the young students from the Forum for Young Albertans who are up behind us in the members' gallery. One of the things that they asked was how MLAs responded to constituents' concerns, how they brought them forward, and I tried to indicate to them that this is one of the methods that we use to reflect constituents' wishes.

The other thing that they asked was how useful things like surveys were. I said, Mr. Speaker, that although surveys are useful, in some areas they're not useful at all, and sometimes just by experience you can tell what the reception is to a certain idea. I told them that tonight's speech might be a little bit short simply because I could tell from the reception that I got from the youth that they weren't exactly enamoured with the potential of raising the drinking age. However, I'll do my best. I do have to say that the folks that you're looking at over my shoulder here are probably some of the most responsible youth and probably not the ones that we have to worry about.

I'm getting off my speech, but maybe that's the best way to do it, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hlady: Just go from the heart.

Mr. McFarland: It is from the heart.

You know, maybe you and I and some of the students in the gallery have known somebody who's been the victim of a horrible accident. When a person's gone out that night to have a little bit of fun and maybe have a beer or two with a friend, they don't really expect that anything is going to happen except that they will arrive back home safe and sound. How many of them, including myself, are aware of kids in that very same circumstance who might have gone out to an otherwise innocent party knowing that they were going to come home and one thing led to another, somebody that was under the influence happened to get behind the wheel or in the worst case the responsible four or five in a vehicle were going home with a designated driver and were hit by somebody who was totally impaired and didn't have the responsibility that many of our young people today exercise?

Mr. Speaker, I proposed this idea as a private member's bill in 1999, and I continue to feel very strongly about this initiative and believe that it's a measure that we need now more than ever. The

overriding objective of this motion is to reduce the negative impacts of alcohol on Alberta's youth. Motion 508 has a crucial role in achieving a safe and more responsible use of alcohol.

I would like to shift my focus and speak briefly about a news article that appeared in the paper over a month ago. This article expressed that Albertans outpace most provinces in drinking as well as driving while drunk. This news story was reporting the findings of a study conducted by the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*.

The results of the research indicated that Alberta outdrank all of the other provinces in 2000. I can see a couple of grins from a few of the colleagues, but when you consider that the average Albertan was consuming 8.8 litres of alcohol – and that includes every Albertan – it's an amazing statistic, Mr. Speaker. The only territory that outdrank Alberta, so to speak, was the Yukon, and I find this very unsettling. The increasing alcohol consumption rates are alarming, and they'll have an impact on all Albertans.

In this province we promote the ideal of wellness and healthy living. We talk and express concern about FAS, the effects on young women who are pregnant who consume alcohol and the horrible costs . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, we have a lot of young visitors, and I think the noise level is fairly high. The hon. Member for Little Bow has the floor, and I hope we can accord him the courtesy to at least listen to what he has to say.

The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying, I believe alcohol is the one area where we've kind of fallen down. We talk about FAS, we try to curb smoking, we try to get in everyone's face at every turn of the road, but the one thing that we don't seem to want to address, maybe more for political and voting reasons than any, is the alarming rate of statistics that involve our youth in alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents.

The Alberta Medical Association and the Alberta Motor Association endorsed raising the drinking age one year when I proposed this in '99. I believe they still raise it as a substantial issue. I have to be totally honest. Although one of the highest numbers of alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents does occur during the ages of 18 to 21, the other significant number is 21 to 24 years of age. I know that those that don't agree with this motion will simply point to that statistic, but I'm ahead of you. I'm aware of that. I will throw this back at the Assembly, Mr. Speaker, that when you combine a relatively young driver who may have had at best two years' driving experience along with an alcohol component in their body, it's a recipe for an accident.

I can't understand, Mr. Speaker, that when our provinces to the east and to the west of us are already at 19, Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec are the only provinces in Canada, including the territories, who are not at least at 19. It would only make sense to me to standardize it when we look at the overall effects that alcohol can have on a family.

You know, there was a time when a young girl in a community that I'm very familiar with – the kids at that time would go out to the bush, and they would have a party on Wednesday night, and they would kind of plan a party for the Friday or Saturday that followed. Well, unfortunately, one night this young gal had gone out with her boyfriend. Over the course of the night it was decided that she should get back home. On the way back home two of her school classmates met them on a hill, and the classmates coming back with more liquor for the party were the only survivors. The sad part was that when the RCMP knocked on this young gal's mother and dad's door to ask if, in fact, they had this person in their house, the mother

responded: yes, she's asleep in bed. Well, she wasn't, Mr. Speaker. She had snuck out.

You know, those kinds of things will happen. It's a horrible thing to inflict on any family, but at the same time, Mr. Speaker, had this life been saved with this proposed amendment, just the one life, it would've been worth it. As it is, it happens too often. Sometimes it happens every week.

Mr. Speaker, I'll go back to the comment that I made earlier. If we would only sit back and look at the measures that we seem to get in front of everyone in Alberta on a yearly basis, again whether it's FAS, making people aware of the things that are not in their best interest – we're trying to do things that make Alberta a better place – I believe you might see the merit in this motion.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, I want to again congratulate the young people that are here tonight. I did appreciate their comments. I would recognize the young gal from Austria who's here on a student exchange. She asked me if I knew what the age limit was in some of the other countries, and although I couldn't tell her that this country was 16 or that one was 17, she did tell me that in her home country of Austria they can drink when they're 16. I don't really have an answer for that except to say that this is Canada. We've always done things a little bit differently. In Alberta we do things quite a bit differently.

I would ask for the concurrence of this Assembly to support the motion. This is not a private member's bill for those in the audience. It's a motion just urging the government to consider raising the legal drinking age to 19.

Thank you.

8:10

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's with interest that I rise to participate in the discussion around Motion 508 to raise the legal drinking age in this province from 18 to 19 years. Certainly, there are compelling reasons why we need to have this discussion in this Assembly. As a parent of three children who are constantly being influenced by marketers, this is a very interesting motion.

Along with a discussion on raising the legal drinking age in this province, perhaps it's also time that we have a discussion or a debate on curtailing some of the marketing that goes out to young people and how young people and alcohol relate. I certainly would want us to look at some of the ad campaigns that are bombarding some of our postsecondary institutions and some of our technical schools. If one were to believe those ads, you can't have fun unless you drink. I think that is unfortunate, and I think we are doing the young people of this province a disservice when we neglect to discuss this. Advertising can have an enormous influence on young people. As a matter of fact, it can have an enormous influence on anyone, but the idea that you can't have fun without a beer or a cooler is not something that we should promote, Mr. Speaker.

When we consider looking at raising the drinking age from 18 to 19, I would urge all members to just reflect on the implications of an advertising campaign. Let's say that a beer company, for instance, hosts an event at NAIT, or we could pick the university during frosh week or orientation week. We're trying to build at that age a brand loyalty, and we're doing that by associating drinking with fun. If one is to visit, like the hon. Member for Little Bow has suggested, the hospital where there have been some young people involved in a traffic fatality or to visit a police station where the police have just come back from a call in the middle of the night where, unfortunately, someone has been in a serious accident as the result of

alcohol consumption, it is a sobering reminder, so to speak, to all of us of our activities surrounding young people and drinking.

Even before people are of the legal age, there is a pressure. There's peer pressure, and also there is in my view pressure from the advertisers to start drinking. This is a consumer that has to be, so to speak, Mr. Speaker, captured and programmed to be satisfied with one brand or another or one product.

I was looking before I had my opportunity to speak at the number of coolers that are sold in this province. It's quite significant. That's another brand of alcohol, if I could use that term, that is targeted, in my view, at young people.

It was, I believe, last week in Public Accounts where in the Gaming minister's annual report from 2003 there was a list of beverages and the government revenue as a result of those. I could be mistaken on this, but I believe, for whatever reason, it was in Gaming estimates in the annual report. I was shocked to see that in some of the categories there was a slight decrease in total volume sales but not in coolers.

So that would be another reason to have a good debate on increasing the minimum legal drinking age in this province. We are one of the few Canadian provinces – there are others who use 19 as their age of permission, but here it is 18. Certainly, the hon. member is correct. If you look at Austria, 16 is the minimum drinking age, and that's probably the lowest. Egypt is 21. Belgium, again, is 15. But in Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec it is 18. All other provinces are 19.

There are many people, Mr. Speaker, who would like to get some remarks on the record in regard to this very important motion, and I would cede the floor to another member of this Assembly. I would be interested to hear what they think of this motion.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming. [some applause]

Mr. Stevens: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker and fans. First of all, I'd like to commend the Member for Little Bow for bringing forward this motion. As he indicated in his preliminary comments, he brought a private member's bill in '99, I believe, so this is a matter that is of concern to him and of concern to some of his constituents.

As the Minister of Gaming it's my pleasure to respond. However, I must say that I will be speaking against Motion 508, which proposes to raise the legal drinking age to 19 years. To explain why, I'd like to introduce to you two hypothetical Albertans whose experience reflect the typical youth in Alberta: Bill and Sharon. Bill and Sharon are two young adults who turn 18 in May 2003. They were high school sweethearts, and they got married last year right after they graduated. In August Bill and Sharon announced that they were expecting their first child. A month later, in September, Sharon started school at the University of Calgary. At this time Bill decided to enlist in the armed forces, and they bought their first house in December.

I would like to ask all the members here a rhetorical question. Are Bill and Sharon responsible enough to drink? Of course they are. They are hard-working, taxpaying Albertans that have as many rights as 19 year olds. Most of Alberta's young people are responsible people who make responsible choices every day. As the argument as old as time goes: how can we deny an adult, who is by every other right an adult, the privilege to make the choice whether or not to drink?

8:20

Mr. Speaker, there's much evidence to support my position. First

of all, I'd like to say that the drinking age in this province has been 18 years since 1971, and as such anybody who has been born in this province since 1952 has been raised in a jurisdiction where the drinking age has been 18 years.

In the fall of 2003 AADAC released a report that took a look at the drinking activities of youths in grades 7 to 12. The Alberta youth experience survey was a major study of youth in Alberta's schools. The information in this study is valuable as it allows us to compare the experiences of our youth to youth throughout North America.

The survey shows that adolescent alcohol use in Alberta is 56 per cent. This trend is prevalent across a number of provinces, including those where the legal drinking age is 19. In fact, Alberta's rate of adolescent alcohol use is lower than Ontario's, which is at 65 per cent, and the legal drinking age in that province is 19. All of the information that has been released in the last year clearly demonstrates that the legal drinking age has little bearing on the number of adolescents who consume alcohol.

As AADAC conducted the Alberta youth experiences survey, it is understandable why they have also taken a position against raising the legal drinking age in Alberta. I would point out, Mr. Speaker, that AADAC has been in this business for 50 years at this point in time.

Recently AADAC released a position paper on this issue, which is available on their web site. It states:

Raising the legal drinking age can encourage and promote increased illegal activities such as bootlegging, binge drinking or drinking in high-risk situations, procuring false identification, and possibly the use of other drugs as substitutes for alcohol.

The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that AADAC does not support raising the legal drinking age. Its commitment is to the education of Albertans in order to encourage responsible and informed decisions about alcohol use. They have resources for parents, teachers, and children that provide information about making responsible choices. Education is the key. We all need to take responsibility for ensuring that our children have the tools to make responsible choices.

The teachers in Alberta meet this challenge every day. Alberta Learning provides materials and resources to help teach children how to make responsible decisions regarding drinking and regarding drinking and driving. Programs that have been developed by Alberta Transportation are also in place to educate, enforce, and increase the awareness of the effects of drinking and driving.

Overall, national statistics have shown that young drivers are the least likely of any age group to drink and drive or to have a blood alcohol content in excess of the legal limit. Unfortunately, however, of all the provinces in Canada, Alberta and Saskatchewan do have the highest proportion of adolescent drivers who are fatally injured and are legally impaired. Given that this trend is common to both provinces, which have different legal drinking ages, Saskatchewan being 19, you can't substantiate the argument that a higher legal drinking age will ultimately decrease impaired driving among youth.

As I've pointed out, the government is actively working to ensure that adolescents have the tools to make responsible choices when it comes to alcohol. As the minister responsible for the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, my role is to ensure that there are effective enforcement and education programs in place for licensees, and it's the top priority to ensure that minors are not being served alcohol by our licensees.

In fact, over the past two years I've overseen three initiatives that have emphasized that commitment as a priority. The first is that the AGLC increased penalties to licensees who were found in violation of policies relating to minors accessing alcohol. Secondly, the AGLC increased awareness and enforcement of its under-25 ID policy, and thirdly, the AGLC initiated a joint effort with all liquor

industry stakeholders to create a uniform training program for licensees and their staff.

You may have heard of the significant efforts taken by the AGLC to increase awareness under the under-25 ID policy, which helps ensure that minors are not obtaining alcohol. The AGLC has taken significant steps to increase the number of licensees asking for ID from people who appear to be under 25, including sending letters to licensees and stakeholders, providing training sessions, and providing awareness materials such as the It's the Law poster. The AGLC found that almost 67 per cent of licensees, including liquor stores, bars, and lounges, complied with the policy in 2003, and I have directed the AGLC to conduct another audit this year, which we expect will show another significant increase in compliance.

The third initiative mentioned that will help combat underage drinking is the new mandatory training program, that is a collaborative initiative. This program is called the Alberta server intervention program, or ASIP. It's a uniform training program that has the highest level of standards. Everyone involved in the sale or service of liquor will be required to take ASIP.

Alberta's young adults have the ability to make responsible choices when it comes to alcohol, and they prove that every day. It is imperative that parents of our young adults take responsibility and teach their children by example how to consume alcohol responsibly. It's important that parents find the time to teach their children how to make responsible choices. In today's world of drugs and violence kids have to grow up fast, and they have to make the choice to drink or not long before they're 18. Every day children, adolescents, and young adults make responsible choices because they have learned how to.

I'd like to conclude my remarks by congratulating the young adults who make the choice to be responsible and drink responsibly.

As a last comment, often in this House we hear people talk about how we can get our young people involved in the democratic process and in political issues, and I must congratulate the hon. member opposite for bringing this matter forward because if indeed it does go beyond a mere vote here today, I imagine that we will have gained the interest of all of the 17 and 18 year olds in Alberta, who I'm sure will take the time to find out where their MLAs live so that they can communicate with us.

So once again, Mr. Speaker, I recommend to my colleagues in the Assembly that this motion be turned down.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and join in the debate on Motion 508 this evening. I think this motion is very important, and I'm glad that those of us here this evening have an opportunity to debate this issue.

We've heard a few times this evening that the intent of this motion is to "urge the government to raise the legal drinking age in Alberta to 19" years. This would be quite a change, Mr. Speaker, and would affect a large number of Albertans in this province. That being said, I find it's very pleasing that we can discuss this issue tonight, and we can discover what's good about this motion and what's not.

The legal drinking age has been 18 years of age for quite a long time in this province, over 30 years, so making a change like this would have to be done after a significant consultation process with Albertans. That being said, if we do decide to support this motion before us today, I think the government should begin the process of consulting with Albertans immediately to see what their views on this subject would be. I assume that the debate would be quite divisive across Alberta because there are many around the province

who like the freedom to choose whatever they want when they reach that age that's considered adult.

Then we have before us a motion that will affect Albertans who reside in our high schools and in our universities. I would be very interested to find out how some of our young Albertans feel about this motion.

Mr. Speaker, the evidence that has been collected over the years does not conclusively conclude that having a higher drinking age is better suited to stopping things like alcohol abuse or drinking and driving. I think we'll find that these problems are going to continue regardless of what our drinking age is. I think the best strategy for stopping these problems is still through our education programs, such as those offered by AADAC or through local high schools. I also believe that these programs are working somewhat as we are seeing fewer cases of young people drinking and driving.

8:30

However, this motion does have one strong advantage going for it, and that is that it will eliminate drinking, albeit legal drinking, from our high schools. It is the case that many students in our high school system are at a legal age where they can drink. There are many who enter grade 12 at the age of 17 and turn 18 before the end of June. Those kids do get that opportunity to be adults, and they can currently choose to drink. What I worry about are those kids who are 17 who are at parties with the 18 year olds that bring all the alcohol they want and feel peer pressure to drink.

Now, I'm not so ignorant to think that this would stop outright if the drinking age were increased. Kids will be kids, and if there's an opportunity to make poor choices, they usually do, but that's how they learn. If we raised the drinking age, I think that would limit the access that many 17 year olds have to alcohol, because I don't feel that it's the 18 year olds that are truly at fault for underage drinking but, rather, those 17 year olds who are not strong enough to realize when a choice they are about to make is not the wisest.

I think that it's important to realize that 17 year olds would know more 18 year olds than 19 year olds; therefore, I think that an increase in our drinking age would stop some of those 17 year olds from getting their older friends to bootleg for them.

As well, we can look at the graduation ceremonies that will be happening across Alberta during the next couple of months. There are a lot of high schools that have what are termed wet grads. This is where there's a bar and alcohol is served. The only way you can purchase a drink is if you receive a stamp or a tag that shows that you are at least 18. But we all know what happens. Little Johnny 17 year old gets his buddy who turned 18 three days prior to the grad party to buy him some drinks. Then Johnny is passed out sick in the bathroom, looking like he's been run over by a drunk tank.

I think that if the legal drinking age was 19, we could avoid some of these situations. I think that a lot more graduating classes would choose to have dry grads because none of the graduates or very few of the graduates would be able to legally drink. When the option to drink is taken away, a lot of the time the problems that usually follow are diminished. I think that it's those problems that come with drinking alcohol that we should try to eliminate.

I realize that there are plenty of kids who are very responsible when it comes to drinking, but we have to face the facts that most kids are not all that responsible, especially when they've just turned 18. Responsibility is a lesson that some of them must learn.

Alcohol is a very dangerous substance, Mr. Speaker. If we went across the province, I'm sure we could find many instances of bar brawls, domestic disputes, and other instances that can be directly related to alcohol. If we can stop a kid who is still in high school from having those problems so early in life, I think that we will be better off.

I'm reminded of the tragedies that happened in Calgary that are alcohol related. I think of the tragedy that occurred in the Member for Peace River's constituency a few weeks ago, where a young man was killed in a bar fight. As well, there was a tragedy in Lethbridge I think four years ago where a young man was killed in a fight after a night in the bar. All the tragedies are related in that they are linked to alcohol. Would these tragedies have been avoided by having a higher legal drinking age?

Mr. Speaker, I think that one thing we really should realize is that there might be an argument made that when a person turns 18, there are rights that are given that person. The biggest right is of course the right to vote. I think that a lot of 18 year olds believe that since they are of the age that is considered adult, they should be allowed to do those things that adults do. They should magically have the same rights as the rest of the adult population.

I agree wholeheartedly with that assumption and that 18 year olds should be given every right that's coming to them, but drinking is not a right. It never has been a right, and I think that is where we run into the problems when we debate issues such as this one before us tonight. There are too many young people out there who think that drinking alcohol is a right. However, it's not a right; it's a privilege. It's a privilege that can be taken away if that is what the majority of Albertans prefer.

If we pass this motion today and we eventually decide to raise the legal drinking age, what benefits are we going to see from this move? For one, I think it may stop cross-border drinking, meaning that there might be fewer kids from Saskatchewan, where the drinking age is 19, coming to Alberta to get in a night of partying. I think that that would keep our children safer. As well, a higher drinking age would keep alcohol predominantly out of the high school system. I'm not saying that that's in the school lockers of our local high schools, but I think that children who have yet to learn about responsibility have far too easy access to alcohol. I think that raising the drinking age just might reduce that peer pressure to drink.

As I stressed earlier this evening, I still think that education is the best way to alert our youth to the problems that are associated with alcohol. If we as a government decide to raise the legal drinking age, we should do it for the right reasons. We must study the impact that such a move would have on Albertans.

As well, I don't think this should be the only thing that we do in this area. One of the big reasons for raising the legal drinking age is not only to get alcohol out of our schools but to curb the traffic deaths that are related to alcohol. Since this is the case, I think that we should come up with a comprehensive strategy so that raising the legal drinking age is not all that we do. I think it should be part and parcel of a far-reaching, Alberta-wide strategy to curb the abuse that is seen in regard to alcohol.

I'm looking forward to seeing what other members have to say on this motion this evening, and with that I'll conclude my remarks. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to join in the debate on Motion 508, which calls for raising the legal drinking in Alberta from 18 to 19. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my colleague from Little Bow for having the vision and initiative to introduce a motion which aims to protect some of the most influenced and vulnerable members of our society, our youth.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the intent of Motion 508 is not to demonize the consumption of alcohol. I am of the belief that most adult Albertans are responsible consumers who are aware of the health and social risks associated with the abuse of this particular substance. By

having this knowledge and experience, adults are able to make informed decisions with regard to how much they choose to drink and what amount is right for them.

However, while adults have the luxury of knowing how much they can drink before it starts to affect them in an adverse manner, younger Albertans, especially teenagers, may not be aware of the inherent dangers associated with alcohol abuse. Furthermore, those who are aware of the dangers choose to ignore them as a result of the it-won't-happen-to-me type of mentality. What they don't realize is that drinking, especially binge drinking, which many adolescents are prone to, can lead to some serious physical, emotional, and social consequences.

One of the risks associated with adolescent drinking in our province, Mr. Speaker, is traffic accidents. According to Alberta Transportation, young males, especially those between the ages of 18 and 24, are most likely to be involved in collisions involving alcohol. However, it should be noted that those at the highest risk of drinking and driving tend to be in the 20 to 21 age group. This suggests that raising the legal drinking age to 19, as proposed in Motion 508, may not help lower the number of alcohol-related traffic accidents because the motion does not target the age group that is most likely to partake in such high-risk activities. While this may be true, I still believe that Motion 508 is a step in the right direction because it will hopefully raise further awareness of the dangers associated with drinking and driving.

With this in mind I believe that raising the legal drinking age to 19 would also complement our province's graduated driver licensing program, which was introduced in May of last year. Alberta Transportation instituted the program to provide first-time drivers with the necessary driving experience and training and to minimize the number of traffic accidents that are caused by driver inexperience.

The graduated driver's licence, GDL, as this program is commonly referred to, consists of two stages, the learning and probationary stages. During both of those periods new drivers are taught how to operate motor vehicles and follow traffic laws in a safe and responsible manner. The instruction also includes a strong message concerning the dangers of drinking and driving and emphasizes the legal and social implications of such dangerous behaviour.

8:40

While new drivers are enrolled in the program, a strict zero-tolerance alcohol policy is enforced, and any student drivers who violate the policy face an immediate licence suspension. Judging by the experiences of other jurisdictions like Ontario, which has had a similar program in place since April of '94, results have been extremely positive. According to the latest collision statistics the number of traffic accidents in Ontario since '94 has decreased by 30 per cent. It should also be mentioned, Mr. Speaker, that the legal drinking age in Ontario is 19.

I believe that through the provisions outlined in Motion 508 and the goals of Alberta's graduated driver's licensing program, our province would be in a position to achieve results similar to those achieved in Ontario. I say this because by the time young new drivers complete the program, they would still be too young to legally purchase liquor. More specifically, Mr. Speaker, most young drivers enrol into the GDL program at the age of 15, and it takes them three years to complete the course. They would still be one year away from being legally entitled to buy alcohol.

It is my hope that through the training and instruction they receive as part of the GDL program and the fact that they would have one more year left before they could legally purchase liquor, young Albertans would have the time to consider the risks associated with

drinking and driving and make the right choices and decisions. I believe that through a combination of such measures and positive reinforcement, we will be able to address the systemic problem of impaired driving and lower alcohol-related collisions in our province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, in my remarks today I have mainly focused on the dangers of drinking and driving among young Albertans. However, it's also important to highlight other equally dangerous consequences associated with adolescent drinking. Medical studies have found that there is a direct correlation between alcohol abuse and physiological development. More specifically, teenagers who are prone to binge drinking may inadvertently be compromising their physical growth due to the fact that alcohol can suppress the growth hormones, that are fundamental to the development of their bones and muscles.

In other cases alcohol abuse leads to learning difficulties, depression, brain damage, liver problems, and many other health-related complications. Furthermore, adolescents who start drinking before the age of 15 are approximately four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence later on in their lives compared to those who have their first drink at the age of 20 or older.

As I mentioned earlier in my remarks, Mr. Speaker, peer pressure is one of the main reasons why teenage Albertans pick up the bottle for the first time. This is further encouraged by the fact that the current legal drinking age of 18 has created a situation where students can legally purchase alcohol before many of them graduate from high school. I believe that this sends the wrong kind of message to younger students, particularly those between the ages of 15 and 17, who try to emulate the behaviour of their older peers. Undoubtedly, seeing their older friends consume alcohol will encourage them to do the same, thus risking their physical and emotional health and well-being and their future success.

Motion 508, Mr. Speaker, would help alleviate this problem by raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 19, which means that the majority of students will have graduated from high school before being able to purchase liquor products. Therefore, by making it illegal for 18-year-old students to purchase alcohol, Motion 508 would help create a deterrent for younger students to follow the actions of their older high school peers.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that we as Albertans must take it upon ourselves to educate and warn our younger generations of the inherent dangers of alcohol use and abuse. We have to teach them to treat this potentially dangerous substance with respect and caution. We need to get the message out to them that alcohol abuse, especially at their young age, is extremely dangerous and may end up costing them dearly. In order to get this message out, we need the full co-operation of the parents, schools, communities, media, and the government.

Motion 508, Mr. Speaker, provides us with one of the means to accomplish these goals and, as such, requires our full support. Concerns that raising the age to 19 will increase illegal activities such as bootlegging and false ID, et cetera, already happen, and I think that it already happens to the maximum. I don't think that you can increase it any more. Although it's legal to marry at the age of 18 and perhaps younger with the consent of your parents, not too many young people do that nowadays. They kind of intrinsically know that that's not such a great idea.

We know that we have a problem with alcohol in Alberta because we are forbidding the use of alcohol in some of our provincial parks over the long weekend this year. It's a pilot project, and if it works in helping families and groups and associations have a better holiday during the long weekend, we may take that regulation and use it for other long weekends.

Also, in Red Deer we know that we have a serious drinking problem with youth in our clubs because we have a bar owner who owns two of the largest clubs in Red Deer who is seriously considering making his clubs only for people 21 years and over, because he insists that it's basically people under 21 who are drinking to levels that create all kinds of complications in his bar. He recognizes that the age of 21 and over is important for him.

I don't think there's much difference between teens in Canada and the United States. I have a couple of facts here that are American facts, but I don't think we're that different, so I think that they could probably apply to us. Certainly, I think it's something for us to think about. Using national data on alcohol and drug use among high school seniors from 1976 to 1987, one study found a decrease in marijuana use associated with increases in the legal drinking age. Between '79 and '84 the suicide rate was 9.7 per cent greater among adolescents and young adults who could legally consume alcohol than among their peers who could not. The earlier a person begins using alcohol, the greater the risk of current and adult drug use and harm to the developing brain.

I, too, like the Minister of Gaming, would like to congratulate all those young adults who drink responsibly, and I thank all those good friends that take their turn as designated drivers and safely return their friends to their homes.

This is a good motion even if it only serves to raise the issue of our deep concern for the safety of our young adults. Motion 508, Mr. Speaker, provides us with one of the means to accomplish these goals and, as such, requires support. As a result, I urge all my colleagues present today to support our youth and their safety and vote in favour of Motion 508. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have the opportunity this evening to address the Assembly and share my thoughts about Motion 508. I think the idea of raising the legal drinking age to 19 is worthy of discussion, and I would like to express my thanks to the hon. Member for Little Bow for bringing it forward.

What is interesting about the legal drinking age is that it is one of the laws that almost all Albertans know about. Just this evening, Mr. Speaker, talking to my five students at the Forum for Young Albertans, this was a subject that was very much on their mind. In Alberta turning 18 becomes a right of passage as it is on this birthday that society begins to look at you differently. You are afforded the right to vote, the legal system looks at you as an adult and expects you to act accordingly, and legally you become old enough to consume alcohol.

When such a law becomes so ingrained in our being, we accept it without thinking because it seems that this is the way that things have always been. The member presenting this motion is right in questioning whether we could better serve Albertans by making changes to this long-standing law. While most Albertans consume alcohol in a responsible manner, this substance does create problems in our society, and that is why there is a legislated age for alcohol in Alberta in the first place and in just about every other country in the world.

Mr. Speaker, as a former counsellor and minister I know first-hand that alcohol has wrecked marriages, cost people jobs, and killed people on our roads. It has affected our unborn children, our communities, and our province. Now, to make this clear, I am not arguing in favour of prohibition; I am just stating that with the use of alcohol comes great responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, the main crux of my argument revolves around the

fact that by allowing youth to wait the extra year to legally drink, we are also giving them an extra year to mature. It is my hope that young adults then would be in a better position to make the right decisions when it comes to alcohol-related matters. I also think that by extending the drinking age to 19, we would have an opportunity to reduce alcohol use among underage Albertans, thereby curbing some of the social problems associated with youth and alcohol. I believe that we need to do what we can as legislators to make Alberta as safe as possible and to create an environment where our children have the best opportunity to safely enter adulthood.

Now, I'm not naive enough to believe that by changing the legal drinking age, we would eliminate the practice of underage drinking. It is a fact that youth under 18 currently do consume alcohol. That will continue if the legal drinking age is changed to 19. According to the Alberta Youth Experience Survey 2002 as conducted by AADAC, Alberta adolescents in grades 7 to 12 are consuming alcohol. The survey indicated that 56.3 per cent of this demographic had consumed alcohol in the previous 12 months to being questioned. To me this number is too high, Mr. Speaker, and we need to be open to options that would help to lower the number of youths that participate in drinking alcohol.

8:50

An age change would make it more difficult for youths to have access to the substance. As many grade 12 students in this province turn 18 before they graduate, they are able to legally purchase alcohol. But what also happens is they have the ability to illegally purchase it for their 16- and 17-year-old friends. Of course, not all 18-year-old grade 12 students participate in this practice, but they are put in a position where they may be pressured to do so. While this measure would probably do little to curb the will of youth to experience the drink before they turn the legal age, there's no question that it would make it harder for high school students to purchase alcohol for other students not yet of age.

Research has shown that the behaviour exhibited by 18 year olds is partially influential on youth 15 to 17 years old. Younger students typically imitate the actions of slightly older individuals rather than those who are significantly older. If we can reduce the drinking influence that an 18-year-old student could have on others through school relationships, it may reduce the number of younger students who engage in this activity.

Mr. Speaker, alcohol impairs the good judgment of adults and youth alike. As I would like to speak to some of the social problems that can be experienced by youth who drink, I would like to make my intentions very clear. The problems with alcohol do not discriminate by age. I say this because I don't want to come across as someone who's picking on our youth. On the contrary, I believe that our youth are among the most talented in the world, and I believe they have proven this on an ongoing basis. During this debate it's important to recognize that fact. If we intentionally or unintentionally paint our youth as a segment of our population that is prone to drink, well, then, we make the suggestion that we expect them to drink.

This is prevalent in how postsecondary school students are viewed in our society. The misconception that young adults go off to college and will become involved in heavy drinking is not only false, but it's dangerous as well. If this mindset becomes ingrained in future college and university students, they will more likely engage in this behaviour or in alcohol abuse as an effort to conform.

So with this disclaimer I'd like to continue with some of the negative effects that alcohol has on our youth. Suicide, unplanned pregnancy, automobile deaths are just some of the issues that Alberta teenagers face. I would argue that all three of these issues are a

result of poor planning and bad decisions. However, when we also add alcohol to the mix, I believe that the occurrence of these incidents is increased. I would like to quickly address each of these issues.

Suicide is tragic in itself, but it is further disturbing when one takes into account the number of extended people that it affects. Tragically, suicide is the second leading cause of death for males and females who are 15 to 24 years of age. According to the United States National Committee for Injury Prevention and Control the use of alcohol is often a contributing factor for suicide. Research indicates several possible explanations. Drinking, as well as drugs, may reduce inhibitions and impair the judgment of someone contemplating suicide, making that act more likely. Further, alcohol may also aggravate other risk factors for suicide, such as depression or other mental illnesses.

Moving on to teen pregnancy, I'd like to touch once again on the issue of impaired judgment. Add alcohol and peer pressure to the mix, and you may have a recipe for a poor decision and, subsequently, an unplanned pregnancy.

Finally, I'd like to touch on drinking and driving. While alcohol impairs all drivers of all ages, inexperience behind the wheel makes drinking and driving especially dangerous among youth. Recently it seems as though there are more graduations in this province where a certain amount of time is put aside to honour a friend and a classmate who was lost in an automobile accident, sometimes – not always, but sometimes – where alcohol was involved.

It's worth noting that Alberta Transportation has implemented the graduated driver's licencing program, an initiative that allows progressively greater authority to drive based on experience and demonstrated competency. One of the restrictions placed on young drivers under this program is a zero tolerance attitude for alcohol consumption. Violation of this will result in an immediate licence suspension. This motion ties in nicely with what the Ministry of Transportation has put forward on this issue, as the hon. Member for Red Deer-North has aptly stated.

Mr. Speaker, it's probable that raising the legal drinking age to 19 would reduce the access that school-age children would have to the substance, and in turn it would be my hope that the negative effects of alcohol would also be curbed. If anything, the move would provide some consistency among the provinces of western Canada in having a standard drinking age.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to once again state that I believe that raising the legal drinking age could be an important step to reducing some of the negative social effects that plague our youth. If young Albertans are able to deal with alcohol in a responsible manner at a young age, I expect they will also become more productive adults in the future.

I'd like to once again thank the hon. Member for Little Bow for bringing forward this important motion and allowing us a forum to discuss this excellent idea. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What do I have: about two minutes?

The Acting Speaker: No. We have until 9.

Mr. Maskell: Until 9. So this will be a *Reader's Digest* version.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to rise and speak . . .

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, you will have an opportunity to continue next Monday as well.

Mr. Maskell: Next Monday?

The Acting Speaker: Yeah. You're not limited to four minutes.

Mr. Maskell: This still may be the *Reader's Digest* version.

Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise and speak to Motion 508, which urges the government to raise the legal drinking age to 19. I believe measures like the one being suggested by the Member for Little Bow are important to consider if we want to continue to make forward progress where alcohol and youth are concerned, and I certainly appreciate the comments earlier from the hon. Minister of Gaming and the AADAC stats that he provided us.

Alcohol can be a dangerous substance to all members of society. It affects young and old Albertans alike. However, it is necessary to do everything in our power to teach our youth that with the use of alcohol comes responsibility. Youth who learn the lesson at an early age are less likely to have alcohol-related problems later on in life.

This has been suggested in many studies. The *Journal of Substance Abuse* finds that the younger a person is before using alcohol, the greater the chance he or she will become dependent on the substance or will abuse alcohol later on. About 16.6 per cent of those who begin drinking at age 18 will become dependent on alcohol, with 7.8 per cent of those abusing alcohol at some point in their lives. However, the same statistics show that if a person waits until they are 21 years old before taking their first drink, these risks decrease by over 60 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, even if we raise the legal drinking age, there will be underage youth who will drink and sometimes drive, but I believe that raising the legal drinking age could help to reduce this trend.

The big mistake we made over 30 years ago, of course, is that we changed it from 21 to 18, and there are some people in this room who remember the coming of age was 21 years of age, and this has changed our society, changed our youth a whole lot.

I was really disturbed when I heard the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow talk about wet grads. I mean, I'm flabbergasted to believe that there are schools in this province that have wet grads. I spent over 32 years in this business and more than 20 years of them as a high school principal, and I can't remember wet grads. They were dry grads, and we were not a part of any of this whole business of after grads. We would not in any way allow that to even be organized within the school, as least formally. This must be happening south of Red Deer somewhere because it certainly isn't happening in the Edmonton area, certainly not in any school I was involved in and not in the district that I was involved in.

Also, what happened when we reduced it from 21 to 18 is that there was a time when students went to football games, they went to watch high school basketball games, they went to the dances, and so on. Now when there's a high school basketball game or a football game or whatever, the girlfriends or boyfriends are there, maybe the odd parent cheerleader . . .

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, but the time limit for consideration of this item of business has concluded.

head: 9:00 **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 26
Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to rise and move

third reading of Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004.

The legislation is the result of the most comprehensive review of the K to 12 education system in more than 30 years. As a member of Alberta's Commission on Learning I am proud to state that all the stakeholders as well as any interested Albertans were involved in the process.

I know that all members in this Assembly agree with me when I state that improving student achievement must be a priority. This legislation will contribute significantly to that end.

I urge all members to vote in favour of Bill 26 in third reading. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for bringing in this bill. This bill does some very important things. One of the things it does is operationalize the practice review process, which is a way of getting rid of incompetent teachers. It's a fairer way. It's a way that is a lot easier. It's cheaper. But, most importantly, it is a fairer way.

Mr. Speaker, I will say that there is some controversy with this bill between the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association when it comes to the central office administrators. The Alberta Teachers' Association is concerned about the central office administrators not having any disciplinary process. The Alberta School Boards Association is wanting all of the central office administrators out of the union altogether. Included in this bill is a provision for regulation-making powers to set the category of central office administrators that will be out of the union.

In conjunction with the Alberta Teachers' Association I have looked at this, and I have decided that it will not be proclaimed until the regulations are done. Once the regulations are done which define the class of central office administrators, that portion of the bill will then be proclaimed. Mr. Speaker, this is something that has been done in conjunction after a lot of discussion with the Alberta Teachers' Association, keeping in mind that the bill is at third reading. The discussion also was that this bill be put over until the fall.

The important thing about this bill is not the central office administrators, Mr. Speaker. The important thing about this is the practice review process, which has to be put in in order to operationalize it. Once the regulations are brought in, the specific central office administrators will then be potentially taken out of the union.

Mr. Speaker, it is a good bill. It is a bill that operationalizes a lot of things that were done in the Learning Commission, and I would urge all members to vote for this bill.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like the opportunity to make a couple of comments about Bill 26. One of the things that I find really unfortunate was that I supported the bill and expedited it as much as I could at second reading based on the assurance that both the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association had agreed to the amendments. It's much to my chagrin that I find that that's not the case.

I think it's unfortunate that what happened happened. It's not just that I was misled, Mr. Speaker, but I in turn misled my colleagues, and that, I think, is regrettable. We have a tradition in the House of dealing with each other frankly and in a spirit of co-operation to try to move legislation through as quickly as we can, and when things

like this happen and there's deliberate misleading, I think that makes that kind of process much more difficult.

I'm pleased that the minister has addressed the problem and spoken to the ATA and agreed to address through regulation some of the concerns they've had, but I don't think that that excuses not having the courtesy to let me know that before the amendments were pushed through the House as quickly as we did.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to make some comments on Bill 26, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2004, in its third reading.

I want to begin by saying that it's my considered view that the education system has been well served by having a unified association that represents teachers both in their professional capacity and represents them in collective bargaining. In fact, if you look back, I believe the evidence shows that a unified association representing teachers in both of these capacities has worked as well or better than it has where different organizations represent the professional and collective bargaining sides.

In fact, what's remarkable is how few times Alberta teachers have taken job action. Other than the job action of two years ago, which was precipitated by an unusual set of circumstances including a ham-fisted attempt by the Tory government to impose wage controls on teachers, teachers' strikes in Alberta have tended to be few and far between.

If you look at the track record of the provinces that have separated the professional and collective bargaining functions into separate organizations, again Alberta compares very favourably. To me this demonstrates the success of the existing legislation and arrangements. There's an old saying that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I'm concerned that by moving away, as Bill 26 does, from the principle that all certificated teachers should be represented by a single association, we may be going a ways down the road from something that's been working well.

Last October the Learning Commission submitted what was a very good and in some respects even a visionary report into the future of K to 12 education in this province. There was one area, however, where the Learning Commission report uncharacteristically missed the mark. This was the report's recommendations dealing with the teaching profession. The Learning Commission did not favour eliminating the teachers' right to strike nor completely breaking up the ATA into separate professional collective bargaining organizations despite the fact that these two policy options seemed to have considerable support in the Tory government caucus. I believe it's somewhat of a relief that the Learning Commission rejected these more radical options.

Nevertheless, the recommendations the Learning Commission did make – namely, the removal of principals and assistant principals as well as certificated teachers performing central office functions from the ATA – in my view were not conducive to enhancing the learning system.

Bill 26 further refines the Learning Commission recommendations to make membership in the Alberta Teachers' Association optional for teachers who carry out central office administrative functions for a school board. The existing Teaching Profession Act exempts only school superintendents from membership in the ATA. I listened to the minister's remarks carefully, and I hope that this issue, which is a matter of concern to the ATA, will be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties through regulation.

Going back to the exemption, the existing Teaching Profession

Act exempts only school superintendents from the membership. While this is a limited exemption affecting only several hundred certificated teachers across the province, I'm concerned about the incremental approach being taken eroding the membership of the ATA. I remain unconvinced that even this step is warranted, and I am further concerned that this step may be followed by more serious ones in the future.

9:10

The Bill 26 amendments point to a policy direction whereby the ATA represents only teachers in the classroom and not the teaching profession as a whole. What is the purpose of this fragmentation of the teaching profession, however limited it may be, in Bill 26? That's the question. I simply don't see the justification at this stage or a compelling argument made to justify moving in this direction.

I see other practical problems as well, Mr. Speaker. Individual teachers go back and forth between being classroom teachers and performing central administrative functions. It's been the case, and there has been very healthy movement back and forth between teaching and nonteaching positions. Each time they move, they will be required to make a choice as to whether they wish to be represented by the ATA or not. Will school boards favour teachers who opt out of the ATA or those who choose to stay in the ATA when they're hiring for central administrative positions? Does this open up the possibility of new conflicts between the ATA and school boards? These are some of the questions that come to mind and cause me to worry about the impact that this bill could have whether it's intended or unintended.

For all of the above reasons I'm not supportive of this particular change to Bill 26 despite the fact that I'm aware that the government has gone some ways to try to accommodate the concerns of the teaching profession as articulated by the ATA.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you and take my seat.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark to close debate.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would just like to speak to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods' comments that he feels that he was misled. I, along with the minister's EA, met with the hon. member and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona to discuss the amendments. At that meeting – and I know people were rushed to get back into the House – we did state, both the EA and myself, to the members that everything was moving ahead except for that one piece, the central office staff, and that the minister and the president of the ATA were going to be discussing these and working out the bits there. I mean, that was made very clear in that meeting as we discussed these amendments, so I'm very sorry if that wasn't stated clearly enough to the hon. member and that it appeared to him that he had been misled. That's something that I would not do, and I am very disturbed by those comments.

Mr. Speaker, I move closure and the vote on the question. Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 26 read a third time]

Bill 25 School Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to move third reading of Bill 25, the School Amendment Act, 2004.

As mentioned during second reading, Bill 25 reflects this govern-

ment's action on yet another recommendation from the Learning Commission. It balances the interests of teachers with the rights of our children to receive an education that is responsive to their needs. It will achieve this by improving the functioning of the Board of Reference to make sure there is a process to deal with situations where an educator might not fulfill the high standards of his or her peers.

The intent of this bill is quite simple. We need appropriate measures in place to ensure the highest quality of service in the profession, and all measures taken must be effective and fair. As amended, Bill 25 will ensure a good education for all Alberta students.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 25 will add the following responsibilities for Alberta's teachers. They will

- (a) participate in curriculum development and field testing of new curriculum;
- (b) develop, field test and mark provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations;
- (c) supervise student teachers.

Section 18 adds on to the current statutory responsibilities of teachers.

As mentioned earlier, Bill 25 will also allow the Board of Reference to function more smoothly and more in accordance with Bill 26. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark with his bill that we've just passed will work in conjunction with Bill 25 in order to ensure that Alberta's teachers are performing to the ability that all Albertans expect them to and know that they can.

Mr. Speaker, with regard to the amendments and everything that has been accepted, the changes to the Board of Reference and to the teachers' responsibilities, I would like to move third reading and would leave it at that.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 25 in its third reading. Bill 25 is the School Amendment Act, 2004. In many respects Bill 25 makes parallel amendments to the School Act that Bill 26 made to the Teaching Profession Act. I'll focus my remarks about some changes that are made in Bill 25.

I'm pleased that Bill 25 retains the Board of Reference and did not follow the Learning Commission's recommendation to abolish it. The government is taking the view, not surprisingly, that changes proposed in Bill 25 will improve the effectiveness of the Board of Reference.

That remains to be seen, Mr. Speaker. The jury is still very much out on this. In fact, the changes proposed to the Board of Reference are illustrative of a more fundamental problem that I have with Bill 25. Quite frankly, I'm not sure that any of us can reasonably predict whether the changes being brought about through Bill 25 will improve the learning system or not. It's a bit too early to hazard that guess.

To further complicate matters, the bill's sponsor, the Member for Drayton-Valley-Calmar, last week brought significant new amendments during the Committee of the Whole debate. These were amendments to what's already in the amending bill, Mr. Speaker, creating even more uncertainties about how these changes to the School Act will improve or harm the learning system.

Bill 25 as amended makes a number of complex, highly technical changes to the School Act which have largely unknown implications for school boards, teachers, and students. I would have much preferred, Mr. Speaker, to have had more opportunity to examine and consult on the proposed changes prior to being asked to give third and final reading approval to Bill 25.

Be that as it may, this is all too typical of how this government

sometimes operates and is yet another indicator of the severe democratic deficit that exists in this province. There are no all-party committees to examine a bill such as this and to question and ascertain the views of education stakeholders, whether school boards, teachers, parents, or school administrators. Instead, an amendment is brought to this Assembly late in the evening, receives limited debate, and is approved that very same evening.

While there are a number of areas in Bill 25 where I have questions, there is at least one provision in Bill 25 to which I'm strongly opposed, and I want my opposition to be clearly on the record. This has to do with the changes to section 18 which redefine activities that are now voluntary or extracurricular and makes them mandatory. These have to do with requiring teachers to participate in the curriculum, supervise student teachers, and mark and field test provincial diploma exams. Most teachers undertake these extra responsibilities voluntarily, and I remain unconvinced that it is necessary to make them mandatory.

Requiring teachers to mark, for instance, diploma exams as a condition of their employment by a school board is particularly heavy-handed. Finding teachers to mark diploma exams was only a problem two years ago during the dispute when the government itself provoked the teachers and attempted to interfere with the collective bargaining by imposing those controls on teachers. It has not been a problem in any other year. Again, the government's approach is akin to using a sledgehammer to swat a flea.

In conclusion, given the lack of consultation prior to the introduction of Bill 25 and particularly given the lack of time to examine the amendment introduced only last week, I would urge somebody to take the necessary time to consult all education stakeholders – parents, school administrators, teachers, and school boards – before proclaiming this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 25 read a third time]

head: 9:20

Private Bills Second Reading

Bill Pr. 4

Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to move Bill Pr. 4, the Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004, for second reading.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood to close debate.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If there's nothing further, I'd like to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 4 read a second time]

head:

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 29

Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004

[Adjourned debate April 28: Mrs. McClellan]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to stand today and speak to Bill 29, the Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004. As the minister stated when moving second reading, this bill will amend the current act to allow AFSC to make loans or execute guarantees in excess of \$2 million to businesses with two or more investors. Currently AFSC is only able to make loans to specific businesses for a maximum of \$2 million regardless of how many investors are involved in a project.

The amended act, while increasing available funding from AFSC, will still limit the amount of debt an individual investor can carry at \$2 million. Presently AFSC is limited by section 29 of the act to \$2 million in loans or guarantees to or for the benefit of any person. The term "benefit" has been cautiously interpreted by AFSC, and as a result loans made to a company are considered a benefit to the shareholders, and similarly loans made to a shareholder are considered a benefit to the company.

Mr. Speaker, the reason the act is being amended is to allow AFSC to facilitate investment in larger value-added projects as well as lend support to investment vehicles such as new generation co-operatives. Farmers are looking for ways to add value to their product right here in Alberta. They want to improve their profitability and limit their exposure to risks such as export restrictions.

The BSE crisis is a vivid reminder of how vulnerable we are to the uncertainties of the export market. We need to process more of our product here in Alberta, and that also goes for all of our primary products: wheat, barley, beef, pork, and others. Of course, we'd have to have wheat and barley outside of the board to do that, but we're working on that, Mr. Speaker.

Alberta needs to develop more processing capacity to add value to these products. There are farmers and others out there ready to invest. Whether it is through a new generation co-operative or some other investment vehicle, there are groups out there that are anxious to get their projects off the ground. However, some of the projects being proposed require millions of dollars of investment. While farmers may have the capacity to borrow for such investments, conventional lenders are being extremely cautious in the current environment. AFSC has the capacity to fill this important void.

This government does not want it to be difficult to do business here, Mr. Speaker, nor have we made it so, so we're amending the act to allow entrepreneurs to capitalize on the opportunities that are in front of them. Whether it's the development of a new slaughter plant or a grain-processing facility, we want to help Alberta investors expand our value-added industry. This investment will create jobs and opportunities, particularly in rural Alberta communities.

Mr. Speaker, the risk to the lender, AFSC, will not increase with the changes to this act. All of the loans and guarantees will still need to satisfy all the requirements as set out in the regulations regarding eligibility and all of the normal lending criteria established by AFSC.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all members of this Legislature to give this bill their full support. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly with interest that I listened to the remarks from the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert and the minister of agriculture last week in regard to Bill 29. If one listens to the remarks from the hon. member, it would certainly warrant support, but what he's also talking about is that we are gradually getting back in the business of being in business as far as supporting some enterprises over others. This isn't about supporting the family farm. This is about increasing the ways that corporate agriculture can get more and more money from Agriculture Financial Services Corporation.

I don't know what the object of this bill really is. Is it to provide funding for meat processors, beef processors? Certainly, we all know that the BSE crisis has alerted both urban and rural Albertans to the fact that we do not control in this province our processing industry. It's controlled from another country, in this case America. We have lost control of that industry.

At one point in this city's history there were many meat-packing plants, both for beef and for pork. That no longer happens. We have two large processing facilities and another one that is not so large, but it is vital to the interests of the producers.

On the face of it, it appears that the goal of this legislation is to eliminate provisions preventing individual persons from receiving more than one loan of up to \$2 million, but the question here is why. I would be grateful for an answer. Is this because farms have become such large corporations? Up until this bill the total amount, as I understand it, that any person could get was 2 million bucks. Indeed, even after this bill, if it's to become law, there would be an appearance that the total amount of any loan or guarantee would be \$2 million. But that said, more than one individual could get that \$2 million. Where would all this end? How much will this cost?

An Hon. Member: Wrong.

Mr. MacDonald: This is wrong. Okay.

How much additional money will we as taxpayers have to set aside for the Alberta Agriculture Financial Services Corporation? Who will be eligible for these loans? These are very important questions. There are hon. members in this Assembly who receive support payments from the Alberta Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. Farmers from across the province receive money. How much in additional funds will be needed if we make these changes?

Those are my questions at this time, and hopefully they can be addressed at committee or later on in debate in second reading. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a second time]

head: 9:30

Private Bills Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

Bill Pr. 4 Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There is an amendment. The following is added after section 5: 6 Section 6 is amended by striking out "academic".

[The clauses of Bill Pr. 4 as amended agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Bill 28 Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise and speak to the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act at Committee of the Whole. I would like to start off by thanking Mr. Andrew Horton and Brad Fournier for their backup and help in bringing this forward.

As I mentioned during second reading, this bill expands the mandate of the act by allowing feeder pigs to be included under the act, allowing Alberta's hog producers to take advantage of Alberta's successful feeder association structure. Consultations have occurred with the hog industry, the AFRD staff, the feeding industry, and even the trucking industry.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona raised some very legitimate questions at that time that I'd like to address. The actual cost of the program is two and a half full-time equivalents who run the program for Alberta Agriculture, significantly less than the \$52 million listed in the lottery fund estimates. We need to recognize that this is a producer-driven process, and they bear much of the cost of that particular program. In fact, the \$52 million is the liability of guarantee that is allocated to a feeder association, and it's held as the guarantee for the feeder association loans. The total guaranteed cap for the program is at \$55 million, so that leaves about \$3 million to expand the guarantee to the hog feeding industry. It's important to remember that over the past 10 years the government guaranteed draw has been less than 5/10,000ths of a percentage, a very stunningly low number for any industry.

There was also some question as to how this program would affect producers under the Canadian agricultural income stabilization program, or the CAIS program as we know it. Because there are no actual dollars delivered to producers and members of feeder associations, the feeder association program does not affect producers when it comes to their CAIS claims.

Both hon. members asked why hog producers should be eligible to use Alberta's feeder association structure. When I spoke about this bill at second reading, I noted that the hog industry has now defined two distinct feeding industries, much like the cattle industry. A straight feeding operation now exists that did not exist a decade ago where feeder pigs are introduced to the barn and fed until finished. This is similar to what occurs in the cattle industry. The second more traditional operation continues to be the farrow-to-finish operations. It's important to remember that the act itself does not restrict either operation from getting involved, and it will be again through a thorough industry consultation process that regulations will be developed and in place to build a program that is legitimately useful for hog producers.

Both hon. members wondered how many hog producers would use the feeder association program. While I'd love to give them an exact number, I really can't. However, a simple questionnaire recently done of all the hog producers in the province estimated that up to one-quarter of the feeder pigs may be contracted, depending on the

full implications of interest rates and administrative fees. There's a potential to save some dollars on both these aspects, but without the full regulations in place it is difficult to establish exact estimates of producer and hog involvement.

I know that there was some concern expressed on the tracking of hogs that were purchased through a feeder association. Obviously, Mr. Chairman, branding a hog is out of the question, and while there hasn't been a final decision made about how a hog purchased through a feeder association will be identified, there are a number of options already in use on farms across Canada. These options include anything from tattooing feeder pigs to the use of the national identification program that Canada's pork industry has been working on. The pork quality assurance program is also widely used in the province of Alberta. Identification in co-ordination with inspection of hogs should all but eliminate the risk involved with contracting feeder hogs.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona was concerned that this bill would help the large hog operations but not the small ones. In fact, Mr. Chairman, on the contrary, Bill 28 gives more decision-making capabilities to smaller pork producers. It offers smaller producers more financial alternatives than simply going to the bank, which will allow them to increase their competitiveness. There are maximum loan limits that are placed on members. This benefits mostly our smaller family-operated units therefore.

He was also concerned about the possible environmental damage that can occur with feeding operations. The hog producers that would commit to a membership with a feeders association would meet and comply with any environmental regulation within the province, just as members of feeder associations already do. In fact, I would argue that these hog producers would be leaders within the industry that are involved with the quality of pork initiative and food trace-back systems. There is no more jeopardy to the environment from having hogs defined within the definition of livestock within the Feeder Associations Guarantee Act.

I'm sure that all hon. members are interested to know what the next steps would be if Bill 28 is passed, and I'm pleased to share that with them. The time frame once Bill 28 is passed in this House – there will be further consultation with the pork industry and current feeder association members and those involved with the current feeder association structure. This includes the lenders of feeder associations. Thus, consultation will continue over the next few months. Once a comprehensive set of guidelines has been established to govern feeder pig association contracts, only then can eligible members take advantage of the new opportunity. I estimate this to be sometime in the late summer or fall. It could go as late as early 2005.

I hope that I've answered your questions in a satisfactory manner, and I urge every member to give this amendment their full support. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

9:40

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the hon. Member for Dunvegan's answers to questions that were posed earlier in debate at second reading on Bill 28. That certainly answers my question satisfactorily in regard to the CAIS program.

I have now this question for the hon. member: what is the total of all loans to feeder associations at the current time that are partially guaranteed by the province? If this bill was to become law, in the future how many additional loans or how much additional money would have to be set aside or guaranteed by the province if we were

to allow hogs as well as cattle and sheep to be a part of the feeder associations?

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The province has set aside \$55 million in total for the guaranteed portion of that particular program. Presently \$52 million is being used as a guarantee to the livestock feeder associations, and that leaves \$3 million available as a guarantee for the hog industry. That's exactly what it is. It is a guarantee, and it's not actual cash that's given out to the producers or to the associations. It's money set aside in case there's a massive amount of default that occurs in the industry. Then those dollars would come in as a guarantee.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again I would like to express my gratitude to the hon. member for that answer. My next question would be: has there ever been a default involving the feeder associations before, and if there has been a default, how much money was involved?

Mr. Goudreau: If you remember my comments when I discussed this in committee a little earlier, I talked about 5/10,000ths of a percentage in the last 10 years as what the province has paid out in default. So, basically, it's very, very insignificant and nonexistent. In the 65-year history I believe that there were only three claims against the feeder association program. We're 65 years in existence. So the claim numbers have been very, very low.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 28 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 29

Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to take just a couple of minutes to address some of the issues that were raised during second reading. The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar had a couple of questions, and I'm certainly appreciative of his commenting that the amendment does warrant our support.

I just wanted to bring some clarity to some of the comments that he made with respect to the loan limits. I wanted to emphasize that this amendment will not allow AFSC to make larger loans to companies. The loan limit for a company will remain at \$2 million. What the amendment does is allow individual shareholders in a company to access loans up to \$2 million. It does increase the

aggregate amount available for a single project, which is something that we need to do in this province for our value-added agriculture sector, which I know our Minister of Economic Development is very keen to do. Certainly, on the rural development side it is very, very important that we have these types of available lending institutions to get value added off the ground.

The goal of the amendment is to provide a provision so that we can have a value-added facility that is larger than the \$2 million, although each individual borrower would have to come up with his own repayment terms and his own assets to back up the maximum \$2 million loan.

The other question was how much additional dollars and who would be eligible for the loans. The people that are going to be eligible for the loans are the same people that are eligible for the loans today, and that is the family farm in Alberta, Mr. Chairman. AFSC will handle this additional program absorbed within its approved business plans today. They had a \$25 million proposal for value added already in their budget with limited take-up because of the fact that these projects are much larger than an individual \$2 million.

I can give you an example for the members' benefit, Mr. Chairman, of five family farms. The family farm of today is different from the family farm of 50 years ago; it may have four brothers, and it may be a \$10 million operation. But let's say we had five different family farms. Each one wanted to invest into a facility that would value add what they're doing in the province of Alberta.

Under this proposal each one can only borrow the maximum \$2 million. The company that they create can only borrow \$2 million, but each one of them could borrow on their own \$2 million and actually invest that in the project. So individually they are only borrowing \$2 million, and AFSC would take the same due diligence on that credit facility that they would take on any other credit facility that they do today. The only difference that we're doing here is we're allowing a facility, like a new generation co-op, to be able to have those investors access financing through AFSC. So the whole objective here is to actually add value-added facilities in our agricultural sector.

I think that answers the questions that the hon. member had. Again, they were good comments, Mr. Chair, and I think we've added that clarity for him. With that I will conclude my comments.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much. I appreciate that response from the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert. Now, if this bill were to become law, would the interest rates that would be available to the borrowers be slightly matched with the Alberta Agriculture Financial Services Corporation? Would there be a better rate than what they could find at, say, a commercial bank?

Thank you.

Mr. Horner: To clarify the comments. Again, Mr. Chairman, this amendment is simply taking the one aspect of the \$2 million aggregate or for the benefit of. It's not changing anything in the way that AFSC operates in terms of the interest rates, their due diligence, how the farm community or AOC community would approach AFSC. It doesn't change any of that type of criteria with AFSC at all.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. It's interesting, Mr. Chairman, to

participate in this debate this evening, particularly in light of the fact that we are expanding the loan provisions, essentially, in one sector of the economy backed up by the government, yet in another sector of the economy or another sector of the government we're promoting this notion of a P3, this private/public partnership, or pity, pity, pity, as some would say.

I find it quite ironic that we're making more government money available to one sector, yet with schools and hospitals and specifically courthouses and in some cases roads, we're going gung-ho for the private sector. We're forgetting just how much financial muscle a government with a good credit rating can provide.

Thank you.

9:50

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, just for clarity. I don't want to play politics with this because this is something that our agriculture community really needs to help value add our province's commodity-based ag community.

The funding under this amendment is not restricted to simply agriculture value-added products. I'm sure the member is aware that AFSC is an amalgamation of the Alberta Opportunity Company as well, so that expanded the corporation's mandate to provide loans to many small-business ventures, especially those that will enhance rural development. That really is the key. This is not a change, really, in the *raison d'être* for the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. In that regard, I think this will only add to what it can do today.

[The clauses of Bill 29 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would move that the Committee of the Whole now rise and report Bill Pr. 4, Bill 28, and Bill 29.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 28, Bill 29. The committee reports Bill Pr. 4 with some amendments. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been a very good night of progress, and I hope the Calgary Flames have equally good progress in their business. It's sometimes hard for an Oilers fan just to admit that, but we're all cheering for Calgary.

I would move that the Assembly now stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; at 9:55 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, May 4, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/05/04

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. We give thanks for the bounty of our province: our land, our resources, and our people. We pledge ourselves to act as good stewards on behalf of all the people of this province. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. members, I'm honoured today to introduce you to a group of 15 former Members of Parliament from British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. They're attending the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians' regional meeting here in Edmonton, and they are in the public gallery. So let me introduce them, and if they represented a riding in Alberta, I'll give you the name of the riding in Alberta. If they're from outside Alberta, I'll identify the province as well.

Now, we're all parliamentarians, so I'd appreciate it if we could withhold the applause until the end because of the competitive nature – okay? – and we'll ask them all to do it at one time. First of all, the Rt. Hon. Don Mazankowski, Vegreville; the Hon. Jack Horner, Acadia; the Hon. Nick Taylor, Senator; Mr. Douglas Rowland, representing the constituency of Selkirk in Saskatchewan; Mr. Clifford Breitkreuz, Yellowhead; Mr. John Browne, Vancouver Kingsway; Mr. Cliff Downey, Battle River; Mr. Norval Horner, Battleford-Kindersley in Saskatchewan; Mr. Bill Lesick, Edmonton East; Mr. Willie Littlechild, Wetaskiwin; Mr. Bob Porter, Medicine Hat; Mr. Jack Shields, Athabasca; Mr. John Skoberg, Moose Jaw in Saskatchewan; Mr. Walter Van De Walle, Pembina; Mr. Bill Wright, Calgary North. They are accompanied by their partners as well as Mrs. Susan Simms, assistant to the president, and George and Myra Letki.

Hon. members, later in the day one of our own, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, who is a member of this group, will be joining with them as they participate in their regional meeting of former parliamentarians.

So I'd ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Each year one student from every Alberta high school receives the Premier's citizenship award in recognition of their contribution to the community through good citizenship, leadership, community service, and volunteering. From this group of very special students the five most outstanding individuals are then selected to receive the Queen's Golden Jubilee Citizenship Medal and, along with that, a scholarship of \$5,000, which they may use towards future education or development.

Mr. Speaker, this afternoon I and some of my colleagues had the pleasure of meeting these young men and women along with their parents during a special luncheon hosted by Her Honour the Honourable Lois Hole, Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. During the luncheon we had an opportunity to talk with each of them, and I'm sure my colleagues would agree with me that they are truly exceptional individuals and deserving of the award.

Mr. Speaker, among the Queen's Golden Jubilee Citizenship Medal recipients for 2003 are Samantha Saretsky from Lacombe composite high school in Lacombe, Alberta. Samantha is accompanied by her parents, Tony and Marilyn Saretsky. She is currently attending the University of Saskatchewan, or was until about the end of April, in political studies. She was joined today by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler, the chair of the Standing Policy Committee on Justice and Government Services.

We also have Laura Abday from Edmonton's Jasper Place high school. She is currently attending the University of Alberta in atmospheric sciences. She was joined today by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, the Minister of Economic Development.

We have Evan Wisniewski from Hairy Hill, Alberta, graduating from the Two Hills high school. Evan is here with his parents, Orest and Rosemarie Wisniewski. He is studying engineering at the University of Alberta. He was joined today by the hon. Member for Vegreville-Viking, the Minister of Transportation.

We have last but certainly not least Wilma Shim from Archbishop MacDonald high school here in Edmonton, someone who, I'm pleased to say, Mr. Speaker, is here today with her parents, William and Dr. Margaret Shim. The Shim family live in Edmonton-Whitemud, and as their MLA I couldn't be happier about Wilma's achievement in winning this prestigious award and scholarship. Wilma is attending the University of Calgary in kinesiology.

Unfortunately, the fifth recipient, Michele Romanow from St. Mary's high school in Calgary, was unable to attend this afternoon's luncheon, but her MLA, the Member for Calgary-West, joined us for lunch as well.

I'd ask these four outstanding young Albertans to rise in your gallery, Mr. Speaker, with their families and receive the traditional warm welcome and appreciation of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real honour today to introduce special guests from Jean Vanier elementary school in Sherwood Park. There are 27 students, two teachers, and two parents here today. Vicki Whalley and Linda Murphy are the teachers, and Pat Lemire and Suzanne Biamonte are here with the students. I've met with them. They've had their picture taken, and they're enjoying the tour of this beautiful building. I would ask now that they rise, please, and that we give them the worthy recognition of which they are so deserving.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise on behalf of my constituency and my colleague the hon. Minister of Seniors, the Member for Stony Plain, and introduce to you and through you to members of the House 36 visitors from Parkland county. These students and parents are the Parkland Home Educators and are here today to tour and observe what happens here at the Legislature. The students are accompanied by parents Mrs. Margaret Doige, Mrs. Janice Freund, Mrs. Glenda Foster, Mrs. Marie Tutt, Mrs. Nancy Gammon, Mrs. Janet Sawatzky, Mrs. Darlene Taras, Mr. Willy Freund, Mrs. Tami Garside, and Mrs. Carol Preston. I believe they are in both galleries, and I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You have already

introduced Mr. Willie Littlechild, but perhaps members and those joining us in the gallery would be interested in knowing that Mr. Littlechild has been given a singular honour in being Canada's – I believe that it's Canada's, but it could be the United Nations – representative for aboriginal peoples. Mr. Littlechild, if you would stand and receive the recognition of the House for that honour.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and indeed to all members of the Assembly Peyman Razavi. Peyman is a recent graduate of the University of Lethbridge. He has a bachelor's degree in management, and he is here this afternoon to observe the proceedings of the Assembly. Peyman Razavi is seated in the public gallery, and I would ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: 1:40

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Automobile Insurance Reform

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On December 3 last year the Premier said that he'd consider his government's auto insurance plan, quote, an absolute failure, end quote, if it failed to reduce premiums for 80 per cent of Alberta drivers. Unfortunately, the plan currently before cabinet does not save money for 80 per cent of drivers. My questions are to the Premier. Why is the government considering an auto insurance plan that by the Premier's own definition is an absolute failure?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, the hon. leader of the Liberal Party is not telling the truth again. There is no document, as far as I know, before cabinet, and I would be the first to know. So that statement is misleading, and before he proceeds, I wish he would stand up and apologize for saying that there is a government document before cabinet, because that is not true.

Mr. Speaker, the regulations surrounding the government's auto insurance reforms are still working through the approval process. As I understand it, it was at a standing policy committee, which is not cabinet, last night. So I can't comment on the speculative media reports about what will or won't be approved. I can tell you that I've heard third-hand – and this is media scuttlebutt. The report that the hon. member alludes to was not a government report. That is being reported by one media outlet. Another media outlet said that it is a government document.

Perhaps the hon. minister can shed some light on the situation.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has made some bold statements about the path that we're going on for reform of automobile insurance in the province of Alberta. I hope you'll give me the latitude on this.

Let's be very clear. When we started this process, we recognized that we needed to have a fair, accessible, affordable, and comparably priced insurance package within this province. We also recognized that there were spiralling costs that were being incurred last year by people who were purchasing insurance, and to make a long story short, some of the people in the province were not doing that.

So the path that we have gone down is to bring a new structure into Alberta that will bring down insurance premiums so that they are in fact affordable. The process we're into right now is going

through the regulations to back up the legislation that we've already passed in this House to support this structure.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why under this government's plan will most good drivers be locked into the highest insurance rates in Alberta history?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, there is no plan. As I say, no decisions. I would ask the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition to listen very carefully: no decisions have been made about the detailed regulations. No decisions. It has not been to cabinet. It is working its way through SPC. I don't know about the document that was reported in the media, but I will say that it is absolutely premature to be talking about the government breaking its promise. In fact, we don't intend in any way, shape, or form to break our promise.

The reforms, quite simply, are based on personal responsibility. Good drivers will pay competitive rates, and bad drivers will pay more. Our basic goal with auto insurance reform is to have premiums that reward good drivers, penalize bad drivers, as it should be, and provide fair compensation for those who are injured in traffic accidents.

Again I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

The Speaker: No. We're spending a lot of time here. The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, here's a plan the government could adopt. Why won't the government do what the Alberta Liberals and the vast majority of Albertans want and simply bring in public auto insurance?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I've said before in this Legislature, we subscribe to the policy of entrepreneurship and free enterprise, but we do know that there is a problem relative to a privately operated regulated industry, and we want to make that industry more responsive to, first of all, the needs of those in small to medium businesses that have a hard time hiring young drivers because of rising insurance premiums. We want to be able to be in a position to have insurance companies recognize that just because a person is a male between the ages of 16 and 25 doesn't necessarily make that person a bad driver and that therefore good drivers in that age bracket should be rewarded. We don't want to penalize those in the mid brackets, but we want to make sure that older drivers, male drivers in particular over 65, are not penalized because of age and because of gender. We don't think that that is fair.

Mr. Speaker, I have asked this hon. member and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands to table in this Legislature their insurance premiums for this year and last year and the previous year and also what they would pay in Saskatchewan. I would be very, very happy to table what I pay right now and what I would pay in Saskatchewan and what I would pay in Manitoba and what I would pay in British Columbia. I find that within a dollar or two or maybe 10 it's ostensibly the same.

Government Aircraft

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, only last week the Premier said, "All flight manifests are kept, and any member of the public is welcome to view them." But since 10 a.m. last Friday this government wants Albertans to wait months, maybe forever simply to find out how the Premier, ministers, and their staff are spending taxpayers' money on

flights in the government-owned air force. To the Premier: was it the Premier's decision to deny access to information about how he is using the government-owned aircraft?

Mr. Klein: To answer the question, the answer is no. It was not my decision whatsoever.

Mr. Speaker, relative to the flight manifests I don't have a problem generally. The flight manifests, as the hon. Minister of Infrastructure pointed out, are made public I think on a quarterly basis and are generally available for anyone to view.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I'm going to create a scenario. If Mr. or Mrs. Grundy want to look at a flight manifest, what they do is they phone the minister's office or they phone the hangar or they phone an appropriate authority and they receive permission to look at flight manifests. They sort of indicate what they want to look at, not 10 years of flight manifests that add up to 12,000 – I think that you save 12,000 or 13,000 different manifests, that would tie up literally countless hours of public service employees' time at great expense to the taxpayer. Nor do Mr. and Mrs. Grundy arrive at the hangar with a microphone and a bevy of media people. So one has to wonder: is he seeking legitimate information, or is he trying to create a media circus? I suspect that the latter is true.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the Infrastructure minister has said that government-owned aircraft cannot be used for political party business, why did the Premier take a government-owned aircraft to Fox Harb'r golf course for an event that was funded by a political party, the PC Party?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that plane was on its way to Halifax for an annual Premiers' Conference. Fox Harb'r is about 20 minutes from Halifax. I was let off there. The plane came back. It was deemed that part of the expense would be party expense and part of it would be business. I considered it all to be business, but if the party wants to consider some of it to be party-related activities, then that is entirely up to the party. I don't pay attention, nor do I ask who pays what for what, when, and why. It's all there.

1:50

It's no secret that I went to Fox Harb'r. I explained in this Legislature that I was invited by Ron Joyce to go there to meet and network with about 40 business leaders from around North America. I consider that to be part of my job as government, but if the party decided that part of it was not politically related and related to my job as the Premier, perhaps the golfing part, then they should pay for it.

Dr. Taft: The lines are too unclear, Mr. Speaker.

Has the government ever been reimbursed by the Premier's leader's fund for the cost of a flight on a government plane?

Mr. Klein: I don't know, Mr. Speaker, nor do I pay attention to those things. If business is deemed to be – well, I wouldn't use the plane for strictly party business. As a matter of fact, when we have Premier's dinners, when we have strictly party events, the party charters aircraft. There are times, admittedly, when government aircraft is used to do other business, and perhaps some party business will be done at the same time, as it was done in Fox Harb'r, but you can't separate the two. You can't walk and fly at the same time. It's like, you know, walking and chewing gum. Well, I guess you can do that, but you can't walk and fly at the same time. If it so happens

that some party business is mixed with ministerial business, so be it. What is the big deal? I'll tell you: their Liberal cousins . . .

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Automobile Insurance Reform (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Alberta drivers have been involved in a hit-and-run collision. Their government is at fault for hitting them with double-digit auto insurance rate increases and running behind access to information laws to hide its incompetence. My first question is to the Premier. If New Brunswick's Conservative government can quickly provide the Official Opposition with its KPMG study on auto insurance reform, what's stopping this government from publicly releasing its own KPMG report on auto insurance reform which was prepared at the same time by the same author?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know the timing relative to release of the report, but I will have the hon. Minister of Finance respond. I believe it will be released publicly once the information from the report is used to properly draft the regulations.

I'll have the hon. minister respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Nelson: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I've said numerous times in this House that once we have finalized the regulations associated with the reform package, which will go to cabinet when they are completed through the SPC process, and they are put in place, then the report will be finalized by KPMG and we will release the report. Until such time we won't release the report because it's not complete.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: why are the government's Conservative cousins so open and accountable regarding auto insurance in New Brunswick while this government disregards the FOIP commissioner by refusing to release even parts of the Alberta KPMG study, as the commissioner's office has instructed?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should understand that this is not New Brunswick. This is Alberta, and we do things the way that we deem to be proper here in Alberta. There is a process. We are following that process. The legislation to lay out the framework for the regulations vis-à-vis insurance has been passed. We are now working on the regulations. We are doing it in the normal manner, and the only people who are asking for that report, which is a working document or a document from which we can work, are the Liberals. I don't know what the circumstances are in New Brunswick, and although I have the deepest respect for Premier Lord in New Brunswick, he does things his way and we do things our way.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: is this government reluctant to release the KPMG study because the study tells the truth and doesn't back up this government's proposed reforms?

Mr. Klein: I don't know anything about the report other than that

it's a document from which the SPC, cabinet, caucus can work to arrive at reasonable solutions. Those solutions are to reward good drivers, punish bad drivers, and make sure that accident victims are fairly compensated, Mr. Speaker.

Relative to the report itself I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't know whether the hon. member opposite stays up too late at night and dreams these things up, but I have said dozens of times in this House that once this process is complete and the report is finalized, we will release the report publicly. Now, I don't know how much clearer you can make that, unless I have it go in slow motion to send the message over there.

We are not hiding anything. We're in a work in progress right now, and we're moving forward to have a new insurance system implemented in this province, a made-in-Alberta solution, this summer. We're on track and we will move forward, and hopefully he'll come with us.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The sand under the government auto insurance reforms keeps shifting, and it's quickly turning into quicksand. Last fall the Tory government claimed that Albertans would see their auto insurance premiums reduced to comparable levels with other western provinces. Now it appears that 80 per cent of Albertans will see no reductions in their premiums, which are already 35 to 50 per cent higher than in those provinces that enjoy the benefits of a public auto insurance plan. My question is to the Premier. When will the Premier admit that it is impossible to deliver through private insurance rates on par with those in other western Canadian provinces and that this is the real reason that 80 per cent of Albertans will see no rate reductions under the government's so-called reforms?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, two comments before I turn it over to the hon. Minister of Finance. One comment is that this hon. member has never responded to my request, a reasonable request, to table his personal insurance premiums and those that he would pay in Saskatchewan or Manitoba or British Columbia for this year or the last year or the year previous. He has never ever responded to that challenge because what he says is misleading. He knows that his insurance premiums are comparable. Are comparable. So he misleads the public of Alberta when he says that we are paying higher rates, because he is not paying a higher rate. He knows it, and I know it. Within \$10 or \$15 I know that ostensibly my rate is about the same.

Mr. Speaker, the second comment I have – and I'm trying to remember it.

Mrs. Nelson: Eighty per cent.

Mr. Klein: Oh, the 80 per cent. Yeah, the second comment was that it is so typical for this member in particular to do his research in the *Edmonton Journal*. Honestly, he gets up and he reads the *Edmonton Journal* and says: oh, boy, have I ever got a question today, and if it's in the *Journal*, it's gotta be true.

Well, you know, I hear from my communications people that there's a little spat going on between the CBC and the *Edmonton Journal* as to whether it was a government document or not a government document, and I don't get involved in media spats. So perhaps he should leave the Chamber and maybe get a tape of the

CBC news and see what the CBC has to say about it, and maybe he'll come back with a changed tune, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's the government bureaucrats that can't get it straight whether it's a government document.

My question is to the Premier. Since he and his Minister of Finance are both on the record as saying that Alberta will have rates similar to those in the other three western provinces, will he stand again in this Assembly and recommit to that promise and promise that we will have those rates in place before the next election?

2:00

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would be happy if the hon. member – well, I'd be happy without the hon. member, but it's going to take me some time.

Mr. Speaker, I would be very happy to table my insurance rates for this year, last year, the year before, and the year before that and also table what I would be paying in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. I'm not afraid to do that. You will see that they are comparable notwithstanding what the hon. member says or tries to tell the Alberta public in a misleading way. I would hope that the hon. minister, or the hon. member – I'm sorry; never a minister – would do the same thing.

Relative to the question I'll have the hon. minister respond.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, we've been on this path of reform now for quite some time, and our goal has been to provide insurance that is affordable to Albertans – comparable, competitive, et cetera – and accessible. We have stayed on this path through a lot of turmoil up and down.

I can tell you that as this path evolved last summer, we recognized that rates were going up, so we took steps immediately to stop the spiralling increase of rates by putting a freeze in place. People who were going to have their rates increase after October 30 were frozen at the prior year's rates. So they've already experienced a decrease in their premiums that they would have had.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this is important, and I hope you'll let me . . .

The Speaker: I know, hon. member, but I also have a list of 15 other hon. members who want to participate as well.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the Premier has two chauffeur-driven Buicks, I'm sure his rates are not comparable with the average person's.

If the Premier cannot deliver on his promise to provide automobile insurance premiums on par with those in other western provinces before the next election, will he do the honourable thing and resign?

Mr. Klein: No. Mr. Speaker, the answer to the last part of the question is absolutely not. I look forward to the absolute annihilation and elimination of this individual in the next election. But, again, I speak to the honour, the integrity, and the truthfulness which this hon. member swore an oath to uphold, and then to say that I don't have insurance rates because of the chauffeur-driven red Buick.

Mr. Speaker, in Calgary, although it is a government vehicle, I have a PT Cruiser, hardly a luxury car. In Edmonton I have a vehicle of my own. It's my own vehicle. It is a 1977 Volkswagen bug. Now, because of the nature of the Volkswagen it is classified as a classic and therefore is subject, unless I drive it on a limited

basis, to a special insurance rate. I don't drive it on a special occasion; therefore, it is subject to the full rate. That Volkswagen is assessed as if it were almost a brand new Volkswagen.

Mr. Speaker, I say again that I will table the insurance that I pay on that Volkswagen as a full-time driver.

Mr. Mason: Do you promise?

Mr. Klein: I'll table it tomorrow.

Since the hon. member seems to be reluctant to table what he pays on his personal vehicle for insurance, I will take it off the Net if he will give me the information relative to his driving record, his age, and so on – well, I can get that off the Net, but I can't get his driving record – and he will find that it is comparable.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Education Funding

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Red Deer public school board has recently expressed concern about its funding for the upcoming year and has stated that it falls far short of government promises in Budget 2004. My questions today are to the Minister of Learning. How much of an increase will school boards receive this year?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In our budget, that was just approved a couple of weeks ago, there was a \$250 million increase budget over budget for the basic K to 12 education system. Of those dollars, \$192 million went directly to school boards. The remaining \$58 million accommodated things such as increase in teachers' pension, curricular changes, things like that. There was a \$60 million injection that was announced around November of last year, and I do include that in that number. So be perfectly clear: \$250 million is from budget to budget. This represents about a 6.9 per cent increase to the amount that actually goes to the basic K to 12 system. The amount that actually goes to school boards has gone up by 5.8 per cent.

The thing that I really must say, though, as well, is that the way the money is being given out to school boards has changed. With the new flexible funding formula that is there, there are new conditions that have gone out to school boards. Each school board, however, is guaranteed at least a 2 per cent raise over last year, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Jablonski: To the same minister: based on the annual increases due to inflation and the anticipated increases for all district employees and specifically in the case of Red Deer public, has the school board received enough funding to cover their increasing costs and to hire new teachers?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, in direct relation to Red Deer public they have received a 4.8 per cent increase over the last budget year, so that's a considerable amount of dollars. They received about \$1.1 million in November with the \$60 million that I just referenced. They received about another \$1.7 million.

Mr. Speaker, the interesting thing about the new funding formula is that it's very dependent on the school boards and how they spend it. If they choose to spend it in hiring new teachers, which I certainly hope they would, then it is up to them. If they choose to spend a million dollars on technology, it is up to them. They are

accountable to their constituents. That's the way the funding formula has been arrived at.

Overall – overall – it's a 4.8 per cent, or roughly \$2.7 million, increase on a \$55 million budget, so that brings your budget up to around \$57 million for 6,000 students.

Mrs. Jablonski: To the same minister: is this enough money for school boards to begin to address the Learning Commission's recommendation on class sizes?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would certainly hope that \$250 million can go a long way to do it. The Learning Commission recommended that their class size guidelines be implemented over five years. I think that this is a start. Can we get to the class size guidelines in one year with these dollars? Probably not. There are some school jurisdictions who will do it.

Mr. Speaker, they have raised a very interesting question, and this question in itself begs a question, and that is, quite simply: what is the funding for each of the individual school jurisdictions? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods asked me in the estimates to table all of the funding profiles for the school jurisdictions, and indeed, through to the hon. Member for Red Deer, they will be on our web site today. I will be tabling all the profiles for all the school jurisdictions in Alberta later on this afternoon.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Coal Bed Methane Development

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On a number of occasions the Minister of Energy has indicated that there is very little freshwater production associated with coal bed methane drilling in Alberta. Then on April 20, 2004, the Minister of Energy said, "There is no evidence of fresh water production to date." My question is to the Minister of Energy. So which is it? Is there or is there not any freshwater production associated with coal bed methane drilling in Alberta?

Mr. Smith: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, again, if I had the ability to predict the presence of water in coal bed methane – how much, if it's fresh water, if it's saline or brackish – believe me, I wouldn't be here. People pay millions of dollars a year to somebody who can predict that with any kind of accuracy.

What we do know is that originally two wells in the Drayton Valley area which applied for freshwater production had, in fact, when they produced, saline or brackish water; that is, water with salt in it. We also know that the wells that are being drilled today in upper coals do not have water in them.

So our results to date with coal bed methane in Alberta are extremely encouraging in that there is very, very little, if any, fresh water associated with coal bed methane production.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. My next question is directed to the Minister of Environment. How many applications to divert fresh water from an aquifer within a coal bed methane seam are currently before Alberta Environment?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the Minister of Energy has quite clearly identified, we do not know what is in coal bed methane until there's some application to it.

Now, in my constituency, Mr. Speaker, we have people we call water witches, that can test for water, and it appears that the member opposite might be considered one. I don't know.

As we move forward, we will review all of those applications as they come forward, and if there's any evidence that there is fresh water to be diverted, then they will have to go through a full licensing procedure. As well, Mr. Speaker, there are hearings in the province right now that are being conducted by Energy and Environment to review with Albertans the whole issue around coal bed methane.

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Environment, there was an interjection there. There will be a point of order. There'll be some stormy waters ahead. You might want to rethink what you've just finished saying.

Ms Blakeman: Back to the Minister of Energy. Given that over a thousand coal bed methane wells have already been drilled in Alberta, why does the government continue to classify many of them as experimental, thus preventing people with CBM wells in their own backyards from obtaining information on them?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I do not have any information at my disposal that would indicate that somebody who is having a well drilled on the property that they owned would not have access to the data or not know about the water situation.

I would point out to the hon. member that there are regulations set out in the Water Act, very, very clear regulations, and by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board that guide the use and disposal of any water produced in association with natural gas and coal development. Most wells and shallow gas in Alberta have produced little or no water. The water that's produced in the deeper coal is brackish or saline. So it's not as if the fact that there's methane gas, which virtually goes directly into the sales stream, is brand new to Alberta.

The member, if she'd cast back, would realize that Alberta has been a gas producer for a long, long period of time and with that becomes . . .

Ms Blakeman: Answer the question.

Mr. Smith: Am I answering the question? Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that focus, given the interruptions from the very person who asked the question. I would just simply deduce by normal logic that she would want to be quiet and listen to the answer, and then I would use up less time in this important Assembly, Mr. Speaker, to you.

Having said that – and I don't want to go through the entire history of gas evolution in Alberta, although there are others that would like me to, Mr. Speaker – suffice it for me to say that the Alberta government, the Department of Environment, the Department of Energy, the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board do a very, very good job of managing our resources, and inside that resource envelope is included a very precious resource called water.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Canada/U.S. Relations

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The ongoing trade disputes between Canada and the U.S. have caused great hardship throughout Whitecourt-St. Anne. In preparation for last week's

meeting between the Prime Minister and President Bush I understand that the Premiers took part in a conference call with the Prime Minister in advance of that meeting. My questions are to the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. What issues of concern did Alberta put forward to be raised by the Prime Minister in this meeting with President Bush?

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, the recent meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Martin, of course, was extremely important. Overall, it was designed to advance relationships between our two nations, especially in areas of softwood lumber, yes, the BSE crisis, security, and a number of other areas.

Now, as far as the conference call is concerned, during the conference call between first ministers in advance of the Prime Minister's U.S. visit Alberta urged Prime Minister Martin to pursue the following topics. Certainly, we were to pursue and demonstrate a new and more positive relationship towards the United States. We urged the Prime Minister to press for speedy resolution of the BSE market access issue, especially as it relates to live cattle access, and to discuss how to deal with this sort of issue in the future. Also, overall, the goal was to reinforce the United States' understanding and appreciation of Alberta as a crucial energy security source and particularly the contributions that could be made by increased U.S. investment in Alberta's oil sands.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given the wide range of discussion, were there any positive results that came out of that discussion for Albertans?

Mr. Jonson: I think that first of all, Mr. Speaker, the overall, we hope in the long run, accomplishment here is that it would appear that Canada/U.S. relationships are back on a more positive footing than before, and that, of course, is extremely important for Alberta and for all of Canada.

Now, according to media reports, President Bush stated his administration's commitment to free trade when it comes to beef and promised that the border would reopen as quickly as possible, but from what I understand, the President did not provide any firm timetable. The Prime Minister also indicated that President Bush would like to see an end to the long-standing softwood lumber dispute between Canada and the United States, although again there was no specific timetable.

However, Mr. Speaker, it is very positive that after two years of deteriorating relations between Canada and the United States, our federal government seems willing to take steps necessary to ensure that our relations with the U.S. remain strong, and Alberta certainly supports the federal government's serious, proactive approach to improving the crucial relationship between Canada and the United States.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister. You mentioned the softwood lumber dispute. Can the minister indicate what impact the latest ruling in the dispute will have on Alberta?

Mr. Jonson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the recent NAFTA ruling, of course, is very positive. It's one of the strongest and most specific sets of findings that we've had thus far. We have been meeting with respect to analyzing the outcomes of this particular ruling and how

it might be applied to breaking the softwood lumber impasse, but I regret that at this point in time I'm not able to quote or to report on any specific results that have come from that particular ruling. But, certainly, it is positive overall.

Automobile Insurance Reforms

(continued)

Mr. MacDonald: When the government announced last summer its intentions to reform auto insurance, it promised to make the system more accessible, affordable, and fair. We now know that this is yet another broken promise by this government. My first question is to the Premier. Is there a lack of competition among private auto insurers in Alberta?

The Speaker: That's an opinion, hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: do private auto insurers have a collective monopoly over the underwriting business here in Alberta?

The Speaker: It sounds like an opinion again, hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that members of the Insurance Bureau of Canada use very similar, if not identical, rating structures when they are asked for a policy quote, how can this be called real competition here in Alberta?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know. Quite honestly, I don't know, and I'm not that involved with the insurance industry.

Mr. MacDonald: Obviously, you're not.

Mr. Klein: No, I'm not, Mr. Speaker, nor is this individual involved. As I understand it, he was a steamfitter before he became, well, sort of a politician and a union representative. He is not by any stretch of the imagination an actuary or any other kind of official associated with the insurance industry, and to intimate that he knows about the insurance industry and has all of this knowledge – he gleans it either from newspapers or off the Internet. I can tell the public that he is no expert by any stretch of the imagination. I don't know – and I will admit it; I'll be honest and admit it – the intricacies of the insurance industry, but I do know what I pay.

2:20

Now, I'm going to do him a favour. What I'm going to do is I'm going to first of all search his bio, find out how old he is, and then I'm going to make some assumptions. The assumption is this: that he has a car, a vehicle registered in his name, that he owns his vehicle. I'm going to assume that it's a medium- to late-model vehicle. I'm going to assume that his record is good. Then I'm going to find out generally what he would pay. I don't know what insurance company he goes through.

Mr. MacDonald: I'll save you the trouble. Twelve hundred dollars.

Mr. Klein: Okay. That's for PL/PD.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this is question period, not a back and forth.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Right-of-way Regulations

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We all know that pipelines and transmission wires are infrastructure vital to Alberta's economy. Recently a constituent of mine who owns farmland met with me and raised an issue of a farmer who was not allowed to expand his barn because it would infringe on a pipeline right-of-way. My questions today are to the Minister of Energy. What rules are in place to fairly compensate landowners for the loss of opportunity resulting from the rights-of-way?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I hope that that hesitation between "hon." and "minister" was just Freudian when it came to me.

Mr. Speaker, let me say that there is a robust set of regulations and a sophisticated network of process surrounding right-of-way. The government has the power of eminent domain that it can exercise with the siting of transmission, but there is a very good process with the EUB, the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, and the Surface Rights Board. I'm more than pleased to provide the member with absolute, finite detail as to how he could direct his constituent into that process.

Let me conclude, Mr. Speaker, by saying that the transmission process is still a regulated process in Alberta's competitive market generation model.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental question is to the same minister. Who is responsible for maintaining the rights-of-way for things like weed control or overgrown branches that negatively affect the crop cultivation?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, this may require a supplement from the minister of agriculture, because his example of weed control actually is governed by the Weed Control Act of the Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development department. So should further light be shone on this noxious subject, I'm sure that there's nobody more qualified than the minister of agriculture.

But I can say that the operators of these transmission lines have a responsibility, Mr. Speaker, for safe and effective handling of transmission. Again, they apply to the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board and tell the board how much this maintenance is going to cost. From that, the board works up the price that is charged to consumers for transmission rates in the province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last supplemental question is to the same minister. Several companies working in the same region of Alberta could result in criss-crossing of pipelines underground. My question is: how is the siting of pipelines planned, managed, and the documentation of the network updated?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, it's a natural monopoly and, as such, controlled by the EUB.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Crossroads Program

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The forecast for this last fiscal year's victims of crime fund estimates that there will be a surplus of at least \$6.2 million. Meanwhile, the Crossroads program for victims of prostitution is going under because they could not find the \$350,000 to keep it running. My questions are to the Solicitor General. Given that the Solicitor General is sitting on at least a \$6.2 million surplus in the victims of crime fund from the last fiscal year alone plus the operating money for this year, why will she not help this valuable program continue?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member asks a good question, and I guess the first thing I'd like to say is that this group she's referring to – I believe it's Crossroads – has not approached me. I know Crossroads very well in the work that I did in regard to child prostitution, and I have not heard from them at all.

Maybe the Minister of Children's Services would like to supplement the answer.

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, currently we're looking at the incidence of children who have been in care that are adults now by virtue of the fact that they're over 18. Our Children's Services staff are talking to them and talking to the people that manage the program.

Initially last year when they served notice that if we did not fund the adults that were in that program, they would be compelled to close, we had other placements for them, but we wanted to look very carefully, because we are not in the business of serving adults that require these types of services. If they have been youth in care and we can provide mentoring and transitional supports, if we can assist them in finding housing supports, then we'll do that as well as providing counselling.

My understanding is that region 6, whom I was in discussions with today about this, are in discussions as we speak on this very topic.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Back to the Solicitor General then. Am I hearing from the Solicitor General a willingness to go the extra mile not only for prostitutes under 18 but, in this case, for prostitutes over 18, particularly those with children of their own? If they approach you, will the minister be willing to listen?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, this minister is always willing to listen, Mr. Speaker. I've always spent a lot of time listening. I think one of the things that Crossroads can look at: we have reinstated our crime prevention grants, and our restorative justice they may be able to access. If they want to talk to me, I have wonderful staff that work for me in that area, and I'm sure that I'd be pleased to meet with them, and I know my staff would be willing to listen to them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Back to the same minister. I'm specifically seeking information. Why won't this minister fund the Crossroads program out of the surplus she already has for the victims of crime fund?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, let's be very clear first of all: that fund is for victims of crime. If Crossroads feels that they qualify for that, they can go and apply to get some money from the victims of crime fund.

It's very, very simple. We're here to help people, and we're willing to listen. If the people at Crossroads want to talk to me, I'll certainly sit down, discuss with them, tell them what avenues there are and what resources we have within our department to help them.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday the Minister of Seniors shared a podium with the Deputy Prime Minister to announce funding for 11 new affordable housing projects. While this is positive news, the Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation announced yesterday that a lack of funding is forcing the closure of the Crossroads duplex, which provides safe and supportive housing for homeless and street-involved women. The Crossroads duplex opened only two years ago in the Boyle Street area on lots where fortified drug houses once stood. My questions are to the Minister of Seniors. Why is this government failing to provide the necessary ongoing funding to allow affordable housing like the Crossroads duplex to keep its doors open to vulnerable street-involved women?

2:30

Mr. Woloshyn: Well, it's unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, that I have to explain the affordable housing program to the hon. member. The affordable housing program provides funding in partnership with municipalities, with private developers, with non-for-profit groups to build – to build – affordable housing. The operation of that comes from the proponents of the projects. We do it at a very, very economical rent, and as he indicated, very positive news.

So how our affordable housing project would come into this other situation, which seems to be unfortunate, is beyond me, since that project was funded by the federal government's initiatives, good initiatives, I might add, and those two cottages were homes that were moved from Griesbach barracks.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the government is unwilling to provide ongoing operating support for affordable housing projects after they get built, why is the government exposing vulnerable women to the risk of homelessness and forcing them back into the arms of criminals who operate the drug houses that the Crossroads duplex is built to replace?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, generally, I try to keep a composure in this Legislature, but when a question so misdirected, so vindictive, and so inaccurate comes here, it irritates me to no end. Number one, the Seniors' department was not involved in this project. The Edmonton Housing Trust Fund promised funding up until March 31 to the operators. Alberta Seniors funds at least a million dollars to the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund annually.

Mr. Speaker, that member is so far off course I don't think he realizes that he's in the Legislature.

Dr. Pannu: My last question to the Minister of Seniors: given that the Crossroads duplex supports highly vulnerable individuals overcoming addictions and past abuse, what immediate actions will this minister take to make sure that this supportive and innovative housing project is not forced to close its doors at the end of this month?

Mr. Woloshyn: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for a very good question. Thank you very much. That I can answer.

I think it's important to note that we invest through Seniors some \$4.6 million annually into Edmonton; \$1.28 million of this goes towards the Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre, which you're familiar with, and to Elizabeth House for single inner-city women.

Mr. Speaker, in direct answer to the question posed by the hon. member – what am I going to do immediately? – because this is new to me since we were not involved in this in any way, shape, or form, I'm having my staff set up meetings with the operators, with the funders to determine if, in fact, there was perhaps some support from other areas of government in here. We will be looking at what we can do. We're not in the program business, but as minister responsible for housing I would be very distressed to see shelter spaces that could be utilized go unused because of some, shall we say, problems that arise from it.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of four hon. members to participate today in Members' Statements, but in the interim might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a great honour today to be able to recognize six distinguished educational leaders from the Caribbean and northern South America who are visiting Canada and Alberta in particular today. These are people who have won the Canadian Teachers' Federation John Thompson fellowship program. They're part of that program.

We have Mr. Jerry Coipel, who's the treasurer of the Dominica Association of Teachers. We have Ms Avril Crawford, general secretary of the Guyana Teachers' Union; Mr. Cecil Hodge, president of the British Virgin Islands Teachers' Union; Ms Celestine John, president of the Anguilla Teachers' Union; Mr. Vivian Sedney, secretary-general of the Surinam teachers' organization; Mr. Anthony Wolfe, president of the Bermuda Union of Teachers. They're accompanied by Mr. Tim Johnston, the international officer of the Alberta Teachers' Association, and Ms Shelley Svidal, who is the administrative assistant at the ATA. Their mission here is to observe first-hand the operations of one of Canada's provincial teachers' organizations and in particular the Alberta Teachers' Association, and we're greatly honoured to have them in the Legislative Assembly today. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Rolls-Royce

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour for me to be privileged to stand today in the Assembly and make a statement concerning a very important centenary. On May 4, 1904, 100 years ago today, an engineer named Frederick Henry Royce met an aristocrat, Charles Stewart Rolls, at a luncheon in the Midland Hotel

in Manchester, England. On a handshake they agreed that a company should be formed to market motor products designed and produced by Royce. The company we know as Rolls-Royce is the result, recognized around the world for excellence in engineering technology and manufacturing.

The importance of this event for our Assembly is that Rolls-Royce's efforts leading up to and during the second great war, supplying aircraft, marine, tank engines along with other machinery and armaments, are credited with giving Allied pilots, sailors, and ground forces the edge that allowed them to secure victories critical to saving Britain. The parliamentary system we have and for the most part enjoy today in all likelihood would not have survived if it had not been for this historic meeting and the subsequent superior products produced by the company.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Canadian Forces Base Cold Lake

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to honour Canadian Forces Base Cold Lake, who will be celebrating their 50th anniversary on Friday, June 18, 2004.

CFB Cold Lake is Canada's largest air force base and home of the CF-18 tactical fighter squadrons. World renowned for their ability and skills, 4 Wing pilots receive rigorous training and are deployed from either 416 or 441 squadrons. Combined with the air weapons range, which is the only tactical bombing range in Canada, 4 Wing has evolved into the best fighter-force training venue in the world.

Build it, and they will come. In 1951 an announcement was made concerning the development of the air weapons range on a tract of land 180 kilometres by 65 kilometres bridging both northeastern Alberta and Saskatchewan. CFB Cold Lake began construction in 1952, and operations commenced in 1954. Today the base, under the leadership of Wing Commander Colonel Sullivan, has over 2,000 regular and reserve personnel as well as a civilian workforce that fluctuates between 230 and 430 and is set to grow even further.

I think we can all recognize the impact of the base on the city of Cold Lake. The 4 Wing was built at Medley, between what was Cold Lake and Grande Centre, and became part of the tritown area, merging into one in 1996. What is special and unique is the joint co-operation between the base and the city of Cold Lake, and you will see this spirit of co-operation in the events planned for this summer celebrating the base's 50th anniversary.

For example, for six weeks beginning May 3 and running to June 11, the Maple Flag days will host 10 nations, arguably making this one of the biggest and best fighter-force training exercises in the world. On June 18, 4 Wing's anniversary date, a 25-year-old time capsule will be opened and restocked and a CF-18 pedestal aircraft will be unveiled. On Saturday and Sunday, July 17 and 18, the city of Cold Lake and 4 Wing are jointly hosting the Cold Lake International Air Show, which is going to be one of the best in North America this year. The Snowbirds, USAF Thunderbirds, Skyhawks, and an exclusive CF-18 multiship attack complete with pyrotechnics are all part of the show. In conjunction with the air show a Border Bash will be featuring many talented musical singers and bands. The final highlight of the summer will be the freedom of the city of Cold Lake commencing with the parade through the city of Cold Lake on Friday, August 27.

On behalf of Colonel Sullivan, wing commander of 4 Wing Cold Lake, and all of the base personnel I invite my colleagues, their

families, and all Albertans to participate in celebrating CFB Cold Lake's 50th anniversary.

Happy 50th anniversary, CFB Cold Lake, and congratulations on a job well done.

Thank you.

2:40

The Speaker: That statement by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake ran a full one minute beyond the time allocated for it, but it was allowed today simply because the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky went one minute under his allocated time.

The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Citizenship Medal

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On February 26, 2002, our hon. Premier rose in this Assembly and introduced Bill 1, the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Recognition Act. This provincial legislation annually commemorates the golden jubilee of our Queen, Elizabeth II, and recognizes in her honour the very special contributions of Alberta's young people in building this province and its communities.

Everyone knows the kind of young Albertans I'm talking about. They are the ones who go way above and beyond in their communities, the ones who go out of their way to help others, give freely of their time in support of a worthy charity or cause, or through some other way find the time to give back to their community. Quite simply, they represent all that it means to be a very good citizen in this province.

There are many awards or scholarships that recognize outstanding achievement in academics or sports or perhaps even both, but with the Queen's jubilee recognition act we now have a way to recognize Alberta's young people who exemplify the best qualities in citizenship and leadership. I truly cannot think of a more meaningful award.

Every year one student from each high school in Alberta is chosen to receive the Premier's citizenship award based upon their exemplary contributions to their community and their school. From this select group the five most outstanding are recognized with the Queen's Golden Jubilee Citizenship Medal and a \$5,000 award to use for further education or development.

Today I had the honour of hearing the name of an outstanding young constituent of mine, Michele Romanow from St. Mary's high school in Calgary, who was recognized in this Assembly along with the four other Queen's Golden Jubilee Citizenship Medal recipients for 2003: Samantha Saretsky from Lacombe composite high school, Laura Abday from Edmonton's Jasper Place high school, Evan Wisniewski from Two Hills high school, and Wilma Shim from Edmonton's Archbishop MacDonald high school.

Our province is very proud to celebrate the achievement of young Albertans who exemplify the qualities of citizenship, volunteerism, and community participation. Having pride in one's community and a willingness to contribute back is important because it builds upon the important foundation of compassion and respect, two characteristics that I believe are the cornerstones of a caring and safe society. These key components have made Alberta the strong, vibrant province that it is today and will allow it to remain strong in the future.

Congratulations to these five outstanding young Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Romanow and Juliet

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Romanow and Juliet, with apologies to William Shakespeare. Scene 2, New Democrats' orchard, enter Romanow.

But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and medicare is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious Tory moon,

Who is already sick and pale with greed,

That thou our public system art far more fair than she:

Be not her maid, since she is envious;

Her health delivery is but sick and greedy

And none but fools do bear it; cast it off.

It is my birthright, O, it is my love!

Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear

That tips with silver all these fruitful contracts.

O, swear not by the moon, the inconstant Tory moon,

That monthly changes in her circled orb

Lest thy coverage prove likewise variable.

Good night, good night! Privatizing is such

sweet sorrow,

False savings today and Americanization on the morrow.

O, Romanow, Romanow! Wherefore art thou,

Romanow?

Deny delisting and refuse thy premiums;

Or, if that wilt not put an end to waiting lists,

Then thou no longer be a New Democrat.

'Tis but their greed that is my enemy.

Thou art thyself, though not a Pettigrew.

What's a Pettigrew? It is his foot in mouth

That reveals the Liberals' deceitful scheme.

Too early, I hope, for the election is not yet come.

What's in a name? That which we call medicare

By any other name would smell as sweet;

So Romanow would, were he not by the

Liberals and Tories ignored,

Retain that dear public system which we owe

Without that title to Tommy Douglas and the NDP.

The Speaker: That one could be in the book, hon. member.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition signed by 108 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to "pass legislation that eliminates health care premiums."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Bill 31

Highways Development and Protection Act

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to introduce Bill 31, the Highways Development and Protection Act.

The bill will consolidate and modernize the existing Public Highways Development Act and the City Transportation Act and provide a single legislative framework for planning, developing, and protecting the provincial highway network system.

[Motion carried; Bill 31 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I am tabling the requisite number of copies of all the school funding profiles for the province of Alberta, including charter schools and all the schools that are funded by us. This will enable full transparency and full disclosure for everyone involved, as was asked for by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods during estimates.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table the requisite number of copies of a report showing that toll roads apparently are turning out to be as much as twice as safe as publicly built and maintained highways, clearly something worth investigating. It's called Facts and Myths About Tolls. It's prepared for the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, whose motto is There Are No Free Roads. Clearly, it's the sort of reading material that should keep people wide awake at night.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to table five copies of a letter from Kip Snelling, who is employed in the Ventures program at Michener Centre in Red Deer. In the letter Kip includes a petition signed by 34 residents of Michener, constituents of mine, in support of maintaining the Ventures program, which helps Michener residents to be active and employed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first is a letter that I received on December 22, 2003, from Alberta Finance, and it's a partial release of the KPMG actuarial study commissioned by the government to help set the rate for basic automobile insurance in 2003 in Alberta.

The second tabling I have is a study done by KPMG. It's titled Impact of Proposed Tort Reform on Private Passenger Automobile Rates in New Brunswick, and it's dated July 28, 2003.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table a letter addressed to all MLAs from Mr. Phil Flaumitsch. Mr. Flaumitsch is a young driver and has raised serious concerns about insurance rates in Alberta. He's particularly concerned by the government's obvious inability to deliver on promises of lower insurance premiums.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of a news release from the Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation. It's dated May 3, 2004, that is yesterday. It announces the closure of the Crossroads duplex due to lack of funding. The Crossroads duplex had provided a safe and supportive home for those who had histories of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, violence, or homelessness.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Point of Order Insulting Language

The Speaker: During question period today, hon. members, there was an interjection by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands with respect to a point of order heard very clearly by the chair. Hon. Minister of Environment, do you want to withdraw some statements, or should we proceed with the point of order?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, if I could just elaborate perhaps for . . .

The Speaker: No. Then we'll proceed. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands raised the point of order.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm raising the point of order under our Standing Orders, section 23(j), which is when a member "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder."

It's my view that when the hon. minister referred to the hon. Official Opposition House Leader as a water witch he was not particularly talking about her ability to divine moisture in the soil. I think that it was inappropriate and uncalled for, and I ask that he withdraw it.

2:50

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's no fun being the only woman on the front benches of the opposition, and I'm very aware that many women, perhaps most women, who might currently be considering running for political office would find the minister's comments sexist, distasteful, juvenile, and a deliberate attempt to trivialize my role as an equal member of this House.

I've gone carefully through the list of unparliamentary language that's provided in *Beauchesne* and by the Speaker's handout of February of 2004. Interestingly, "witch" is not found as unparliamentary language, I suspect because the amount of name-calling that has happened to people of a particular gender of whom "witch" might apply has not been as common, and that's why we're not finding it. I think the member is very uncomfortable being challenged by a woman, and his attempt to trivialize my role in this House is his way of handling that, shrinking me down to a size he can handle, if you would like, and I think it shows how far in the past he indeed is living.

It's not a compliment to his caucus or to the government that those kinds of comments would be uttered, I believe. But, Mr. Speaker, I take comfort, small comfort, in two adages. One is that they always scream the loudest when they know they're losing, and secondly, what comes around goes around.

Thank you.

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think we have not so much a point of order here as, I would say, a point of misunderstanding of a rural cultural tradition. I would point out to you that water witch is not sexist. I'll explain to you what it is. First of all, in my constituency and I've since learned in a number of constituencies around the province from the number of notes that I've received, it is common terminology. What water witch refers to is one who can usually take a willow with a fork in it . . .

Mr. Cardinal: Or a crowbar.

Dr. Taylor: The hon. minister suggests a crowbar. As you walk through a certain area where you're trying to find water, that bar or

that willow will move in downwards motion. People that can do this – I can't do it, Mr. Speaker; I wish I could – can actually identify the type of water and the depth that the water is at. These people are referred to as water witches.

Now, this is a terminology that is common in rural Alberta. I thought it was just southern Alberta, but apparently it is common in other parts of Alberta as well. To suggest that it is sexist is inappropriate, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Minister of Learning is in fact a water witch, and it appears to be something that is inherited. The hon. Minister of Learning has informed me that his father can witch and his brother can witch as well, so that is the cultural tradition on this.

Now, if you look at the member's comments – I don't have them in front of me, so I'm just going by memory – I believe she suggested that she knew that there was potable water in coal bed methane where we had not drilled, and we don't know if there's potable water in that. Well, the only thing somebody coming from my cultural tradition can assume is that she must be a water witch; that is, she can divine water without having to go through the scientific methodologies of drilling. As I say, it's a rare skill and a very valuable skill.

So I think, Mr. Speaker, this is a point of cultural misunderstanding as opposed to any point of order.

The Speaker: Others on this point?

Well, the chair disagrees with the hon. Minister of Environment. Here is what was said from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. "My next question is directed to the Minister of the Environment. How many applications to divert fresh water from an aquifer within a coal bed methane scene are currently before Alberta Environment?" Minister of Environment, that was the question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre. The Minister of Environment after one statement says, "Now, in my constituency, Mr. Speaker, we have people we call water witches, that can test for water, and it appears that the member opposite might be considered one. I don't know."

Now, let's see what the *Encyclopedia Britannica* says about what a water witch is. First of all, it says that it's an "occult practice." Secondly, it says that it was "first practiced in Europe during the Middle Ages, dowsing is most often used to find water but may also be employed to locate precious metals, buried treasure, archaeological remains, or even dead bodies."

Now, I suspect, I just really suspect – I wonder if the term "water witch" would have been used if the poser of the question had been male. On that point I am going to rule that this is an actual point of order. I am going to ask the hon. Minister of Environment to withdraw his comment.

Dr. Taylor: Certainly, Mr. Speaker. In deference to you I would withdraw my comment.

The Speaker: Thank you.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Human Resources and Employment

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Order the first hour will be

allocated between the minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm here today to present the 2004-2005 estimates for Alberta Human Resources and Employment.

We have some folks in the gallery today, and I believe that Dan Thompson, director of budgets and forecasts, is there; Duncan Campbell, senior financial officer; James Frey, the acting assistant director of communications; and Charlene Schmidt. I see Shelby MacLeod, my executive assistant; Warren Chandler, special assistant; and it looks like some guests that are here touring. So welcome to everybody.

I wanted to talk first, Mr. Chairman, about the future of Alberta, about a future when Albertans are even less dependent on government supports, when employers can find the skilled labour they need, and when the risk of workplace injury or death is minimal.

Alberta Human Resources and Employment is looking to build a better future for Albertans, and building that better future for Alberta comes at a price. This year I'm asking for \$1.148 billion to support the work of the ministry. This does not include the WCB, the Workers' Compensation Board, which is entirely financed by employer premiums so is not a part of these budget estimates.

The Alberta Ministry of Human Resources and Employment is made up of five components: the department, the Alberta Labour Relations Board, the personnel administration office, the Appeals Commission for workers' compensation, and fifth, the Workers' Compensation Board. As I said, I will not be discussing WCB in these remarks.

3:00

First, I would like to discuss the Alberta Human Resources and Employment department. Before I begin, we've all heard about the tyranny of the anecdote: how one welfare client taking advantage of the system means everyone is a cheat, how one unhappy WCB client means the system is a failure. But those anecdotes are the minority. Stories of real Albertans provide us with real examples of what government does to affect their lives every day. Today I will be including stories about real people who have accessed our services. They are just a few of the hundreds of stories I and my colleagues hear every single day. These stories reflect our priorities and the great work Alberta Human Resources and Employment has done and will continue to do over the next year.

There are five main initiatives that will be addressed by the department over this next year. First, we will continue to implement Alberta Works income support and employment training programs. Our province's record on welfare reform is a national good-news story. At 1.3 per cent we have the lowest percentage of working-age population receiving social assistance in this country. This percentage has remained stable, but population continues to grow. We also have one of the highest percentages of adults participating in the workforce, more than 74 per cent.

This year we will invest \$617 million into the Alberta Works initiative as a system of income and employment supports, health and other benefits. It is a program designed to produce better results but at no additional cost to the taxpayer. It is a program not simply about giving people money; it's about giving them a future. Alberta Works will build on our success at helping people find and keep a job. It takes us even further away from old approaches where people could be trapped into dependence on government handouts instead of being given the hand up that they really need to create a better future for themselves and their family.

Under Alberta Works we help Albertans leaving financial assistance remain independent of government programs. Sometimes it means getting them into academic upgrading or skills training. Of the total Alberta Works budget nearly \$280 million will help 40,000 Albertans get labour market information, academic upgrading, language courses, or job skills training to move into the workforce.

Sometimes it's supporting people so that they can flee abusive homes. Eligible clients fleeing domestic violence could receive up to \$1,000 to help them set up a new household and get a fresh start. Diane is just one such woman who needed our help. This 40-year-old mother of two from Calgary fled an abusive relationship and needed to get her life back. Before he left the country, her estranged husband had destroyed her entire wardrobe and her eyeglasses. She was so distraught and fearful that she left her executive secretary position with an oil company.

We provided Diane with income supports while she attended counselling for the trauma she had experienced. She also received encouragement and support from our staff. We were also able to assist Diane to replace some of her work wardrobe and eyeglasses. She participated in life skills and career planning workshops to rebuild her shattered self-confidence. Diane is now back working full-time as an executive secretary for an engineering company. Where would Diane be if we just gave her a monthly cheque? Alberta works because we invest in people, and through Alberta Works, the program, we will see a return on that investment.

To access our services, we tell Albertans to click, call, or come in. In March 2004 there were more than 184,000 clicks to ALIS, our career, learning, and employment web site. That was our best month on record, and this is up 28 per cent from last year. We just launched two new on-line services, WAGEinfo and CERTinfo, to help job seekers find out what they can expect to earn in the Alberta job market or which occupations have special requirements. Clients can also call our new income support contact centre to get toll-free, 24/7 access to information on our financial assistance programs and services. Across the province people can come in to one of our more than 50 Alberta service centres or Canada/Alberta service centres.

Supports do not just end. For those that need it, they can continue to receive the hand up. Through the Alberta adult health benefit program health benefits will be extended to parents leaving financial assistance for work or because of an increase in Canada pension plan disability benefits. These health benefits can be renewed each year if the family earns less than the established income threshold. Alberta Works includes \$86 million invested into health benefits.

Also for the first time, child support services can continue after a family leaves financial assistance to help them get child support agreements or orders. This is very important because next to earned income child support has the greatest financial impact for low-income families. We will also spend \$4 million to provide child support services to help low-income parents get child support orders and agreements.

Our second initiative is the skills investment strategy and is part of our ongoing work to address labour shortages and skills deficits in Alberta. The skills investment strategy will increase opportunities for Albertans to get the skills and supports they need to find and keep a job. The skills investment strategy addresses the training needs of all Albertans including aboriginal people, immigrants, low-income Albertans, older workers, people with disabilities, and youth. The new skills investment programs provide greater flexibility and offer a better range of training, an increased number of work-related programs, greater supports for part-time learn-while-you-earn training, and an increased opportunity for providers to create training partnerships.

Our job corps office in Lac La Biche has been piloting a program

for at-risk youth, meaning kids who have quit school and are hanging around with nothing constructive to do. One of these at-risk youth, Thomas, was 19 and had quit school in grade 10. He was, in his own words, hanging around smoking dope for a couple of years and not going anywhere. Job corps helped Thomas decide what he didn't want to do by assigning him to a placement commensurate with his education as a labourer. After two days of digging sand, Thomas decided he wanted to go back to school to become a pipe fitter. The story isn't over. Thomas hasn't graduated yet, but I can say that he's still in school.

This year we will help more adults get the supports and information they need to succeed in the labour market, to get academic upgrading or language courses or job skills training they need to move into the workforce sooner so people like Thomas can get through their training and into the workforce faster.

Each year the department receives approximately \$120 million from the federal government for the Canada/Alberta labour market development agreement, or LMDA. The purpose of the LMDA was to recognize provincial responsibility for labour market training and to transfer delivery of employment insurance training programs to Alberta. Ours was the first LMDA signed, and now similar agreements exist between the federal government and most other provinces. The funds we receive from the federal government have been shrinking by about \$1 million a year even though demand has gone up and costs have gone up. Last year we actually spent \$10 million more than the LMDA services that we received from the federal government.

The department's third initiative is one mandated by legislation. This fall we will begin a review of the assured income for severely handicapped, or AISH, program to ensure that client needs are being met, the program is sustainable, and Alberta's most vulnerable people have the benefits they need. At \$393 million AISH is the largest program in the ministry and is still one of the most generous programs of its kind in Canada.

This year for the AISH program we will spend \$276 million for AISH's financial benefits and \$118 million in medical benefits for more than 32,000 Albertans. Medical costs account for nearly one-third of the total AISH spending, an increase of 13 per cent from 2003-2004, or an additional \$14 million. Medical costs for AISH recipients have increased dramatically from approximately \$63 million in '99-2000 to \$118 million this year. That's an increase of 87 per cent in six years, and a large portion of that is prescription drug costs.

3:10

The AISH caseload is also increasing. The number of recipients is growing by about 4 to 6 per cent per year, much more rapidly than the population. We need to understand why that's occurring. We have all heard from constituents on AISH about the challenges they face making ends meet. I wish I could do more, but first we need to get a handle on medical costs, prescription drug costs, and caseload increases.

Something must be done. The AISH program needs to be changed to ensure its long-term sustainability. We'll be talking to the people closest to the program: the workers, the advocacy groups, the service providers, and clients. Our hope is that the AISH review will bring solutions and identify ways to make the program more responsive to the people it serves.

For our department's fourth initiative we will develop partnerships to meet Alberta's human resource development needs, focusing on skills deficits, workforce planning, supporting increased workforce productivity, and improving relationships with workplaces.

Another example. David is a 21 year old who came to the youth

employment centre in Calgary. He was tired of working dead-end jobs. David completed a career planning inventory with a counsellor. He was then assisted in researching his options. David decided to become an electrician. He and his counsellor completed a resume. The counsellor then connected David with the Calgary Construction Association, who put him in touch with a journeyman who was willing to take on an apprentice. Six months later David is still employed as an electrician's apprentice.

We need to continue to develop and foster partnerships with all sectors—construction, tourism, agriculture—to ensure that Albertans like David can remain part of our vibrant economy. In our six delivery regions our staff are working directly with employers, business associations, chambers of commerce, and economic development authorities to get the word out. There are people who need to work, who want to work, and we can help employers connect with them.

The department's fifth and final initiative is WorkSafe Alberta. Our goal is to reduce workplace injuries by 40 per cent, and we're almost halfway there. In 2003 the lost time claim rate was down from 3.4 to a record low of 2.8. Our goal is to have it at 2.0 by the end of 2004. Consider these statistics. Someone is injured on the job in Alberta every 3.5 minutes. Last year there were 127 work deaths in Alberta. Emergency room doctor and injury researcher Dr. Louis Francescutti described this death rate as an epidemic. I believe it is 100 per cent preventable.

We will continue to reduce workplace injury rates even further and lower the health, personal, economic, and workers' compensation costs associated with preventable incidents. The funds we put in are an investment, \$13.7 million in workplace health and safety this year, a slight increase over last year. If WorkSafe Alberta is successful in meeting the 40 per cent reduction target, it could save \$220 million each year in WCB claims and assessments. We have hired 19 more inspectors, we had more convictions, and we've increased fines from \$150,000 to \$500,000, but we still have a long way to go. Injuries are down, but they're still occurring.

The key to WorkSafe Alberta is education. We have to get new workers educated in safe practices. One of our inspectors in Medicine Hat told me about something he saw last fall. He was parked in his vehicle across from a residential construction site. Workers were on scaffolding installing siding on a new house. A young worker was attempting to reach higher to get an extra section installed before he had to climb up to the next level of scaffolding. He couldn't quite reach, so he proceeded to grab a plastic bucket to stand on. Our inspector was about to yell up to the worker to stop what he was doing when the man's supervisor told him to stop and climb up the scaffold to reach. Later the supervisor told our inspector that he couldn't afford to lose anyone off his crew due to injury. Lost productivity, lost time, and lost lives: that's what WorkSafe Alberta is trying to prevent.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention a couple of other areas within the workplace side of our department. The first is employment standards. These folks ensure that employers and employees have balanced rights and responsibilities. In employment standards and other enforcement areas of the department our approach is to educate first, then regulate. An example: our officers provide training on how to calculate overtime and holiday benefits or how to arrange shifts and compressed work weeks. This year we will be devoting \$5.3 million to employment standards initiatives so that we can continue to help people and workplaces be fair.

One area of employment standards I'd like to highlight is partnerships. The Alberta Hotel & Lodging Association is working with our employment standards staff on a number of initiatives to increase their members' knowledge about the legislation and regulations.

The advice and information our staff can impart has been particularly valuable to the smaller members who do not have human resource professionals on staff.

Another component of our workplace investments is labour relations. In 2004-2005 we will spend about \$2.2 million on labour relations, a relatively small part of our budget but with a large and lasting impact. Labour relations is about mediation services to help disputing parties reach a settlement. Mediators make a difference. Employers and their unionized workers need to work together to meet training and sector needs, and it is important that the negotiations about wages and benefits not undermine the working relationship that is needed for other challenges. Mediators can help make workplace relations more balanced and productive.

Labour relations is also about ensuring confidence in regulated professionals, and it's about labour relations policy development. Alberta has one of the most stable labour relations climates in the country. Between 1999 and 2003 Alberta averaged the second lowest rate of lost time due to labour dispute at 217 days lost per 10,000 person-days' work, about one-third of the national average.

That concludes the department portion of the ministry.

The second component of the ministry is the Alberta Labour Relations Board. Last year's passage of the Labour Relations (Regional Health Authorities Restructuring) Amendment Act has set out a number of tasks for the board in the coming year. Previously the board concluded the runoff votes between unions as well as determinations and votes on collective agreements. This year the board will be providing mediation for those parties requiring it and adjudicating any outstanding issues from the mediation process. On a day-to-day basis the LRB will continue to resolve the issues brought before it with an emphasis on trying to settle disputes before they require formal hearings.

The third component of the ministry is the personnel administration office, the government's central human resource agency. PAO's budget of \$8.7 million supports the work it does to build a strong Alberta public service. The PAO collaborates with ministries on strategies committed to attracting, engaging, developing, and retaining the best public service employees. Success of attraction and retention initiatives can be measured in many ways, but a key indicator is the 80 per cent job satisfaction reported by employees of the public service in the 2003 employee survey. [Mr. Dunford's speaking time expired] What do I do? Do I ask for unanimous consent to go on?

The Deputy Chair: You could.

Mr. Dunford: Can I have unanimous consent to go on? I've got four more pages.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There is a long list of hon. members on this side of the Assembly who have expressed an interest in questions to the Alberta Human Resources and Employment minister in the time provided. Certainly, if my experience in the past month in budget estimates has taught me anything, it's that the ministers certainly have lots of time in which to defend the programs of their respective departments, and this minister is no different.

Now, Mr. Chairman, certainly this minister has worked very, very diligently where others have been less than diligent, and the proof is in the statistics in regard to people who lose their life as a result of

a workplace fatality. The minister and his department should be credited for working very hard to educate Alberta workers and employers about work safe sites.

When we look at the statistics and we recognize that fatalities are going down on the job sites, they're going up in other areas. These statistics are frightening. Last year, as we know, 127 Albertans died as a result of their work. There were 98 deaths in 2002, 106 in 2001, and the death toll in 2003 in total is the highest it's been in 17 years.

3:20

How does the minister track and record lost-time accidents and fatalities in Alberta's workplaces? Also to the minister in regard to this issue, which Alberta job sites are the safest? Those where workers are under union contract or those where the workers are not protected by a union contract? Does the department study that, and if they do study that, which are the safest job sites?

When will this government make all Alberta employers maintain the same occupational health and safety standards for workplace safety? Now, it's unfair of one employer or one group of employers to have an economic advantage over another employer or another group of employers if they know that they can avoid the occupational health and safety law and its regulations, so I would encourage the minister to make sure that we have a level playing field. Certainly, that's in the interests of everyone to make sure that there's a level playing field for all employers.

In regard to the working alone regulation that came about as a result of the passionate advocacy done by Deb Dore, who lost her daughter in a violent act of crime some years back in Calgary. This crime against Deb Dore's daughter was committed while she was working alone in a sub shop. The minister had a consultation process, and there were recommendations made.

I want to know now what sort of follow-up has been done in regard to that. What exactly is going on with this working alone regulation? Does the minister still consider it to be adequate? What sort of compliance numbers does the ministry have in regard to this? Which sector of employers are abiding by that working alone regulation, and which are not? Or have we simply left that up to voluntary compliance? What exactly is going on with this working alone regulation, and does the minister feel that it is working?

Also, before we move on to other subjects, Mr. Chairman, I understand that the department is working on regulations to govern NORM, and NORM is naturally occurring radioactive materials that are in the workplace. Naturally occurring radioactive materials show up in industrial process streams. One particular place they do show up is in fertilizer plants in the concentrated process stream that is involved in making fertilizer. Workers not only in that industry but in the petrochemical industry come in contact with what are known as NORMs.

Some individual companies, to their credit, have regulations in place to protect their employees from naturally occurring radioactive materials. I may have been incorrect, but I was left with the distinct impression that this minister and this department had a subcommittee set up to study this issue and were going to make recommendations in regard to naturally occurring radioactive materials. I would like to get an update on that. This is very, very important, particularly for workers who on a number of occasions as a result of their work have to enter a confined space or perhaps a pressure vessel doing routine maintenance and come in contact with these naturally occurring radioactive materials. So if we could get an update on that.

It's particularly important when one considers that the number of fatalities in this year's report from the ministry has increased significantly as a result of breathing contaminated air or high concentrations of smoke or high levels of dust over a period of time.

A lot of workers are developing respiratory illnesses that 10, 15 years down the road are killing them. So this is something I hope our government is working diligently on and we can report some progress to the workers who could be affected by this very soon. The death rates are going up for occupational diseases, and I think this could be one way of starting a gradual decline in the death rate.

In conclusion on this matter, certainly the good work the minister and the ministry have done could be continued if we had an education process to alert all workers and their employers about the hazards of poor ventilation on work sites and, if there is poor ventilation, the importance of providing correct respiratory protection and ensuring that the workers wear that respiratory protection, because the costs down the road are incredible.

Now, we see an increase in this minister's budget. In the 2004-05 budget there's an increase of \$15 million over the 2003-04 forecast, but unfortunately there hasn't been an increase for those who need it most. Now, I don't know how this government can justify putting more and more gambling revenue into the horse racing industry. They have their own frequent flyer club, extensive travel, and there's no shortage of money for communications budgets. We can increase all those. Government spending in the years that I've been in the Assembly has increased by 50 per cent, Mr. Chairman, but we do not seem to have any money for those in this province who need it most, and those are Albertans who are living on assured income for the severely handicapped or those receiving money through supports for independence.

Now, the majority of people on those assistance programs cannot work. The minister has talked about other people, and that's wonderful. That's good news. I'm glad we have programs that can help. In a province as rich as ours we cannot forget some of the most needy and their families. We can talk about many things. We can talk about having skills investments, and we can have lots of programs, but the majority of these citizens through no fault of their own unfortunately cannot work for any length of time. Many of them have mental illnesses. Some have a disability of one sort or another. When we look at what we expect them to live on, it is simply not enough.

3:30

Now, we have as a province certainly outperformed the rest of the country in job creation. We have enormous resources, which are in global demand, and we should count our blessings. Our economic productivity was higher than other provinces, but it's interesting that real wages – real wages – have stagnated during this last decade of growth and prosperity. We have to wonder not only about the minimum wage, which hopefully I'll get an opportunity to talk about, but how are we going to convince this government that we need to increase the benefits for those on AISH and SFI? I think it is a disgrace that in a province as rich as ours we have some of the lowest benefits in the country. Why are we continuing to punish the poor?

Now, for welfare benefits and if we look at the types of households, Mr. Chairman, for a single employable in this province our rank is eighth in the amount of money that we provide; persons with a disability, ninth; single parent, one child, 10th; a couple with two children, fifth. We have to treat our poor citizens better. For a single parent and one child with a \$12,000 a year income and even if you include an additional \$3,000 in tax benefits from the federal government, this is very difficult to live on. I've asked members of Executive Council if they could live on that, and the question was essentially avoided.

When we look and we compare, Mr. Chairman, not only those amounts but have a quick look at the reduction in constant dollar

welfare benefits in Alberta between 1992 and 2002 and if we look at the households involved, the 10-year benefit reduction, a single employable person has lost 28 per cent of their income, a person with a disability has lost 7 per cent, a single parent with one child has lost 28 per cent, and a couple with two children has lost 30 per cent. So that's in a decade, and that's deplorable. It's shameful.

When we look at utility costs, for example, and what this government has done with its energy deregulation policies and the increased use of user fees, we should be ashamed of ourselves.

We have to look after everyone, because in a caring, compassionate society it has to be recognized that not everyone is able or is up to the challenge to provide for themselves.

[Mr. Lougheed in the chair]

Now, the Alberta government – and this is a sensitive topic for the government – diverts some federal funds from welfare programs to other provincial programs. I think we have to have another look at this. Are we taking money off the table that could be used to provide food for children and using it for other purposes? If we're not going to look at this in any other way, I would ask the government to consider the children. Consider the children of those households where incomes are very, very modest because of this government's lack of attention on poverty-related issues.

We can divert enormous sums of money to any number of issues. I'm not saying that they're not worth while, but why can't we spend a few dollars on the most needy in this province to improve their quality of life? This is unacceptable when you consider that inflation has affected those households in a significant way.

I know that poverty lines and low-income cut-offs – that's a debate in itself. But if the government needs one more reminder, let's look at Alberta's rank among provinces for welfare benefits as a percentage of the poverty line. For a single employable, again, we rank eighth. For persons with a disability we rank 10th. For a single parent with one child we rank 10th. For a couple with two children we rank sixth.

It is clear, it is without debate that the poorest Albertans, you know, those living on welfare, those living on AISH, have taken a terrible economic hit over the last decade. There are over 12,000 families trying to survive on SFI benefits. They can no longer be used in the manner that we are treating them. If for no other reason, please think of the children in those households. We can talk about having this market-basket measure all we want – and I'm looking forward to seeing what's in that market basket – but we've got to make a commitment to put some necessary items in that market basket.

We are talking about skills investments, \$10 million less for skills investments than forecast for 2003-04. What would that be and why?

Thank you.

The Acting Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Mr. Dunford: It was good of the hon. member, despite not allowing me to continue on in my speech, to compliment us on a number of areas, and if he liked us in those areas, he should like us in the following areas as well.

I want to talk about the personnel administration office and the fact that they continue to lead a key administrative initiative across the government called the corporate human resource development strategy. This strategy has brought a concerted focus to key human resource issues facing the public service, including the need to build leadership capacity and to attract and retain talent. For example, as

of January 2004 approximately 43 per cent of all executive managers have participated in the corporate executive development program.

The PAO has established ambassador and internship programs to promote the public service as a positive career choice to seek out new talent. There are currently 180 ambassadors from across the government. The internship program continues to expand. More than 214 interns attended nine networking events on a variety of development issues over the last year. A newsletter called *GAIN* for sharing information with and about interns is being published on a regular basis.

The PAO has been using new technologies to receive applications for government jobs. Seventy-three per cent of applications are now received on-line. This is a 40 per cent increase from 2002-2003.

3:40

A key focus this year for the PAO is assisting ministries in establishing workplace health initiatives such as reducing workplace incidents and enhancing the abilities of employees to remain healthy. Deputy ministers will be reporting on their ministries' workplace health initiatives this year.

The fourth and final component of the ministry is the Appeals Commission for Alberta workers' compensation with a budget of \$6.9 million. The commission joined the ministry in September 2002. Established under the Workers' Compensation Act the Appeals Commission is a separate government entity independent from the WCB. The commission hears appeals from workers or employers on decisions of the review bodies of the Workers' Compensation Board. The operating costs of the Appeals Commission are paid from general revenue, which is reimbursed from the WCB accident fund. The accident fund is made up of the assessment contributions of employers. The Appeals Commission continues to bring about changes to make the appeals system more open, transparent, and accountable.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Employment has been an active part of thousands of Albertans' lives over the year and will continue to be over the year ahead. This year Alberta Human Resources and Employment will invest \$1.148 billion, the fourth highest budget in government, for Alberta people, skills, and workplaces. These dollars come with personal stories and make a difference to people every day in many communities across the province.

So with that – we've already had some comments and some questions – I'll answer what I can this afternoon, and then, of course, we'll provide written answers.

Not to deal with Edmonton-Gold Bar's total presentation but just a couple of comments in order that wrong impressions not be left here in the House of the Assembly or for anyone who might happen to be studying *Hansard*. He mentioned the arrangement that we have with the federal government under the national child benefit program and how when the federal government provides additional funding in terms of income to low-income Canadians, and in our case Albertans, every jurisdiction – this includes all provinces and all territories – has the ability and the responsibility to determine whether or not there will be that increase in income and whether the situation is to be left alone or whether there are opportunities in which to maximize, then, some other support systems for welfare people.

I want to indicate to the hon. member and to members of this House that each year the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment will make a decision once we have the quantifiable number that arrives from the federal government. In every case where there has been a decision to allow the income to move forward, then of course that's been the case. There's actually been an increase in the income

portion for a low-income Albertan, but in those cases where we have determined that there are more important factors than just simply income, then what this government has done is looked at the funds that would otherwise become available, and we have used them for other benefits for low-income Albertans, and we have especially focused on families with children.

I would direct the member's attention to a business plan or to any of the documentation that surrounds Alberta Human Resources and Employment, to an excellent program called the Alberta child health benefit. I don't have the number exactly in front of me – certainly, we can confirm this at a later date – but by providing for dental care, providing diabetic supplies for children, emergency services, eyeglass or sight assistance, we've been able to assist I believe the number would be 65,000 children here in Alberta. So we don't need to be hearing anything from any member of this House about how we strip funds from the welfare program in order to put them into other areas. Similar to what we have done for seniors and other programs, we move money around, but we keep it in there for the benefit, then, in this case, of low-income Albertans, low-income families and their children.

It's pretty easy to pick apart a particular program and just focus on one aspect of it, and in this particular case the member picked on the levels of income and made some comparisons with other jurisdictions. As far as income goes, that would be fine. The numbers are there. While he used the word "shame" and other inferences, I stand here without shame in this particular area because what we have done in Alberta is substituted benefits in kind for income.

For an example, if we were to look at all of the health benefits, the medical benefits, some of the work allowances, the clothing allowances that we make and if we were to gross up those benefits, then, to relate to only a comparison in terms of income, of course we would substantially move upward in that comparison.

I would caution the hon. member and all hon. members not to get totally oriented and focused on the income level. One of the things that research is showing people that have an interest in this particular area is that if the support through welfare in terms of income gets above certain levels, then what we have is the construction of what is now called the welfare wall. A welfare wall means that there is an opportunity for a person to determine whether or not they would be better off working and contributing and being productive in the general economy versus it being worth their while to stay on welfare.

So while I have some understanding of what other jurisdictions might be doing in this area, I don't know to the nth degree all of their particular policies, but the thing that I can tell you about this government that is governing Alberta is that we administer ourselves with a couple of philosophies. One of the main ones is that there is inherent and redeeming value to work.

With that belief, then, we are going to administer our programs in such a way that there will always be the incentive for those who can work so that they will seek and retain work within the workplaces here in the province. This is fundamental to understand what it is that makes up the Progressive Conservative government of Alberta in this particular era.

The other thing that is a philosophy, that is an integral part of how we think, is that we're prepared to provide people with a hand up when they are in need of support. We are not in the business of providing handouts.

So when one looks through our business plan, when you look through the estimates and you want to discuss, criticize, you must understand that we are in the business, in terms of human resources and employment, of moving people away from dependence on government and into the personal independence, the personal responsibility of being able to provide for themselves and their

families and to be able to then pride themselves first of all on the work that they do, on the product that they produce, and of course on the benefits that come with responsibility and with productivity.

On that note, I think we'll wait for the next series of comments.

3:50

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have some more questions for the minister in regard to his department, and I will start with the minimum wage. Certainly, it needs to be increased. I don't know if 30, 35, or even 50 cents is enough. I would think that in light of the time that has passed and the inflation that has occurred, a \$7 minimum wage in this province would not be inappropriate.

At \$5.90 Alberta has the lowest minimum wage in Canada, and that's almost a dollar less than the national average. So if we were to increase our minimum wage to \$7, let's say, we would be just about the national average. We don't have the national average in electricity prices for domestic use. That's significantly more than the national average. If for no other reason than that, we could look at increasing the minimum wage by that much.

The minimum wage should also be reviewed annually. Our compensation packages in this Assembly are reviewed annually. If it's good enough for us, why is it not good enough for those working for the minimum wage? The minister could take a real leadership role in this and organize this annual review. Some of his crackerjack officials, students who may work in the hospitality or the service industry who work for the minimum wage could be involved. The hotel restaurant association also could be involved. It could be reviewed on an annual basis instead of this – I don't know how you could accurately describe what's done now.

You know, the policy resolutions at the Progressive Conservative convention: well, if that's what it takes to raise the minimum wage by \$1.10, \$1.05, so be it, but it needs to be done and it needs to be done now. Certainly, I would hope that the minister would take the advice of this side of the House and increase the minimum wage and then initiate an annual review to see if it needs to go up even further.

Now, certainly, there are other issues, and there are so many parts of this department. It's a very interesting department. I'm not saying that the others are not; for instance, the Gaming, or gambling, ministry. It's interesting also. The hon. Ministry of Human Resources and Employment is certainly an interesting department.

On Saturday I was looking through the newspaper, and there was an ad in one of the daily papers – it could have been in both of them – on recruitment for the Appeals Commission. I asked a question some time ago, Mr. Chairman, in regard to an apparent change in direction at the Appeals Commission and matters of the WCB. I for one am surprised whenever there is this argument presented, not only by this minister but by others, that they're independent from the WCB process.

This minister, as I recall, correctly stated that he was directly involved with the Appeals Commission and, certainly, the changes that have occurred there, but in light of the fact that there seems to be this decree – I don't know what else to call it – from the government that advises MLAs appearing before the Appeals Commission, that may not be in anyone's best interest. This is inappropriate.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Now, what other boards or what other quasi-judicial tribunals other than the Appeals Commission are we talking about here? Certainly, there are appeals boards for AISH, and there are appeals boards for SFI, and seniors' benefits would certainly be another one.

Are those quasi-judicial tribunals also affected by this order, however it works? I wasn't informed of this. Government MLAs, obviously, were informed of this, but I wasn't.

Mr. Dunford: What are you talking about?

Mr. MacDonald: I'm talking about government MLAs appearing before the Appeals Commission on behalf of constituents. We had a question in the Assembly about this, oh, a month ago, Mr. Chairman, and this was information. I tabled it for public view.

This would be dated December 16, 2002, from the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment to the chief appeals commissioner, Mr. Pheasey, on MLAs appearing before quasi-judicial boards or tribunals, and I can read it for the members' interest.

Following our conversation, I have attached a copy of a memo from the Honourable . . . Minister of Justice and Attorney General regarding the concern of MLAs appearing before quasi-judicial boards and tribunals.

[The MLA from] Airdrie-Rocky View and Caucus Whip also sent this memo to all Government MLAs explaining why it is inappropriate for MLAs and Minister's to appear on behalf of constituents. I am confident the concern is perceptual that an MLA or Minister would be intervening in a quasi-judicial matter. You may want to share this information with your staff.

Signed, recognizing that we're in the Assembly, the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

That's essentially what that memorandum stated. There are others. There's another one dated October 25, 2002, from the Minister of Justice to the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

I don't know what sort of problem there is with this. Does this also apply to, as I said before, other boards where a person representing a constituent may appear on behalf of a seniors' benefits appeal, an AISH appeal, or an SFI appeal? I don't know how many boards would be affected by this. I don't even know why and how all this happened. If the minister could not only enlighten this member on this but also the House, I would be very grateful. There are documents. I'm sure I tabled them, but if I haven't, Mr. Chairman, I apologize to the minister and to the House. I thought that I did after that question.

I think this is a very important matter. If it was all MLAs, I certainly wasn't informed. I've polled my colleagues, and they haven't been informed. What would the need for this be in the first place? I got a book, for instance, whenever I signed on, and it was a book basically dedicated to MLAs to make them understand the complex system of the WCB and how it all works and the old appeals process and the new appeals process. Why go to the time and effort of producing such a document if people are encouraged not to go before the Appeals Commission? I would just like to know where we're coming from on that.

4:00

On the Appeals Commission as well, while we're there, Mr. Chairman, I have some concern. I have received recent correspondence in regard to the Appeals Commission and a perceived apprehension of bias by a party that deals with the Appeals Commission on a routine basis. This party would be an advocate. Certainly, in section 11 of the WCB act "the Minister is responsible for the Appeals Commission." That was acknowledged in question period about a month ago in the House. But I'm concerned about the issue of confidence in the whole appeals process. This issue I don't believe is isolated. Other advocates are also expressing the same concerns. They maintain that there are errors in jurisdiction and/or application of policies, and these always occur to the detriment of the injured worker.

There's one specific Appeals Commission hearing chair mentioned here, and that would be Mr. Otterdahl. This is of huge concern, and I'm quoting again here from this correspondence: on several occasions we have objected to Bruce Otterdahl chairing a hearing; we believe that there is a body of evidence which shows that a panel chaired by Bruce Otterdahl issues decisions that contain errors in justice and/or application of policies; as a result reconsideration panels granted new hearings; a number of these new hearings resulted in the new panel issuing a total opposite decision, end of quote. Now, this is quite a serious issue, and I wonder what the minister is doing about it.

One solution to this matter that has been suggested in this correspondence would be to have the Ombudsman's office conduct a review and issue a report. They go on to say in here that there's a precedent for this type of action as a result of an incident at a Calgary WCB office. The minister at that time, in 1992, had the Ombudsman conduct a review and a public report on that matter. I'm wondering, in light of these allegations and to improve the confidence in the whole appeals process, if this minister at this time would not consider taking the initiative that was used by a former minister of labour in 1992.

I don't know how this whole appeals process is going to work out. I don't know if there are going to be any changes in the future on how we're going to appoint appeals commissioners and other individuals to the Appeals Commission. Certainly, there are restrictions and limitations in the WCB act in regard to those appointments. I have brought up that issue in the past with the minister, and I would like to know if we are going to be looking at any changes in how we appoint individuals to the Appeals Commission. It has been brought to my attention that previous employees of the WCB have gone on to work for the Appeals Commission, and I am of the understanding that that was not to happen because of the WCB act.

Now, with those questions I will take my seat and wait for the hon. minister's response. Thank you.

Mr. Dunford: I just want to address a couple of things that are coming out this afternoon. First of all, on the minimum wage I don't know if I've had an opportunity to put some of my thoughts into *Hansard*. Perhaps through question period I have, but this would be an excellent opportunity to of course do that.

I want to assure all of the members of this Assembly that I view minimum wage as a tool of economic policy, and as a tool of economic policy, then, I believe that what is inherently important are levels of unemployment. That being the case, there are some interesting situations that start to arise as one analyzes the material and especially when one looks at unemployment rates amongst young workers, and the definition of young worker would be between 15 and 24.

I think that as an answer to a question in question period I indicated that the correlation wasn't perfect, wasn't a 1.00, but there were indications that it would probably end up close to that. If you make a list just on a piece of paper and start at the top of the page, plug in British Columbia, for an example, with the highest minimum wage, and just go all the way down till finally you find Alberta down there at the bottom at \$5.90, then what you should do is get the most recent Stats Canada numbers and start up at the top of the list with the province or territory that has the highest number of unemployed and just go right down the list. Then look at a third list and look at what province has the highest unemployment rate amongst youth, and you'll find B.C. would be right at the top, and just list it right down.

As you go across, you're going to find a tremendous correlation

of those provinces, and I would indicate, then, to the hon. member that based on that evidence alone, I would rest a case on the minimum wage.

The anecdotes that people provide me with: oh, this person's been working at minimum wage for six months, five years, whatever it is. Just advise them: go down the street. There are all kinds of for-hire signs on the windows and the doors of Albertans. Have them look at newspapers. Have them understand that 80 per cent of the jobs that are available never show up in newspapers. Have them go knock on some doors. No reason for anyone to be working at minimum wage in Alberta. The fact of the matter is that if we look at the numbers of people that are on minimum wage in Alberta, at 1.1 per cent, I mean, we can scoop up those folks in a heartbeat into other areas and, might I say, more productive areas.

Now, I'm not here trying to preach that people leave the mom-and-pop shop at the corner to go and find other work if they like working at the mom-and-pop shop. But if they like working at the mom-and-pop shop for the \$5.90 an hour, don't come and whine to me and have me try to give them an increase on the backs of the mom-and-pop shop. You know what? We're not going to do it that way.

Now, I don't disagree with some sort of mechanism to be put into place to review this on a periodic or even on an ongoing basis, but that'll have to be determined at another time. As indicated in my opening comments, currently as I stand here in front of you today there is no initiative that we have on our books right now to look at the minimum wage.

4:10

On the Appeals Commission side we have worked very hard to try to provide not only an independent tribunal, because many would argue, and I think successfully, that even before our ministry took the Appeals Commission inside our own shop, they were working in an independent fashion, but certainly the perception was not there. When you had an Appeals Commission that was tied so closely to the Workers' Compensation Board, whatever the reality was, it was being hampered by the very perception that an Appeals Commission constructed that way would not have the independence required for a modern and effective Workers' Compensation Board system.

So we made those changes. We took them into our shop to try to provide a better perception, then, of independence, and I think we're achieving that. We've got a ways to go, but I think we're headed in the right direction. Some of our severest critics have now started to I think recognize, you know, that we're working very hard in trying to resolve those particular issues.

Now, I'm absolutely sure that the hon. member tabled the documents that he's referring to regarding MLAs appearing at quasi-judicial boards. I'm advised by colleagues of mine that perhaps there are some issues around natural justice as to whether a person that holds a political position in fact should be doing that. To my knowledge, even though there have been concerns that have been expressed – and perhaps coming out of this discussion today there's going to have to be some kind of a determination made by the government – I do not believe that I have instructed any of the quasi-judicial boards that are under my responsibility not to hear a situation if, you know, an MLA shows up to represent their constituent. I don't think I agree with it, but I don't know that I've ever said that an MLA cannot do that.

I think it's unwise. I think there are all kinds of ramifications that can happen, especially for the MLA, especially if the appeal that they're making is turned down. I mean, how does he live with that constituent? But, in any event, I believe that to be a decision until further definition from the people that I report to. Again, while I

don't like it, I don't know that I've ever said that they couldn't appear. I don't know why they would listen to me anyway.

Appointments to WCB Appeals Commission. Now, this is one area where I have to admit to the hon. member that I consider myself to have failed. When we started to try to revise and modernize and streamline and all that other stuff the WCB system in appeals, I tried to remove the notion that appeal commissioners would have to be representatives of either employees or employers. I wanted the best people that were available, and if we needed 10 appeal commissioners, I cared less whether they all came from union ranks or they all came from teachers or business people or, you know, where they came from. I wanted the best people that were available.

We found that as we went around and discussed these proposed changes with stakeholders, we just could not get through on this particular point. There is still mistrust in the system. The employee representatives want to make sure they have their employee representatives on the Appeals Commission, and employers want to make sure they have employer representatives on the Appeals Commission. So we've proceeded in that fashion.

I don't like it. I think that all it does is perpetuate a confrontational type of arrangement within these quasi-judicial boards. I think it puts undue hardship on the person that has been appointed. Where are the loyalties? Sure, I can be appointed as an employee representative and I'm there to keep the interests of the employees in mind, but if the employee has no case, the utmost responsibility should be on a good decision on that particular case. Yet if there's somebody back somewhere in an employee group or an employer group that's simply adding up wins and losses, you know – I think it's a situation that could be done a lot better.

In any event, what we are doing as far as appointments are concerned is that I've instructed the chief appeals commissioner to develop a set of competencies, and we will publicly advertise positions for appeals commissioners. Those that qualify under those competencies will be further screened and prioritized and sent to me as the minister so that I can do my job in taking those pending appointments through the orders in council to then provide them with the authority to sit on an appeals commission board.

With that, Mr. Chair, I'll be ready for the next set of questions.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

Mr. Pham: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the opportunity to join the debate on the budget of the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment. Before I begin, I would put on record that this minister and his ministry have done an outstanding job to provide service for many, many Albertans, especially for underprivileged Albertans, and for that I would like to thank him.

If I am going to stand here and list all the good things the minister and his ministry have done, I don't think there is enough time. I just want to make sure that that is on the record because next I'm going to focus on two weak areas of your ministry, and that doesn't mean that reflects badly on you or your ministry at all.

The first area I want to focus on is the WCB. This area is still a very troublesome area judging by the number of constituents who come and see me every week about their problems. For me it is a very, very complicated issue because we have a system where there is absolutely no accountability at all on the part of the WCB. When it comes to dealing with long-term injured workers, the WCB still follows a practice that they help these people for about two years and then they kick everybody off, and all of these workers have to try to prove their way back into the system.

4:20

For the small percentage of people who are successfully able to

find their way back into the system, WCB just gives them back the money that they owed them in the first place. So there's nothing there to encourage the WCB to do the right thing. There's every incentive for the WCB to force everybody off to save money.

Very few people in our society realize that the WCB may be the only organization in our society that is not under the control of the government, that is not under the control of the employers, and that certainly is not subject to any court challenge at all. When you have that kind of power and you have nobody as your direct boss, it can easily lead to abuse.

I have helped many workers dealing with the WCB, and what I found was a very frustrating experience. One case that comes to mind was last year. I brought it to the minister's attention. I helped that injured worker for 15 months to deal with the WCB. When he first came to my office, he brought with him the medical discharge report from the Columbia rehab centre. On that report it said clearly that this injured worker couldn't stand for more than one minute, could not walk for more than one minute, and could not sit for more than six minutes.

At first I thought that it was a mistake by the WCB, so I assured my constituent that it could be taken care of. I wrote to the case manager, and the case manager wrote me back, and then we took that case through the first level of appeal. At that time it was the Claims Services Review Committee. The Claims Services Review Committee reviewed all the documents I sent to them, and then wrote on their decision paper that they deemed this person fit and able to return to work. They also put on there, knowing the restriction, that this man cannot stand for more than one minute, cannot walk for more than one minute, and cannot sit for more than six minutes. It was so unbelievable.

I took the case directly to the CEO of the WCB. I sat across the table from him discussing that case with him for two hours. He gave me a written response still quoting these numbers and then saying that this man was fit and able to return to work. Nobody in their right mind could come to that conclusion with those restrictions.

Because of that, I talked to the minister and decided to bring the question to the floor of the Legislature. Miraculously, only after that did the WCB bother to correct the record and send out a note saying that: we have checked it out; his restrictions are 10 minutes for standing, 10 minutes for walking, and 60 minutes for sitting.

That proves a very, very important point. Through those 15 months, regardless of this person's condition, the WCB was under the belief that his restriction was one minute sitting, one minute walking, one minute standing, but they ruled against him anyway. That's systematic right from the top, from the CEO down to the case manager. The restrictions that we had there did not have any influence at all on their decision. Because of that, more and more people today are coming to us and saying that when the WCB has a monopoly and is unaccountable, it equates to a disaster, that injured workers, especially long-term injured workers, have nowhere to go.

A few years ago I brought to the House, to the Legislature, a piece of legislation, a private member's bill, and I believed it could solve the problem. We have to open up the system. We have to allow competition there to ensure that injured workers have a choice, that the workers have a choice of who they want to take their insurance with. That is the only way we can take that out of our hands. Today, even though we say it's arm's length from us, we're still morally responsible for it because we gave the WCB the monopoly, and the injured workers in our society have nowhere to go.

This ties very neatly into the second subject I'm going to discuss today; that is, the area of AISH. As we all know, AISH is a program that we set up in 1994, the assured income for the severely handicapped of Alberta. This program is there to provide financial and

health benefits for the small percentage of our population who are severely handicapped and cannot work.

We haven't seen any increase to the financial benefit paid to these people since 1994. This is almost 10 years ago. This bothers me greatly because over the last 10 years inflation has gone up. The cost of living has gone up. The cost of housing especially in Calgary, where I come from, has gone up significantly over the last 10 years. So the financial assistance that was okay 10 years ago becomes relatively inadequate today.

However, if you look at the total budget, the total amount that we do spend on AISH, there is a significant increase each and every year. The problem that the minister mentioned earlier is that the rapid growth rate of the AISH program is much faster than the population growth rate in Alberta. Part of that, I suspect, is because there are many of those people who are on AISH today who should be on WCB. Some of the long-term injured workers who were denied WCB benefits in fact ended up on AISH, and this poses a very interesting dilemma because under the same watch of the same minister we have one person who is classified as fit and able to return to work by WCB and at the same time that same person is deemed as severely handicapped by his ministry.

Under one minister, under one ministry, should we allow this kind of conflicting information to exist? Can we say that both agencies are correct? Can we say that AISH is correct in deeming this person severely handicapped or that WCB is correct when saying that this person is fit and able to return to work? You know, one of them has to be wrong.

If we can get those people who theoretically speaking should be looked after by the WCB back to the WCB and stop the WCB from off-loading their responsibility onto the backs of the taxpayers of Alberta, maybe we can free up the resources to help the people who are on AISH today to see their benefits go up.

Mr. Chairman, when I raise these issues, I realize that they are very, very complicated issues, and this minister has tried to do more than many other people that I have seen in the past. So I feel that it's a little bit unfair to sound like I'm criticizing him, but it is not. These are just the facts, and these are very, very important facts because they affect the people who are the most vulnerable in our society, the long-term injured workers, those people who are on the verge of losing everything that they have: their family, their house, their own health, and sometimes even their own lives. So I feel obliged to speak out on their behalf because without people doing that, who will look after these people?

The same thing for AISH clients. These are people who are severely handicapped. They cannot go out and find employment. They are not bums; they are not lazy. I would applaud any effort we can make to find more money to help these people.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mr. Dunford: Well, thank you very much, and thank you to the member. This type of government style that we have would not work if we didn't have constructive criticism, constructive coaching coming from wherever it should arise. Certainly, I acknowledge the difficulties that the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose has had, especially in the anecdotal evidence that was presented on that particular case. I don't know whether anybody would be consoled by this, but perhaps he will be to some extent. I don't know how many hours we have spent on that particular case. It's one of those that just doesn't seem to fit into some sort of easy resolution, so it will be ongoing.

4:30

I'm pleased to report to not only the hon. member but to others here in the House that those kinds of cases really are reducing. Ten and 11 years ago, when many of the members here in the House were first elected and came up here and started to deal with constituent concerns, there was a real serious issue around workers' compensation in this province. There were huge bodies, advocacy groups that were being formed working against the Meredith principle of workers' compensation, on which the Alberta compensation system is based, and I think it was in jeopardy. I think it really was.

There were calls then for privatizing a compensation system. Periodically there still is support, but with some of the recent situations that have happened in jurisdictions where workers' compensation has been privatized, there would be a cause, then, to question that support.

There's no question about the WCB system being a monopoly situation, but in most cases, by most standards of measurement I believe that you could call it a benevolent monopoly, and one that is truly working in terms of the provisions of WCB. They were simply that in place of the ability to sue an employer when a workplace incident happened that led to an injury or to a fatality, employers would collectively provide, then, a system that would do two things: one, it would take care of the injury, and then, secondly, it would provide rehabilitation to get the worker back to work or back into the workplace if they were no longer able to do their previous work.

One of the psychological issues that we deal with on a constant basis in this area is that when a worker suffers severe trauma and then once they're over that and they're in the rehabilitation area, quite often we run into cases where they want to make whole again. They want to be back to, you know, where they were previous to the incident, when they were 10 feet tall and bulletproof. With some of these injuries, Mr. Chairman, that's just not going to happen. They will never ever, ever be the same again, so the relationship then becomes a very delicate one as to what is the meaning of that Meredith principle in terms of getting them back into the workplace.

I mean, there are people there that are hired and trained and all that type of thing to do that, and it's not my position to make those kinds of decisions. But in terms of questioning the accountability, I have to be held accountable to some extent. I can't off-load the responsibility that the minister has to see that an act, you know, is being administered, so there's some accountability that way.

Certainly, the Lieutenant Governor in Council appoints the actual members of the board of directors of WCB. Now, here again we get into one of these areas where there shall be members representing employers, there will be members representing employees, and there will be members representing the public, so we have this confrontational kind of situation that could develop with the appointments. But as far as I can tell, with the tremendous job that the previous minister did in this portfolio and the job that I've tried to emulate, you know, we have a board that is functioning as a board of directors should be.

They've tightened up some of the financials. They've moved away from subsidizing employer assessments just because we had a bull market, as we did through the late '90s, when injury assessments were allowed to fall below the actual level that they should have been based on injury, so it was hiding the true fact here in Alberta that Alberta was a more dangerous place to work in than what one would ordinarily think in comparing WCB assessment rates. That has all changed. We no longer allow subsidization by an investment portfolio to impact on the WCB assessment. An industrial sector, you know, a sector that's covered by WCB, must pay the assessments that are indicated by the injury rates within that sector.

This is another reason, by the way, that every member in this

House should be supportive of health reform. Not only Progressive Conservatives but Liberals and representatives of the NDP should be supportive of this area because the injury rate is clogging up the system.

Part of the difficulty we're having with increasing WCB costs in a time when the injury rate is actually going down is – well, there are two reasons for it. The primary reason is, first of all, an incredible increase in the cost of drugs that are used to work on the injuries and, secondly, the wait times. People cannot get into the system without WCB starting to take, now, extraordinary methods to provide for treatment of injury and rehabilitation. As a matter of fact, they now contract for time in operating suites in the Leduc hospital and have had a tremendous improvement in reducing the time it takes for a WCB claimant to receive the kind of orthopaedic attention that they're requiring.

One thing that intuitively one would believe, just as the Member for Calgary-Montrose does, is that if you have people that are being kicked off WCB, they're going to end up on AISH, and that's probably quite true if it turns into a severe handicap. I want to indicate to the hon. member that I, as a matter of fact, in my first term and the first couple of years in my second term was quite public about how I thought that inaccurate decisions on injuries within WCB were in fact off-loading the situation onto taxpayers, that we were then supporting income through our AISH program.

So when I became the minister, I had the opportunity to try to do something about it. One of the things that we did, then, is that we commissioned a study to try to track as best we could the names – and there were some privacy issues, but we had to try to work around those, and I don't think we violated anybody's privacy. In any event, we tried to use what information we had through AISH and correlate that with the information that was available to us through WCB.

4:40

Again, not having the study in front of me, after the study of an incredible number of cases in the databases that were available to us, it was a very small percentage of AISH cases that we could relate back to work injury. Even if we could relate it back to the fact that the person may at one time have been on WCB, we then immediately ran into that clash of jurisdiction: you know, was this disabling condition now a result of a previous work injury, or was something else involved? So we weren't able to draw any clear conclusions on that, but that's something that with the health information now as we advance in technology, it will be worth while to take a look again on a periodic basis.

I do agree with the member in that sense. If a person is unable to work and the reason for it is because of an incident that happened in the workplace leading to that injury and that disability, then it ought to be the employers of this province that are funding that person, you know, back to work or for the rest of their lives, if that's what the case is, and not off-loading to the backs of taxpayers through either Alberta Works or AISH.

To gently correct the member if I can – because after all he did say extremely nice things about me, and I want to maintain that level of co-operation – AISH was formed in 1982. It's gone through some revisions and that sort of thing over that period of time, and I believe that the last increase in the AISH program was 1999. In any event, he's quite right. It's been a long time since we've increased the income levels in AISH, and it's something now that under the legislation we have to do this fall.

You know what? I think there's justification for looking at income levels in this area. Many of the 32,000 people that we have on AISH do not have assets. They don't own a car. They don't own

a house. They're in shelter situations and sometimes shared accommodation. They're trying as best they can to get by. Yes, the question is there: can you get by on \$850 a month? Unfortunately, as the member pointed out, we've had tremendous increases, actually, in the AISH budget line item. We're now up to \$393 million that we're spending in that area, but again to reaffirm what the member has said, we have found in the past and currently it's still happening that the AISH caseload is increasing faster than the demographics.

Now, in case people reading *Hansard* wonder what the demographic is, basically it's increasing faster than the normal growth that we're seeing within the population. So something is happening there, and we have to find out what that is.

The other thing, and again the reason for NDP and Liberal support for health reforms with the government, is that tremendous increase in medical costs. That's what's eating the lunch of the AISH budget, and that's what's holding us back from looking at various things that we could do within the AISH program.

Before I leave it and just in case AISH doesn't come up again this afternoon, I want to say that the other thing we need to look at with AISH is whether or not we've got it right. What happens now is a person comes and applies for AISH funding, and of course there are all kinds of criteria, and I'm not going to object to the criteria. They actually have to become eligible from an income standpoint for AISH, and then, even if it's just a dollar or something, they'll get a medical card. But many benefit plans are indexed to a consumer price index or something, so we have many, many people in Alberta that are actually not eligible for AISH even though they're severely handicapped because their income might be a dollar or \$5 or a hundred dollars over the allowed AISH income entry level. It's a rhetorical question here in the Assembly today, but it's going to be a question that will be put on the agenda when we have our formal AISH review this fall.

We've got it the wrong way around. What we should be looking at is: does a severely handicapped person need help with the medical issues that they have, having access to a medical health plan? Once that's stabilized, then let's look and see: well, now, what do they need for income? So I think there's a major, major revision that we need to at least analyze in this review this fall.

I think I got myself off on a small digression, and I want to come back to it in case AISH doesn't come up again. I talked about the people that really had nothing and that they probably needed some more income support. A good way to pay for that, ladies and gentlemen of the House, would be to look at the basic unfairness of the income support program under AISH. When you have somebody that can own a house, can own a vehicle, can own a second vehicle if it's been remodified to fit the disability of that person and when they could have \$99,999.99 of cash in a mattress where they're not getting any income from it, basically, then, they could stand side by side with that person who has nothing – has nothing – and the two of them are going to get the same income. There's a basic unfairness to this program, and we need to get that resolved.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Rising as I am at nearly the end of the debate, there are advantages to it. Most of the questions have been asked, and the minister has addressed some of them at greater length than others. So there are advantages to it, and the disadvantage, of course, is that the time remaining is short. The minister may not have the time to answer the questions that I will have, and I'll have to work hard to frame questions that don't run the risk of repeating what has already been asked.

Since the minister was, before he just sat down, talking at some length about the AISH program – and he did that just in case, he said, questions about AISH don't come up again – I am going to ask some questions about AISH.

The minister has now been in charge of this program and with the current responsibilities associated with his portfolio for over three years, since 2001. I have heard the minister several times, and I've asked him questions and other members in the House have asked him questions about the need to revise upwards the AISH income component of the assistance that needy Albertans receive. He's returned to this basic unfairness of the system.

4:50

It really boggles the mind to see a minister who has been in charge of this portfolio, who has the responsibility for this particular program for the last three years, repeat at the end of three years and three months, perhaps, that the system is unfair. It's just amazing. Is the minister unable to or is he simply not willing to act on it? My fear is that he is using this argument, which really is a fiction, it seems to me, to justify his procrastination on taking action on something that he really needs to take action on and take responsibility for it.

I'm not going to be engaging in, you know, back and forth just for the sake of it, but I do want to raise some questions about it. The minister recognized and said that the last time some increase in the income component of AISH assistance was made was in '99, and it was a very small one. Over the last 11 years the amount of money has remained more or less the same.

I just want to ask the minister to perhaps have his department do some calculating and examine the amount in real dollars – real dollars – let's say since '99. In '99 \$855 was the amount that recipients were getting as part of their income assistance. Now, if \$855 was barely enough in '99 to meet the subsistence needs of AISH recipients, what amount would be needed now given the inflationary costs to what this \$855 is targeted for at this point? Or what's the real value of \$855 in 2004 dollar terms? That's what I would ask the minister to perhaps think about, and if he knows the numbers, maybe he can share them with us.

Given the fact that \$855 in '99 was there to meet the very basic minimum subsistence needs, how does he expect the same Albertans to wait perhaps another year or more before the minister's review, which he now says will start some time in October, is concluded – I don't know when, how long, what timelines he's giving for this review to happen – and then for him to again consider taking action following the report being received and due consideration has been given to its recommendations?

Given the tone of the minister's comments on the unfairness of the system that he's talking about, I frankly worry about what this review is going to be about. Is it going to in fact bring in new standards with respect to the AISH income entry levels? The minister said that they're already very strict, that not everyone who applies for qualifying for the AISH program does in fact get accepted in the program. So there are standards. The standards seem to be quite strict according to the minister himself.

Can I get some assurance from the minister that these standards will not be sort of tempered in a way in order to exclude people who need that assistance in terms of the standards currently in place? That's something that I would like the minister to please address if he can.

I listened to the appeal and the comments that the hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose made, and I just want to encourage the minister to pay attention to it and not delay without any firm timelines his readiness to take action to provide added income

assistance to people who are on AISH and who we know are the most vulnerable citizens among us. They're not volunteers. They're not people who can get in and out as they please. Before they enter, they do have to meet some very strict standards, as is the case now.

The minister did say, I think, in response to the question from the Member for Calgary-Montrose that very few WCB cases that are in limbo qualify for the AISH program or in fact are AISH recipients. The minister did say that it's a very small percentage. I wonder if the minister has any sort of general idea about what percentage they might be and if it's been declining. My impression from what the minister said was that people who may be injured at work and are awaiting the WCB decision – and in the meantime some of them become AISH recipients – their numbers in proportion as part of the total AISH recipients has been going down. I wonder if the minister would want to clarify that a bit to say at what proportion they might be at this time as we talk about it.

So if the minister would please give us some assessment of the real dollar value today of \$855 compared to the '99 costs and dollar value at the time.

My second question to the minister is a simple one, an easy one. As part of the government's report, the MLA committee considering a review of the Labour Relations Code, the minister decided to reject one of the recommendations which had to do with bringing agricultural workers under the labour code. The minister has decided to reject that particular recommendation at a time when in fact there's a great deal of emphasis in the government to transform our agriculture in a way so that we add value to most of the things that we produce on a farm or on a ranch, which would mean, therefore, that more and more people who may not be covered currently by the labour code but need that coverage will be working in agricultural production and processing. WCB is one area, particularly for people who work in ILOs, intensive livestock operations. Their numbers, I guess, are increasing. I'm sure that most of them are not necessarily full-time workers, but regardless there are increasing numbers, perhaps, of Albertans particularly from rural areas who seek and find work in intensive livestock operations around the province.

The size and number and intensity of this kind of agriculture activity is growing. In fact, it's one of the key policies of the government to encourage and help in the growth of this sector of the agricultural production. Why is it, then, that in spite of the fact that the numbers of people who work in ILOs or in agricultural operations in general is growing – these are wage workers; these are not just workers who work as part of their family operations – we deny them coverage under the Labour Relations Code? Therefore, also, they're denied coverage under the Workers' Compensation Board.

So if the minister would please make some comments on the real reasons as to why he has decided to reject what I thought was a very reasonable recommendation made by a committee that he himself appointed from his colleagues in the backbenches of the government caucus.

My third question to the minister is with respect to the salting and MERFing issue. The minister did make a few comments on it a couple of days ago, I guess, in question period. I have here a news release from July of last year from the minister's office which draws attention to the MLA report, and the minister knows that the building trades are strongly opposed to any changes to present practices. The minister has received the report from the committee studying these issues. My question to him: what actions does the minister plan to take and, if so, within what kind of timelines?

5:00

A few other questions for the minister. The minister has also of course resisted any suggestions for an increase in minimum wage

rates. I think that even last week or 10 days ago when he was in Banff, he continued to reject any suggestions coming in from some friendly sources to him that there's a need for Alberta to move forward on this. I just yesterday tabled a letter from three churches on the south side in Edmonton, churches representing more than 14,000 parishioners who are urging the government to take action to increase the minimum wage.

So there is a whole spectrum of voices urging the minister to change his position on the minimum wage. It's not just the New Democrats. It's not just the opposition side of the House that is calling on him to take action on this. People who are not engaged in partisan politics are the ones who are in fact in very large numbers convinced of the need to increase the minimum wage in order for the government to do its part so that the Albertan who works at the lower end of the wage levels can make a living wage.

The minister says that he is not going to listen to me on this.

Mr. MacDonald: The Minister of Energy says that this is dogma.

Dr. Pannu: Oh, the Minister of Energy – it doesn't surprise me – sees it as dogma. In Banff I guess he must have put some plugs in his ears when some of his own friends were calling for a similar increase, when social justice groups such as the people who have concerns about poverty, people who have concerns about the growing number of working poor in Alberta are asking the minister to do something so that those people who are willing to work and work hard should at least at the end of the week, at the end of two weeks, at the end of the month bring home a wage cheque that helps them pay their electricity bills and pay their gas bills, that thanks to the government's policies have gone up, and pay their health care premiums, which thanks to the government have gone up. In order to do that, the minister has to take action.

I don't know why he is digging in his heels. It's not a partisan issue. It's not something that New Democrats are the only ones asking the minister to act on and do some rethinking on. It is Albertans at large, from all walks of life who see problems with the minister's position on this minimum wage. It's the lowest in the country. It's the lowest in the country, and the people who spend most of their money, most of their wages, on basic needs – that is, shelter, food, housing, clothing – are the ones who are hit hard by this.

People who work at the minimum wage level or close to the minimum wage level are young people, are recent immigrants, immigrant women in particular. They are a very specific social segment of our working population who are disadvantaged by the minister's intransigent position in refusing to change the minimum wage. These are the people who need help. These are the people who would be helped. They would love to be independent. They don't want the government to supplement their low incomes. They want to be able to earn on their own and have pride in their independence.

The minister's policy, in my view, directly or indirectly in effect creates the dependence on government handouts to top up their incomes in order for them to survive, in order to pay their bills. The minister needs to see the reasonableness of the requests that are coming to him, the pressure on him on the need to change the wage.

So that's my question on the minimum wage. I urge the minister to rethink his position in light of what he's hearing, not only from me as leader of the New Democrat opposition but what he's hearing from church leaders, what he's hearing from community leaders, what he's hearing from people across party lines, including his own party.

One other question the minister would certainly like to, I think,

answer as well. The minister some time ago promised that there would be an independent review of the long-standing, contentious WCB claims, and those outstanding claims pushed some people over to AISH, I must say. The minister is concerned about the pressures on the budget in the AISH area because the costs are going up and the numbers are increasing. One way in which you can perhaps stop that pressure is by resolving these contentious WCB claims so people get their claims settled and they can return to their lives which don't require turning to AISH.

My question to the minister: why has the minister not acted on this? Why has he changed his mind on establishing an independent review for the long-standing, contentious WCB claims?

I will conclude with this, Mr. Chairman. The minister has, I'm afraid, only a few minutes, but he can answer the questions in writing.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise and ask a few questions as well. I realize that we're running out of time, so I'll try and be quite brief on this. I'll go through them quite quickly for the minister if he could answer some of these questions. If he can't answer them today, perhaps at a later time.

My first question, of course, is on the earned income tax credit, EITC, the alternative to raising the minimum wage that we keep hearing about today. As anyone who has studied the issue thoroughly knows, raising the minimum wage not only does not cure poverty; it may in fact increase it. Anyone who takes a responsible position and does their due diligence would not be recommending increases to the minimum wage, but they may well look at the idea of earned income tax credits.

I'm wondering if the minister's department has had a chance to look at the EITC concept, which basically takes the approach of reducing clawbacks for people who do go out and get employment and, in fact, reverses the flow there. It tops up their paycheques if they do work.

It's also known as the incentive to work program and is credited with lifting millions of people out of poverty in the United States, unlike raising the minimum wage, which we all know raises the unemployment rate among youth and helps bankrupt small business owners and does a whole bunch of other damage in society that we are aware of. I wonder if the minister could speak to that as well.

The AISH program I have some questions about. I know from my research that in 1980, when it was started, we had about 5,000 people on it. It cost about \$25 million a year for that program. We've seen almost stratospheric growth in that program. It now has, as I understand, some 33,000. That's 5,000 to 33,000 people in that system. It's gone from \$25 million, as I understand it, to something like \$349 million. So the amount of money that this government has put into the AISH program has been almost perpendicular in terms of its growth, but because of the larger number of people getting onto the system, individuals are unable to see the increases that they need.

I'm wondering if you can talk about some of the explanation of this phenomenal increase in funding that we're putting into the AISH program and why it isn't trickling down to individuals. Maybe we have to look at screening the growth of the population of people on that program, and perhaps we have to look at some of the front-line people and how difficult it is for them to say no sometimes to people who maybe are not severely handicapped and what incentives and what performance benchmarks we might have in place of that.

The main thrust of my questions today, Mr. Chairman, is I'm really wondering – it's called Human Resources and Employment,

and all the focus is on employees and employment, in my view, and I'm a little concerned about the human resources side and, in particular, a group of individuals in this province who I think are one of our greatest human resources, but they're not employees. They're in fact owners of small businesses. They are people who decided one day for whatever reason – perhaps they could not find employment; perhaps they could not get a job – to get off their duffs, go out there, and try and create a job for themselves, try and create a little business. So they started their own small businesses only to find out just how incredibly difficult it is to succeed in a small business. To me, those are some of our best and brightest people. They're self-reliant; they're trying to stand on their own two feet.

5:10

What do we do to help them? What do we do to help reduce the risks of failure when we have 4 out of 5 of them failing within five years? What are we doing to help them in terms of a social safety net when they do fail? I mean, the reality is that they don't qualify for unemployment insurance. They don't qualify for any of these programs, in fact, if their small business goes broke and they find themselves again unemployed, where they started. I'm just really concerned about what we do to help small business owners.

Just along that line, I recognize the tough job that the minister has here. I mean, there's just never enough money, way more demands than resources, and of course, you know, so many – I characterize them as socialist – kind of concepts looking at short-term gain and forgetting about the long-term pain attached to that, just so much focus on trying to solve short-term problems and what I call treating symptoms instead of the disease. Frankly, it makes it virtually impossible to focus on the cause and the cure of some of these problems when there's just so much demand to alleviate the short-term pain instead of solving the disease, as I say.

I recognize the tough job that the minister has on this, but I do want to kind of stress that if we're really going to solve some of these poverty problems in our society and some of these issues, we really do need to focus on helping people that maybe can't find a job: help them create a job, help them start their own small business.

We all know that most new jobs and most new wealth in our society comes from small businesses. In fact, almost all business is small businesses. Most new wealth and most new jobs come from small business, and we have 4 out of 5 of them failing – failing even in this province, the very best province in the country – in the first five years. I look at that and say: well, that's a success rate of 1 out of 5. What could we do if we could get that success rate up to 2 out of 5? Would that not double the new wealth creation in this province and double the new job creation in this province? What would that do towards solving poverty in this province as opposed to just handing out lots of money and paying people to sit home and taking away their incentives while at the same time some of our best and brightest are facing huge barriers and huge obstructions and huge risk in trying to succeed with their tiny little business, one-person companies that may then become two or three. It's really a terrible situation.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the question.

After consideration of the business plan and the proposed estimates for the Department of Human Resources and Employment for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$1,147,879,000
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The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Human Resources and Employment and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Human Resources and Employment: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,147,879,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that the Assembly adjourn until 8 this evening, at which time we reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:16 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, May 4, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 04/05/04

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

head: **Committee of Supply**

The Chair: I'd call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Gaming

The Chair: I wonder if there are any comments or questions to be offered with respect to these estimates? The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to start the evening by introducing members of the Ministry of Gaming who are with me this evening and watching the proceedings. Norm Peterson is the deputy of the ministry, Marilyn Carlyle-Helms is the communications director, Lana Lougheed is the strategic services director, and Jeremy Chorney is my executive assistant. I would like to point out to the Assembly that what I lack in numbers is more than made up in quality. So four is really all I need for this evening.

I'm glad to be able to provide some information on Gaming estimates this evening, but, first, to put them into perspective, I'd like to take a moment to give the committee some context regarding what my ministry is responsible for. The Ministry of Gaming is made up of three essential areas: the Department of Gaming, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, and the Alberta Gaming Research Council.

The Department of Gaming provides communication and strategic services support to the ministry and manages a number of lottery-funded programs. The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, or AGLC, licenses, regulates, and monitors all gaming and liquor activities in the province. Finally, the Alberta Gaming Research Council is a broad-based group that provides advice on gaming matters both to the minister and to the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. I also have responsibility for the Horse Racing Alberta Act, and my ministry administers the Alberta lottery fund.

As has been my pleasure for the past three years, I'll review in detail with you today the Department of Gaming's estimates for 2004-2005, which total \$165 million and which can be found starting at page 165 of the government and lottery fund estimates. Four per cent of this budget goes towards the costs to administer the department and the lottery-funded programs. The lion's share, 96 per cent, or nearly \$160 million, to be precise, goes towards lottery-funded initiatives. This shows that we've got our priorities right.

The fact of the matter is that these numbers show only one thing, that Alberta's gaming and liquor industries are very well managed and continue to return tremendous benefits to Albertans. I'm sure that even the opposition would be able to agree with that.

I'd like to begin by highlighting some of the key areas for Gaming in the '04-05 year. The first and perhaps the most important is the Alberta lottery fund, which can be found both at page 165 and page 173. This year's lottery fund estimates quite clearly indicate that we've listened carefully to the priorities of Albertans and have directed lottery revenues towards those priorities.

Revenues from the Alberta lottery fund make a difference in the lives of all Albertans in two ways: through allocations to 13 specific ministries in support of public initiatives and through two of those ministries to foundations and grant programs to support volunteer and community-based initiatives. What this means is that lottery

funds allocated to individual ministries are most often the responsibility of my colleagues to disburse according to the plans presented in this Assembly.

So you should have already heard how the ministers of Community Development and Infrastructure plan to invest lottery revenue into centennial initiatives, how the Minister of Innovation and Science plans to build the Alberta SuperNet, and how the Minister of Health and Wellness has put lottery dollars to good work by supporting AADAC. My job will be to discuss my ministry's lottery fund allocations, which total \$160 million, and highlight some of the significant changes.

What hasn't changed in Gaming's lottery fund allocations is our request for continued funding for the ministry's two key grant programs: the community initiatives program and the community facility enhancement program. In the past these two programs have put millions of dollars of lottery revenue to good work in hundreds of communities throughout Alberta.

A few examples. Thanks to the Alberta lottery fund the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation has \$75,000 more to conduct breast cancer research. The Cardston district public library got a \$125,000 contribution towards a new library, and the residents in Alberta Beach have a better playground for their children thanks to a \$17,000 grant to their community league. If you want further details, of course, you can look at albertalotteryfund.ca for all of the excellent volunteer projects that received funding through these two programs.

We need to be able to continue funding projects of this nature and many others, Mr. Chairman. We plan to put \$38.5 million into the community facility enhancement program and \$30 million into the community initiatives program to do just that this year. I can't imagine any member here contesting that.

This budget indicates that \$7 million is estimated to go to the charities that assist in the conduct of electronic bingo, or digi-bingo, and keno. First of all, I'd like to point out that all benefiting charities have been properly registered and their use of proceeds is thoroughly scrutinized to ensure that the funds are going to worthy causes. Secondly and most importantly, the \$7 million allocated here is the money that we estimate the charities and the bingo halls will themselves earn through digi-bingo and keno. As such, these proceeds are generated through the commitment of the charities to fund-raise, and the proceeds just flow through the lottery fund and directly back to those groups. This is the first of four flow-through initiatives that I will describe this evening.

The second flow-through initiative is the racing industry renewal initiative. This initiative provides the support to the horse racing and breeding industry by returning to the industry a portion of the net proceeds from slot machines at racetracks. The other portion of the net proceeds is directed to other lottery-funded programs.

This initiative benefits the horse breeding industry specifically as well as the agriculture sector, and it brings good jobs to cities like Edmonton. For example, Northlands Park directly employs over 700 people each year through horse racing. These people, real people like Kim Dressler, a harness trainer and driver at Northlands Park, are helping to build strong urban communities by buying houses and paying taxes. Kim has said: I wouldn't have been able to buy my house last year if it wasn't for the slot machines helping to increase the purses.

Let's be clear. This is not a government handout. It's an arrangement that benefits the agricultural community, strengthens our urban communities, and along the way raises funds that assist local groups in their many worthwhile endeavours.

As you see in this year's estimates, the budget for this initiative is set to increase from \$37 million to \$45 million. Why? It's partly

due to the possibility that a racing entertainment centre in Calgary could be licensed this year. It's also because revenues at existing racetracks have increased. As in all these flow-through arrangements if revenues are projected to increase, then the flow-through amounts go up as well.

8:10

The third flow-through is the NHL lottery tickets. Again, in case you need help reading the budget, this line item doesn't mean that we're giving away a \$1.3 million taxpayer handout to the two professional hockey teams in Alberta. Albertans told us that they didn't want us to do that. What it does mean is that those Albertans who choose to play are able to buy lottery tickets to support their favourite NHL team. My favourite team, of course, is the one that made the playoffs and, I'm pleased to say, as we speak, the only Canadian team that is still very much there. The amount shown in these estimates, a total of \$2.7 million, is the final amount of revenue expected to be payable to the teams from the sale of the last NHL lottery tickets.

I'd like to remind all the members that our commitment through this initiative was to offer Albertans this unique scratch-and-win ticket through to the end of this year's hockey season. The five tickets offered under this commitment has so far generated a combined total of over \$5 million for the two teams. I'm pleased that we were able to support Alberta's teams in this unique way.

The final flow-through initiative in Gaming's estimates is the First Nations development fund. This program was transferred to Gaming from Community Development in October of '03. It's part of the First Nations gaming policy that was announced in January 2001 in support of the government's aboriginal policy framework. First Nations casinos are expected to provide direct economic and social benefits for First Nation people.

Under the policy 40 per cent of the slot machine proceeds from First Nation casinos is to be allocated for social, economic, and community development projects. This includes addiction programs, education, health, and infrastructure within First Nation communities. These funds cannot be used for capital, operations, or financing costs of gaming facilities or activities. The \$4 million included in Gaming's 2004-2005 estimates is directly linked to the operation of one or more First Nation casinos. Just like the other flow-through arrangements the revenue has to be generated before the flow-through grants can be provided.

The last item in Gaming's estimates that I'll elaborate on is the increase in FTEs, full-time equivalents, for the upcoming year. Gaming's FTEs will increase from 39 to 42 this year. This increase reflects the additional staff needed to administer the First Nations development fund. Of course, these individuals will only be brought on board when we actually are required to administer and disburse funds throughout the First Nations development fund.

The final item I'd like to mention before taking questions is the statement of operations for the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. The AGLC is treated like a commercial operation and, as such, is included in the government's fiscal reporting as a revenue item, which is net of operating costs. The AGLC does a tremendous job in its role of licensing, regulating, and monitoring the province's gaming and liquor industries. As a commercial operation they're able to do so in an uninterrupted fashion.

Lottery revenue from VLTs, slot machines, and ticket lotteries is expected to increase \$104 million this year to over \$1.1 billion. This reflects casinos and racing entertainment centres being built and expanded. It also reflects the expected growth in ticket lotteries. Again, this revenue is put entirely in the Alberta lottery fund. This reflects our commitment to Albertans to be transparent in how these funds are used.

Liquor revenue is expected to increase slightly to \$560 million.

As you've heard, Mr. Chairman, our funding request is reasonable. We're simply trying to continue to operate in a straightforward, transparent, and fiscally prudent fashion and to play our part in making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit. Albertans expect and deserve well-managed and regulated gaming and liquor industries. It's a simple request, and I'd encourage the hon. members to support it.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for the opening remarks from the minister. I join the minister in welcoming members of his staff who have appeared here tonight to assist him.

I will start by looking at page 166 of the estimates. I notice that under vote 1 the ministry support services is up by it looks like a little under 7 per cent to me, and the lottery fund programs are also up by a similar percentage. Now, this is higher than inflation or a cost-of-living increase, if you'd prefer to think of it that way, so I'm seeking an explanation from the minister as to why those costs are above what we'd be expecting for cost of living. For example, we have a 3.5 per cent settlement, I think, with the unions. Sometimes that figures into it. So what's the explanation for the increase there?

On page 167 under vote 1.0.3, strategic services, we have an increase there from \$1.226 million to \$1.326 million, so \$100,000. My understanding is that strategic services is responsible for policy, business planning, performance measurements, financial planning and co-ordination for the department. This \$100,000 is an over 8 per cent increase from the previous year. So, again, I'm seeking an explanation and some detail on what that extra money is being used for or why the request has come through.

Next, I'm looking at page 169, vote 3.0.7, which, indeed, is the racing industry renewal, and it's up \$8 million from last year. The minister has already explained that that's anticipated revenues from possibly a new racing entertainment centre opening in Calgary. Could we get some details on that, please? When I inquired back a bit – I guess it would be in January – I had some trouble getting information about where this is anticipated to be; whether it's a new facility or, if attached to an existing facility, which facility; how many machines are expected to be in it; what's the amount of money that's expected to be generated from it; et cetera. Are you expecting the entire \$8 million to come from that one location, or are you expecting that to break down with some increases from the other racing entertainment centres and then the largest chunk of it to come from this potential Calgary site?

I'm also interested in this racing industry renewal. That's flowing from the June 2001 requests. When I look at what's coming out of I guess it's the 2002 report, the most recent one from Horse Racing Alberta, what's expected as revenue here just continues to increase and increase and increase. I'm wondering how far the ministry or strategic services or whoever does the planning here is expecting this to increase.

We've watched it go from \$13.2 million in 2002; in 2003, \$33.6 million; in 2004, \$40 million, depending on whose numbers you're looking at. One of them is on calendar year; one is on fiscal year, so they're always a little bit different, which I asked about in a written question the other day, saying that these numbers are hard to figure out when they're always coming to us completely separate. But obviously they're continuing to increase to a healthy amount. Is there a ceiling expected? Is there some point at which the department will step in and go: okay; that was as far as I expected you to get; you've now gone over that?

8:20

For example, in 2004 it goes well above the, again, fiscal year, \$37 million, calendar year, \$40.2 million. What if it goes to \$50 million? Does the department step in and go: okay; that's enough? Or it goes to \$55 million, which is exceeding even what is anticipated for 2006. Is there any point at which the department says: "Okay; that's it. That's all we agreed to give you. You've exceeded that. We're going to take that money and do something else with it"?

What is the planning over that initiative? Is there a top limit, and if there is, what is it, and how much more do you expect this to increase? I'm looking at \$53.3 million in 2006 having gone in essentially five years from \$13.3 million. It's a substantial amount of money for that one industry.

Okay. Still on page 169. The other initiatives, which is vote 3.0.12: last year, \$13.088 million, this year \$15.088 million. The minister, when I questioned him in Public Accounts, noted that this is the fund where you can't apply to it. There are no criteria for successful recipients or no criteria that are available anyway. It dispenses larger amounts of money than are available to be dispensed through the other two benefit programs in this ministry, which are the CFEP grant – top amount there is \$125,000 – and CIP, \$75,000, so we're looking at substantial amounts of money. It's larger than \$125,000.

The minister also mentioned that often there's a multiyear commitment here for very large projects. So could we get a list, please, of the multiyear projects that are falling into this funding of \$15 million? What projects are carrying over, and where are they? Are we in year 2 or year 3; are we beginning them, starting them, or in the middle? Also, how much those are anticipated to be.

Now, part of what the minister was saying when we looked at this other initiatives or discretionary fund was that how much money might be required couldn't be anticipated. So I'm wondering how much is already committed coming into this year from those other multiyear projects. Then second to that are other projects that are not multiyear, but you know that you are going to pay that money out.

I'm also interested in whether this other initiative fund breaks down by constituency. You know, is there an allocation that each constituency has access to X amount of money? If so, I certainly never had that information passed on to me. Is that information passed on to anyone else? How do people know? To approach the minister, one presumes. Again, during Public Accounts I had asked for what was the decision-making process? Who makes the decision that X group gets a certain amount of money?

You know, one of my favourite theatres, Vertigo Theatre in Calgary, was a recipient of a series of grants through this. Who decided that they literally won the lottery and they were going to get support for their project there? Who brought that forward, and how did they know to bring it forward under that initiative, or did they just come to the minister and say: I'm looking for help; where would it be? The minister says: this is the place; apply here. Well, you can't apply, so how does that work? I'm thinking of some initiatives in my constituency that I'd like to bring forward, and I'd like to do it properly, and I'd like to be successful, obviously, so how do I do that?

On page 178 of the estimates under Revenue, the video lottery revenue. When we looked at the budget for '03-04, it was \$603.244 million, and in fact the comparable forecast is less at \$584 million. I'm wondering: it's going back up again in this budget year to \$598.62 million. What were the reasons for the drop between the budget and the forecast in those VLT revenues? Is there something

happening there? Is there a wave? Is there a trend that needs to be watched? Does the ministry know why that happened? Do they have an opinion on whether it may happen again this year?

Or maybe here's the answer. On the same page, then, page 178 of the estimates, the casino gaming terminals lottery revenue is up. The forecast was \$461 million, which was in fact above what the budgeted amount was at \$455 million, and it's being put in the budget for '04-05 at \$509.487 million. That's a healthy increase. That's about \$53.8 million. I'm wondering if the horse racing slots are in here or what money that is in particular and what opinion the department has on the \$50 million increase. What's that ascribed to?

I did have a question indeed about the FTEs, and the minister has answered it, explaining that the staff would administer the First Nations fund. Now, that's interesting because my impression of the money coming out of the aboriginal casinos was that a lot of it was going to be sort of set off to the side and distributed by going into the various funds that were being established and for the use and good works of the aboriginal people in Alberta. I'm interested that the staff would come through the Department of Gaming and not be paid out of the profits, in effect, of what's coming out of the casino. Could the minister comment on that?

Perhaps that is going to happen. There was a particular formula, and maybe I could get the minister to repeat it because it broke down differently than usual. It used to be 15 per cent to the proprietor and 15 per cent to the group and 70 per cent back to the government, and the breakdown with the aboriginal casinos is quite different. There's a fair amount that, in fact, stays with the casino, so I'm interested whether these FTEs will be paid out of that fund or whether they're paid out of the administration for the department.

I'm just going to switch to the business plan book, strategic priorities on page 220. Priority 5 is dealing with the First Nation casinos and "opportunities for gaming facilities on First Nations land and benefits for First Nations communities." I've asked this next question a number of years in a row. What efforts or what steps has the ministry taken to protect itself or inoculate itself from the situation that developed in Ontario, where there was an agreement negotiated between the provincial government and the aboriginal peoples around casino proceeds? When push came to shove, the monies were not turned over to the province, and they all ended up in court.

8:30

I believe that court case has now worked its way through the system and the province did lose the gaming revenue when the First Nation decided to keep it. I know that the government has gone to some efforts here to negotiate an agreement, but what else? Is there anything else in place to so-called protect the investment? I mean, strictly speaking they're on aboriginal lands, and we don't really have much to say about what goes on there. So we're entirely at the goodwill, if you will, of the First Nations upon which the casino is situated.

I'd like an update on that situation and what other plans or steps have been taken there. In fact, what is the interpretation by the Gaming minister of the – I'm actually not remembering a specific ruling, but that court case has been up so long there must have been a ruling. So if it hasn't happened, let me know, and if it has, what's the opinion there?

Priority 6 on page 220 is talking about "managing the Alberta Lottery Fund and increase awareness so that Albertans understand how the Fund benefits volunteer groups and public and community-based initiatives." What I'm noticing here is that when I start to add the numbers up, in fact it looks like \$85.8 million go to volunteer and community-based programs in the entire Ministry of Community

Development and \$68.5 million go to CFEP and the community initiatives program. Then when I look at the amount of money that is distributed through the rest of the lottery fund, well, I mean it totals \$1.17 billion dollars. So a significant amount of money is going into the departments

Part of my question here is: who decides? For example, I note – and I'm switching back and forth; I'm on pages 172 and 173 of the estimates book – that under Agriculture, item 2, agriculture initiatives, they're getting \$11.62 million. Who requests that, or who decides that they get that amount of money?

Surely all things that government does are public good or public benefit. So how is the minister – what were the words he used? Allocated to ministries to support public initiatives. Who's deeming that something is not a public initiative and therefore doesn't get lottery dollars? Or, indeed, are there private initiatives that the government is involved in that would not be eligible for lottery funds?

You know, the minister and I have had this tug-of-war of words over a number of years now, but I still find it very interesting, and I know why the government did it. The amount of money that's essentially paying for regular government programs – in fact, the very first year that it happened, I spent a lot of time pointing out that the program was paid for out of general revenue previously, but now it's been transferred over and paid for under the lottery fund. So it wasn't a new program that was created at all. It's just a matter of transferring where it's being paid from. But this interesting definition that the minister always uses of public and private and what goes on his list that adds up to the numbers that he says are most interesting to me, and I'm always interested in seeing exactly what the details are on that.

In the annual report on page 45 performance measurement 4 under this core business establishes the "percentage of Albertans who are satisfied with how the Alberta Lottery Fund revenue is being used." It looks like it slipped from 73 per cent to 70 per cent, and I'm wondering if the minister has a comment on that.

We also have under the AGLC – and again this is the Auditor General's report on page 131. The "AGLC staff use contract management policies developed in 1992 under the Alberta Liquor Control Board . . . policies are outdated and not sufficiently comprehensive for the AGLC's current business operations." For example, the Auditor General indicated that there's no "formal process to ensure contractors comply with the terms and conditions of the agreement" and that the "AGLC did not sign contracts for . . . consulting services," nor did they "require consultants to confirm that their interests . . . do not conflict with the interests of the AGLC."

I'll have to return later. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks very much. The hon. member has asked for some detail with respect to support services information contained at page 167 of the estimates. The manpower budget associated with this is \$1.3 million, which is 58 per cent of the program budget of \$2.3 million. There are 17 FTEs associated with this particular item. Supplies and services and other costs are budgeted at \$952,000, which is 42 per cent of the program budget. There's a \$145,000 increase. The 7 per cent increase reflects salary increases and increased support costs associated with increased program delivery. Although this program provides overall support and direction to the ministry, it uses about 1 per cent of the budget.

With respect to strategic services, also at page 167, I can advise the hon. member that the budget of \$1.3 million is about 59 per cent

of the program's budget of \$2.3 million. The manpower budget is \$507,000 for salaries and benefits, 38 per cent of the office's budget of \$1.3 million. It has 8 FTEs: the director, four managers, a research assistant, and two support staff. The balance of \$819,000 is budgeted for normal office costs and supplies, contracting of professional services, service agreements, which are the ACSC, and the department's share of common government-wide information management systems, which are IMAGIS and ARTS, AGent, and ExClaim, all of which comprise 62 per cent of this element's budget.

The hon. member asked a question with respect to the racing industry renewal initiative at page 169. The principal increase that has been built into this item reflects the prospect of a racing entertainment centre being created and operational in Calgary in this budget year. Calgary does not have a racing entertainment centre at this particular point in time. The arrangement relative to Calgary is in connection with the casino located at the Stampede grounds, and it has 206 slots. A proposed new racing entertainment centre in Calgary, which would be contiguous with and part of a race track, would have 500 slots and would involve 51 and two-thirds per cent going to Horse Racing Alberta under the terms of the racing industry renewal initiative agreement.

The arrangement relative to the casino sees only 36 and two-thirds per cent go to the racing industry renewal initiative because the casino is a charitable casino, and the other 15 per cent that would otherwise make up the 51 and two-thirds goes to the charities.

8:40

So the assumptions that were built into this particular budget contemplate, one, a racing entertainment centre for a portion of the year that would have more slots and which would generate a higher percentage. There may be other assumptions associated with that, and to the extent that there are, we'll respond in writing to that point. Generally speaking, I can advise the hon. member and other hon. members that questions which are asked which I do not respond to verbally will receive the courtesy of response in writing.

There was a portion of the questions with respect to the racing industry renewal initiative that related to: where's the end point in all of this? At this time I can tell the hon. member that there's a racing entertainment centre in Edmonton and Lethbridge and Grande Prairie. Horse Racing Alberta wishes to establish a long-term 10-year racing licence for Calgary, which would see a racing entertainment centre go in there.

There has been discussion by Horse Racing Alberta of another B track. B tracks are located at Lethbridge and Grande Prairie. At some other location in Alberta they've talked to, for example Red Deer, and ultimately weren't successful in proceeding, but there may be one, perhaps two other B tracks, according to Horse Racing Alberta, that might make sense from a horse racing perspective in the province. So that is the extent of the plans as I understand them.

The agreement relative to horse racing is that the Calgary and Edmonton racing entertainment centres would each have 500 slots if they proceeded, and the B track racing entertainment centres, if they perform, can have a maximum of 99. Lethbridge has 99; Grande Prairie has 35. It is something that is earned, so if another B track were granted, one would have to determine the market, but they might start at something less than 99 and proceed to 99 if, in fact, they can demonstrate that there is a demand for an increased number of machines.

That essentially is the environment in which racing entertainment centres would proceed, and what is required from the horse racing perspective is that a long-term racing licence is granted. Either an A or a B track are the two types of licences at this point in time that I'm aware of that are associated with this.

Government's commitment to the horse racing industry is to provide them with funds with a view to allowing them to stabilize and grow horse racing in Alberta. They have a commitment to prepare and file through this ministry in this Assembly their business plan on an annual basis so that we can determine what their plans are relative to the industry.

That business plan, like business plans of government, will have key performance indicators built into it that will assist us in determining what are appropriate measures of success within horse racing and breeding and, as time goes on, measure whether or not the money which is part of this particular program is in fact achieving the results. So the object is to over time determine that the Horse Racing Alberta folks are in fact doing the job given that they have been provided the tools of financing through this particular initiative.

There were some questions with respect to other initiatives, and we'll provide you with the specifics that you asked for relative to carry-overs from year to year and so on and so forth. But just to recap and as I've indicated to this hon. member previously, the initiative is one which allows us to react to unplanned or new initiatives that are identified during the year and which are priorities within the communities and within the regions of the province and often which are of amounts of money that cannot be accommodated within the scope of any of the programs that we fund, whether it be within Gaming or Community Development or elsewhere in the provincial government.

So that is the general gist of this particular program. You can do a search at albertalotteryfund.ca, and you will find under other lottery-funded programs those groups which have received funding, so the information is available at that web site. I can tell the hon. member that, so she can do a search.

Using the Vertigo example of process, Vertigo, like many groups, approached the government because they're looking for provincial funding. Most groups are familiar with CFEP and familiar with CIP, but they come and talk to government because they have a large ask. It's a logical place to come. Whether they have any understanding of the limitations of funding or not, I can't say. But they tend to end up in government, and as Minister of Gaming I end up seeing many of them because ultimately they are referred to me by people for reasons which I can only guess, but I assume that it's because there are lottery dollars and they assume that there's some money available within the ministry. The only money that's ever available, really, outside of programs is this particular initiative.

Vertigo, as you will recall, was in the process of becoming homeless. They had a very well-developed option for a new home, they had plans that were very far along as far as architectural concept, they had a firm commitment from the landlord, and they had significant individual funding in place when they approached us relative to what they were doing. What they said was something to the effect that it was essential for them to be successful that someone stand up and make a commitment of a substantial amount of money. Today, admittedly, I don't remember the numbers, but it might have been a couple of million dollars or \$3 million or \$2 million.

In funding, my experience is that most groups will tell you that somebody has to go first, and if somebody goes first, it really makes it very helpful for them to approach others. So they can approach the federal government and the city and private members of our community for additional funding saying that the province is behind us. In any event, that was the situation with respect to Vertigo.

I can say at the outset that I'm responsible in the end result for all of the decisions. I'm the one that signs off the approval. Because this particular initiative is under my ministry, I'm responsible for everything that happens within that particular program.

8:50

It was something that had an urgency to it but had incredible leverage in terms of the money that was met by other governments – I think the federal government came up with a similar amount of money, and the people of Calgary came up with a large sum of money also – and they were able to go forward quickly to spend that money and create a home for themselves and do a very good job in adding to the arts and culture life of downtown Calgary.

That is a typical situation. They come up, and if we didn't have a program like this, we wouldn't be able to address any of those particular asks at all. As I've indicated to the hon. member previously, there are far more asks than there is money available, but that is a typical situation. Most of them are one-off like that, and each of them will be slightly different than the next as a result.

Some questions were asked with respect to VLT revenue on page 178. It was specifically with respect to the year '02-03. I think what I'll do is I'll have a written response. I don't remember that year as clearly as I should relative to the reasons for the decrease, but we had an older system at that particular point in time that was more prone to downtime as a result of repair. It was around 10 years old. I'll provide you with the detail on that, hon. member.

With respect to the casino gaming terminals or slot machine lottery revenue line, the increase there has something to do with the increased number of machines. Yes, it would include the racing entertainment centre slot machines; it would include the casino slot machines. We have certain casinos which are expanding or have expanded, and that is built into this. That's existing casinos, and it would also include new casinos that are contemplated in this particular budget. So that would be the principle reasons for an increase.

There were some questions with respect to the First Nations development fund and the First Nations gaming policy. The First Nations gaming policy included an agreement with respect to split, which essentially had 40 per cent of the slot revenue flow through the Alberta lottery fund into the First Nations development fund, and that was to go to the host First Nation, 30 per cent, and to other First Nations, 10 per cent. The First Nations development fund agreement, which has now been transferred to Gaming, is the vehicle through which that will be managed, and further particulars with respect to that we'll provide in writing.

With respect to our relationship from a jurisdictional point of view with the First Nations and Gaming, our position is that the province has total jurisdiction with respect to gaming on First Nations lands. I believe there's a Supreme Court of Canada case which supports that position. The name of the case I don't remember, but we'll provide particulars of that for you. We have a situation where the First Nations have accepted that. We have our licensing process that is being followed by First Nations that are pursuing licences.

With respect to protection, all of the slot machines are controlled through a centralized system, and we control that centralized system, so, you know, if there is a problem, then the machines don't operate.

The other thing is that all of the money ultimately finds its way into specific accounts.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. And thank you for the responses and the promise to provide further detail that the minister provided.

If I can just go back to the racing renewal initiative, looking at page 58 from the Alberta Horse Racing Industry Review, the minister talked about some, you know, people and gave examples of individuals who were directly benefiting from this, and I'm wonder-

ing if he can provide us with a firm number; for example, the number of individuals who are able to take advantage of the breeders' incentives that are listed. For this year they're listed at \$1.8 million, and it goes up to \$2.5 million in 2005, \$2.7 million, et cetera.

There's also an additional program that says that there's a breeders' \$1,000 incentive program. I'm presuming that the linkage is obvious here, but I shouldn't presume, so I'll ask: how many breeders are involved in that program and are able to take advantage of it or are expected to take advantage of it? Again, that one is increasing. Last year, 2003, was \$1.03 million, this year is \$1.19 million, and then that particular program disappears off the map.

I would also like to get a breakdown, please, of Horse Racing Alberta. Purses, track/ATN operations and infrastructures I think is what's being listed there. "Horse Racing Alberta expenditures on purses, racetrack infrastructure . . . racetrack operations/minor capital and share of VLT revenues from ATN/OTBs." So if I could get specifics. It's giving me some numbers here, but this document was written some time ago, and I'm looking for updated numbers on how that happens.

And I have not been able to get the synchronization of numbers that I referred to in the written question a couple of days ago, so I'm looking to the minister, who, I expect, can get this sort of information, to help me break it down. The main problem, of course, is that these numbers are always different when I look at them. Horse Racing Alberta always produces by the calendar year. The most recent one that's out is the 2002 annual review. Well, we're now in the fifth month of 2004, so I'm expecting that there will be a 2003 that comes out soon, but the numbers never work because what is in the department numbers, which is a fiscal year, and what turns up in Horse Racing Alberta never jive, which is the information I've been looking for from the minister.

I can't make these numbers work because I don't know how they're breaking down by month. If I knew that, then I could add on January, February, March, and I'd be able to do this, but I can't. You know, I don't think that that obfuscation is deliberate. Nonetheless, it is troublesome for me, so I'm looking for the minister to provide that.

Can the minister give me the figure on how much is allocated for operations for Horse Racing Alberta as well? We're in the fifth month now of 2004, but when can we be expecting the 2003 report from Horse Racing Alberta?

9:00

Now the community initiatives program. I'm referencing again the estimates book, page 169, vote 3.0.3. We are now in the third year. It was announced in June of 2002. It indicated then that the program was \$30 million a year for three years. I'm presuming that we are coming to the end of the program. The third year ends next summer. Do we have any plans to renew this? Would it be renewed at the same amount of money? Is there any possibility of returning to the community lottery board structure, in which the decision-making was more localized or regional? I think I also asked whether there would be considered an increase or any changes in the way the program has been structured.

Vote 2, page 168, Alberta Gaming Research Institute, Alberta Gaming Research Council. What studies are going to be conducted this year to examine the relationship between gambling addictions and the criminal acts to feed those addictions? I keep coming back to the minister with this one. We know that there's a connection, but we don't know how there's a connection. So where is the minister and the ministry in examining this?

I know that he's going to say, well, these two groups operate at arm's length, and whatever they do, they do. Is the ministry itself

doing any additional research along these lines? Are they requesting that the research be done by either of these two groups or looked at by either of these two groups?

I'm also interested in how much is enough. We've already examined a number of programs in which there continues to be a significant increase in the amount of revenue that's being generated, and it's being generated through gambling activities. So once again I ask the minister: has he done any work to determine – or perhaps he's made an arbitrary decision – how much gambling is enough in the province? Is there a dollar figure that he wishes to see achieved and that's enough? Or is there a level of activity? What is the market for this? Has the market been clearly identified? Does he look at it and say, "When there are 10,000 slot machines out there, then we've reached it; that's enough," or "That's the beginning; we want to see 20,000 slot machines out there"? How much is enough?

What studies has he done to support the level of activity that he's at currently? Perhaps he hasn't done any. Fine; tell me that. What's supporting the decisions that the minister is making up to this point?

I also continue to be interested in the lack of connection between the amount of revenue that this ministry brings in through gambling activities and the amount that is spent on treatment for problem gambling, and there is no direct correlation. There's a flat amount that is expended here, which actually now shows up under AADAC, I think, because there is a growing body of work that is starting to indicate that there is a direct correlation, and I'll come to some of the studies that I've looked at.

In particular, the one that's been pointed out to me is by Professor Earl Grinols, who just published *Gambling in America: Costs and Benefits*. Now, he's an economist, and his conclusions are that gambling in general is net costly, contrary to what has been much touted up until now. His point is that jurisdictions should be doing socioeconomic cost-benefit analyses, and those should be giving you a net cost or a net benefit, but his point is that you're going to find out that there's a net cost. We are getting huge revenues certainly, but it may well be that in the end the benefits are in fact outweighed by the social costs. So I'm looking to see whether there are plans to undertake any kind of extensive socioeconomic cost-benefit analysis about the use of gambling and how that affects our society.

How does the ministry know that they currently have the right mix of VLTs, bingos, slot machines, racing entertainment centres, casinos? There's been a significant change in the mix that we've had up until now. While I've been working as an MLA, I've not had as much volunteer time to put into the communities that I've been used to volunteering with, so I was a little surprised, going into a casino sometime within the last year, at the change that I saw: the number of slot machines that were now in place, and the tables were almost gone. The blackjack and the roulette and all the rest of those, that used to make up 80 per cent of the business, were down to 20 per cent. And the slots: there were just banks and banks and banks of them. Actually, the casino I was in had been renovated to accommodate the slot machines that were in there. So how does the ministry decide, what factors do they use to decide that they have the right mix of all of those various components of revenue-generating machines?

What expansion plans does the ministry have in place? These are all sort of a continuum of questions here about how much is enough. What are the expansion plans that the ministry has? He did list for me what was expected to go into the First Nations casinos but also into the racing entertainment centre in Calgary, so I'm presuming that he knows. So please share that.

Interestingly, right now in the lower mainland of B.C. there is a request out for proposals to do an impact assessment on that cost-benefit analysis and net costliness or net benefit of gaming and

gambling to the community. Ontario, I note, has also done one.

Around First Nations gaming – and I suppose this could be extrapolated to any of the new ones – I’m wondering whether the claims of job creation have been examined and whether, in fact, these are jobs created or whether in any given community what we have is I think it’s been termed cannibalization, where you have somebody working in a fast-food outlet in a particular community, say Stony Plain for example, and we have a casino open, and what happens is that the casino goes looking and hires the fast-food worker away from the fast-food outlet in Stony Plain, and they end up working at the casino of the First Nations. We didn’t actually particularly create any jobs there; we cannibalized staff members from one place to the next. Now the community businessperson has to go out and try and find a new worker there. So how are the arguments of job creation versus redistribution of jobs working out here?

Now the VLT report that was done by the Gaming Research Institute and released in January of 2004. They very clearly started to make a connection between problem gambling and an increase in crime. I’ve already asked the minister this question earlier. How is the minister responding specifically to the issues that were raised in this report? How does he respond to that particular issue?

9:10

How does he respond to the issues raised around problem gambling treatment? I notice that Dr. Hunter is the pioneer on problem gambling treatment and the director of the Nevada Psychological Associates, so you may well have visited him when you went down there on one of your trips to check out gambling. He’s concluding that “if you don’t think gambling is a serious problem for society, consider that no alcoholic has ever drank away four generations of money in a weekend – which I know that gamblers can and do.”

I know that the minister hasn’t been particularly willing to make changes based on the research that’s been done thus far, and I’m wondering how he is responding to issues like that, that are increasingly coming forward. You know, we have gambling being blamed in suicides. Some medical examiners are now starting to record gambling as a factor.

The other issue that I like to ask about every year is the connection between gambling addiction and fuelling crime. I’ve mentioned this once already, but specifically I’m wanting to know what work the department has done in tracking that. We certainly know, for example, that where we have other addicts – in other words, alcoholics or drug addicts – they commit crimes to produce money to be able to buy what they need for their fix. We know that this happens, and it only makes sense that that’s what’s happening when you’ve got a gambling addict, that they’re committing some kind of crime.

Certainly, the government has experience in their own departments. There’s one that’s running in the paper today, yesterday, the day before of a government employee who committed crimes to fuel a gambling addiction and in fact got a business associate or a friend or somebody else involved in the same thing, and together they were both involved in committing a crime, perpetrating fraud against the government to feed their addiction.

Where is the government in tracking this, and how much attention are they paying to it? Are they investigating particular kinds of crime or just not worrying about this at all? Or are they looking at incidents of property crime, for example, or only looking at white-collar or fraud, embezzlement? What is being looked at and examined here? Has the minister requested the Gaming Research Institute to do any of that work on his behalf?

Have there been any thoughts of having changes made to legislation so that those people who do steal from, for example, the government as an employer or from other employers to finance a gambling addiction be responsible for paying the money back?

The other question that I’d like to get on the record is: where are we with Internet gambling? What has been explored? What studies has the minister looked at? What’s being considered? Perhaps there’s been the decision that we’re not considering it. Once or twice a year I hear from some advocates that say: “We’re missing the boat on this one. We could be making a lot of money if we got involved in it. We could control it more if we got involved.” It’s the same arguments that I believe led to our getting involved in VLTs to begin with, some 10 years ago now. So where are we both with government involvement or government regulation of gambling on-line and also any kind of cyberattack? You know, it’s both sides of this. It’s one thing to be involved in gambling on-line, but there’s also what comes from on-line that can be causing your own machines trouble if they’re hooked up in any way or that could come through the tools that are used to upgrade the machines or however that works.

Do we have any idea of a criminal organization association with gambling here in Alberta? Are you tracking any criminal organization Internet gambling happening in Alberta?

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. The hon. member has asked a question with respect to plans for the community initiative program. Yes, this is the third year of a three-year program. It’s been very successful, and as minister I certainly will be advocating a renewal of the program just as we have been advocating a renewal of CFEP, which started in 1988. So I anticipate that that will be part of the business plan process going forward. As far as increases, that has a lot to do with budget issues, but certainly as far as the future of the plan is concerned, I will be advocating that it continue because it has been very successful.

With respect to the issue of our plans on gaming in the province, I would refer back to the licensing policy review, the recommendations that were made there which were accepted by this government. That is the model that we are using at this point in time, and the commitment was that it would be reviewed again five years out or so. So in ’06 or somewhere in that vicinity there will be a review of the rules that we’re currently using.

The process that we have with respect to VLTs is that they’re capped at 6,000, that we are in the process of reducing the number of locations and, in fact, have been successful over the last couple of years in reducing the number of locations by about 12 per cent. The recommendation was to try and reduce it by 15 per cent, and we are marching as we speak toward that particular number.

The issue of expansion of casinos is based very much on the eight-step process that we have. It has to be initiated by members of the public. It’s not a matter of this government initiating anything. This government doesn’t have a specific plan relative to any casinos per se, but we do have a process which is outlined for members of the community. We have seen over the course of the last couple of years in a number of regions throughout the province those rules put into practice.

One of the salient features of the eight-step process is that there has to be viability within a market in order for the matter to proceed. For example, applications were made in the Lethbridge area for new casinos. The AGLC, that is responsible for application of those rules, determined that there was not a market for an additional casino

in that area at that time. As such, the applications were declined.

Another aspect of the eight-step process is that it requires a comment from the community. So one of the stages has a letter going to the municipality or the city or the county, wherever the proposal is located, asking whether or not the government in that locale are supportive or not supportive of a casino. There are examples where municipalities have said yes. Examples of that would be Leduc, Leduc county. There are examples where communities have said no, although it has not been in the context of a specific application but rather as a pre-emptive matter. Examples of that would be Lloydminster and Strathcona county. There are examples where communities have taken a neutral position, which is something that they asked to be able to do. A neutral position allows the application to go forward. Examples of that would be Edmonton and Calgary. But the short of it is that municipalities have an opportunity to say if they don't wish to have a casino in their community, and that expression of interest would be honoured by the AGLC.

9:20

The hon. member has asked about some research issues. I think it's fair to say that my views with respect to research have grown and crystallized over the three years that I've been in this ministry. Some of the more recent events which have been very helpful for me were, first of all, a gaming research conference that I went to in Las Vegas last December, where a paper was referred to at some length which put forward the concept of the Reno model. It's a paper that was prepared by Dr. Ladouceur, who is Canadian, Dr. Shaffer, who's at the Harvard Medical School, and Dr. Blaszczynski, who is with the University of Sydney in Australia. What they do is put forward a model which talks about the way one should, among other things, develop research that will be meaningful in the gaming context.

I think it's fair to say that gaming research is relatively new, and people obviously have been thinking about how best to go forward and create some kind of parameters which you can work within and rely upon to measure and make research meaningful. So I found that very, very useful.

There was a book by a fellow, Peter Collins, which was titled something like *Gambling in the Public Interest*. I met with Mr. Collins. He is the director of a group that deals with public policy and research in South Africa. It is a very, very good book because it really covers all of the issues, the morality issues, the research issues, that relate to gambling. I wouldn't call it a primer – it's more than a primer – but it's a very good book, and it's the best book that I've come across which outlines the considerations which one should have in place.

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute, of course, has been doing research funded through the Alberta lottery fund since 1999, and the arrangement that we have with that institute is that they are arm's length from government. They determine how they spend their money and what research projects they have. I have come to the conclusion that the research to date has been useful, and the reputation that they have garnered is useful because in a relatively short period of time they have gained a reputation for what they have done, bearing in mind that there are virtually no other jurisdictions that have taken the proactive initiative that we have to fund in a sustained way gambling research.

What we have failed to arrange for to date, simply because of the way that research is determined, is research that has been particularly useful in developing policy regarding gaming. So I think it's fair to say that over the months ahead we will be reviewing exactly how the research has been done and what models might better provide the kind of research that would be useful in developing public policy

with respect to the gaming in this province. That's definitely something that we will be looking at going forward.

We have developed a social responsibility division within the ministry, and there is a new director of that. The purpose of developing the division is so that we can focus on social responsibility issues. Research issues are included in that. So I would anticipate that as the months unfold, we will be able to provide a better direction with respect to what we want to do in that area, once again recognizing that compared to other jurisdictions at this point in time, I understand that we are doing very well indeed.

With respect to job creation and casinos I have absolutely no doubt that they are net job creators. The fact that somebody has a job before they go to a casino does not detract from the fact that it's a job creator. I think one can take a look at the First Nations' experience in some of the other jurisdictions for perhaps the most obvious job creation opportunities.

If you go to Casino Rama at Orillia, Ontario, and talk to the First Nations there and ask them the question, "What benefit has this casino been to your people?" they will without hesitation say that it has been tremendous. They were a reserve of massive unemployment, without social services, without electricity, running water, and what we would consider to be the basic minimum necessities of life. Today they have those services, they have employment, and they attribute it to the opportunity that was afforded to them by that casino. But I would encourage you to talk to them because they can speak far better than I ever will as to how that has impacted their people.

If you go to Saskatchewan and any of the First Nation or Indian casinos, as they call them there, you will find that they have employment on the floor somewhere in the vicinity of 70 to 85 per cent First Nation. That includes the management. In fact, I think I saw all of the casinos in Saskatchewan, and I believe that all of the management at that time were in fact First Nation. That's a very impressive thing from where I stand, and that was impressive from their point of view because those in large number are people who were previously unemployed or unemployed a great portion of the time. So we have demonstrated in our next-door neighbour after a five-year period – and that's roughly how long it had been from the start of those casinos to the time that I visited them – a very successful job creator for the First Nations people within the casino environment.

The last question I'll comment on is Internet gambling. That is a matter that we continue to follow because it's something that is occurring on a global basis. There's absolutely no doubt that Internet gambling occurs globally. The laws in Canada are such that Internet gambling outside the boundaries of a province is illegal. So if we could construct Internet gambling solely for the purposes of gambling within the province of Alberta and no more than that, that would be legal, but of course Internet gambling by its very nature is global.

There is a recent case involving I think it was a P.E.I. Internet gambling project of some description which went outside of their borders, and it determined that you can't do that. So, practically speaking, Internet gambling under the current laws makes no sense from where I sit in Canada, but laws can always be changed. So we continue to monitor it both from a view of understanding how it may impact the market that we currently have and also seeing what the trends are. I'll provide you with further detail as might be available, but the short of it is that it's not something that legally makes sense in Canada at this point in time.

9:30

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Mr. Herard: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to make a few remarks and ask a couple of very minor questions. First, I ought to tell the minister that my experience in my constituency with respect to his department staff and himself has been very, very pleasant. I've never heard a community in my constituency complain about the way that they've been treated by your department, and I think that that's great because community associations sometimes don't always do everything one hundred per cent correct. From what I understand from my communities, those minor errors and so on are met with a lot of understanding and a lot of help, and I just wanted to thank the minister and his department for doing that.

The question I have, though, is on page 172, line 14. There's an item there called centennial legacy grants of \$13 million, and then on the next page at line 46 we have another centennial legacy grants of \$12.5 million, and then on line 47, centennial projects, \$20 million. So I guess what I would like the minister to do – and he can probably do this later in writing if he wishes – is explain to me what the difference in these three centennial programs is and what the criteria might be for those three in particular.

Those are all my questions, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Stevens: I'll provide the details to the hon. member regarding the question.

With respect to the kudos for the staff, you're absolutely right. The pleasure of being in this ministry is that you receive letters of thanks, and the reason that occurs is because the staff that manage the various programs are consumer oriented. They go out of their way to ensure that the applicants are assisted in their applications, and they work with them to make sure that the program works for the applicant. We don't get complaints very often, and we get a great number of kudos, and that's all as a result of the incredible committed staff that we have, not only in the program area but throughout all of Alberta Gaming and the AGLC.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to ask some questions of the minister with respect to his estimates, and I appreciate his comments and responses so far.

I'd like to start by asking about the province's NHL lottery ticket funds. It appears that the funds were underdisbursed to the tune of about \$2.4 million, and now this year the amount is reduced to about half of what it was the year before. So I'd like to find out from the minister what's going on, how that lottery is working, if it's being successful, and if it is going to generate sufficient revenues to support NHL hockey in Alberta and how that compares to the projections at the outset of the lottery ticket fund program.

Now, I want to ask about casinos and particularly casinos on First Nations. I appreciate that the minister was responding to questions on that from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, and if some of the questions were asked while I was not present, maybe the minister can just tell me, and I'll look it up in *Hansard*.

It was my understanding a couple of years ago that the Enoch First Nation was essentially taking the position that they rejected the government's ability to determine whether or not a casino could be approved for that site, and I think there were some negotiations. As far as I, you know, am able to understand the situation, the government more or less went along with that, but there's a sort of a situation where the government has approved it and agreed to disagree, type of thing.

So my questions have to do with how this is going to be put in place and whether or not the revenue-sharing arrangements are standard or have been set differently, what impact the case in Ontario

has on that issue, whether or not the First Nations have accepted the government's right and responsibility to regulate the casino in any way, send inspectors, that sort of thing. So, you know, if the minister could expand on the situation there and the arrangements between Alberta Gaming and the First Nations.

I don't know if there are any other outstanding issues with respect to some of the issues raised by the city of Edmonton in connection to this. I don't know if the minister is in a position to comment on that, but if he can, I would very much appreciate it.

We've seen that bingo associations have an increase of about \$3 million, or 75 per cent, over the last year. I'd like to know what's happening with bingo. Is bingo continuing to grow and be a real success and support the community organizations relative to VLTs and that sort of thing? If the minister could just elaborate a little bit on the state of bingo and what he sees in the future for that segment of the gaming industry.

I think I'd also like to get some information with respect to the horse racing subsidy program. Has this got a sunset clause? Is there a finite point at which the funding to the horse racing industry is successful? Has the program been successful in stabilizing horse racing, or is it continuing to be a declining industry? What can the minister tell us about the benefits of this funding program for the horse racing industry in terms of continued employment creation, economic benefit, and so on?

So those are my questions, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to the minister's reply.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I just had one more administrative issue that I wanted to raise with the minister, and that was around choices that were made, and I guess I'm searching to find out whether this is department policy or AGLC policy. I've been in correspondence with the deputy minister and the minister over a particular situation that arose in downtown Edmonton around the granting of a liquor licence to a location that was a nightclub that was renovated by a new group but not soundproofed. The problems that had caused concern for the neighbours, which include a seniors' residence called Cathedral Close and an apartment hotel called Alberta Place, had not been addressed. There was a sort of long-running series of applications from the new group to AGLC and sort of protests back from the community organizations.

9:40

One thing caused me a little bit of concern, and I just wondered if this was a policy or whether there was a misunderstanding or something. I did send an e-mail to the deputy minister, and it was never responded to by anybody, and that raises some eyebrows with me. I would have expected that correspondence from an MLA, particularly the local MLA, about an issue that was controversial, got into the newspaper, would have merited a response. I did check to see if there was a bounce back on my e-mail, and there wasn't. I checked for months to see if there was a bounce back on my e-mail, and there wasn't. So I'm curious as to why the decision was made not respond to me about this.

In particular, I was questioning whether there was a policy of being very aggressive in pursuing the neighbours to bring them onside with what the businesses wanted to do. In fact, what I'd had were a couple of complaints from the managers of the seniors' residence and the hotel over the staff who were pursuing very aggressive conduct around: well, you know, you really need to withdraw your objections to this new location and fall into line with this; you could end up talking to their lawyer a lot. Finally, these

individuals – I don't know if the gender matters here, but maybe it was a factor; I don't know – were quite uncomfortable about what was being done, and I raised that point in the e-mail, and that was the e-mail that was never responded to.

So two issues for me: one, why wasn't the e-mail responded to when it came from the local MLA, and two, why didn't I ever hear anything? Maybe it is the policy to be quite aggressive in trying to get surrounding neighbours to withdraw their objections and fall into line with the granting of a liquor licence by AGLC, but this one just ain't sitting right with me. This just does not reflect what I have seen of the minister's integrity. I don't want to have to raise it in this situation, but I kind of feel like I got backed into a corner about doing that. Obviously, the minister will probably want to go and investigate this and respond in writing to me about it, but I'm interested in how this all plays out. If he needs the information again, I've got a file folder here with all of the correspondence back and forth from the various parties.

I was really uncomfortable with what happened to those organizations. It's a long-running problem there, and they were left quite high and dry. They really feel that the AGLC did an end run around them in granting a class A licence in a situation where the city of Edmonton had been very careful to try and work their way through this snakes' nest, this land mine filled course. There were real concerns about how this all happened. Anyway, I don't need to go into it any further than that.

The city of Edmonton had worked hard to try and put in place something that was going to keep this lower key and not let it grow to the extent that it had. They had been very careful to grant a private licence and recommended against or tried to set it up so that there wouldn't be a class A licence granted.

In fact, the AGLC granted a class A licence and didn't hold the public hearing that these two parties were expecting. They expected to be able to appear at a public hearing and make all of their concerns known. They believed that they had asked to be informed of a public hearing, and they were never informed of it. So I think there are a number of issues that arose from this situation that should cause the minister some concern, and I'd like to hear back from him on that.

I've used up about 45 or 50 minutes worth of questioning time in this session with the minister. I appreciate his willingness to share information and to provide missing information in writing. I look forward to receiving that, and I thank the Assembly for the opportunity to question the minister.

Thank you.

Mr. Stevens: Just briefly. On the last point, to the Member for Edmonton-Centre, it is not the policy of Alberta Gaming or the AGLC not to respond to communications from the public or from MLAs, so I can start out by saying that. Our policy is to be responsive to the questions that are asked.

With respect to the details of that particular matter I believe that we know what you're talking about because I think I've heard something about this somewhere along the line. If we need further clarification as to the e-mail and whatnot, we will be in touch with you. Otherwise, the response to you will address the e-mail and the various points that you've raised here this evening.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. The NHL lottery ticket program was set up so that the NHL teams had the option as each ticket stage came along to say, yes, we'd like to proceed, or no. From my vantage point they got into the first one without any experience, and then they had the experience of the first one, which was a good experience, so they went to the second and so on and so forth.

What I can tell the hon. member is that they optioned each opportunity as it came along, including this last one, which will be ending this month. So it has been a positive experience for the NHL teams in a net monetary way. I can also tell the hon. member that as time has gone on, those particular products have declined in sales, so perhaps the first one was the most successful. That's the general line of it, but each of the teams will have made a substantial amount of money as a result of that particular initiative.

On the First Nation casinos I think a great deal was addressed in my response to the Member for Edmonton-Centre, but if there's something additional, we'll provide that in writing.

The First Nations policy was as a result of negotiations between this government and the First Nations people here in Alberta and was ultimately ratified at an all-chiefs meeting of all of the Alberta First Nations. So, from my perspective, that is the starting point for the current arrangement that we have relative to gaming in the province. I think you will find that from time to time there are members of the First Nations community who will say or write something that indicates that they think there is an inherent right, sovereign rights if you will, for them to control gaming. But, as I indicated to the Member for Edmonton-Centre, there is a Supreme Court of Canada decision which we say determines the matter in favour of the province, and certainly the arrangement that we have with the First Nations, which was ratified at that meeting I referred to, says that we do. So to me the issue is settled indeed.

We'll give you an update on bingo.

Many of my comments regarding horse racing I think would apply to your questions, but we'll provide you with some additional information if it wasn't otherwise answered.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Just a quick supplementary on the NHL lottery ticket program. Has the ministry determined whether or not they need to reassess the product that they're selling in light of declining sales? I wonder if he can provide, perhaps in writing, the financial contributions that have been made to the two NHL teams over the different issues of the lottery tickets and whether or not the minister feels that there is adequate marketing and advertising of these tickets and whether or not the absence of such might be a contributing factor and, as well, whether or not the minister feels that in the long run this particular program is going to be of continuing value in supporting NHL hockey in the province.

Thank you.

9:50

Mr. Stevens: Very briefly, the program is at an end. Our commitment to the NHL teams ends with this particular ticket. We said that we would provide them with support in this fashion up till the end of this particular year, so it does not extend beyond. Our commitment ends this month, if you will, with the close-off of the current ticket.

The Chair: After consideration of the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Gaming for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:	
Operating Expense	\$164,712,000
Lottery Fund Payments	\$1,167,831,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Gaming and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Gaming: operating expense, \$164,712,000; lottery fund payments, \$1,167,831,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 27

Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I'd like to just make a couple of comments with respect to some questions that were raised in second reading.

As we've gone through second reading, some of the questions probably still raise or highlight the fact that there may be some differences in preference of tax structures, and I don't know how to necessarily state otherwise. It is still the stated policy of the government to reduce corporate income taxes, the general rate, to 11 and a half per cent and, as affordable, to 8 per cent – that has been the government policy expressly – and then with the small business rate to go down to 3 per cent. This one does actually get the small business rate down to 3 per cent, and the threshold is at \$400,000 from last year.

So our small business reductions have been the first of the priorities that we've pushed and encouraged, that we would ensure that the small business income would go up, that we would capture a greater number of businesses into now a \$400,000 threshold.

As to potential loss of revenue, I know it is talked about. The rate reductions will save Alberta businesses about \$142 million. Yet as we've seen, even in the past years as we've reduced rates, the absolute dollars that we're collecting are still holding strong. It's

still at about similar numbers that we had before the rate reductions.

As to whether we keep those savings in Alberta, what is actually happening, on the converse, is that many of the companies around the country are trying to put more of their income in Alberta precisely because they do retain their income. In fact, there is a formula where they have to allocate the corporate income among all the provinces, and they have to go through an allocation of how much business. There are standards such as employees and offices and a number of things that are used to judge how much of the apportionment of income should be in one province or another.

The challenge we actually have is that the other provinces are more anxious to ensure that they have their share of that income whereas the corporate entities, for the large part, because we do set the right structures in place for them, are looking to locate more of their offices, more of their personnel, and more of their business in Alberta. It's precisely for that that this tax structure was developed.

I think I'll leave it there and answer any further questions that people might have at committee stage.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I know that our Finance and Revenue critic had spoken to this bill at second reading, and the minister has just answered some of the concerns that he was raising, specifically that we're putting ourselves in a situation that's not fiscally sustainable. You know, we're in an oil boom-and-bust economy, and we're in a boom right now, and eventually that will end. Meanwhile, we will have cut income taxes and business taxes to the point where we've created a situation that's not sustainable. [interjection] The minister is responding to that. I have to say that I think we disagree with what the likely outcome is going to be.

There are other considerations in stimulating a strong economy. Again, that's something that this government, you know, in the more than 30 years they've been in power now – it was Premier Lougheed's originating mantra to diversify the economy. Here we are 35-plus years later, and we're still overwhelmingly dependent on the oil and gas sector. Given the choices that this government has made, we may well be able to be in a situation with the debt, but we've created a huge infrastructure debt that will also cost us significant amounts of money to pay down, whether that has to be done through cash or through whatever.

So we just feel that the management of the province's wealth, the choices that this government makes in the way they do it, is questionable, because we think that over the long term it's not in fact sustainable. Now, maybe they're not the ones that are going to be in power when they have to start increasing the income taxes to make up for the drop in oil and gas revenues. Then I guess that's a problem I'm going to have to deal with rather than the minister is going to have to deal with, but the situation will have been created by him.

10:00

I think that when I thought about what other kinds of taxes could be cut if we were looking to give people a break, well, the obvious one is to eliminate the health care premium tax. If we're really looking to put some money back in people's pockets or make it easier for businesses, particularly small businesses, to operate, there's the one. Eliminate the health care premium tax. That'll certainly help small businesses as well.

Another one that came to me just recently was dropping some of the user fees that the government has increased and increased and increased certainly over the time that I've been elected. The one that I just had to experience again – and I think we're up for another

challenge under the Eurig decision – is around vehicle registration.

The government has never been able to explain to me why I'm paying a different rate for car registration and registering my snowmobiles when in fact the fee is to cover the administration, the paperwork, the paper shuffling of those two registrations. Well, there's no difference in paper shuffling that paper. I'm registering a vehicle. It shouldn't make any difference. The amount of work that the staff person has to do walking from here to there and picking up the licence plate or picking up the computer code really is no different, yet I'm charged different amounts of money. So that tells me we're still not dealing with something that in fact is just covering user fees.

I think there's also an issue that I do not see this government coming to terms with – the federal government is starting to deal with it – around income tax and property tax and the relationship with the municipal governments. The federal government is making that overture. The province is not.

We have a situation where every time people earn more money or get a raise or get a job and they get income tax deducted, the province and the federal government without doing a thing make more money. But the municipalities don't, and the municipalities have taken up a huge load in terms of helping the government get rid of the debt and deficit created by the Tory government in power.

The municipalities have gone a long way in reducing that deficit, but they are the ones that always look like the villains because no matter how much money somebody is earning, it's not really affecting their property tax. So they look like the villains in increasing the property tax all the time, and they have to actually increase the property tax, whereas the moves made by the federal and provincial governments result in an increase without them lifting a finger.

I think that also flows through in the kinds of things we're talking about here with the general corporate income tax rate and the small business income tax rate. Both of them are based on income, but the federal government has started to recognize that the municipalities need some relief, and the federal government has started to deal directly with the municipalities. I think that's going to cause a problem for the provinces, if they don't start to figure out where their role in all of this is and start to look for more concrete ways to work in a partnership with the municipalities. So a related issue.

Essentially we're willing to support this at this stage, but I think there are a number of unanswered policy decisions that we question in the way this government is conducting business. We have been supportive about providing relief for small businesspeople. Certainly, I'm very interested in that. I've got a lot of small businesspeople in downtown Edmonton, and they're the ones whose money stays in the community. You know, a lot of those huge office towers that are named after particular companies, their profits go south. They leave the province. But the profits from the dry cleaner and the grocer and the local Mac's store and all of those other small businesses that exist and thrive in downtown Edmonton, their money stays here and helps our economy go around. So I like to see them being able to thrive.

So those are the issues that I wanted to raise during Committee of the Whole. I have some reservations about this, and I know that my colleague the critic for Revenue and Finance, the MLA for Edmonton-Riverview, was willing to support this. I'm willing to support the small business part. I'm not so sure about the other part, and I'm still questioning why this is the only route that the government seems to know how to take and why they won't consider and steadfastly won't consider things like relief on the health care premium tax.

Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I'm just going to rise and ask a few fast questions as well of the minister. I don't know if he'll have the answers handy, but perhaps he can make a few comments about it.

Really, I was just wondering about some comments that we heard earlier today about taxes and corporate taxes. In my view, the taxes that we collect are expected to be passed on to the consumer. I mean, people don't really realize that when you put a tax on a corporation or a business, at best it's just passed on to the consumer, and therefore by definition it's a sales tax by proxy, and I would suggest a hidden sales tax by proxy. It begs the question, then, of what benefit are any corporate taxes if they're just expected to be passed on to the same consumer?

In that regard, we heard about a request to raise the minimum wage. Well, it seems to me that if you're raising the cost of the business to do business by ordering it to pay higher minimum wages, isn't that just another tax on the business, just another hidden sales tax on the business? I'm wondering if the minister could perhaps comment on that.

You know, it may sound fine to do it, but take for example the case of a bookstore owner trying to compete in the world against amazon.com on-line, et cetera, and we impose higher costs here in the province through minimum wage increases or other tax increases. Well, how do they compete against virtual bookstores, for example?

Along this line I'm wondering if the minister has the numbers or the percentage of small businesses that actually pay corporate income tax. What percentage of small businesses actually pay any corporate taxes, which gets at the question of how many small businesses actually have a profit? How many small businesses are actually going broke instead of showing a profit? Is that 1 per cent, 5 per cent, or more like 30 or 40 or 50 per cent of small businesses that actually don't even pay any taxes because they don't have a profit to pay them with? Of course, that would be the group we'd be asking to pay more wages now if we raised the minimum wage. So I wonder if the minister could comment on that.

The last question is whether or not the minister could comment about municipal property taxes that require businesses to pay large amounts of taxes when they have zero profit at all – they have no income at all – a class of Canadians being expected to pay large amounts of taxes when they have zero income and are in fact going broke and whether or not that impacts the province's revenues if we are killing these small businesses before they ever get to first base through municipal property taxation crowding out potential revenue for the province in the longer term.

So those would be my questions, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I had a few questions for the hon. minister. The comments of the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, however, have piqued my interest in perhaps debating some of these points.

Now, just a moment ago, Mr. Chairman, he asked the rhetorical question: aren't taxes on business just another sales tax because they get passed on directly to the consumer? You know, we need to take a look at economics a little bit. In setting prices, businesses have to make some calculations and they cannot just set the price anywhere they want. They can't just raise their prices because somebody down the road won't raise their prices and they'll lose business, so they have to set it at a certain point where the rate of return is maximized.

The market doesn't let them set their price anywhere they want.

Sometimes when costs are increased, the consumers are not willing to pay all of that, so they have to take it out of their bottom line. So the idea that in a nonmonopolistic situation you can somehow fix the price is not the case. Sometimes it comes out of the profits of the company and not out of the pockets of the consumer, and there is a difference.

The hon. member also talked about minimum wages being a tax, but my understanding of a tax is that it's something that's taken and goes to government and is spent, then, by government on various programs. But in the case of the minimum wage it actually goes to low-income workers directly, and then it may possibly be taxed, but that's at a much lower rate. So I don't accept that argument at all.

10:10

My question to the minister is: what evidence does the government have that increased investment in this province or increased economic activity is attributable to this program of cutting taxes? I want to distinguish the lower corporate tax rate because I am supportive of the cut to the small business tax rate; it's the corporate tax rate that I have a concern about. The reason I ask that question is that I believe that much of that investment has to do with the strength of the oil industry and the high prices for oil and natural gas and not necessarily changes in the corporate tax rate. As an example, Mr. Chairman, there was a tremendous rate of investment in this province before this tax reduction was approved. The question is: has that change in tax rate increased in some way the investment that's happening in the province?

A second question: does the government offset increases in investment in the province with outflows of capital as a result of profit-taking and dividends and that sort of thing? In other words, when they talk about how much the net inflow of capital there is to this province, do they calculate and offset the amount of capital that is flowing outside the province as a result of profit-taking or management fees and so on, that sort of thing?

Those are my questions for the minister, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Chairman, I'll just state that I don't have some of the stats right here anyway with respect to what percentage small businesses pay in corporate income tax. I can get that. Certainly all taxes are a cost to business, as was stated.

With respect to the one question asked about the evidence, for the same reasons that there seems to be support that this is beneficial to small businesses, it's equally beneficial to the broader business community. There's not a difference in economic policy. Part of the challenge we have, actually, in Canada is to encourage more growth beyond small business. In comparison to the world we have a very large percentage that are small and micro companies. In fact, sometimes even the preferential treatment of the small business rates that everybody seems to say we're supportive of gets punitive to actually encouraging the growth to get beyond that. We need more companies to become mid and large and very large companies. We obviously need a healthy climate for small business. So that's why the rate reduction for small business activity.

What we do know is that taxes and the incremental tax rates are very much focused on. When they look at what is the combined federal/provincial rate of tax, those are key focus points known, examined, or otherwise for the incremental profit that you could earn and how much could be retained. We do know that the economic activity – I don't have specific, identifiable. Because of last year's rate reduction, there are these X number of new businesses in here. I do know that what continues to happen is that we have had an increase in businesses in registration, the numbers of businesses that

are here. We do know that there is an increase in the number of companies paying taxes. I don't have the specific numbers in front of me. We do know that the amount of absolute dollars that we collect remains at about the same level despite our rate cuts. We're still collecting the same absolute amounts in dollars. We do know that clearly when you're talking about – you're right – inflows and outflows of profits, we've got to track the right inflows, investments. That's why you want companies to come and set up here in Alberta. You want them to also incorporate in Alberta. You want them to do more of their business in Alberta so that they thereby can retain more of the profits in a low-tax jurisdiction. That is what's happening.

We can certainly provide lots of evidence of what economic activity is happening in Alberta. It's not just because of oil and gas prices. Many of the sectors, the forest industry – we could go down all the industries and show economic activity that's beneficial because of economic structures, of which tax policies are a fundamental part. They're not the only, but they are one main component of government policy that impacts business decisions and sets a climate.

We do know that even if there are outflows to shareholders' profits, we do get the tax base right here. We collect it. Maybe not all the profits are retained because maybe some of the investments are coming from around the world and their shareholders around the world are getting dividends, but we retain that tax on corporate income that was based here, earned in Alberta, and taxed in Alberta. We have benefited substantially from the money from people throughout the world that's invested right here. We collect our share through the corporate income tax structure, so we are really main beneficiaries of that, whether or not there are outflow profits to shareholders around the world. I'll be happy to chase down some more specifics of that question asked, though.

[The clauses of Bill 27 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the committee rise and report Bill 27.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 27.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? The motion is carried.

head:

**Private Bills
Third Reading**

Bill Pr. 4

Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Masyk: I'd like to take this opportunity to move third reading of the Northwest Bible College Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill Pr. 4 read a third time]

10:20

**Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

Bill 22

Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, for third reading.

We've had quite a bit of discussion on the act, that really details a number of administrative changes primarily requested by the Chief Electoral Officer in terms of modernizing the way in which he and his staff conduct elections in the province. It also of course increases the contribution limit for contributions that can be made to candidates and constituency associations and the corollary tax deductions that can be made. It clarifies better for candidates and enumerators the ability to have access to multifamily and gated dwellings. The Election Act in the past referred to apartment buildings, and of course we have so many more multifamily dwellings and multidwelling buildings, so we need to have the ability to have access to them.

The Election Statutes Amendment Act provides, really, a modernization of most of those areas, and I would ask the House to consider it for third reading.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thank the government for its co-operation in allowing this bill to spend some time waiting for members of the public to catch up with it. We've passed a number of bills with a great deal of speed in the House this spring session, and I was campaigning to have this one slow down a bit so that the public could catch up with us, and in fact that happened. I finally heard from a member of the public, so it was worth it. [interjection] One. One member of the public.

I was disappointed that others weren't sharing my incredible interest in the parliamentary process. Nonetheless, we did hear from one individual. They raised a number of issues, and I agreed that I would raise them in the House. Now, some of these were issues that had already been raised by the Liberal opposition and, I think, in one case a combination or concerted effort from the Official Opposition and the third party in moving amendments to try to deal with some of the concerns that had been raised with Bill 22, Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004. I'll identify those as I go through.

This individual is a member of one of the now small parties – what goes around comes around; eh? – which was at one time one of the governing parties. As a matter of fact, for many, many years it was the governing party in Alberta, that being the Social Credit Party.

This individual was very concerned with four different sections. Section 116.1 of the original bill is appearing in our amending bill here as sections 59 and 60, and they are both amending section 116 in the original act. This is around secure ballots and special ballots.

In section 116 the concern was that in being able to use electronic mail to request secure special ballots or special ballots, it could be difficult to authenticate the person who is making the request. As well, the e-mails are generally difficult to trace.

So there was a concern there that if people were trying to achieve nefarious ends, they could in fact be generating a number of e-mail requests for special ballots, which if they were followed through and mailed out to particular addresses or something, there could be some skewing of the results. There was a real concern that the ability to authenticate with an e-mail is very difficult, because that's the point: it's cyberspace. It really is just going to a computer, but the computer can move around. I think that there can be some controls that could be put in place on that, but perhaps we'll get an opportunity to get some input from the member sponsoring the bill or perhaps from the Chief Electoral Officer after the fact as to how this could be addressed.

The second issue that was raised by this individual is section 116.1, which is a new section being added, and it's around a secure special ballot. Now, this was to try and address those individuals who really believe that their personal safety is at risk if their name or an address appears in a polling book or if they, in fact, appeared in person. Certainly, I can understand that from the amount of work that I've done in trying to protect women that are in a danger of being harmed by an intimate partner. I'm very alive to this issue.

The issue being raised by my Social Credit Party friend is that allowing the Chief Electoral Officer to conceal information about who requested a special secure ballot voids transparency, and he feels that possibly impartiality is at stake. His concern around this was that by keeping somebody's name and identifying information completely off the voters' list, it would be quite possible that no one would be able to know that there was a voter out there and to access them and try and give them information about a candidate. It gets particularly hard for those candidates of smaller parties that have less resources to be able to track this kind of thing. Possibly with larger parties and candidates with more resources they could spend more time trying to figure this all out, but that was the issue being raised there.

I have to say that in trying to balance off the personal safety of women that are fleeing abusive situations or being stalked by individuals – actually, that could pertain to men as well – against whether or not somebody's name is appearing on the list, I'm going to have to come down on the side of protecting the individual's safety and believe that, you know, if they're interested enough to be trying to be involved in the democratic process when they're really feeling that their life is at stake, good on them. Any assistance that we can give them to complete that process by using a secure ballot or a secure special ballot is to be applauded and moved along.

This individual did raise the hardship that they expected to be created by the increased candidacy fees. I think that was one of the issues that was raised jointly by the opposition and the third parties with concerns about the effect on the smaller parties. That may not be that much of an issue to see the fee increase from \$200 to \$500 for the three leading parties in the province but certainly could be a tremendous hardship for a smaller party that was fielding perhaps only 10 candidates. That could be a significant amount of money. When you multiplied that \$300 by 10 candidates, that might be enough to make them only field nine candidates because they couldn't cover the costs otherwise. We certainly agreed with that and supported an amendment to strike that change and remain at the \$200 level.

The final issue that the individual was raising was around the decertification if there were no candidates running representing a particular party. They outlined a situation that happened to their

particular party in 1986 whereby there was some support for, I think, what would have become the predecessor for the Reform Party but some generations back. In trying to nurture this new party along, there was an agreement from the Social Credit Party that they would not run candidates, to allow this smaller party to get going.

So in that year, 1986, the Social Credit Party showed no candidates at all running, and according to this new rule that then would have decertified them. They had concerns because there's an example in their collective history as a political party where these new rules would have in fact caused them to cease existing. They just didn't see why that was necessary and wanted that issue raised and put on the record. Perhaps I can get a response from the sponsoring member to address the concerns that have been raised.

On balance, despite my disappointment with a lack of a citizenship initiative or reform process with what I feel are some undemocratic moves, an erosion of democracy around making it more difficult for the smaller parties – I had less trouble with the unique identifier numbers because I thought it might lead us to more inclusion of younger people that are very keyed into or hooked into electronic communications.

10:30

But I was very pleased to see the changes that are made around ensuring that there's a very clear understanding that candidates are to have access to every voter, and that includes voters who are living in secure access buildings or secure access compounds. That's very important. The voter can decide not to open the door and talk to the candidate, but, boy, the candidate sure needs to be able to get to the door. I've talked about that quite a bit in the past; I don't need to talk about it any more here.

I'm glad that we were able to have repeated discussions on this act. I think that on balance there are some good things and some bad things in it, but I'm certainly happy to support it at this point. I'm glad that we were able to hold it over long enough that we did have other political parties that could join into the discussion and even other individuals who actually took the time to come down to the Assembly and flag people down and present their comments to me. I'm happy to be able to put them on the record on their behalf.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in third reading, and I will leave the floor to others. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to third reading, and I want to indicate to the Assembly that, unfortunately, I will not be supporting third reading of Bill 22, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

I made a number of specific comments during the committee stage, Mr. Speaker, and I won't repeat them here except to indicate the one particular aspect that causes me the most concern, and that is the increase in deposits for candidates. The government's position, expressed in a news release, is that this would provide a check on frivolous candidates. I asked the question in committee: in a democracy what exactly is a frivolous candidate? Is that someone who is not affiliated with the three parties here or not affiliated with the one party there or not affiliated with any party or a party that we disagree with? You know, there are many candidates that may not be taken terribly seriously by significant numbers of voters, but that doesn't make them frivolous. So that's a concern. Nearly two-thirds of the candidates in the 2001 election lost their deposit. That is a substantial amount of money when it's spread across 83 constituencies, so it is a significant barrier to small parties' participation in elections, and I think that's a problem.

Mr. Speaker, in principle what we have here is just a minor administrative tinkering with the basic electoral system in this province, and the New Democrats feel that a major reform is needed of the electoral bill on a broad scale. I think that's partly the reason why, as the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre has said, there has been little interest in this, and that's because it's just a few tweaks, not necessarily positive tweaks in all cases, a few tweaks to the existing system which clearly has served this government, or the party that's now in power, very well. But we believe that a more fundamental process needs to be undertaken that engages Albertans on a broad scale and asks them exactly what it is they want to see in terms of an electoral system in this province and asks whether or not what we have now is really the most in keeping with their democratic aspirations, something like but not necessarily exactly the same as the process that's been undertaken in British Columbia, which has been a very, very interesting exercise in public democracy and takes it out of the politician's hands.

You know, in a sense we have a built-in conflict of interest in our political system, Mr. Speaker. The politicians are in charge of the political system that elected them, and we all pretend that we don't have a vested interest in that system, but we do. What B.C. has done, I think, is to a degree recognize that and actually put nonelected nonpoliticians in charge of reforming the electoral system. I think there's lots of merit in doing that.

There are three elements that we would propose if such a process were put in place that we believe are fundamental to democratizing the electoral system in our province. The first of these is proportional representation, Mr. Speaker, and I don't intend to go on with that in great depth. I know that people feel that we don't want to just be voting for a list of party candidates. We want to have some constituency representation. We want to have geographical and community representation.

It is possible. There are systems that are in place in some of the European countries, for example, called mixed-member proportional representation which do make sure that the balance in the Legislature equals the balance of popular vote but does apportion the seats geographically according to where the strengths geographically of the political parties are, so people are able to vote for a member in their area. I think that this is something whose time has come. Sooner or later in this country one or more provinces are going to break with the first past the post system, which is in fact very much an archaic system and is rapidly diminishing in the world as a method of electing people in democracies.

The second one is electoral finance reform, and I think that that's critical in this province. You know, it's interesting, Mr. Speaker, that two-thirds of the \$4 million war chest of the Progressive Conservative Party to fight the next election comes from corporate donations. I know that members here don't see anything wrong with that, but I think the typical Albertan would wonder why our governing political party is not supported by grassroots political donations of individual citizens. In terms of personal political donations, individual donations, the New Democratic Party of Alberta raises more money than the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta, so I think that maybe says quite a lot. So that's something that needs to be done.

The last thing, Mr. Speaker, that we would propose as part of an electoral reform package is fixed election dates. The archaic notion that the Premier or Prime Minister in a British parliamentary system can call an election when they want to is, you know, a real slap in the face to equality amongst political parties, and it gives the incumbent government a tremendous advantage.

We're seeing that now with the federal election. You know, you

have this scandal about the sponsorship program, and the Prime Minister is completely within his powers and it's accepted that he can just wait until the scandal dies down, public anger dies down, and then he can call the election when the polls are in his favour. Now, who benefits by that other than the federal Liberal Party?

That's just not how we should be running a system. Dates should be fixed unless the government falls. I will say to the credit of this government that it has kept fairly regular election dates. Every four years: I think that's how it should be. But, you know, if the government found an advantage in calling a snap election or felt that it had to delay an election because it wasn't doing that well in the polls, I fully expect that it would do that. I just don't think that it should be allowed to do that, Mr. Speaker.

Those are the main elements of an electoral reform. I think that the bill fails because it doesn't really address any of the broader, meaningful questions about our electoral system and our democratic system in this province. It trivializes the issue and is not what I think would benefit Albertans. As a result, Mr. Speaker, I'll be voting against the bill.

10:40

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General to close debate on third reading?

Any questions or comments?

[Motion carried; Bill 22 read a third time]

Bill 28

Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to move third reading of Bill 28, the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, the feeder associations in Alberta have been very successful for everyone involved, and we wish to extend this option

to our hog feeders. I want to commend the House for the support this bill has received, and I ask for its continued support.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will try to keep my comments brief, but we have been known to speak longer if we get heckled. [interjection] Good. We'll do our best here.

It is a pleasure to rise this evening and speak to Bill 28, the Feeder Associations Guarantee Amendment Act, 2004. I'd certainly like to commend the Member for Dunvegan, who sponsored this particular bill, on the hard work he did in order to get it this far. Its purpose, certainly, is to expand the mandate of the act by allowing feeder pigs to be included under the act. It allows Alberta's hog producers to take advantage of Alberta's feeder association structures. It is a producer-driven process; they bear much of the cost of this program. So, again, some very strong points for Bill 28.

As well, we had some concerns about how this would affect CAIS, and since there are no actual dollars delivered to producers and members of the feeder associations, the feeder association program does not affect producers when it comes to their CAIS claims.

So, again, a bill where there's been a lot of debate. Any questions that arose out of the bill have been answered. I would urge all members to support this very good bill.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 28 read a third time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:45 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 5, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/05/05

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. As Canadians and as Albertans we give thanks for the precious gifts of freedom and peace which we enjoy. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we rededicate ourselves to the valued traditions of parliamentary democracy as a means of serving our province and our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly a group of seniors from the Boyle Wildrose Villa in my constituency. They are seated in the members' gallery. I'd like them to rise or wave and receive the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am privileged on behalf of the hon. Minister of Learning, who is in the air and plans to land any moment but was not able to be here, to introduce a delegation that is here today to meet both the Minister of Learning and the Minister of Community Development. The mayor of the town of Brooks, Don Weisbeck, and the reeve of the county of Newell, Cory Baksa, are accompanied by two councillors, Clayton Johnson and Kerry Crapo. Would they please rise, and would we all give them a wonderful and warm welcome.

Thank you so very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly one of the key members of a fabulous group of young Alberta Liberals who's very involved, very interested in politics and is an eager supporter of ours. She is in the public gallery today. Her name is Jennifer Krauskopf. I'd ask her to rise and receive the warm welcome of all MLAs.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Mr. Magnus: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me today to stand and introduce to you and through you to Members of this Legislative Assembly a friend of mine and a friend of many of us here. His name is Pete Davis, and I'd ask that he stand in the gallery and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce Mr. Lorne Olsvik, former deputy mayor of Onoway and former president of the AUMA. Mr. Olsvik is a resident of Onoway and currently with TrackFlow, an international software company. He's

seated in your gallery. I'd ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you a very remarkable young man, Kyle Lillo, who used his own experience with disability to help him have a true impact on disabled children in the community and has done it remarkably well. I met Kyle when I was a director of the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital Foundation. He came to me with the idea of making the hospital a much brighter place to be as a child. Our foundation agreed to match any funds Kyle raised.

Kyle Lillo is the founder and chief promoter and operator of Kyle's Toy Cart, a vehicle he uses to bring toys to the children on pediatric unit 201 at the Glenrose rehab hospital. In doing so, he brings joy, friendship, and a sense of inclusion to the lives of children who are recovering from or adjusting to a significant disability. Kyle's Toy Cart makes monthly trips to the unit and inspires children with new toys, games, and books. There is a noticeable stir when Kyle arrives and it is announced to the children that Kyle is in the building. Kyle is also a recipient of the Alberta Great Kids award.

I would ask you all to please recognize Kyle and his caregiver, Lillian Koch, and accord them the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Legislature 81 visitors from Graminia school. Graminia school is one of the original community schools in this province, a very fine school in my own neighbourhood. They are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Gloria Wolff, Mrs. Lorraine Hennig – Mrs. Lorraine Hennig is a very special person; she used to be my student, was my colleague in teaching, and is now a teacher in the area – and Miss Michelle Pernisch along with parents Mrs. Lussier, Mrs. Carefoot, Mrs. Mailman, Mrs. Franks, Mrs. Skocylas, Mrs. Nurani, Mrs. Weiland, Mrs. Zuidema, Mrs. Champoux, Mrs. Krawchuk, Mrs. Nonay, and Mrs. Gibson. I'd ask the students and the parents to rise and receive the welcome of the Assembly. They're in the public gallery.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure to rise on this glorious Alberta day. Actually, I'm rising on an occasion of an innovation of your own, and that is the idea to bring in seniors to visit the Legislature. Today I have my very first seniors' group ever, visiting the Legislature from Drayton Valley. They are led by group leader Norma Wall. There are 39 of them, and they had a long bus ride here today. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Knight: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It certainly is a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and to all members of this Assembly 19 bright students from the Rich Valley school in the riding of Grande Prairie-Smoky. They are accompanied today by their teacher, Ms Susan Thomson, and by parents and helpers Kevin Thompson, Brent Minni, Danny Scott, Jodi Danielson, Julie Zenner, and Shelley Lenes. I would ask them to rise now and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my distinct pleasure to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly Mrs. Sonia Varela. Mrs. Varela is a highly respected leader in the Chilean community of Edmonton. She is a passionate advocate of human rights and social justice and regularly volunteers with Edmonton's Food Bank. She is here this afternoon to observe the proceedings of the Assembly. Sonia is seated in the public gallery, and I would now ask her to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Automobile Insurance Reform

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The auto insurance reform plan currently before government MLAs will not save any money for 80 per cent of good, experienced drivers. That contradicts promises from the Premier himself and his Finance minister. To the Premier: given the contradictions, what are Albertans supposed to believe?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, what Albertans are to believe is precisely this. The regulations surrounding the government's auto insurance reforms are still working through the process. That Albertans can believe. No decisions have been made, so I can't comment on speculative media reports or speculative Liberal reports about what will or won't be approved. No decisions have been made about the detailed regulations, so it's premature to be talking about the government breaking its promise. No decision has been made.

1:40

Our basic goal with auto insurance – and I'm sure the Liberals will agree with this – is to have premiums that reward good drivers and penalize poor drivers and to fairly compensate accident victims. That makes a lot of sense. My commitment that rates in Alberta will be comparable to those in other provinces still stands. Now, I don't know if it's going to be lower or higher than in Saskatchewan, but it will be comparable within, I said, \$5, \$10, \$15, \$20, and that's not unreasonable. I would add that the reforms are based on personal responsibility, and good drivers will pay competitive rates, and bad drivers will pay more.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Can Albertans have any faith in this government's auto insurance plan when the government is now trying to claim that the premium rate freeze was actually a rate decrease?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't recall that claim ever being made, but I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance respond.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, the actions that we took in the fall as a government to protect Albertans and consumers of automobile insurance were clearly in an effort to stop the continual spiralling costs from being passed on to consumers. We put a freeze in place for those people whose premiums were being renewed from October 30 onward at the previous year's rate, so they saved dollars from the current rate that they otherwise would have had. That was the first step in protecting Albertans from the increases. Now, we weren't

able to do it for those that had already had their rate increases, but they will receive a benefit this summer as the new plan comes in place.

Clearly, putting the freeze in stopped the massive increases that were taking place, and those were passed on to consumers. In fact, if some were in the mix and already had received their bill, they have since received a cheque back from their insurance company or they have received a credit on their statement or their policy was rewritten and a new one sent out to reflect the previous year's rates. So they've already experienced those savings.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. What exactly is preventing this government from introducing public auto insurance now?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, no one is asking for it. Secondly, I would remind the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition that it was this government that took the initiative to address the whole problem of insurance premiums. In that regard the hon. Member for Medicine Hat was assigned to do a survey and to investigate the situation and prepare a report as to what could be done without going into a socialist system, which the NDs and the Liberals so admire, and at the same time still protect consumers under a regulated system. It's as simple as that. As I said previously, we are now working through the regulations.

Executive Council Travel

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, the Premier said that part of the trip to Fox Harb'r golf resort was reimbursed by the Tory party. A receipt provided by the Premier in the Public Accounts Committee is labelled by hand for some costs associated with Fox Harb'r. While no details are provided on what was covered, it does show almost \$1,200 being paid. My questions are to the Premier. Will the Premier now provide details and receipts for the government portion of this trip?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, fine. Someone, please, take the question under advisement and provide the hon. member with whatever she wants if we can find it. Please, you know, get it off my back. I mean, as I said, they're talking about Executive Council travel: 1/10,000 of 1 per cent. You would need a computer the size of this Legislative Assembly to compute what \$800 means in the scheme of the overall provincial budget, I think.

Mrs. Nelson: Twenty-three billion.

Mr. Klein: Well, \$23 billion, \$800 – I don't know. I have no idea how to calculate that. But, my God, if all they want, if all they can think about is \$800 and that receipt, then, please, whoever is out there listening, help me with this and provide them with the information. Get them off my back.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Again to the Premier: did the Tory party reimburse any expenses for the India trip taken in January of '04 by the Premier, the Minister of Community Development, some government MLAs, and others? Were any of those reimbursed?

Mr. Klein: I'm sorry. The question was: did the party pay? No. That was one hundred per cent.

Mr. Speaker, just to go back to the Fox Harb'r trip, I said earlier that that trip was part business and part vacation. I was invited to the event by Ron Joyce, the former CEO of Tim Hortons, and attended in my role as Premier. Other Premiers were invited as well. I don't know if any others attended. I can't recall. I had the chance to meet with business leaders, as I say, from around North America and promote Alberta.

I also used the trip to play some golf. That's why roughly half of the \$2,500 tab was paid back by the party on my behalf. Right? It didn't cost taxpayers. That's the \$1,200, roughly, that the hon. member refers to. Peter Elzinga, my former chief of staff, paid approximately \$1,200 personally and then obtained reimbursement from the party. A record of that payment is available from my communications staff, and I understand that they do have a record of that payment.

I know that previously it had been reported that the party paid up to \$2,000 of the \$2,500 tab. That's what I was advised. However, unfortunately, that was an error that wasn't noticed until last week when we went back to the 2002 financial records. But I believe that overall the half-and-half payment set-up accurately reflects the mixed business/personal nature of the Fox Harb'r trip.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I will say this as well. As I was travelling to Nova Scotia anyway for a Premiers' Conference, there were no additional airplane costs incurred as a result of the Fox Harb'r stopover in that it's on the way to Halifax. It's about, I think, one hour by car and maybe 15 minutes by airplane from Halifax, so it was on the way. We flew over it, so we stopped. There might have been additional costs relative to landing the plane and the gas used in taking off. Now, if they want that, we'll try and figure that out too.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: did the Tory party reimburse any expenses for the trip to Mexico in September of 2002 taken by various members of Executive Council?

Mr. Klein: No.

The Speaker: The third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Requests for Information

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Thursday the Liberal opposition made an appointment for the next day to view publicly available flight manifests for government aircraft for 2000 to 2003. The Premier has since admitted that he was phoned by his staff that Thursday evening and informed of our appointment. The next morning our appointment was cancelled on us, and the manifests were suddenly classified under the so-called freedom of information laws. To the Premier: will the Premier admit that this is blatant political interference in the due process of government?

Mr. Klein: No. What I will admit is that the approach the Liberals took was blatant political grandstanding. Was blatant political grandstanding.

Mr. Speaker, as I said in the media scrum yesterday – and this hon. member knows because he was there. He attends every scrum along with his little researcher.

Mr. MacDonald: He's bigger than you.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. Premier has the floor. He can continue.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out yesterday in the scrum, Mr. and Mrs. Grundy or Martha and Henry, normal Albertans, don't appear at the government hangar requesting 10 years' worth of documents, manifests, some 12,000 different documents, don't request the use and the tying up of over 50 hours of public service employee or employees' time, doesn't arrive decorated with a microphone, with a bevy of media. So I suspect that there was some media grandstanding going on.

Dr. Taft: To the Premier: is the Premier routinely informed by his staff of information requests from the Liberal opposition and the media?

Mr. Klein: Not routinely. Sometimes. Although I suspect that many FOIP requests are from the Liberals or from the media, FOIP requests are kept confidential. You can tell by the questions that are being asked that Martha and Henry or Mr. and Mrs. Grundy are not asking those questions, because when you listen to the questions and the kind of information they're seeking, you say: "Gosh, this sounds like a request from the Liberals or the media. I wonder who's trolling, who's casting. I'm sure it's not Martha and Henry."

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Is informing the Premier of information requests from the opposition and the media part of this government's surveillance system of information requests?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as far as I know, we are not spooky. No. This is a democracy, and we don't set up surveillance systems. Maybe the Libs do – I don't know – but we don't have a snoop squad. No. The answer is no.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Education Funding

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two weeks ago during estimates debates I urged the Minister of Learning to make public the funding profile for all school boards and charter schools in the province. Now that that has happened, school board after school board is saying that these numbers can mean no new teachers, zero reduction in class sizes; in other words, no implementation of the Learning Commission's recommendations. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Given that school boards like Edmonton public, Red Deer public, and Elk Island are all saying that the increases are much smaller than claimed and won't allow them to hire more teachers or reduce class sizes, what actions will the minister take to address these concerns?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just for the record I do want to put in what Edmonton public received. Edmonton public received a 5 per cent increase from last budget to this budget. They received \$22 million more this budget over last budget. When it comes to the interim funding that was put in in November, we added in another \$7 million. In this budget alone – this budget alone – \$16 million more went to Edmonton public. We have to recognize that Edmonton public is predicting a decline in their enrolment. They have \$16 million more to spend for fewer students.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what does the minister have to say to the trustees of Red Deer public when they state in a resolution adopted unanimously that the increase in next year's budget will make it difficult to maintain existing programs and staffing, let alone implement the recommendations of the Learning Commission?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Assuming that there is no enrolment change in Red Deer public, their budget will have gone up 4.8 per cent last year to this year. Their budget will have gone up about \$2.6 million. Given that \$1.1 million was given to them in November of this year, they will have \$1.6 million on top of the \$1.1 million to hire teachers, to do what that school board sees as their priorities. Red Deer public, for example, has decided that they will go to full-day kindergarten, so they have put their funds into full-day kindergarten. They have gone up \$2.6 million. On this side of the House \$2.6 million is still a lot of money.

Dr. Pannu: My final supplemental, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: how can the school boards honour the minister's own commitment and implement the Learning Commission's recommendations by reducing class sizes when the budget increases they are getting will be barely enough to cover inflation, let alone improve classroom conditions by reducing class size?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, the day when \$250 million is not enough, the day when \$250 million is just seen as a drop in the bucket is a sad day for Alberta. Two hundred and fifty million dollars, taxpayers' dollars, is still a tremendous amount of money, and that's something that everyone in this Legislature needs to remember.

Access to Motor Vehicle Information Database

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, my constituents and indeed many Albertans are very concerned about reports that the War Amps organization is going to be denied access to motor vehicle information. My questions are for the Minister of Government Services. Could the minister inform this Assembly what his department is doing to ensure that the War Amps organization is going to be able to continue their very worthwhile operations in Alberta?

Mr. Coutts: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, let us say one thing. The War Amps organization is a very credible organization that really helps and assists young people not only in this province but across this great nation of ours with prostheses, and they do that by getting donations for the very valuable key tag service that they've provided for a number of years.

Charitable organizations have not been able to get access to the motor vehicle database, but about a year ago I met with War Amps, and they were able to convince me that they were a special case from the service that they provided.

What we did at that particular time was we made a special exemption, which was basically a compromise, for War Amps to gain access and retain access to the motor vehicle database for a period of two years. They can take the names and the addresses of Albertans who have successful drivers' licences and people who would benefit from the key tag service that War Amps has, and they would be able to put that in their database for the next two years. As a matter of fact, we're working today with War Amps on developing a form of consent. The form of consent would then be added to their database after the year 2006. We're staying within the privacy concerns of Albertans and protecting that.

Mr. Speaker, War Amps has not been denied access to the motor vehicle database.

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, again to the same minister: could the minister explain why Impark and other private-sector parking companies will be allowed access to the motor vehicle information database?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, I want to clarify that Impark will continue to be denied access to the driver information because of customer complaints, and an investigation continues into those customer complaints and the practices that Impark used in violating the Fair Trading Act. Other private parking companies will be granted motor vehicle information only on the basis of implied consent, and that is by posting clear parking lot signage on the consequences of illegal parking. Names and addresses will only be released if – if – proof of payment is not displayed in accordance with the posted instructions. These restrictions will ensure that consumers, customers who park in those lots, are clear on the terms and the conditions on the parking there. If they agree to park there, they are consenting to those consequences if they do not abide by those terms. We will continue to audit private parking companies and to make sure that their requests for information comply with the terms of the contract.

2:00

Mr. Lord: My final question, Mr. Speaker, again for the same minister. I'm wondering if he could explain to this Assembly what his department is doing to address concerns by private investigators who are also concerned that they'll be put out of business if they can't access this database.

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, it's not only War Amps and not only private parking companies and public parking companies that get this kind of information, but we're working with all stakeholders across this province to make this transition easier and to ensure that there's compliance with these new, tougher regulations that were asked for by the Privacy Commissioner and the Auditor General.

Private investigators do a great deal of work for clients, such as banks and lawyers and insurance companies, and all they'll need to do is get consent from their customers in the event that their motor vehicle information is needed. That's the operative word. We're only going to give out information for purposes of that company to do business.

Banks and insurance companies who hire private investigators will have to ensure that the investigator has been approved by my department and licensed by the Alberta Solicitor General. We have made arrangements to release information to the bank or to the insurance company for use by that investigator working on their behalf.

To conclude, these scenarios are as much of the information that is available and needed for the motor vehicle related incident or if it is needed for a court proceeding.

Automobile Insurance Reform (continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Because this government would rather fly than drive, they are completely out of touch with Alberta drivers. The backgrounder released with last November's announcement about auto insurance reform stated that "age, sex and marital status will no longer be factors in setting premiums." My first question is to the Premier. Is it true that this government is going to break this commitment and will in fact allow discrimination to continue on the

basis of age, sex, and marital status when setting auto insurance premiums?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, quite the contrary. I'll have the hon. Minister of Finance respond.

My directions and certainly caucus's agreement were quite clear relative to the fundamental policy surrounding this issue, and that is that we want to end the discrimination for young good drivers who happen to be male and older male drivers. We want to end that discrimination – that's what the legislation is all about – and at the same time to make sure that those who are injured are fairly compensated.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the only discrimination that will be brought into play in this new reform package, quite frankly, is the difference between a good driver and a bad driver. Then there will be discrimination. If you're a good driver, you're rewarded. If you're a bad driver, you're going to be penalized.

Mr. MacDonald: Edmonton drivers are going to be discriminated against.

Now to the Minister of Finance: is the government planning on setting maximum base premiums so high that insurance companies will be able to continue to use all the discriminating factors they use now?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the actuarial assessment that has been in place for a long time has been based on regions within the province. Clearly, under this package it has shown that there has been a difference between the rural communities and the two major centres. That has been based on experience, the driving experience and the claims experience, within those jurisdictions. As the major centres become more equal, their driving experience, we assume, will follow suit, and we will see parity between them.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the Premier: will the Premier admit that, yet again, this government's auto insurance plan or their proposals will have so many loopholes that once it's introduced, most Alberta drivers will be no better off than they are today, that in fact many will be worse off as a result of your tinkering with our auto insurance premiums?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, again, I would remind the hon. member that they wouldn't even have an issue had we not created the issue to address a serious problem that involved discrimination against young male good drivers and older male good drivers. We want to end that discrimination.

I can't for the life of me see what they are upset about or why they are questioning these motives. These motives are good. You know, there's always difficulty with regulations and to make them as tight and as firm as we possibly can. What we're working through right now is the regulatory aspect of the legislation and the policy.

Mr. Speaker, I don't know; maybe the hon. member can answer this question. In areas where they do have state or socialist insurance, I don't know if one area, Regina for instance, pays the same as a driver in Saskatoon. I don't know that for sure. Perhaps the hon. member can enlighten me, or maybe I'll find it on the web, hopefully. Maybe he can enlighten me too. I don't know.

Animal Disease Surveillance

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, much attention has been given to the border opening for products from livestock under 30 months of age.

Most producers are able to provide documentation as to the birthdate of their animals, some as accurately as purebred registration certificates, only to find that the 30-month age criteria is irrelevant and that the actual benchmark is the appearance of the animal's third tooth. Many animals develop this tooth as early as 24 months. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Was the Alberta government involved in the determination of this criteria, and why do they continue to use the 30-month terminology?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the use of the third tooth to determine the approximate age of the animal is an international agreement, part of animal disease surveillance. It is accepted internationally and endorsed in Canada by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, so directly we did not have any input into developing this. However, we have accepted it as an international standard.

One of the difficulties is that you have differing standards around the world. You have different ways of documenting age of animals, and this is seen as consistent. There's a second method you can use, and it's called ossification, but in that case the animal has to be slaughtered or dead.

Mr. Speaker, there's no question that this tooth can vary in its eruption in different ages of animal, but it is the most practical method we have. We call it denturing or mouting of animals. It's not new.

I just want to point out to the hon. member and to all hon. members that there are two reasons that you use this. One is that under that age you do not have to remove the specified risk materials, so you want to know the age of the animal because over 30 months there is a removal of SRMs. The second thing is that we cannot export the meat from an animal over 30 months, so we have to have a way of determining an age that is accepted by our international buyers.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that many producers find after the fact that their product has been hugely discounted by the packers under the premise of the mature designation, even in cases where the meat is sold in Canada and grades triple A, what process is available to the producers to guarantee that the packing houses are not simply using the mature designation to rip off the producer and, ultimately, the consumer?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, every producer that brings an animal into the market wants to make sure that they're getting the most value out of that animal, but grade of that animal and dentition, or the third tooth, are not related in any way. Although it's unlikely that you would get an over-30-month animal grading triple A, it is not that age that determines the grade of the carcass. The packer uses that, if they are a federally inspected packer, to do two things, as I indicated. They know they can export that meat into the international marketplace, and they also know that they do not have to remove the specified risk materials.

2:10

Mr. Speaker, it's important to understand that the seller and the buyer will determine what you get back. I mean, if you take an animal in to market and you're dissatisfied with the grade or the price, you take that up with the person who's purchasing it. But there is no question that some processors, especially large packers that are killing many animals a day, may charge a producer for bringing in an animal that's over 30 months in a group because they

have to segregate that animal, and there can be additional costs.

Mr. Speaker, the grading of that carcass and the dentition work that's done to determine the age of the animal for removal of SRMs or export are not related in any way.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Cross.

Education Funding

(continued)

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For many school boards there will be no reduction in class sizes and there'll be no progress on the Learning Commission recommendations with respect to class size this September. In fact, in some urban and suburban districts class size will likely increase. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. How much money was allocated in the budget specifically for the commission's class size recommendations?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, this is déjà vu all over again. In the Commission on Learning there were two issues that were looked at, and, as I've said in this House before, they were essentially contradicting ideas. One idea was the whole issue of class size where they put in class size numbers that we have agreed to. What they said on the second side of things is that we should institute the funding formula.

The funding formula gives the school boards the ultimate flexibility. In all fairness, the school boards have the ability to use 95 per cent of the dollars that they will receive as they see fit. There is 5 per cent that is left over that is targeted for the Alberta initiative for school improvement, the SuperNet, and student health.

Mr. Speaker, in direct response to the hon. member's question, as you can tell by my explanation, there was no money that was put directly to class size. There was, however, \$250 million that was given to schools, basic K to 12 education. Of that, \$192 million went directly to school boards. The majority of the other \$58 million went for increases in teachers' pensions, and the second thing was increases to the curriculum, where we're working on bigger and better curriculums.

So in direct response to that, there has been the potential for \$192 million to go to class size if that's the school board's priority.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That's absolutely wrong.

The question is to the minister. Given salary grid cost increases close to 2 per cent, inflation, and the arbitrated settlement, how with an average 5 per cent increase does the government expect urban and suburban school boards to begin reducing class sizes?

Dr. Oberg: This is quite unbelievable. A 5 per cent increase in education in Alberta is not heard of anywhere else in Canada. British Columbia: zero – zero – per cent for three years. Saskatchewan: probably looking at a decrease in education funding. Mr. Speaker, in this province our government gave \$250 million to the K to 12 education system, which is an absolutely huge amount. Not only did we give \$250 million; we have budgeted \$650 million over three years for the basic K to 12 education system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the money is adequate,

why has this minister in this letter made a crude attempt to muzzle school boards should they speak out on this issue?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of what letter the hon. member was talking about. I would assume that it is a letter that went to school boards clarifying the actual amount of dollars that they received, and I will give you an example. In the Assembly this week the hon. Member for Red Deer-West, I believe – Red Deer-North; directions were never my strong point – asked me a specific question about this, and what the school board had done is stated that, yes, there was \$330,000 or thereabouts put into aboriginal education. There was another \$230,000 or \$240,000 that was put into special-needs education.

Mr. Speaker, what the school board forgot to say is that those funds are flexible. There is nothing tied to those funds. In essence, they can use those funds however they see fit, and that's what we expect school boards to do.

Global Telehealth Technology

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Speaker, health care is being reformed already by rapid changes in telecommunications. I understand that a respectable hospital in Boston is sending its X-rays and radiological films to India for reading and diagnosis. I also understand that that cost is approximately \$10 U.S. in India as compared to \$150 U.S. in Boston to read that same film. Apparently, this saves not only money but time for the patient. So my question today is for the minister of health. Is your department giving consideration to using telecommunication to access services outside of Canada for radiological diagnosis in order to save time and cost in patient care?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's health system already does make effective and efficient use of information technology in sending and reading radiology images from remote locations. We have one of the most extensive telehealth systems in the world. We have some 25 teleradiology sites here in the province, and through that, we are able to send X-rays and ultrasounds and other diagnostic images from remote locations in the province for reading in major centres such as here in the city of Edmonton or in the city of Calgary.

Mr. Speaker, we do not send any of these out of province at this time, but I think that in looking at the applications, the hon. member raises an issue that ought to be looked at. I think that the key issue, though, is that we must ensure that the standard of care, in this case the standards of reading films or X-rays, would have to be maintained. I'm not familiar enough with what the results of those readings would be in other jurisdictions. I've tried my best to verify the place where this practice takes place. I've been advised of it, but I cannot confirm which facility in Massachusetts is using this, nor can I confirm the price differential between the reading of films in Boston versus reading them in another jurisdiction.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Further to that, then, I'm wondering if the minister's department is using health care providers outside of Canada for any patient services.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we do spend a small amount of money in seeking services that are not available here in Alberta and in some cases not available in Canada. There are certain lab results that are very sophisticated that we do not have the volumes with which we can do them here in this province. Certain genetic tests, for example, we do send out of country to the United States. The total cost of that is in the magnitude of \$100,000.

We do send Albertans out of province to other parts of Canada sometimes when we don't have a particular service here in Alberta. Last year, Mr. Speaker, we spent \$4.3 million on out-of-country hospital care, mostly in the United States, although on occasion we do send people to jurisdictions other than the U.S.

So the answer is yes. We do rely upon out-of-country services, practitioners. We always need to satisfy ourselves that the service is not available in Alberta and that it is of a recognized high-quality calibre of service.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental is to the same minister. Does your department or any of the RHAs have policies in place to ensure – and not just to consider but to ensure – that Canadian standards are met when buying patient services in a global market where the costs are lower?

2:20

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I think it is of primary consideration that we maintain very high standards in our delivery of service. So if a service is available through some other means that is less expensive, we would not do that at the cost of decreased quality of service.

Calgary Ring Road

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, on more than one occasion the Premier has suggested that tolls might be implemented to cover the cost of the future southwest leg of the Calgary ring road. The Alberta Transportation news release, however, makes no mention of any tolls. My questions today are to the Minister of Transportation. Can Calgarians look forward to paying a toll on a future southwest Calgary ring road?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is referring to a question that came from the media at the signing of the agreement in principle that will eventually transfer land from Tsuu T'ina nation to the Crown of Alberta for the purpose of a ring road. The question was: will this road be tolled? The reply by the Premier was: we're looking at all kinds of options. There are some policies tied to tolls, and with a toll you must have an alternate route. If you are going to toll a new road, you must have another road that provides the same type of service. That was further to the Premier's comments at that particular time.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that this ministry is considering implementing tolls for this ring road, is it also considering making this a P3 project?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, in this Assembly I did mention that if our inaugural project, being the southeast leg of the Anthony Henday in the city of Edmonton, works well, if it brings savings to the provincial taxpayer, we will certainly look at that option for further development of the ring roads in Alberta.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister: has the government shifted its policy on tolls, and will it now begin to implement tolls on new highways constructed in the province?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, no. There have been no policy changes. We always had a policy, as long as I was minister of this department, that tolls could not be implemented unless there was an alternate route.

Also, tolls on roads don't particularly work in every instance and every application. There has to be a significant amount of traffic on that particular road to pay for the construction and the maintenance of that road in the future. I don't know how much traffic will be in the southwest, but on the other roads that we're looking at in terms of the ring road, we'd probably only cover about a third of the cost, and then once you subtract the collection costs, it decreases the revenue even further.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Peace River.

Health Care Reform

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As set out in an Ottawa speech by the Minister of Health and Wellness yesterday, the Tory government's vision is a bleak one of a stripped-down public health care system that only protects Albertans against catastrophic health costs. This is the very opposite of our national vision of a comprehensive public health insurance system that covers all health services. Far from being a Cadillac, this government's vision is one of an old beater sitting up on blocks in the yard. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why is the minister outlining a vision of health reform that, far from being the original vision of medicare, takes us back to the bad old days before medicare?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I wish to correct the hon. member on most if not all of the content of his preamble. The reality is that when medicare was first introduced in the province of Saskatchewan, Tommy Douglas – and I know that he has read extensively on matters that Premier Douglas had spoken about – contemplated that medicare would be about hospital care and physician care.

I don't want anybody to be left with the impression that the hon. member would leave, that we're trying to strip down medicare to its bare basics, but we do have to return to what its original roots were and what the original principles were. The reality is that many of the things that we do in the health care system today could never have been contemplated by the founders of medicare 40 years ago. There are things that we can do today that were not even available five or 10 years ago.

Our point as a government is that we need to reform our system because it's not sustainable. There are those who will say that it's sustainable because expressed as a percentage of gross domestic product, it hasn't really changed. Well, gross domestic product isn't like money in the bank that you can spend; revenue is.

Mr. Speaker, here is the stark reality across Canada: 8 to 10 per cent is how much health care has been increasing in provinces across this country each year for the last 10 years. Revenues over the same period of time have grown 2 to 4 per cent. So something has got to give. That's why it's not just the provincial government of Alberta that's interested in reform of the health care system. It's the reason why a New Democrat government in Saskatchewan would commission Ken Fyke to do a report for them. It's the reason why the Claire report was produced in the province of Quebec. It's why similar reports have been done in British Columbia and Atlantic Canada.

Mr. Speaker, we're doing our very, very best to ensure that we remain true to the original principles set out in medicare and still reform the system. We don't deliver health care the same way that we did 40 years ago. Our public policy and the structures in which we deliver it must therefore change. It must keep pace with medical technology and drugs and other things that are being done today that were never even contemplated 40 years ago.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the minister's speech says, "It will be a system that provides core services in the original spirit of medicare," will the minister now define for this House very broadly what core services he has in mind?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, that is the subject matter of our discussions right now in preparing a document that we can place before the Alberta public before the end of June. That's been the commitment of the Premier of this province and ours. I think that looking at how services are delivered in other jurisdictions will provide us with some demonstration of how things might be different and how they can change effectively.

I think that the hon. member would be well served to learn about health care systems in other parts of the world, and I think that one of the great difficulties is that he and other people like his supporters would only look to the United States and say: our choices are the United States or Canada. Our choices are not nearly so stark. We have a broad range of choices.

So we will look at other health care systems throughout the world, and we will come back with the best solutions that we can find that would be applicable to Alberta within the spirit and the principles of the Canada Health Act and its original principles.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the minister's speech says, "No one should face financial hardship because of catastrophic illness or injury," can the minister tell the House just when people should face financial hardship in our health care system?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very rare that an NDP member of the Legislature would quote a Conservative minister of health. But I think the principle would be well understood by most Albertans that there should not be catastrophic health suffered by an individual that results in a catastrophic financial burden. That's exactly what Tommy Douglas talked about on the floor of the Saskatchewan Legislature in 1961. I doubt if anybody asked Mr. Douglas at that time: what does that mean? I think it's well understood, the driving force of the principle. I think that's understood well by Albertans.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of seven hon. members to participate in Recognitions.

Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: 2:30 **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 36 participants in the Forum for Young Albertans. They are accompanied today by Tanya Dyer, Erin Smith, Richard Fix, Aurther Lee, and Selena Craig. These fine young people come from a number of high schools across Alberta and are spending the week learning about the Legislature, the inner workings of the government, and

will participate in a model parliament. Many of our members have met with these students, which has offered both parties an excellent opportunity to discuss the traditions and procedures of this Assembly and the role of the MLA. I would ask that our honoured guests, who are seated in the members' gallery, do rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Robert Dixon

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to recognize today a very special young man from my constituency, Mr. Robert Dixon from Mannville, who was named this year's recipient of the 4-H Premier's award. He was selected out of 129 candidates during the annual 4-H selections program held in Olds last weekend.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier's award is the highest honour the Alberta 4-H program bestows on a member. The award recognizes young Albertans that demonstrate strong project management, leadership, and communication skills plus dedication to their community.

Robert embodies all of the above-mentioned traits and most certainly exemplifies the can-do spirit of 4-H. I'm extremely proud that this talented young man will be representing our province and our 4-H program as he travels to numerous events across Alberta during the next 12 months.

As the Premier's award winner Robert also takes on the role of 4-H ambassador. He will be joined by 13 4-H'ers who were also chosen during the selections weekend based on their leadership skills, their enthusiasm and commitment to their communities and rural Alberta.

A great deal of credit should be awarded to his mother, Barbara. As well, this achievement will also rekindle with fondness the memory of his late father, Bruce Dixon, himself an accomplished 4-H'er.

Please join me in congratulating Robert and all of the ambassadors and young 4-H members on their wonderful achievements.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Liberation of Holland by Canadian Soldiers

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today marks a very special anniversary for both the Member for Edmonton-Manning and for me. Fifty-nine years ago today Canadian soldiers liberated my family and millions of other Dutch citizens from the German occupation in Holland. Also on that date members of my family that were incarcerated in German work camps were freed and started their journey back to the Netherlands.

Mr. Speaker, the Dutch people both here in Canada and in the Netherlands have not forgotten this historic day and the Canadian soldiers who freed them. Growing up as the son of Dutch immigrants, I learned at a very early age the importance of May 5, 1945. My parents would proudly fly both the Dutch and the Canadian flags to remind the people in Whitecourt that the VanderBurg household had not forgotten.

Thank you.

D-Day Commemoration

The Speaker: Hon. members, on that note just given by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, in the next few days all hon. members of the Assembly will receive an invitation from me about a very, very significant and major event that we will have on the

grounds of the Legislature on June 6 of this year. That will be the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings, and we're inviting as many of the veterans who actually participated in that landing on June 6, 1944, to be present. We will have a flyover with F-18s and helicopters and the whole thing, and it will be a huge, huge event. So when you get the memo, please read it.

The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

United Farmers of Alberta

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the United Farmers of Alberta, who recently opened a brand new 18,000 square foot state-of-the-art facility in Camrose. Designed to be a one-stop shopping facility for area farmers and ranchers, this new store reaffirms UFA's commitment to rural communities not only in my constituency but throughout Alberta. Since 1909 the UFA has helped build this province, advocating for farmers and rural Alberta through its influence on provincial politics, and its stamp on Alberta remains to this day.

In the early years of Alberta the UFA was integral in campaigning for the rights of the family and equality for women. As well, they took up the challenge of promoting equal access to education and health care for rural communities, and because of their efforts the province of Alberta created a department of health and a system of public health nurses to help deal with rural health issues.

Currently the UFA is travelling around the province with a history in motion display reminding Albertans about the 95-year history of the UFA in action. The launch of this display occurred in Camrose at the opening of their new regional service facilities.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

International Midwives Day

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise in recognition of the 14th annual International Midwives Day. The concept of having a day to honour midwives was born at the 1987 International Confederation of Midwives conference in the Netherlands, and the first International Midwives Day was celebrated on May 5, 1991. It is now observed in more than 50 countries.

Unfortunately, I make this recognition in support of fewer midwives in Alberta each year. This is due mainly, I think, to a lack of funding. A decade ago the Alberta Association of Midwives had 150 members who were hoping that midwifery would become publicly funded. The profession lost some members when official registration of midwives began in 1998 and additional government fees added to their costs. More midwives have been driven away by the continuing lack of coverage under Alberta health care.

B.C., Ontario, Quebec, and Manitoba all publicly fund midwifery services under their health care plans, and Alberta must consider going this route, especially in light of a severe shortage of obstetrical doctors in Alberta.

My congratulations to those midwives who continue to practise. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Hope Foundation of Alberta

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I had the privilege of attending the Hope Foundation auction gala this past weekend. This year's event raised funds for the Hope Kids, that provides personal growth for individuals, families, and professional caregivers.

I want to recognize the honorary chair of the event, our Minister of Children's Services, who was auctioned off for a considerable amount of money. I'd also like to acknowledge the Minister of Health and Wellness, who performed at the event as Elvis and Don Ho.

It was a Hawaiian event, Mr. Speaker, and I participated in the live auction and had the shirt off my back auctioned, and this lovely Hawaiian shirt was purchased by Dennis Erker from FE Advisory Group with the caveat that I wear it in the House today. So, Dennis, here it is.

Thank you and congratulations to the Hope Foundation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, I appreciate that explanation because I thought it was the Hutton tartan.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: How do I follow that?

European Union

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, this past weekend Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, and Cyprus joined the European Union. These states of central Europe and Mediterranean countries joined 15 existing members to make the EU one of the strongest trading units in the world.

Membership in the European Union inspires political stability, economic openness, and fiscal responsibility. The expanded EU helps the countries gain a stronger economic footing to compete in the global economy.

The expansion also creates the largest internal market, accounting for some 450 million citizens and based on a single set of trade rules and an open economy with a high standard of rules. The EU negotiates major trade and aid agreements with other countries while at the same time allowing free transfer of goods and freedom to provide services among the member countries.

Alberta's Minister of Economic Development is always looking for new and emerging markets throughout the world. Alberta should be prominently featured in the expanded EU to take advantage of business opportunities and importing and exporting agreements.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Code of Silence Award

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize and congratulate this government for being one of five finalists for the code of silence award. This award recognizes only the most secretive governments and government agencies in Canada, and I'm sure the Alberta government feels that it is an honour just to be nominated.

The government won this distinction by the way it handled a FOIP request related to the Stockwell Day lawsuit. When Justice McMahon ruled on the matter he stated, "Access to information legislation is a means by which people get that information from sometimes reluctant government hands." He also said, "The right of the people to require that government account to them is fundamental to a strong democracy."

In conclusion, I'd like to say to the Premier and his government: congratulations for being nominated for this great honour, and best of luck winning the code of silence award on Saturday. First prize will not be a surprise.

head: 2:40

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition here that I'd like to present signed by 80 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to

not rescind the tax exempt status of Alberta Blue Cross because such taxing will significantly increase the premiums of the Canadian National Railways Pensioners' Group Health Benefit Plan and will have an adverse effect on all Alberta Seniors because the Alberta Seniors' Benefit which is administered by Alberta Blue Cross will be faced with increased costs.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. First of all, I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter sent by David Lock, Blood Tribe deputy chief, Inspector Graham Abela from the Taber Police Service, and Chief Marshall Chalmers, president of the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police. Each of the letters expresses support from these associations for Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act.

Mr. Speaker, my second tabling is a letter from Michael Rennich, chair of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees local 003, representing correctional officers and correctional service workers. The letter talks about the need for legislation requiring persons in custody who have assaulted police officers or correctional officers to submit blood samples. The letter also states that the union local supports the bill.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would table the required number of copies of a letter from the Minister of Learning to the chair of the Red Deer public school board and copied to a variety of educational organizations across the province chastising that board for going public with its financial concerns.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of an Edmonton school board publication, a document called *KeyNotes*, showing that the board was disheartened to learn that it would not receive any provincial funding for the construction of new schools.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head:

Main Estimates 2004-05

Infrastructure

The Deputy Chair: As per our Standing Orders the first hour will

be dedicated between the hon. minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I begin, I would like to introduce staff that we have in the gallery, starting with my executive assistant, Jeff Paruk; then the assistant deputy minister in charge of capital projects, Malcolm Johnson; our director of finance, Jim Bauer; and the communications director, Mark Cooper.

Infrastructure's three-year business plan and the 2004-05 estimates indicate how we plan to contribute to the delivery of government programs by carrying out our core businesses. I know that all of you are very familiar with the responsibilities of Alberta Infrastructure, so I thought I would just give you a very high-level overview of our core businesses.

Infrastructure's core responsibilities are, one, to provide policy direction, planning, and expertise and capital funding for schools, postsecondary institutions, health care facilities, and seniors' lodges; two, administer the school plant operations and maintenance funding; three, build and maintain nearly 2,200 owned and leased facilities that support government operations, including the Swan Hills treatment plant; four, to provide accommodation, leasing, and realty services for government; five, manage the government's air transportation and vehicle fleets; and six, administer the natural gas rebate program.

Before I get into the specifics of our '04-05 estimates, I would like to outline the new and ongoing capital initiatives. The capital plan for Alberta Infrastructure will see levels reaching \$2.64 billion over the next three years in areas such as health, school, and postsecondary facilities as well as numerous centennial projects to celebrate Alberta's centennial year. Of that amount, \$1 billion of spending will occur during the '04-05 fiscal year. The following will highlight areas of spending from the perspective of the capital plan as well as the business plan.

[Mr. VanderBurg in the chair]

First of all, health facilities. New funding of \$71 million for health facilities has been allocated in '04-05 to begin new projects such as the expansion of the main building, redevelopment of the emergency department and the intensive care unit at the Foothills hospital in Calgary. In addition to funding for upgrades, new space in the Capital health region will accommodate 170 new acute care beds. In '04-05 \$273.1 million has also been allocated to continue work on 52 major health facility capital projects across the province. These include such projects as the redevelopment of the Royal Alexandra hospital in Edmonton, the Children's hospital in Calgary as well as a large number of ongoing maintenance projects.

School facilities. New funding of \$42.2 million for school facilities has been allocated in '04-05 to begin 17 new projects such as school replacements in Onoway, Drayton Valley, and Peace River and new schools in Calgary. In addition, \$178.6 million has been allocated in '04-05 to continue work on 647 major school facility capital and maintenance projects in communities throughout Alberta which were previously approved in the capital plan.

Postsecondary facilities. New funding of \$53 million for postsecondary facilities has been allocated in '04-05 to begin new capital projects to accommodate major new programs such as the Augustana/University of Alberta merger in Camrose, the NAIT apprenticeship project in Edmonton and Grande Prairie, and the University of Calgary bachelor of science project.

In addition, some \$161.8 million has been allocated in '04-05 to continue work on major postsecondary projects such as the health

research and innovation centres at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary and the natural resources engineering facility in Edmonton and many other maintenance projects.

Now I'd like to share with you the specifics of our '04-05 estimates, \$1.6 billion targeted for '04-05. Alberta Infrastructure's total budget increases by 29 per cent, from \$1.25 billion to over \$1.61 billion, enhancing funding for Alberta's new and aging infrastructure.

2:50

Of the \$1.61 billion, \$1.54 billion was allocated to our operations and equipment and inventory purchases budget with the balance of \$73.5 million going to capital investment; \$598 million is for lights-on costs and includes caretaking, grounds maintenance, utilities, and routine repairs. [interjections] Right; lots of money. Of the \$598 million, \$349.5 million will support the day-to-day facilities operations of some 1,470 schools. To keep more than 1,900 government-owned buildings open, \$125.8 million; lease funding of some \$101 million for 1,766 leases to accommodate government programs in 290 leased facilities; \$21.6 million to continue the operation of the Swan Hills treatment plant.

The budget for preserving infrastructure across the province is some \$298.3 million, of which \$107.7 million is for preserving health care facilities, \$123.1 million for school facilities, \$38.8 million for postsecondary facilities, and \$21 million for government facilities, with the balance of \$7.7 million going to seniors' lodges and environmental services for site remediation and servicing.

To expand, replace, or add to the existing infrastructure, we have some \$527.6 million, of which \$236.5 million is allocated for health care facilities expansion, \$97.7 million for school facilities, \$176 million for postsecondary facilities, \$12.5 million going to centennial legacy grants – the legacy grants program will provide funding for municipalities and not-for-profit groups who wish to undertake major public accessible capital projects in commemoration of Alberta's 100th anniversary – with the balance of \$4.9 million going to government facilities and the land services program.

The remainder of the operating budget is going to address ongoing commitments which total some 108.2 million dollars. The ongoing commitments include the day-to-day administration costs, program support costs, and noncash items such as amortization and consumption of inventories. Fifty-five per cent of the \$60 million is for noncash items such as amortization and consumption of inventories, with the balance designated for support services and air and vehicle transport services.

The equipment and inventory budget of some 4.9 million dollars will go towards purchases of the Swan Hills treatment plant as well as vehicle and air transportation services.

The capital investment portion of our budget is approximately \$73.5 million. Of this amount, \$63 million will go towards funding such projects as the level 3 biocontainment lab, the Leduc business incubator facility, the refurbishing of the north and south Jubilee auditoria, as well as the many centennial projects that are planned or underway. The remaining \$10 million will primarily be used to purchase land required for the transportation and utilities corridor.

I believe that the budget estimates for this year will allow us to meet our business plan's goals and help maintain the government's commitment to financial responsibility. So I would be happy to take questions that you may have. If we can't answer them this afternoon, we will get you the answers in writing in the near future. Thank you.

The Acting Chair: The Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to start off by thanking the minister and his staff for being here today and for their

input into the debate on Infrastructure and also thanking the minister for his opening comments. I look forward to his responses. If some of the questions are technical in nature, require further time, if he would provide those answers in a written form and answer those questions that he has the information here today.

In looking at the core business section of Infrastructure and particularly as the minister outlined them today, core business 1, "Partner with health regions, school boards, post-secondary institutions and seniors' lodge foundations to support the delivery of government programs." Now, in goal 1, "Provide leadership and funding for the development and preservation of health care facilities and the preservation of seniors' lodges," I notice that one of the words here that is extremely important to me is the "funding."

When we go to goal 2 in core business plan 1, we go on to say, "Provide leadership to preserve and deliver effective and efficient facilities in support of life-long learning." Now, no mention in here of funding for facilities in support of lifelong learning. So my question to the minister would be: is this a significant shift from what we've enjoyed in this province since 1905 when it comes to government funding of public schools, or does the delivery of "effective and efficient facilities in support of life-long learning" also include the funding for the building of those facilities? That was one thing that caught my eye just as you were outlining your core business section.

As well, Mr. Chairman, we have in this province somewhere between a \$6 billion to \$9 billion infrastructure deficit, and this indicates that there are already many serious infrastructure issues in Alberta that highlight the steep price to be paid for not addressing repair, rehabilitation, and replacement of existing infrastructure, let alone addressing the needs that this province has for its rapid growth and the growth that we expect to have in the future. The Canadian Society for Civil Engineering through their technology road map project estimates that municipal infrastructure in Canada is a \$1.6 trillion asset. So in order to protect our infrastructure assets here in the province of Alberta, I'm wondering: what additional price do Alberta taxpayers have to pay for neglecting our assets over the past decade?

The minister in his opening comments indicated that Alberta's infrastructure budget is increasing by 6.6 per cent to over \$1.6 billion in 2004-2005. The minister's capital investment in 2004-2005 will be \$205 million, an increase of \$142 million over 2003-2004. The highlights include funding of \$598 million for operations, \$298 million for preservation, and \$528 million for expansion.

In looking at page 223, operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, the ministry support services rose by almost \$975,000 over 2003-2004. If the minister could please indicate what reasons there were for these increases to occur.

When we look at infrastructure operations, preservation, and expansion, it rose by over \$93.5 million. Which projects will this money be going toward? Given that in 2003-2004 the ministry was over budget by \$232 million in this area, can the minister indicate reasons why this will not happen again in 2004-2005?

3:00

Meanwhile, equipment/inventory purchases for infrastructure operations, preservation, and expansion have gone down by almost \$16 million. What was the reason for overspending in 2003-2004, and if the reason for this is because of the use of P3s, how much more is it costing them in the questions above? The capital investment in infrastructure operations, preservation, and expansion has risen by over \$32 million. What projects will these additional funds be going toward?

In program 1, ministry support services, the operating expenses for

the minister's office rose by \$5,000, while those for the deputy minister's office rose by \$11,000. Could the minister please indicate why these additional funds were required? The operating expenses for strategic services rose by \$79,000. Again, if the minister could please outline why these additional dollars were required.

The operating expenses for information management also rose by \$809,000. If he could please indicate why there was such a great increase in the operating expenses for information management.

The operating expenses for shared support services rose by \$71,000. If the minister could please outline to us: what are the shared support services, and why the increase?

As well, why were there information management expenses in 2003-2004 related to equipment/inventory purchases and none for 2004-2005?

Program 2, infrastructure operations, preservation, and expansion. Why have the infrastructure expansion expenses for seniors' lodges decreased by almost \$3 million given the aging demographics of our population? It would seem that as we have an increase in aging in the demographics of our population, we would require more expansion of what is presently there.

As well, if the minister could please indicate why there are no operating expenses for energy rebates in 2004-2005? Has the program ended? Will there not be any more energy rebates? Just what has happened to that program, please?

The expenses for program services have increased by over \$600,000. Once again, if the minister could please outline why there is an increase of \$600,000 for program services.

Why have expenses for the amortization of financial transactions increased by over \$2 million in this particular reporting period? I would have expected that as we pay down the amortization on various projects, this would be an area where we would expect this particular amortization to be less. As well, with the fact that interest rates have been relatively stable over the past year, why would there be an increase and not a decrease?

Also, if the minister could outline which capital and accommodation projects account for the over \$24 million increase in infrastructure capital investment in 2004-2005. As well, if the minister could please indicate why the capital investment for land services is decreasing by over \$10 million in 2004-2005.

When we look at the statutory program, it indicates that almost \$127 million in capital investment has been earmarked for alternatively financed projects when this method of financing hasn't even been proven to be cost-effective to the taxpayers. We can talk more about this as we go along, but I think the prime example of why this is such a great concern to us is the fact that, initially, when the Calgary courthouse was announced, it started out to be a project that was going to be in the \$170 million range.

Under capital projects in the province, which was put out by the Ministry of Economic Development as late as March 31, 2004, it indicated that the cost of the new courthouse was going to be \$170 million. Then we saw that the cost of the courthouse had increased to \$300 million, and then in the latest estimates this has soared to approximately half a billion dollars. So, again, there is great concern in the province over the cost-effectiveness for alternatively financed projects.

I will get into that a little bit more, but this particular question refers to the \$127 million in capital investment that has been earmarked for alternatively financed projects. If the minister could also indicate why there are no specifics on these projects such as what they are and how they've proved to be cost-effective. Again, we want to get away from this whole attitude that a P3 is simply nothing more than a credit card where government charges today and taxpayers pay over the next 30 years. It is a question that continues

to bear heavy certainly on the minds of Alberta taxpayers, who are looking at having to pay for these projects over the next 30 years.

As well, what Albertans are very, very concerned about with P3 projects, particularly if we're looking at the P3 model to build the southwest Calgary hospital, is: what guarantees of service are going to be provided to the patients in those hospitals, particularly as we move down the road and the costs of the hospital increase as they have under whatever model we use, to ensure that there's going to be a level of service in that hospital and that that service to the patients will not be compromised to keep the profit margins of the private provider in place? Again, people are very concerned about the quality of the services that will continue over the life of a P3.

I also would like to ask the minister a question regarding the change in capital assets. New capital investment in centennial projects has increased by over \$20 million. Which projects will this money be going toward?

3:10

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

In the 2004-2007 Infrastructure business plan the mission is "Through leadership and technical expertise, provide effective, efficient, innovative and timely infrastructure and services." This comes from page 278. Alberta Infrastructure's vision is also to provide Albertans with "innovative, quality, and sustainable public facilities." Of course, with our current situation where we have a huge infrastructure debt, the ministry isn't there yet.

Students at Bow Valley high school in Cochrane have had to go without water and sewer facilities for over four years now. That and a number of other safety issues in and around the school have been the result of disputes between private developers and the town. The province certainly hasn't stepped in to make sure that the students are getting the services they need so that they can focus on their studies and do well in school.

Certainly, when we look at the minister's definition of "effective, efficient, innovative and timely infrastructure services," if the minister could tell us how this situation that is presently occurring in Bow Valley high school, where water has to be hauled into the school and the waste products removed in the same manner – how can we say that we have effective, efficient, innovative, and timely infrastructure services when after four years we still have not been able to hook up the sewer lines between the school and the lines that are there? I would urge the minister to certainly make this a priority situation to get those lines hooked up so that this particular school will not have to experience any more delays in being able to use city water and, as well, to have their sewer services hooked up so that they can be operational.

The other situation that this has certainly led to is that Bow Valley school for four years now has not been able to water any of its fields, and certainly the grass that was growing there at one time has died because of the lack of water. It is essential that somebody step in and solve this problem. We cannot allow students to go to school under these types of conditions. Would the minister look at the possibility of intervening in this situation, getting the sewers hooked up, getting the city water so it can be used, and work out between all parties involved how the issues at hand are going to be resolved?

As well, another issue is the access road to the school. The plans had indicated that it would be paved, and it has not been paved. I would like to know what steps the minister will commit to to ensure that this school's infrastructure and services are improved so that they at the very least have permanent water and sewer services, adequate playing fields, and a safe access road.

Under core business 3, goal 6: "Efficiently manage the govern-

ment's air and vehicle fleets to provide safe, reliable and responsive services in a fiscally responsible way." We find this on page 278. Can the minister explain how the billing-back process works when departments book flights on government planes?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll have to apologize to the member, but I was having difficulty following him as he was going through asking very specific questions in different areas. Of course, when you start talking about projects, I don't have that in front of me, so we'll have to get back to you in writing in the future.

I didn't catch all of what you were saying about if there was a shift in the prioritization of schools and the amount of money that we're spending, and I take it that's new versus preservation. No, there's not a shift. I just want to make sure that we understand that.

As far as the infrastructure debt that has built up, yes, we acknowledge that and we have talked about it. Of course, doing the audits on all of the buildings that we're responsible for – the K to 12 schools, the postsecondary, the health facilities – we've got now a very good understanding of the condition of the buildings and what has to be done. We've advocated all along that we need to make sure that we're preserving what we have – it doesn't make a lot of sense to let that go into disrepair – but since the province is so dynamic and growing so fast, we're also faced with having to build new on the school side.

Of course, as you can appreciate, part of the problem we're running into is the fact that a lot of schools now are in the wrong place, and you can't just up and move them. We have to make that balance, and of course one of the things that anybody that's served on any school board recognizes is the fact that it's not easy to close a school. So we're looking at how perhaps we could work our way to see fit to give school boards more latitude in the closure of schools and things like allowing them to plan a number of years ahead so that they could let their parents know that this school is going to be closed. I don't think it would be nearly as dramatic when the time would come.

The rebate program. The gas rebate program is the one that I believe you're referring to, the fact that there's nothing in the budget. The way the sustainability fund is set up, that funding – and it occurred this past fiscal year – is where the money came from, out of the sustainability fund. It wasn't a budgeted item. So that's what would happen coming up in the next fiscal year. If in fact the formula is triggered, then the money will come out of the sustainability fund. So it's not a budgeted item as far as the year coming up.

The amortization – and I think you touched on the \$2 million increase – is because of the increase in the value of the capital that we're responsible for. It's a percentage of the total value of the capital. So it's got nothing to do with the interest rate. That's got nothing to do with it. It's simply that we've added more capital; therefore, our amortization is higher.

The courthouse. As I've mentioned before in the House in answers to questions, the \$170 million was just for a provincial courthouse. That was not for a structure that would put all three courts together in one location. That was for just the provincial. So don't confuse that number with what we were dealing with later on.

3:20

Yes, the costs did increase as we were going along. The fact is that the cost per square metre was going up. You've got to appreciate that building a courthouse is not a normal thing that we're into all the time, so we did underestimate some of those costs. But when

you go to the last number that you refer to – I think you said almost half a billion dollars; well, the number that was kicking around out there was even slightly higher – that is not the cost of the structure. That's the net present value when you take it over the 30 years and back it up to net present value.

One of the unfortunate things that we do in government is if we finance something ourselves, pay cash for it, we never show net present value. We never do that. So it's very, very misleading when you try to compare that number with the actual cost. What I tell you we will be doing is that we will be showing that number regardless of how the courthouse is financed. I know that it's a tough one for people to get their minds around, but that \$530 million is not cash. That's not money spent; that is a book value of the asset, net present value. You've got to take it out over the 30 years and then back it up. That's it on the courthouse.

Your comments about the P3s. I don't believe for one minute that any patient going into a hospital – and I want to talk about hospitals because that's the one you referred to – is going to ask the question: now, who owns the bricks and mortar? They don't care about that. They don't care who owns the bricks and mortar. They don't care how the bricks and mortar were financed. What they care about is the health services in that structure, and we've never talked about doing anything but maintaining the current system with the delivery of service in that structure.

I think you were concerned about the maintenance of the structure and the cleanliness and those types of things and that they would be somehow below standard, and the reason that the operator would do that would be to make money. Well, when you write the contract, you clearly describe the standard that has to be met. If there's a default, if in fact the operator would be not living up to that contract, then, of course, there would be penalty clauses, and the easiest thing to do is simply withhold payment. If you have to in order to accomplish what is necessary and what's in the contract, you would put in your own operator. I don't get a bit worried about that bogeyman because that's easily covered off.

As far as the cost of the money, we have found through our work on the Calgary courthouse that, yes, the private sector can't borrow the money quite as cheaply as we can, but it's only 40 to 80 points above. If government is backing it, they're able to get that kind of a rate. Well, I can tell you that the risk that you transfer over there to the owner, designer, builder, operator is well worth those few points.

Of course, the process that we have established is, first, there has to be a business case for the project. Then if that is approved, if it's a P3, it will come to our department, and the expertise that we have internally – if it's a health facility, then we involve Health; if it's schools or learning, we involve Learning people; plus Treasury; they're all involved – has to be satisfied that it's good for Albertans. Then we move it outside to a totally private-sector committee, and they scrutinize it. They have to approve it, and they have to be able to show that, in fact, this is a good thing for Albertans. It's got to be efficient; it's got to be cost-effective. We insist on having the full lifetime cost of that structure and the operations. So when you look at the whole operation, I believe that with the safeguards we've got in place, you won't see any of them going ahead that aren't good for the public.

Now, you talked about the Bow Valley school in Cochrane, and we agree with the comments you made that it seems very difficult to understand how a school could go four years without having water or sewer, and of course the paved road is, I think, not as large a concern as the fact that they don't have water and sewer. Unfortunately, that school was built when there was a fight going on between municipalities and the developer. One of the things that

we're putting in place now to try to prevent this kind of thing from ever happening again: before we will give a school board the money, we have to approve the site, and approving the site means that the services will either be to the site or there will be a commitment from the municipality to put them to the site.

The ground. We will insist on testing having been done so that we don't run into the situation like we had at Edson where over \$400,000 had to be spent to satisfy the ground after they had decided where the building was going to be built. I can give you other instances where we've run into those problems. Even right here in the city of Edmonton there was an overrun in excess of \$100,000 because they found when they went to start testing the soil that in fact they had to put pillars down to bedrock. Well, we need to know those things before the advancement of the money, so they'll be taken care of.

But it's not the Department of Infrastructure's responsibility to provide any services outside of the lot. We provide the services from the property line to the structure but not outside of the property line. While some might say that has changed, no, it isn't a change. What has changed is that years back if a school board decided to build a school in a certain location and the services weren't to the property, they simply went ahead and built it and then requisitioned the municipality. That's how it used to work. I mean, I was there; I've done that, so I know how it worked.

Now, of course, the province is responsible for the school, so what we've said is, "We provide the services from the property line to the building; end of story," and I'm adamant that we stick with that.

You asked what we might do. I've been in discussion with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and with the Minister of Learning to talk about the Cochrane situation, and we will hopefully find a resolution to it, because it's very unfortunate that the students in that school are the ones that are paying for this squabble that was there before that had nothing to do with us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, before I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's an honour for me today to rise and introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly some students from the grade 9 class at Mountain View school and some of their teachers and leaders. Many of my colleagues have stood to recognize students from their schools in their constituency, and they have said that their schools were probably the brightest, smartest kids to ever come here and so on and so forth. I won't say that my students aren't, but what I can honestly say about these students is that they probably travelled from the most southerly school of any group that's ever come to this Assembly. It's a school that's right on the Montana border. I welcome them here today, and I would like to acknowledge their principal, Mr. Ken Peterson, and a teacher, Mr. Jamie Quinton; parents Mrs. Connie Quinton, Mr. Royce Leavitt, Mrs. Marina Leavitt; and their class president, Kaleen Roe. I would invite them to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

head: 3:30

Main Estimates 2004-05

Infrastructure (continued)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of comments before I continue with my questions for the minister. Again, getting back to, first of all, Bow Valley school, I certainly wasn't asking the department to put those services in, but after four years some type of mediation process has to occur in order for what has remained to be done. It would appear with what is taking place in that particular area that the parties involved who are responsible are not getting anywhere.

I think it's incumbent, whether it be Infrastructure, Municipal Affairs, whoever it may be, that maybe it might be a co-operative effort among ministries to rectify this problem, because four years to operate a school without running water is unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable. So I would certainly urge the minister to see what he can do in order to fulfill the role as mediator or see that somebody does to get this completed.

As well, when we are getting back to the Calgary courthouse, just a couple of comments there. I'm looking at an article in this magazine called *Open Mind*. The title of the article is Pursuing P3 Potential. In the last paragraph they talk about the three companies who were invited to participate in the request for proposal stage.

It took three months to receive the [request for proposal] submissions, which included detailed architectural designs as well as financial and operating proposals. The submissions were carefully assessed during a three-month period, between June and August 2003. In September, negotiations ensued with two teams in order to assess which would become the preferred proponent. In October, GCK was declared the preferred proponent and it has been negotiating ever since with the provincial government to reach financial close.

This to me almost seems backwards in the way we do business in that we got to this stage and we didn't have a commitment on finances. So when we get to that situation, then, certainly, I think we can continue to look at cost overruns or at least increases in prices. I don't know what the ministry has in its procedures which eliminates people who are bidding on a P3 project and lowballing their bids in order to get to this stage and then, once they are accepted, to have to incur the cost overruns, as we have seen in this particular situation.

I want to thank the minister, as well, for his explanations on the questions that I had presented to him in the first section of the debate. As my first set of questions was ending, I was asking the minister: can the minister explain how the billing back process works when departments book flights on government planes? How much has the Department of Infrastructure billed other departments for the use of the government aircraft?

As well, in 2003 there were 1,600 flights taken on government planes. Who was responsible for approving all those flights? What is their position in the ministry? Do other government departments play any role in approving flights, or is it all done through the Ministry of Infrastructure?

Does the Ministry of Infrastructure make the determination of what value there is in flying a government plane compared to commercial, or does the requesting department make that determination, or is the determination made at all?

On page 75 in the Alberta Infrastructure annual report 2002-2003 why were there authorized dedicated revenues of \$1.7 million but actual revenues were only \$887,000? Will the minister provide a detailed breakdown of where this \$887,000 in revenues for air transportation services came from in 2002-2003? As well, can the

minister tell us whether any of this \$887,000 in revenue was from individuals or corporations outside of government? In other words, was the total of \$887,000 all paid from other government departments, or was some of it from other outside sources?

As well, if the minister could please indicate to us in dollars how much the government aircraft are expected to depreciate over the next five years. I think that, particularly in one or two cases, the planes are getting to be fairly old. Are there any plans with the ministry to replace any of the aging aircraft?

On page 81 of Alberta Infrastructure's annual report there's a line item for revenue for air transportation. This line item is for \$1.991 million. In Executive Council's annual report for 2002-2003 there's also a corresponding line item for expenses incurred by others for air transportation. That number is also \$1.991 million. Can the minister explain this \$1.991 million? Is this for Executive Council flights? If the minister also could, please, tell us who pays for Executive Council flights. Also, is there a different process followed for Executive Council compared to other government departments in paying for their flights?

I would also like to take the opportunity, Mr. Chairman, to make some comments and ask some questions in regard to infrastructure debt. This is found on page 279 of the business plan. While the ministry has recognized the challenges facing its department with regard to growth and an aging infrastructure, it has not identified effective solutions that will not place Albertans' essential buildings and services at risk. Its capital plan addresses only a small number of priority needs, realized primarily on the risky funding scheme of public/private partnerships, or P3s. On page 279 P3s are identified as a reality here in Alberta. However, it remains very much an experiment, particularly when it comes to private companies building, maintaining, and operating normally public facilities.

The department itself states that it is "challenged with determining the merit of each proposal. Each partnership . . . requires extensive evaluation and expert analysis." We find this on page 279 of the business plan. This certainly is an interesting statement because it recognizes the challenge of assessing whether a P3 proposal brings value for money to taxpayers.

We believe that this is particularly true for essential public services, which have traditionally required the protection of the government to ensure that their integrity is upheld. Schools, hospitals, courthouses, and highways are crucial infrastructure that directly impact the quality of life in Alberta. These facilities require stringent quality controls to maintain and enhance services, accessibility, and accountability. In such cases the government is accountable to the taxpayer whereas the private sector is not.

3:40

This begs the question as to why the government has decided to pursue P3s for priority needs when this government has failed to produce any evidence that P3s are cost-effective for Albertans, when there are so many apparent downfalls to using a private/public partnership to build, maintain, and sometimes operate a traditionally public facility. So my question to the minister is: what studies has the Ministry of Infrastructure conducted or consulted to ensure that P3s could provide value for money here in Alberta? If the minister would please not only name the studies but, as well, table them here in the Assembly.

Could the minister please explain how P3s save taxpayers' money given that the Alberta government can finance public capital much cheaper than any private corporation?

As well, in the building of P3s, private corporations have to protect themselves against sudden cost increases, so certainly there is a level of protection that is built into their bids. I think the best

example we have today – and it's been mentioned many times in this House – is how you can't even get a price for steel which will be held to for much more than seven days as things currently exist in the world today. Certainly, I think one of the reasons that we have the situation that has arisen is the massive explosion of infrastructure projects in China that are galloping along at an unprecedented rate.

My next question to the minister: is he concerned that there is private control of public buildings and how there is going to be a reduction in the public's control of its own buildings and services? Certainly, when we look at, for example, if a P3 model were to be used to construct a hospital, such as the examples we've had in England, which were dismal failures by the way, what is this particular ministry going to do differently in order to make certain that we don't fall into the same pitfalls that England experienced in their P3 hospitals? I believe there was a P3 hospital in Surrey, British Columbia, that certainly fell victim to the lack of controls of the government in its operations. If the minister could expand on that, please.

How do P3s provide any savings for taxpayers when the private sector also builds a profit into the final cost and consultation and legal fees can reach phenomenal rates?

As well, along the same lines, if the minister could please provide us with the cost for consultation and legal fees that have presently occurred in the proposal for the Calgary courthouse.

Given the profit factor with regard to private companies involved in P3s, can this not result in lower overall quality on projects when firms try to maximize profit margins by cutting corners? I think of our example of the Hamptons school in Calgary, which was constructed with residential grade building materials and not commercial grade. Less than three years after its completion the school board was required to spend \$150,000 on upgrades and repairs because of a lower standard of building materials.

As well, I think the Calgary courthouse, again, is a prime example of how P3s can be plagued by cost overruns at taxpayers' expense when projects are poorly managed and contracts are poorly framed. How can the Alberta taxpayer be assured by the government that there is an effective and efficient way of evaluating costs to Alberta taxpayers?

The government has an advisory committee on alternative financing, and a number of these people on that committee are from the private sector, so certainly there has to be some type of evaluation used by the department to make certain that there isn't a bias in choosing a P3 over the traditional way of doing business. If the minister could please indicate how this decision is made as to whether there is a benefit to doing the project either through the traditional methods that we have followed in this province for many, many years or whether we choose the P3 model.

How do we know that where P3 projects do demonstrate savings, it is not due to staff cuts and layoffs, service cuts, new or augmented user fees, and lower quality of services?

I think that if we want to look at an example where I certainly get many questions from people, it's where we have moved to a private company for road maintenance and particularly on highway 2. We know that highway 2 is a much-used highway in this province, that the amount of traffic and the amount of heavier loads that travel that route have certainly increased over the last decade, yet there is great concern that the condition of the highway is not being maintained, that the condition of the highway has been compromised. So certainly with a P3 model there is great concern, as I indicated. There are a number of different things, whether they be staff cuts or service cuts or whatever, that people are very, very concerned with.

Again, when we look at P3s, by handing over essential public services to the private sector, the government will lose in-house

expertise, effectively diminishing its capacity to provide this service again. We thus become more vulnerable to private-sector interests or more dependent on P3 schemes.

I think that probably the great example we did have, not only in this province but world-wide, was when we had a tremendous downturn in the economy in the '80s, and everybody was downsizing. One of the strategies companies like GM and IBM used to combat this downturn was to lay off management. What both of those companies found was that they had lost their corporate knowledge when they did this, and both of the companies indicated that it probably took them in the neighbourhood of 10 years in order to get that corporate knowledge back. Because of the loss of that, there were great inefficiencies in those companies.

3:50

It is certainly one of those situations that we want to avoid, because I know that over the years in our departments here in the government of Alberta we've I think been blessed with civil servants who were extremely good in their particular areas, and I think that as we move more and more to a P3 model, as I indicated earlier, we do stand a risk of losing those experts from government.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, I could spend the rest of the afternoon on P3s, but I guess it probably would not resonate in the minds of the opposition, so I won't for the rest of the people that clearly understand them. [interjections] Oh, you want to hear more? Okay.

It's interesting to note, Mr. Chairman, that their kissin' cousins in Ottawa have done something that's kind of interesting. They've appointed Liberal MP John McKay as the Prime Minister's point man on P3s. He just recently made a comment about government operations and the need to bring the whole system into the 21st century. Mr. McKay went on to describe those opposing modernization – namely, public/private partnerships – the public-sector unions and the NDP, as being locked in a Marxist-Leninist dialogue of the 1960s: strong rhetoric from a government about to call an election. He then went on about the federal government's preferred method of private-sector involvement being through P3s, public/private partnerships. So that's what came out of the federal government.

It's also interesting to note that the new Liberal government in Ontario, when they were in opposition, of course denounced what the government was doing about setting up any kind of P3. They called it something different when they came into office, but they proceeded with the same process.

Then our friends over on the other side of the country in B.C., when a number of us met with a number of their cabinet ministers, were very anxious that we work together with their minister of public works in order to promote P3s, and this is coming from another Liberal government.

So I guess it's fair to say that some of them have seen the light; others don't.

The member talked about the process. Well, let me describe the process as far as the Calgary courthouse is concerned. The first thing we did is we called for an expression of interest, and there were some 125 individuals, groups that responded to that. From that, then, we put out a request for qualifications, and there were – I don't remember – nine or 10 that responded to that request. Out of those, we narrowed it down and determined that there were four firms that were qualified to enter the race as far as the request for proposal was concerned.

We got the request for proposals in, and there were three companies that responded to that. Then we broke the projects into seven different components. Seven different components. We had people assigned from the outside as well as people from the departments that looked at each one of those components. But, Mr. Chairman, it's really important to understand that the different proponents were not identified. They had A, B, and C. That's how the proponents were identified.

We had all these different groups. For example, the group that was looking at the design: that's all they looked at in the three projects. They scored each project, and we went on down the line. That clearly showed two that were better than the one, so the one was dropped. Then there were negotiations started with those other two. Out of that, finally one was chosen.

In this whole process we had appointed a very, very honourable and outstanding individual by the name of George Cornish, who was at one time the commissioner of the city of Calgary, a very outstanding individual, and he and a couple of other people were charged with making sure that this was fair, that it was open, and that everything was above-board. He came back with a report and said that it was squeaky clean, that there was nothing untoward about the whole process, and that everybody was treated fairly. As a matter of fact, it was interesting because we got comments back from people that didn't get into the last round, and they admitted that the process was fair and it was open, and they were not concerned about that.

The opposition continually talks about the increased price of the structure as we went along. The fact is that the cost per square metre did not go up from the choice of the – actually, after we had chosen the two to stay in the race, those prices did not change. There were a number of other things that changed that ended up boosting the price, but it was not the construction costs. Of course, as I explained earlier today, the number that the opposition keeps referring to, over half a billion dollars, is the net present value, which is not a cash outlay.

So I hope that we've got something a little clearer on that whole process. I'll get back into this P3 thing a little later on, but because he raised the Calgary courthouse – I'll just leave it at that at this time.

The billing that you referred to on the aircraft – I think you talked about the approval and who flies on the planes. The way the system works is that Infrastructure is responsible for the aircraft. When the Premier books a plane, his department books it, and we don't get involved except that the manifest comes over to us. If a member of Executive Council wants to use the aircraft, then it comes to us for our approval. If a department wants to use the aircraft, the deputy minister has to approve it. That's how the approval system works.

Internally, then, when it's a department that books, we charge back to the department. That's where the \$887,000 that you talked about for revenue came from, other departments paying us back.

The breakdown that you see, the \$1.99 million – I'm sorry; I didn't follow exactly where it is. That number rings a bell for me, and \$1.9 million was the cost last year for the aircraft for Executive Council. Okay? Executive Council. There are a number of other items in there, amortization and capital, bringing it up to the \$3.4 million. So there's about \$1.5 million left over that is departments, and the \$887,000, I believe, is the number from the other departments.

Who flies on the government planes? Well, we've got those guidelines, and I know that we gave them to – I guess it was maybe the press, but I thought you had a copy of those. First of all, all MLAs can fly on those aircraft. Certainly, the opposition has availed themselves of that, maybe not lately. You don't have any members outside of Edmonton, so you don't have the same reason. But when

you had an MLA in Calgary, he flew on those planes. When you had a member from Fort McMurray, he flew on the plane. So it's open to MLAs.

4:00

Who else can fly? Well, spouses can fly if there's room, only if there's room. If a spouse flies with a member to a function that they've been invited to and it turns out that on the way back there's another government member, then no, they can't fly back. We'll get you the whole detail on that, but that's basically the way it works.

You asked about the age of the aircraft, and you asked about depreciation over the next five years. Let's just get you that number. I don't know it off the top of my head. Airplanes depreciate very fast, and they kind of level off, and then they take another dip. I happen to know because I owned one. The age of the aircraft, the 200s: one is an '80; one is an '81 model. Then, of course, the 350 is a '97 model, and the Dash is somewhere in between there. I don't know the age right off of my head.

You asked about the replacement. Well, that's a tough one because, like I just finished telling you, the depreciation is rapid, levels off, then rapid. Unfortunately, we're getting to that rapid stage again. One of the things that happens when you get so many hours and so many years is you have to do what's called a vessel test. That means they've got to strip the whole plane down, pressurize it, and test the skin. Of course, metal testing goes on in the whole structure of the aircraft to make sure that there are no cracks or weak spots. So once you get to that level, that's fairly expensive, and it's costly to us because, of course, then we have to charter while the plane is down. We try to book it when it's not in, like, a firefighting season or that sort of thing, but it's not always that easy to do that.

Now, you talked at length once again about P3s. You were so worried about that horrible, horrible word "profit." Well, what do you think that a contractor that bids on a project – do you think he's doing it out of the goodness of his heart? No. How about the architect? Did they do it for the goodness of the heart? No. They've all got profit built in even if we are going to pay for it and we put out a bid. There's profit in all of those, and you have to have profit. People have to have profit. They can't operate if they don't have profit. So to be all bent out of shape about profit being in a P3 – well, yeah, sure there's profit. But there is if you do it in any other way too.

The profit that I think you pretend you're worried about is the profit on the money that they borrow. Well, not necessarily. You mentioned steel, which is a very good one. I was glad you mentioned that because the fact is, like with the courthouse, the prices go back to September, I think, before the steel went way up, and those prices are still holding. Well, guess what? That risk is all being transferred over to the private sector. If we were now putting out the tender, we would be faced with those increased prices.

So what's difficult to assess in these projects is: what is the value of off-loading risk? I've asked the Auditor General. I think we've discussed it in Public Accounts more than once. What is the value of off-loading risk? That's a tough one to quantify.

Also, another one that's tough to quantify is if you get a structure built, say, two years earlier than you would if you were waiting for government financing. What's that worth? Well, that depends on the structure. It depends on a whole number of things, and those have to come into the calculation when you're assessing: is this a good deal for Albertans?

You mentioned some of the projects that have gone sour. How would we do things differently? Well, I think I've described numerous times the process – and I won't go through it again – but the fact is that all of those safeguards are built in there, and at the

end of the day we've got to be able to show that it's good for Albertans.

The quality of the structure. That's easy to monitor. There are different classifications of materials and structures. You write that into the contract. Very simple. Of course, if you find that they're not living up to the contract – it's lovely when you ask for some equity in the contract. That would be one way of ensuring right up front that: okay, you put some cash on the table, and if there's a problem, we dip into the cash and we rectify it. There are just so many ways that we can make sure that we're getting the quality of structure that we demand and that it would be similar to what we would build ourselves.

I think you're not giving nearly enough credit to the private sector in their innovation and the ways that they can do things that maybe are something that we can't access. What I'm thinking of is larger companies, particularly. When you talk about this steel thing, don't you think that a lot of them had already contracted a lot of steel? You bet they had. A lot of them had because they know they're going to use a lot this summer. They contracted that way back last year. Can we access that when we go out to a bid? Not likely. But we could access it where we were into like a P3.

I really take exception to your comments about the outside committee, because on that committee we have outstanding individuals. They are leaders in their communities, they're very strong on the financial side, and they understand business. To say that they somehow would be biased, that some would be not capable – I'm not sure what areas you were describing, but let me tell you that we have total confidence in those people that are on that alternate finance committee. They're there only because of their outstanding abilities, so I really feel bad that you would take a run at them.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A couple of things. First and foremost, I want to thank the minister and his department for recognizing the need for a new facility in Onoway. The facility that is going to be replaced was built in 1921 for a cost of \$11,500. The Onoway community serves about a thousand students. So I'd like to thank you for recognizing the need in that community.

The second point that I wanted to raise – and I haven't heard it in the presentation that you made – is related to the federal building just down the street. What's the plan that your department has to dispose of or sell this building?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Chairman, it's kind of a perennial question that the member asks annually, and I want to thank him for that because we don't want to forget.

An Hon. Member: It keeps you on your toes.

Mr. Lund: Exactly. As one hon. member said, it keeps me on my toes, and that's good.

We are currently trying to assess all of our options and what we might be able to do with that building. It's a cost to us to maintain it and keep it, so I can assure the member that we haven't forgotten it, but it's difficult to really get something moving on it. I guess I can just advise him to stay tuned.

4:10

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I also want to thank the

minister for his introductory comments and thank the department staff who are present in the gallery and taking notes.

I want to just shift the focus for a moment slightly in the questions that I ask the minister. Minister, I was looking at the 2004-2007 fiscal plan, and under the Auditor General's Recommendations there's the Infrastructure department mentioned on pages 148 and 149. For the sake of convenience and for reference I draw your attention to it, recommendations 26 and 27, and the response of the government, the department, to the recommendations.

Let me first, for the benefit of the other members in the House, read the Auditor General's recommendations. Recommendation 26 deals with terms and conditions of construction grants, and the Auditor General's report says that

we recommend that the Ministry of Infrastructure communicate, and require grant recipients to formally accept, the terms and conditions of construction grants. The terms and conditions should include:

- an accountability framework, including roles and responsibilities
- the consequences of failing to adhere to the terms and conditions
- reporting requirements
- the Ministry's right to audit.

Then on the right-hand side column opposite that recommendation of the AG is the response of the department. It accepts the recommendation, but it's the language of the acceptance section that I have some questions about. To me the language is tentative, and I would like the minister to clarify therefore what's stated there. "The Ministry does have grant agreements in place for grant funding for lodges." It specifically refers to lodges here and then says, "The Ministry will look at implementing similar agreements for all grant programs for 2004-05." So I take it that with the exception of lodges such arrangements have not been in place in the past.

The ministry says that it will look at implementing rather than saying that it will implement. I wonder if the words are used deliberately, and if so, what's behind that deliberate use of the words just "look at" rather than making a commitment to implement and if there are reservations what those reservations are. I'd appreciate knowing.

Then in the next sentence the statement says, "The Ministry will also look towards harmonizing its reporting requirements across all programs, recognizing that varying levels of reporting currently exist." So that's, I think, fine.

Mr. Lund: What page are you on?

Dr. Pannu: Page 148 in the capital plan 2004-2007, the smaller booklet of the three related to the budget. I'll certainly be happy to wait for a minute if we can locate it for you. The Deputy Premier has it? Yeah, that's the one. It's page 148 when you get him a copy.

The Deputy Chair: You may proceed, hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: I'll just give another few seconds to the minister.

Mr. Lund: Okay.

Dr. Pannu: Well, Mr. Minister, I find it amusing that you and I are on the same page for a change.

It's the right-hand side, the response of the ministry and the department. The tentativeness of the language is what I'm asking you to comment on. The second sentence in the response is that "the Ministry will look at implementing similar agreements" rather than saying: will implement those recommendations. Then later on in the latter part, the last sentence related to recommendation 26, is that

"management will consider implementing an audit requirement for major projects where this requirement does not already exist." There's a difference between considering and doing. Again, is there some problem that's in fact anticipated in making a commitment that it will happen? So clarification, primarily.

Let me go to the next recommendation as well, 27. Again I'll read into the record the recommendation itself. This deals with the monitoring of construction grants. The Auditor General's report says:

We recommend that the Ministry of Infrastructure strengthen its monitoring processes for construction grants.

We also recommend that the Ministry make all construction grant payments through the Consolidated Cash Investment Trust Fund (CCITF) bank account.

The response from the ministry, again reading just the last sentence, is: "The ministry is also currently assessing the use of CCITF accounts."

My questions. At what stage is the assessment process with respect to the recommended use of that particular account? Is the ministry proceeding with using that fund as recommended by the minister?

I would prefer if we go back and forth this way with a small set of questions and then answers.

Mr. Lund: Just because we say that we're looking at it doesn't mean that we're not doing it. The fact is that we believe in working with the Auditor General to make sure that whatever we do meets with what the Auditor General feels is required.

You have to also appreciate that there's another partner in this. In number 26 it was primarily talking about the lodges and how they were handled. So we are working with the Auditor General, and just because we don't say that we're doing it – we're not exactly sure. Maybe there's a better way of accomplishing the same thing. That's all that means.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to rise to ask a few questions.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Chairman, we had an agreement to go back and forth.

The Deputy Chair: Okay. Did you want to just go back and forth for maybe five minutes or so? Is that okay?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

4:20

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now, the minister has spoken a fair bit on P3s as one of the central pillars, it seems, of the policy of the government. My specific questions. It has come to my notice that a P3 route is recommended by the government to various SIOs, supported infrastructure organizations. That's the term that is used, I guess, in the documents.

The west Lethbridge school construction case is an interesting one. There appears to be pressure coming from the government for the school board to proceed with a P3 route for the construction of that while there is broad-based opposition in the community of Lethbridge. The minister, I'm sure, is familiar with that. That raises the larger general question of: is there more or less a mandatory set of requirements now, or near mandatory, for all SIOs to do a certain percentage if not all of their new projects to the P3 model? If there is a mandatory requirement or at least a strong expectation from the Infrastructure department or from the side of the government?

My next question is: does the government use funding decisions

as leverage to make sure that the party, the SIO, involved on the other side says yes to the P3 route, even though there may be opposition either on the board or, certainly, in the wider community that the board represents, such as the school board in this case in west Lethbridge? So that's one question. Maybe I should ask a couple others too.

My next question is on P3 evaluations. When the proposals are evaluated and then one proceeds with them, are there specific policies which guarantee a certain margin of profit to investors? I'm not at all worried about whether profit is a dirty word. That's not the question. The question is: does the government oblige itself, does the government commit Alberta taxpayers to a certain minimum return on the investment? If that is the case, what is that? You know, these things are not public. People don't have access to that information, and there are concerns all around. Why go that route if it's going to cost more?

One of the questions that's always asked is that a private investor would expect a certain return on the investment which is market based, I guess. Investment project A expects to get 16 per cent. If they then decide to go to project B, which is a P3, would they not expect at least the same kind of return? My question to you is not about what the rate of profit is that's built into the decision-making from the Infrastructure side. First of all, is there a policy of guaranteeing a certain minimum profit rate, and if that is so, then what is it? If it's not there, then what's in the P3 route for a private investor to come along and invest in this and accept some of the conditions and limitations that a P3 project would entail for the private investor?

So perhaps we can get some answers to those two questions.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To say that there's a percentage that we're going to demand be built with P3s: no; not at all. We never ever indicated that that would be the case. Each one will be assessed on its own merit as it comes along, because it's got the process that it's got to go through internally, and then the outside committee will have to evaluate it. It has to show that there's a benefit to the Alberta taxpayer to go that route.

I think that there's a great misunderstanding about P3s. The west Lethbridge is going to be a P3 because the city has said that they're going to put a library with those two schools. So that's a P3. Okay? The city is going to finance their own. We might be financing the schools. What I have said to the schools is that there are investors that are interested in being a part of this whole thing, so don't discard them. Maybe that's part of the process, that there be outside financing. That might be part of the process. But remember that it's a P3 because the city is there.

Another prime example: in Drayton Valley there's going to be a public and a Catholic school, and the town is putting a facility in the middle. That's a P3. We may very well be financing; we don't know. We're telling the school boards to go ahead and look at the options. We're not saying that that has to happen, but in the case of Drayton Valley they're working very hard to make it happen.

It just dawned on me that maybe where you're getting really hung up is the difference between equity and financing. Equity: if a contractor or someone is putting money into a project, yes, they expect to have a rate of return, no question. But remember that when equity is put in there, that's also an area that we can access if, in fact, there's some kind of default. It also works as a contingency in the whole project, because any time that we build a project, we have to have a contingency. Well, over in the private sector it's called equity.

Now, the other, financing. They go out and they buy a bond. So

we have access to that money through the proponent of the project. That's how it works. As far as making a profit on that money they borrow, no, that's not what it's about. That's what it will cost us to repay the bond, whatever that interest rate is. Yeah, somebody's making money on the interest rate, but that's no different than if we invested.

One of the things that we need to do is get our head around: what is money worth? I would be very interested to go back now and look at the heritage trust fund. Go back 10 years and look at the rate of return on those dollars, even though we had a disaster in 2002. I suspect that you will find that the rate of return on those dollars was even greater than the 5.5 or 5.4 per cent that you can currently buy a 30-year bond for. I suspect it's more than that, that we made more.

So, really, does it make sense that we then would take money that could go into the heritage trust fund or take money out of the heritage trust fund to pay for a structure when, in fact, you can go to the marketplace and get the money cheaper? You know, I think we've got to really look at those kinds of things when we're talking about this financing. If you doubt my word about what it costs for bonds, you can go to the marketplace today and find out what it costs for a 30-year bond. It's around that 5.5 per cent. Check and see what the heritage trust fund made. I suspect it made more.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to ask a few questions of the minister as well. He's certainly taken quite a few of them today, so he can get back to me later if he's not able to answer all of them.

My first question. I guess I'm kind of wondering about – and the minister and people may recall – the School Construction and Operating Costs Committee that the minister put together. I was very pleased to be on that as the chair along with my colleagues the members for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne and Edmonton-Meadowlark, and the Member for Calgary-Shaw also helped out quite a bit on that committee. We did quite a bit of work and analysis on that committee some years ago and submitted our report a couple of years ago to the minister.

There were a number of recommendations in that report that I'm curious about. I guess the main one was that we sort of identified savings of potentially up to 25 per cent on costs of building new public schools, obviously something very desirable. At the time, and with the new century school program, we were quite excited with the notion that we might be able to save \$250 million on new schools. Of course, I'm aware that the minister does not actually build the new schools. We don't build them; it's up to local school boards whether or not to actually build the schools. I know that the minister was very, very supportive of that report and its recommendations and asked his staff to send it to the school symposium and incorporate the results into the school symposium.

4:30

I have not really heard anything back from that report ever since. I haven't seen recommendations moving forward, and the results of the school symposium which I read made no reference whatsoever to any of the recommendations that we sort of came up with.

So I'm wondering if the staff in the minister's department perhaps had some issues or problems with that report that found it too difficult to implement. I'm wondering if the minister could perhaps give our committee some advice or recommendations on how we might move some of the recommendations in that report forward. If the problem is getting local school boards to actually act and implement some of those potential recommendations, perhaps we can do some more work on that.

The second question I'm wondering about, of course – in that report we did talk about partnerships with developers, particularly in new subdivisions, to get new schools built in new subdivisions and how that might be envisioned. Of course, when we talk about public/private partnerships, in my mind at least, from my studies on the issue the most beneficial area to look at in terms of potential partnerships was in fact with developers building new schools in new subdivisions.

I mean, there are many, many partnerships proposed within and without government. Of every hundred that are proposed, probably only five or 10 may ultimately ever be put together. But, ultimately, they work when each partner is able to bring something to the table that the other partner cannot bring or has no ability to bring. In other words, there's added value from each partner in the proposal.

Certainly, in a new subdivision where a developer finds that the people buying his houses are anxious to see a school in the subdivision and are willing to pay more for the houses in that subdivision if there were a school, clearly the developer is in a position to bring cash, money to the table that the government has no ability to collect otherwise. That's what makes that type of partnership so potentially beneficial to study in terms of a public/private partnership that would really work on behalf of everybody. That was one of the things that we explored.

I know that in Calgary it met resistance from the schools boards. They hadn't really been in favour of looking at this proposal in the past. They were quite resistant to it. But I did notice that as more and more discussion came out publicly about this kind of approach, they seemed to be slightly warming to the idea at least, and they did come forward with a number of sort of obstacles they'd identified in terms of legislation and shared responsibilities between our department and their department, et cetera, that seemed to be creating some obstacles.

I'm wondering if the minister could maybe speak to that, whether there's been any movement or updating. Have we cleared all the obstacles away such that local school boards could in fact enter into partnerships with developers in new subdivisions, you know, legislatively? I understand that there are still political issues and other friction, but I just wanted to see if the minister knows that we've cleared the legal hurdles to allow it.

The third question I'm kind of wondering if the minister could speak to is the use of old schools and schools that have been closed down or ordered as surplus by local school boards where there have been expressions of interest by alternative organizations, charter schools, other organizations. It appears that there's considerable resistance to local school boards actually allowing that. They tend to perceive them as competitors.

I guess my perspective is that those are public assets, public property, and not to be used, I think, in a negative competitive manner by public school boards that are just trying to prevent the use of these public assets in a manner that would be much more beneficial to our children. So, you know, I'm a little concerned about some of the directions I've seen there.

The final question I'm wondering about – I've been asked, because of the publicity around airplane flights and so on, how much money I am spending, et cetera, or costing the taxpayers, and I've sort of looked at it and said: well, if not one single MLA flew at all in a given year, clearly we'd still have to pay for the plane, the hangar, the pilots, all the rest of it. So there's an operating and a fixed cost on this. I'm curious what the fixed cost component of any particular flight might be. In other words, if only one person flew one flight in a whole year, what would the cost of that flight be? You know, if one person flies on a plane, it costs X number of dollars, but if 20 people fly on the same plane, it seems to me that

the other 19 are flying for free. There is no incremental additional cost.

I'm wondering if the minister has done any breakdown or thought about, you know, breaking down the incremental, the marginal additional costs of more people flying or less people flying and the fact that I don't think it really costs the taxpayers much, if anything, to have more people flying than less if, in fact, most of the costs are really just the fixed costs of keeping an airplane fleet in the first place.

I'm wondering if the minister could maybe speak to those four questions if possible.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you. The hon. member and his committee did very good work. Actually, we fed the report and the recommendations into the school symposium, and then out of the school symposium we had four subcommittees that worked on all of the recommendations that came out of the symposium. I have to admit that I couldn't go back and identify a recommendation that came out of the symposium that came directly out of the hon. member's committee's work. We'll commit to having another look and see if we can't find some of that.

You talked about the new schools in new subdivisions, and we're on the same wavelength. As a matter of fact, when we first talked about P3s, when I met with the developers, I suggested that this would be the ultimate P3 if we could get it accomplished.

Some of the problems we've run into – and you alluded to some of it with the school boards. They're really, really concerned about so-called queue jumping. I don't agree with them. I try to point out to them that, really, what that means is that if you could get a school built by a developer in a subdivision that doesn't cost us money, we could do something over here that actually speeds up in a different area to accomplish their priority list.

That was one bit of the problem, and it still is there. Although credit to the Calgary public board, of course they've gone out now and seem to have embraced the P3 concept. So I'd be very, very anxious if we could get one working.

One of the other difficulties – and the developers raised this right away. The urban municipalities seem to still insist on taking the 10 per cent. That's what the act says that they can do, and that's what they want. I have talked to them and suggested that, well, really, all we need to do is take out the footprint of the school so that you can allow that for another use down the way. If you're going to build, say, a K to 4 school, 25 years out you probably aren't going to have enough people to fill it, so then you convert it to another use.

Unfortunately, we're having some difficulty with getting that kind of agreement. They want to have that 10 per cent either be designated as recreational or school and owned by the city. They don't want to have this part that would be left out of the 10 per cent owned by the developer. Of course, then that would mean that it could be redesignated as something else other than school or recreation or park, those designations.

We haven't got by that hurdle, and that's a problem. The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs and I have had numerous discussions about this and how we might try to move that agenda forward.

4:40

The closed schools are a tough one for us because we do not own the school. While I don't like doing it, I've on two occasions basically directed that certain things would happen with a closed school. It's something we don't like doing, because we like to work

with our partners as opposed to enforcing things, but hopefully we'll get a better understanding. I don't disagree with you that it's public money. I think that we need to look at the best use for that facility and forget about who owns it or who happens to have the say on it.

I'll have to get back to you with those numbers as far as the breakdown of the fixed cost. We've got those numbers, and I just didn't have a chance to go through this enough to pick them out for you right off the bat. But we'll get them for you.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Very pleased to be able to have the opportunity to ask a few questions on this afternoon's estimate debates. First of all, Mr. Minister, I'll ask you about the Jubilee renovations both in Calgary and Edmonton. We understand that there have been a number of cost overruns there and that originally, as I understand it, your share of the contribution was \$32.8 million. It looks like now the project on the provincial side is going to cost \$50 million. So that's a 53 per cent increase between the two Jubilees.

We'd like you to tell us why such a high cost overrun and why those overruns are still occurring and what you're doing to sign off on any of the contracts to try and minimize the costs involved there?

Mr. Bonner: Will they be completed on time?

Ms Carlson: Yes. Will they be completed on time? So if you could answer that too.

That ties into my next line of questioning, which is on the Auditor General's report. The recommendation that we saw from the Auditor General was that "the Ministry should strengthen its processes for managing construction grants." This directly relates to what has happened with the Jubilee. So if you could comment on what steps you've taken to strengthen that process and how many more cost overrun surprises we may be seeing in the next year.

My colleague from Edmonton-Strathcona talked about recommendation 26, where the recommendation was that the ministry "communicate, and require grant recipients to formally accept, the terms and conditions of construction grants," and it included a list of what that should include. The part that my colleague didn't talk about that is of concern to us is whether or not you've established an accountability framework for regional health authority grant recipients, tying it into this particular recommendation? Are you going to specify consequences for noncompliance? Do your approval processes now contain compliance reporting and auditing requirements?

We're looking for you to be able to fully evaluate whether or not you're receiving value on the capital projects, and that would be a worthwhile exercise to make public so that the people of the province can see that too. Do you make those evaluations consistently, and if so, will you make them public?

Recommendation 27 in the Auditor General's report is recommending that the "Ministry of Infrastructure strengthen its monitoring processes for construction grants." Have you standardized the accountability and involvement for every type of capital project, and can you demonstrate value for money on fast-tracked capital projects? What kind of criteria have you developed to determine whether or not a project should be fast-tracked? Is there a ceiling on cost overruns in that particular case?

Are you documenting the review of the grants that you give? Can you tell us how the ministry is ensuring that its approval is sought for every contract greater than \$100,000? Does the ministry make

all construction grant payments through the consolidated cash investment trust fund bank account to protect the grant from any losses?

Another recommendation that we saw in the report was that "the Ministry of Infrastructure implement a process to ensure that contracts with construction managers protect the Ministry's interests as a funder and are cost-effective." If you can give us an update on what you've done to comply with that recommendation. Particularly, I'm interested in whether or not you have a framework for contract management and accountability now built in where risks, roles, and responsibilities are laid out and any contract revisions are in writing and signed off by both parties.

Recommendation 28 was also to do with the Ministry of Infrastructure, and it recommended that "the Ministry of Infrastructure, working with other ministries, improve the security of government buildings and the safety of people who use them" and then listed a series of things that they would like to see enacted such as identifying resources and implementing increased levels of security on buildings determined at risk, monitoring compliance, stuff like that. So if you can tell us what you've done to establish minimum security standards for all of the buildings and communicate with those in the buildings – are you doing a risk assessment on those buildings? – and any other information you have with regard to that, it would be helpful for us. I know that you must be working in conjunction with other ministries on this, and if you can tell us what your role and responsibilities are and essentially what their responsibilities are, that would be helpful.

Of course, I couldn't end my line of questioning without asking an environmental question, so if you could just update us on what you're doing to green up the buildings. I know that you have some projects underway to make sure that buildings are retrofitted, and if you can give us an update on what's happening there.

My last question has to do with the building just north of here on 107th Street and I believe it's 99th Avenue. I think it was called the federal building at one time. If you could give us an update on what's happening there. I understand that it's still vacant. Are there any plans for you to sell it or retrofit it or whatever you might be planning?

Those are my questions. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm not sure where you're getting the information on the Jubilee auditoria, that there have been consistent overruns, because that's not the case. What happened is we did an estimate and then went out for tender, and the tenders came back, and they were 47 per cent or something like that over what we estimated. So, of course, right away that raised a whole bunch of questions. How on earth could it be that far over?

You don't modernize or renovate facilities like the Jubilee auditoria every day, so we underestimated the cost of a lot of what was going to go on there. You must recognize that to get the proper acoustics in a building like that, there are only a few people in Canada that are contractors that are capable of doing it. Those curtains, for example, are hung at an angle. They've got to have the right angle; they've got to have the right tension; they've got to be the right material. That's just one example. The lighting gets to be extremely expensive. For the seating the plan was to redo the whole interior and take out all of those seats and put in new ones. We were short on that. The list of areas goes on, but it was not that it was a creeping increase. It's just that when we put out the tenders, yes, there was a big increase.

We're going ahead with the project. We're going to find the funds

to do it because we committed to the project some time back. Before we put out the tender, we had committed. The reason that we had to commit quite a while ago to doing it was because, as you know, there are a number of organizations that have programs that operate in those facilities, and they're booked years ahead. They had to go and find alternate venues at a big cost, so for us not to go ahead would have put many of them in a very difficult position. Quite frankly, those buildings have been there and served us well for a number of years, so it's time, and no better time than when we're coming to our centennial, to upgrade them. So we will be going ahead with that.

4:50

You asked a lot of questions about the Auditor General, and rather than trying to go through them all – you were asking them as fast as you could read them, and I couldn't write that fast – what we'll do is get the answers back to you in writing.

You talked about what we are doing to green up. Well, when you get to Ottawa, you can tell them how the Alberta government was the one that went out and got contracts for green power so that 90 per cent of our power, starting in 2005, will be green. Incidentally, we didn't have to pay an exorbitant price for it as well. So that's one thing we're doing.

The retrofit program that you referred to is still ongoing, and as you know, this building last year completed the retrofit. I don't have the number of projects that we've completed right in front of me, but we'll get them to you. It's been a very good program and has accomplished a lot.

I commented on the federal building earlier. Now, I'd like you to tell me: do you want us to sell it? What do you want us to do with it? We'd love your input.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of questions for the minister. The procedures surrounding building of schools is of some interest to me and, definitely, my constituents. As the minister may appreciate, many individuals make decisions on where to purchase property or where to move based on an assumption that a school will be built in a given neighbourhood. Using a case in point of Edmonton-Castle Downs, residents have been moving into that particular neighbourhood for some 20 years now under the assumption that a high school will be built in Edmonton-Castle Downs at one point or another. Well, two decades of development have passed by and not a sign of a high school at this point.

I know that the minister has been meeting with the school boards and is in continuous contact with the school boards. I'm wondering: what is the procedure? How are the decisions made on where and when we're building schools? How does the minister's office interact with school boards on the issue of making decisions where and when schools are built? How do we deal with constituents who have made decisions on where to purchase properties and where to raise their children relative to a school being built? How do we interact with those requests?

Thank you.

Mr. Lund: I want to thank the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. Yes, we have been meeting with the boards of education in the city of Edmonton. The whole process as far as when a school is going to be built: first of all, the boards of education every year give us their three- and five-year capital plans. Of course, we require that

they prioritize their list. Then we take that information, internally go through all of the projects, and scale them according to a very rigorous criterion, and they come out with a number. Then, of course, that gives us the ability to prioritize them on a provincial basis. So we come down as far as the money will work and build and approve those projects.

I meant to mention this earlier and just now thought of it again. I think it was the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry that had asked about the preservation issue. I've asked the staff to do an inventory of all of the preservation projects and what it would cost us to not only just do the preservation – in both Calgary and Edmonton we've got quite a few schools that are very low utilization – but what it would cost us to in five years do the modernization and rightsize these schools. So we get our utilization up; we get our operating costs down.

I raise that now because that kind of fits into one of the problems like the Edmonton public board has as it relates to another high school in Castle Downs. In the north part of the city they've got Queen Elizabeth that's running. Even though they closed off half of it, I believe it's still only in around 60-some per cent. Then they've got M.E. LaZerte, that is running well above the hundred per cent, and these two schools are not that far apart. Then in the south sector of the city they've got huge demand down in the southwest, and the schools down in that area are very full. So it's a difficult situation that they've got. They recognize the need for a high school in that very north part of the city in the Castle Downs area. They recognize that, but we'll have to work our way through it.

The Catholic separate board, too, has a situation where their utilization is still below the 85 per cent that we're asking for, and of course they'll be opening their new high school over in the western part of the city very shortly. As a matter of fact, I believe it's next fall that it starts taking students.

What is going on now is that the Edmonton Catholic separate board is very close to needing another school in the north part of the city. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be surprised, when we see their three-year plan come back, that they may very well have that as number 1 or 2.

We also know that the Capital health authority is interested in doing something over in that area, and to me this picture is starting to really look very attractive. If you could have a separate and a public and a health facility in the middle, it would really go a long way to accomplishing a number of things, including the cross-ministry initiative that we're going to be pushing even harder for the benefit of students: Children's Services, because we need to have the health facility or health component, mental health and other health. We need to have the Solicitor General's department be involved, the Attorney General's department, and then of course the educational component on either side of it. So that's where we're at as far as the situation in the north part of the city.

I know that the hon. member, while he didn't mention it right now, was asking me the other day about funding for private schools. Well, we do not fund the capital or operating and maintenance of private schools. They get some Learning funding – I believe it's 60 per cent of the instructional – but we don't have a part of that.

5:00

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, and then I'll recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Just a few more questions. The federal building just north of the Annex was mentioned earlier. It would be very expensive to clear the asbestos out of that building, and it certainly has very, very old mechanical

systems in it for air circulation and heating and whatever. Could the minister please tell us if he's had any proposals at all for perhaps even a P3 project where people would come in and renovate the building and the province would lease that space back from those particular people or enter into the P3 in some type of arrangement whereby that office space could be used by government?

When I'm looking at the annual report for Infrastructure, I see that we are currently leasing 290 buildings and roughly 5.5 million square feet of facility space. So if there were a P3 in that particular situation, would it be possible for the cost savings – I think we pay somewhere in the neighbourhood of a million dollars a year right now just to maintain that building and pay the heating and costs. Those are certainly costs that could be saved by the government owning the building. We could be saving dollars in the cost of leased facilities that we now use in the 290 buildings.

Has there been an analysis done as to whether this type of arrangement could possibly work so that we could make that building operational again? I do realize that it would be a very expensive process, but in the end would it be beneficial to us to enter into this type of agreement?

As well, along the lines of government-owned properties, we have over 1,900 buildings that are owned. Could the minister please indicate: what is the value of those assets to the citizens of Alberta?

Another question that came up when I was talking to people – I was looking as well in *KeyNotes*. It's a publication put out by the Edmonton public school board. In here it goes on to say:

"We respect and recognize that Calgary has a need for new schools," explains Board Chairman Svend Hansen. "But our students need and deserve new schools as well, particularly in emerging neighborhoods. Frankly, we were surprised by this decision."

Of course, the decision that they're referring to is the dollars that Calgary received for seven new schools and that Edmonton public did not receive any monies for new schools in this current budget.

I think we all recognize what a leader Edmonton public is in education, that they've done, I think, a very good job at trying to become efficient. They certainly realize the strain it puts on their transportation costs when they have to bus students from the suburbs to existing schools rather than building new schools in communities as the city expands.

They receive a tremendous amount of calls regarding: "Why aren't there schools in this new area? When we moved in, there were provisions and land set aside for new schools. We were assured that these new schools would be built, and now we've been here a number of years and still no schools." Certainly, it is a huge problem.

I know that they are trying to the best of their ability to make efficient use of the existing schools. They also see the disruption it causes families and communities when they have to bus students out of the community. They also view schools in their communities as community centres, and they're used for many different purposes. They have gone into the whole idea of sharing resources, of looking at clusters. They've been very creative.

Getting back to the quote from *KeyNotes: Partners in Education*, how is it that Edmonton public, for one example, received nothing in the year, yet Calgary received funding for seven new schools. Certainly, what they look at is reliable, sustainable, consistent funding so that they can have their business plans and complete their business plans as well.

I do have a few questions on performance measures for core businesses, and I'm referring to core business 1 on page 281. Only 64 per cent of health facilities are targeted to be in good condition from 2004 through to 2005. Why is this ministry not targeting an increase for that particular measure?

As well, those schools that are in good condition are targeted to decrease in 2006-2007. Why is the percentage of schools in good condition so low, at only 51 and 55 per cent, and why the decrease in 2006?

Performance measures for postsecondary institutions are the most disturbing of all. In 2004-2005 only 39 per cent that were built before 1988 and 45 per cent of all facilities are targeted to be in good condition, and those institutions built before 1988 which are slated as being in good condition are targeted to decrease through to 2007. Page 283 is where I got those figures.

My first question is: why are those percentages so low? Why haven't postsecondary institutions been prioritized given their sorry state? Why are those institutions built before 1988 which are slated as being in good condition targeted to decrease through to 2007? As well, why isn't the percentage of all facilities in good condition targeted to increase through to 2007?

As well, when we are speaking about facilities, why are government-owned and -operated facilities that are rated as being in good condition targeted to decrease through to 2007 to a low of 42 per cent. Again, why are the utilization and functional adequacy performance measures for all these facilities targeted to decrease in 2004-2005 and then remain constant through to 2007? Those figures are from page 284.

When we look at energy consumption, why is the energy consumption in government-owned and -operated facilities targeted to remain the same from 2004 through 2006? Is there no way that we can look at making these facilities more energy efficient? As well, why does the ministry not rate the cost-effectiveness of the air transportation services it provides through performance measures along with the ones that we find on page 286?

Finally, Mr. Chairman, to the minister: why are the performance measures for the client satisfaction survey on service delivery not targeted to increase through to 2007? I got this information from page 287.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to thank the minister and his department certainly for providing us with the information on these many questions today, and I look forward to his answers.

Thank you.

5:10

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The federal building doesn't cost us a million dollars. Probably less than half of that a year is what it costs us to keep that building. We don't know for sure exactly how much asbestos is in that building, but we do know that the cost of renovating would be very substantial.

Have there been proposals? We've never called for any proposals. There have been some come to me unsolicited, and quite frankly they were so costly that we couldn't even consider them.

For anybody who thinks that we're just hung up on P3s, that they're going to work in every situation, there's an example that we didn't even take forward because I don't think they would have passed the test quite frankly. We don't have a need for that building at this point. You know, it's easy to justify it when there's a need for something, but when you don't really have the need for it, it's tougher to spend the money on it.

I didn't keep my notes well enough here, but I do know that you were talking about the decrease in good condition to fair condition. We look at our three-year business plan, and we look at the numbers that we have in our budget, and this is the result. This is what's going to happen. We're being very honest, straightforward. Because of the age of the buildings we know that if we don't spend more money, this is the result. We're being very honest that that will be the result unless we spend more money on them.

As far as the efficiency is concerned, you have to remember that as old buildings deteriorate, the cost goes up. So when you don't see a decrease in the cost of operating those buildings, that's directly related to the age and the condition of the building. You know that from your own experience in operating your house, and these buildings are no different. I really commend the department for being very honest and straightforward, and that's why I signed off on this. This is the result unless we spend more money on preservation.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Infrastructure, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the question. After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Infrastructure for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Operating Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$1,537,000,000
Capital Investment	\$73,489,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Infrastructure and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, '05, for the following department.

Infrastructure: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,537,000,000; capital investment, \$73,489,000.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 31

Highways Development and Protection Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to move second reading of Bill 31, the Highways Development and Protection Act.

This act will consolidate and modernize the existing Public Highways Development Act and the City Transportation Act and provide a single legislative framework for the planning, development, and protection of the provincial highway network.

Alberta highways are vital to our economy. They are key to the safe and efficient shipping and receiving of goods, and they also connect to all other modes of transportation: air, marine, and land.

Why is this act needed? The current legislation which governs highways, the Public Highways Development Act and the City Transportation Act, date back to the 1970s and have not been reviewed or updated in a long time. Many things have changed since these acts were established. Our population has almost doubled and has put enormous pressure on provincial highways. With greater population growth comes the need to manage development near highways as well as to manage access to the highway.

This act is also needed to address the fact that the province now has jurisdiction and control over the former secondary highways, so the transfer of these highways from municipal to provincial jurisdiction will be included in this act. It's also taking over the responsibility for key route highways through cities such as Deerfoot in Calgary and Anthony Henday in Edmonton.

Another reason, of course, is to clarify and consolidate legislation which pertains to highways and development adjacent to highways. Clarification is needed for municipalities, developers, and others about which legislation to use under which circumstance for road closure or access removals on highways. This act will define which act governs each particular situation.

As well, because of population growth and motor carrier industry demands we needed a higher classification of highway, roads called freeways, which are similar to the U.S. interstate system. These are high-speed and high-volume routes which are the only way on and off the freeway via interchanges. We have to protect these freeways. The routes, of course, are more efficient for long-distance travel because we can travel at a steady speed without having to stop for traffic lights. But, of course, we need the space to build all the accompanying interchanges, and the new legislation will protect what property owners or utility companies may do on land located 115 metres from the centre of the highway.

Alberta Transportation knows the importance of planning for highway development. One example is the extreme cost of buying out an established business or a home to make way for a road or interchange, and that is why we are moving to freeway classification. Those will be highway 1 from one end of the province to the other, highway 2 from Fort Macleod to Edmonton, and highway 4 from Coutts to Lethbridge, and highways 43 and 16. We want to make these routes free flow in the future, and we need legislation to preserve and protect the provincial highway network.

5:20

I'd like to say that we have consulted with urban and rural municipalities, utility companies, land development and real estate associations, home builder associations, and short-line railways. There was an advisory committee set up between AAMD and C, AUMA, and Alberta Municipal Affairs. We certainly raised and discussed many issues, and these issues were taken back to their memberships and brought back for discussion. Their input was extremely valuable and helped shape the legislation that you have before you.

As I mentioned before, the act will provide clarity and consistency in the legislation governing the administration and protection of

provincial highways, establish a new classification of highways called freeway, and there is one situation, Mr. Speaker, and that is that for noncompliance there will be an increase in fines if someone builds something on the highway/freeway.

As well, closure of a highway. At the moment a highway can only be temporarily closed to accommodate construction and maintenance. With us taking over the jurisdiction of many of the secondary highways – many of these secondary highways run through small municipalities and, as a result, to close them for a parade or perhaps some other event like a 10-kilometre run, et cetera, we need special permission, and they're not addressed in current legislation.

With that, Mr. Speaker, other than designating and clarifying highways in cities, which will have to be done through agreement with the city and the department, I'm sure that there will be numerous questions coming forward as this legislation proceeds, but it is

timely, and again our goal in Alberta Transportation is to consolidate as many of the acts as necessary and bring them up to date.

Thank you.

I also move to adjourn debate on this bill.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that we adjourn until 8 this evening, at which time we reconvene in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:22 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 5, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 04/05/05

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: Good evening. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order. Again, we'll observe the usual, only one person talking at a time.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Executive Council

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or ideas to be offered with respect to this? The hon. Premier.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, thank you so very much. Hon. members, I'm pleased to appear before this committee to discuss the 2004-2007 Executive Council business plan and, of course, the estimates for the fiscal year.

Programs under Executive Council include the office of the Premier and Executive Council, which includes all of cabinet, of course; the office of the chief internal auditor; and the Public Affairs Bureau.

Before I make any mention of the chief internal auditor, I would like to note that after I mentioned today that we had a chief internal auditor in the office of Executive Council, a media member finally phoned him to find out what was going on.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to provide a brief fiscal overview for 2004-2005, and then I'll offer some details on upcoming initiatives. Executive Council's spending for 2004-2005 is forecast at \$24.4 million. Now, that compares to \$20.8 million in 2003-2004, but the increase of roughly \$3.6 million can be attributed to three items. The first, of course, is the creation of the office of the chief internal auditor, which, by the way, is the only office of its kind, I understand, in Canada. That office accounts for approximately \$2.5 million of the increase. The second is \$535,000 to cover a 3.5 per cent increase in salaries. The third is \$450,000 for the Queen's Printer to produce updated occupational health and safety materials, but we anticipate that sales will offset the increase, making it a cost-neutral item.

Turning now to staffing. There will be an increase of 20 FTEs, full-time employees, for the chief internal auditor's office, and this will bring the total FTEs for Executive Council to 231. That's up from 211 last year.

Now, Mr. Chairman, I would like to offer an overview of Executive Council's program areas and overarching goals for the coming year. Programs under Executive Council include secretarial support to cabinet and, of course, to all the cabinet committees, the standing policy committees. It includes, also, my offices here in the Legislature and in McDougall Centre in Calgary. It includes the protocol office, which will be extremely important next year especially with the visit of Her Majesty the Queen. It includes also administrative support for the office of the Lieutenant Governor and the Alberta Order of Excellence Council and the deputy minister's office, which includes support for policy co-ordination and business and strategic long-term planning for the government as a whole.

A key activity for Executive Council staff has been the co-ordination of a long-term, 20-year strategic plan for Alberta – in other words, Mr. Chairman, the big picture, not a \$27.50 jug of orange juice, not an \$800 expense, but the big picture – the 20-year

strategic plan, the plan that was officially launched in March of 2004. And it's a good plan. It's a plan that builds on pillars, and it's a plan that will bring about a strong, strong Alberta, an Alberta so strong that it builds on such a strong foundation that, God forbid, not even the Liberals if they're elected could begin to tear it down.

In the coming year, in addition to co-ordinating activities related to the government's 2004 to 2007 business plan, Executive Council staff will work with ministries on strategies set out in the 20-year strategic plan. The ultimate vision of the plan – and this is a vision – is a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident and proud about the future for themselves and their children. Mr. Chairman, I should point out that although government ministries make important contributions to that vision, such a far-reaching goal could never be achieved by government alone. It can only be achieved if all Albertans work in partnership, and that means government, public sector, and not-for-profit partners, the private sector, of course, and individual Albertans all working to create the province's future success.

Part of co-ordinating that work involves making sure Albertans understand the road ahead and are able to judge government's progress in achieving its stated goals. That's why Executive Council holds a strong commitment to open and accountable government, to make sure Albertans can fully assess government actions and form their own opinions, not the opinions of the Liberals or the *Edmonton Journal* or the other media but their own opinions about the issues of the day. Interestingly enough, I was asked today if I'm fazed by the hammering of the Liberals on this expense issue, and I said no. What interests me is what Mr. and Mrs. Grundy are saying and Martha and Henry, and I am not getting any cards and letters on this issue.

This government has been a leader in public-sector accountability through its comprehensive business planning and performance measures work and its quarterly fiscal reports. By the way, no other jurisdiction in this country, no other legislative body, provides quarterly reports to its citizens. But there's always room for improvement, and my government remains committed to refining and strengthening the way business is done on behalf of Alberta taxpayers. That commitment is reflected in the recent creation of a new chief internal auditor for government. As I mentioned, this is an office that is unique in Canada.

The office of the chief internal auditor came about in response to a fall 2002 recommendation from the Auditor General to centralize existing internal audit functions across government, and he wanted it assigned to Executive Council and not to his office. Previously some ministries had internal auditors assigned through the Alberta Corporate Service Centre, but there wasn't one central auditor to fully co-ordinate internal audit work across government. So with the creation of the chief internal auditor government has a more efficient and comprehensive process in place.

Mr. Nick Shandro, who I believe is in the audience, who was formerly principal auditor in the Auditor General's office, was appointed chief internal auditor in mid-July of 2003, and only today did the media discover that we had an internal auditor for Executive Council. That is speed. Since then he has been working to establish the structure, processes, and methodology for the office.

8:10

The new office moved into full operation on April 1 when internal audit staff transferred from the Alberta corporate service office. The office is now responsible for the internal audits of all government departments and agencies, boards, and commissions. The written mandate of the office covers a range of assurances and advisory services, including compliance audits; internal control audits,

including financial controls; program audits; information technology audits; and special investigations. The ultimate goal of the office is to help government managers and employees be more productive and effective in their jobs while ensuring that Alberta taxpayers get maximum value for every dollar spent.

The charter for the chief internal auditor calls for the office to be overseen by an internal audit committee. It will also work in concert with the office of the Auditor General to ensure maximum accountability with a minimum of overlap or duplication between the two offices. The Auditor General will have some discretion in terms of sharing the internal auditor's findings with Albertans as appropriate.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to now touch on the protocol office and the office of the Lieutenant Governor. As members of the committee will know, the protocol office is responsible for provincial government ceremonial events and visits from senior international dignitaries, and the most senior of those dignitaries, of course, will visit this province next year. Although the province's centennial doesn't take place until next year, protocol staff have already begun preparing for ceremonial events expected to take place in 2005. A highlight of that event is the anticipated royal visit from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and although a specific date has not been confirmed, we are hopeful that Her Majesty will be able to celebrate the province's 100th birthday. It's expected now that she will attend sometime in May.

In anticipation of that visit I wrote to the Prime Minister asking him to extend the term of Alberta's current Lieutenant Governor, Her Honour the Honourable Lois Hole. While Her Honour is not here, I can say that she has done a remarkable job as the Queen's representative in Alberta, and I personally can't think of a better ambassador to welcome Her Majesty or a person more deserving of recognition for her outstanding service. Well, the Prime Minister obviously agrees as he has extended Her Honour's term through 2005, and that is good news.

Mr. Chairman, I would now like to touch on strategies listed in the business plan for the Public Affairs Bureau. The three core businesses of the bureau are helping government ministries communicate with Albertans, providing Albertans with two-way access to government, and publishing and selling Alberta's laws and other materials.

The first of these includes ensuring open, timely, and accurate communications with Albertans on the wide range of government programs and services that impact their daily lives. Bureau communicators work with the ministry staff across government to make sure Albertans have the information they need on the curriculum their children are covering in school, on infrastructure and road improvements taking place in their community, on how they can live healthier and more active lives and on the health system improvements that impact their health and well-being, on efforts to preserve Alberta's water, forests, public lands, fish, and wildlife so these resources can be enjoyed by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, on how the government is spending their hard-earned tax dollars, on progress and work to reopen the U.S. border to live cattle or how they can access farm safety net programs, on ways they can stay safe behind the wheel and keep accidents from occurring on Alberta's roads, and on how we can all work together to reduce the impact of family violence in Alberta communities.

Mr. Chairman, this is just a handful of examples. The complete roster of government communications programs is too long and too diverse for me to list in full detail, and while the list is diverse, what these communications programs all have in common is a commitment to making sure Albertans get the information they need quickly and efficiently.

The focus of the second core business of the Public Affairs Bureau

is to make sure Albertans are able to access that information. The bureau maintains a number of key avenues for Albertans to do just that.

One of those is the Service Alberta call centre, formerly known as the RITE number. Mr. Chairman, I think the members of the committee will agree with me when I say that the staff who answer calls at the Service Alberta centre perform a key front-line service. In the past year alone they answered close to 1 million calls, and on average each operator handles about 70,000 calls a year. Despite call volumes staff maintain a high level of customer service. Over the years call centre users have consistently shown satisfaction ratings of 95 per cent or better. Work will continue in the coming year to further refine this service and to ensure that call centre technology is able to keep pace with staff answering the calls.

Another popular information resource is the Alberta government web site. User statistics for 2003-2004 tell us that the government home page was accessed approximately 19.5 million times, or more than three times more than in 2001-2002. Statistics also show that the site users are very happy with this resource. Again, bureau staff have worked this year to further improve this already effective and popular information resource for Albertans. That includes refining the public consultation listings that were recently added to the web site and increasing public awareness of the resource. Work will also be ongoing so that the visually impaired Albertans are better able to access all government web sites.

Mr. Chairman, I would now like to turn briefly to the Queen's Printer. As I mentioned earlier, the Queen's Printer will receive an additional \$450,000 this year to produce new occupational health and safety materials. The updates are part of the government's WorkSafe Alberta initiative, which is designed to reduce the number of workplace accidents and fatalities in the province. The increase will allow the Queen's Printer to reprint enough materials to satisfy what has turned out to be a strong demand for a very popular product.

Mr. Chairman, I would like now to end my introductory comments here so that members of the committee may enjoy ample opportunity to ask whatever questions they might have, and I do hope that members of the committee will confine their questions to the estimates. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

8:20

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciated the Premier's comments, and I will try to limit mine to issues relating to the estimates, although you never know where these things go.

I understand here that Executive Council, as the Premier indicated, is requesting \$24.399 million, and it is an increase over last year. I did listen to the Premier's explanations for that increase, and as I understood it, the largest cause of that was through creation of the office of the chief internal auditor.

In the spirit of back and forth, if we can work that out, I guess my first question would be a request of the Premier to just elaborate a bit on the work of the chief internal auditor in some more detail, and I'm sure the media will appreciate this. What's the detailed mandate of the chief internal auditor? What is his focus? Is it the Executive Council? Is it within the government? How is his office going to relate to that of the Auditor General? What are some of those issues? I'd like the Premier to elaborate.

Thanks.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, I thought that I covered it fairly well. Basically, the office of the chief internal auditor, which now exists

within Executive Council, is to provide compliance audits, which should be of extreme interest to members of the opposition, to make sure that all members of Executive Council, all boards, authorities, agencies, and committees comply with accepted accounting principles vis-à-vis expenses, operations, programs, and so on.

He is to provide internal control audits, including financial controls, program audits; in other words, to make sure that programs by various ministries, by members of Executive Council, various MLA committees are properly carried out, and that programs that have been assigned to the administration by Executive Council are being properly carried out.

He is to perform information communications technology audits to make sure that all of the communication systems within Executive Council and all the related activities are being used properly and are functioning properly.

He is mandated to conduct special investigations if, indeed, there is a need for a special investigation into any matter.

He is mandated to identify and recommend improvements to risk mitigation processes designed to prevent such things as failed initiatives, financial mismanagement – that's why I mentioned the internal auditor to the media, because he is charged with looking at that, and there's some suggestion through innuendo that that is taking place when it's not – or reputation damage, which the Liberals are trying so desperately to do.

His function was transferred from the provincial internal audit services mainly to three ministries. I mentioned the increase in funding to expand provision of internal audit services to all departments as well as agencies, boards, and commissions. Of the \$4.6 million in increased spending \$3.6 million is to be recovered from ministries and other users.

Now, I don't know how many other ministries have done their estimates, but in the estimates of the individual ministries – mainly there are three ministries, and I'm not sure which ones they are – virtually all ministries will show as an expense their contribution to the function and the costs incurred by the internal auditor.

The Chair: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's not clear to me why that work couldn't be done by the Auditor General, but we'll pursue that.

Anyway, my primary interest with the budget presented tonight is with the Public Affairs Bureau, which is a very effective organization, I must say. It's a large and powerful organization and well financed. I think it is this government's secret weapon in its success in relating to the public over the last 10 years, and I say that as a compliment. So they're a force to be reckoned with.

One of the questions I have is on the role of the Public Affairs Bureau in relation to other government departments. As you go through the estimates for other government departments and add up their total amount spent on communications, it's some \$8.4 million. So in addition to what's presented in the budget tonight for Executive Council, there's another \$8.4 million scattered throughout the other departments for work on communications.

I'm wondering if the minister responsible for the Public Affairs Bureau, the Premier, could elaborate some on how the Public Affairs Bureau works with the other departments and how this \$8.4 million gets accounted for. In particular, does the Public Affairs Bureau bill out to other government departments for its services? Is there some interdepartmental transfer of accounting mechanisms when the Public Affairs Bureau works in a particular department, if that made sense?

Thank you.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, I will take that question under advisement. I'm sure that my officials heard the question.

Relative to how other ministries, other departments bill the Public Affairs Bureau for services, if indeed they do, that information will be provided to the hon. member.

Mr. Chairman, just to clarify part of the preamble that didn't relate to any questions about the Public Affairs Bureau but did mention the role of the internal auditor, the internal auditor came about for Executive Council as the result of a recommendation of the Auditor General, and it has been a policy of this government to take his recommendations very seriously and implement them. As a matter of fact, over the course of this government's mandate and previous mandates we have paid very careful attention to the recommendations of the Auditor General and have virtually implemented all of his recommendations, and this was one of the recommendations that we implemented.

Relative to the Public Affairs Bureau I take exception to the – I know that the hon. member said that he meant this as a compliment, but it didn't really sound like a compliment. I think his term was an effective weapon. [interjections] Well, a secret weapon and a very effective weapon, he said. Well, it's not a weapon; it is a device and a well-managed device to get myriad information out on just a phenomenal number of government services and what is happening in government. All one needs to do is key up the government web site and look at what is on the web site relative to the multitude of activities that are taking place within government.

8:30

You know, I sometimes wonder why the media doesn't use the web site. There are so many good stories. It reminds me of when I was a reporter. I used to go after the unusual. One day I did a sewer tour. I wanted to know: what's underground; what makes sewers tick? It's a phenomenal story. You get a bit of a scoop that way because no one else would go into the sewers; I'm telling you that for sure.

I don't want to give anyone a clinic in journalism, but this story a day keeps the editor away attitude seems to prevail here in the Legislature: wow, did the Premier ever give us a juicy 15-second bite. Well, today it went 90 seconds. So, you know, it was really juicy.

There are so many things. The Public Affairs Bureau disseminates information relative to the myriad activities that take place within government. The bureau involves 131 full-time employees. The budget breakdown is thus. There are 78 full-time employees helping government ministries to communicate with Albertans, to communicate that multitude of services I talked about, supplying professionals to government departments to develop and implement communications programs, providing communications planning and consulting support to government, co-ordinating government communications to and from Albertans on priority areas for government initiatives and during public emergencies, providing specialized writing and editing services to government, creating and implementing a corporate communications strategy to ensure that public information programs are co-ordinated across government and that Albertans are getting the information they need in the most cost-effective way possible. That involves 78 full-time employees doing just that function.

There are 34 full-time employees who are charged with the responsibility of providing Albertans with two-way access to government. That means managing the Service Alberta call centre, formerly the RITE centre, as I mentioned, to give Albertans toll-free access to government, providing Alberta Connects call centre support for comments and information on major government

initiatives – and I indicated how many calls they received last year – managing the two-way flow of information through the Alberta government web site, providing technical support for major government news conferences and announcements, providing communications technology support to Executive Council and Internet consultation to departments – and believe me, that comes in very handy, especially for those who might be computer illiterate – managing the province-wide distribution of news releases.

Then there are 11 full-time employees charged with publishing and selling Alberta's laws and other government materials. These are people who work in the Queen's Printer's office. They are charged with publishing and selling Alberta's laws and other government materials and operating the Queen's Printer's bookstore.

There are three full-time employees assigned to the managing director's office, and the responsibility of these three people is the overall management of the Public Affairs Bureau.

There are five full-time employees responsible for human resources and administration. Their functions are to manage the human resources finance needs of the Public Affairs Bureau, to develop business plans and budget preparations, to do performance measurement co-ordination, to prepare annual reports and develop annual reports, and to administer five FTEs to administer FOIP. That in itself should involve about 55 FTEs considering the multitude of requests that come from the Liberals.

So, Mr. Chairman, that pretty well covers the functions and the operations and explains the employee functions, at least of those involved with the Public Affairs Bureau.

The Chair: Before I recognize any further members at this time, I wonder if the committee would agree to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Chair: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to everybody for agreeing to this. We have unexpected visitors tonight, the parents and sister of one of our pages, who are seated in the public gallery. I will ask them to rise. They are Gerard Zentner and Maureen Zentner, who are dad and mom, and Emilie, who is a sister to our page, Matthew Zentner, who might as well rise as well. I would ask them all to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Executive Council (*continued*)

The Chair: The chair would also ask the indulgence of those who wish to speak if they would try and speak into the microphone. That way *Hansard* will be able to hear better what they're saying.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now I'd like to draw the Premier's attention to page 202 of the ministry business plans, core business goal 1 of Executive Council, and under Strategies it says, "develop advertising guidelines and best practices to help ministries maximize the clarity, consistency, cost-effectiveness, accessibility and reach of their advertising programs."

So my questions to the Premier are really an elaboration of that point that is going to be funded through this budget. What kind of

advertising guidelines are going to be developed? Could we get a bit more detail on that?

Given that guidelines are being developed for future use, what kind of guidelines are being used now or have been used until this point? Are there guidelines in place historically, or are we starting from scratch? Perhaps each advertising contract has been handled on a one-off basis. I don't know. But if there are guidelines historically, perhaps he could even provide a copy of the guidelines to us. That would be most helpful. Are ministries each using their own guidelines? Is this an attempt, then, to perhaps consolidate all the advertising contracts into a single standardized approach?

How much money from the budget is being spent on modernizing the Alberta government corporate identity? That's a significant initiative. Large, large organization like that: it's a big process. So it would be interesting to get an update on how that is proceeding, including a listing of which outside firms have been hired to help – perhaps we should think of it as rebranding the government or changing its corporate identity, updating its corporate identity.

I don't know if the Premier wants to respond to those now or would prefer to respond in writing at a later time.

8:40

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, relative to the second issue as it relates to the corporate identity across government, I would prefer to provide the hon. member with a detailed reply as to what we hope to achieve by developing a corporate identity. Quite generally, it would expand on the 20-year strategic plan and identify Alberta as we have identified Alberta over the past 10 years through phrases such as the Alberta advantage, such as the stylized logo. But it involves much more detail than that, and I will have our department people undertake to prepare a detailed reply for the hon. member.

On the advertising policy. The Public Affairs Bureau provides consultation and co-ordination support for all government advertising, and the cost of the work is covered by the government ministries responsible. In 2002-2003, for instance, government spending on advertising by departments totalled \$7.2 million. I'll have to go back into my budget to find out – and maybe the hon. member has it at his fingertips – what it is this year. I would imagine that it would be the normal increase.

Mr. Chairman, increasing communications with Albertans in areas that they identify as top priorities is a key goal of the Public Affairs Bureau, and part of this, of course, is advertising. Having a corporate approach to communication and advertising helps to ensure that Albertans receive the information that they need in the most co-ordinated and effective manner possible. So objectives of the strategy would include making sure that Alberta government messages are clear and reach the appropriate audience.

Sometimes, unfortunately, we have to resort to advertising in order to communicate properly and accurately the programs that have been undertaken. A case in point relative to misinformation . . .

Mrs. Forsyth: Bill 11?

Mr. Klein: Well, Bill 11 was a good example. The massive misinformation campaign that was conducted by the Liberals prompted the provincial government to publish ads to explain to the Alberta public exactly what we were intending.

An Hon. Member: Kyoto.

Mr. Klein: One hon. member is mentioning the whole situation relative to Kyoto, why we opposed the accord but not the reduction of greenhouse gases and what steps we were taking to achieve a

reduction in greenhouse gases when the general media portrayed Alberta as being anti greenhouse gas reduction, and we weren't. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Mr. Chairman, a more recent instance of miscommunication – and I've instructed the appropriate minister to respond – was a recent column in the *Calgary Sun* on War Amps. It wasn't prompted by the Liberals, but it was prompted by someone. Nothing could be further from the truth than the rantings and ravings of this misinformed, uninformed columnist. The War Amps program will continue. The department is working very diligently to make sure that we protect the legislation that is in place and was supported by the Liberals relative to protection of privacy and at the same time provide some means of access for the War Amps to licence plates. It's a good program, and everyone is working co-operatively to my understanding, but that's not what the column would indicate, and unfortunately sometimes we have to advertise to make clear the government's position and exactly what we are doing in regard to various programs.

So I reiterate: objectives of the strategy include making sure Alberta government messages are clear and reach the appropriate audience; secondly, identifying government advertising in a consistent way so Albertans know who the message is from and where they can go for more information; for example, by placing the Alberta signature and key contact information in a consistent format for all government advertising. The strategy also involves giving government advertising a unified, creative look and tone. Most importantly, it involves getting maximum value and effectiveness for the dollars spent.

The strategy does not change the way government advertising is funded, and ministries will continue to fund advertising campaigns out of their respective budgets. The Public Affairs Bureau simply provides advertising expertise and assistance, particularly for major campaigns.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to express my appreciation to the Premier for his taking the time to go through some of these plans and numbers with us. Today during Public Accounts the Premier, I guess, tried to put a question to me, which wasn't really allowed by the chair, and it had to do with some numbers that I quoted in terms of communications' people or so-called spin doctors – I don't really think that's an insulting term; it's not meant that way – and wanted to know why the numbers I had were at variance with his. I've got that information for him, and I'd like to ask him about it as well.

The FTEs of the Public Affairs Bureau have been fairly constant, and they've varied, I guess, between about 127 and 131, in there, but we've looked at it in a different way, and the Premier asked the source. Well, what we did is took the government of Alberta telephone directory. It's not very scientific, but it tells a little bit of a different story. So I'll just share that with the Premier if he wants to comment.

We included the Premier's Office, the Public Affairs Bureau. It excludes communications support staff, excludes Crown corporations, and excludes regional health authorities, but includes provincial health authorities, associations, and AADAC. We broke it down by public affairs officers and directors. In 2001 there were 85 public affairs officers and 48 directors for a total of 133; in 2003 there were 56 directors, 98 public affairs officers for a total of 154; and in 2004 there were 60 directors, 103 public affairs officers for a total of 163. If you compare that to the 1993 numbers, there were 30 directors, 17 public affairs officers for a total of 47. So according to this approach it's tripled.

8:50

They grow in a number of different ways. Since 1993 the number of ministries has gone from 17 to 24, each of which has its own communications staff. More ministries have added assistant communication directors as well as communication directors. For example, Municipal Affairs and Transportation have added assistant directors in the past year. Finally, when a new office is created within a ministry, they'll sometimes have their own communications staff, and a good example is the Utilities Consumer Advocate office within Government Services, which has its own communications director and no less than two public information officers.

The question really is: do the FTEs contained in the Premier's office tell the whole story, and what public affairs professionals are excluded from that number, and what's the organizational relationship between those people and the Public Affairs Bureau?

The second question. I also raised this with the Premier today, and it's a document which we tabled in the House from Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development communications branch which gives speaking points for the minister or her officials, I guess, basically trashing the New Democrats. [interjections] We aren't sensitive, Mr. Chairman. I want to make it clear. We're not thin-skinned people. We couldn't be and still survive in this place. But it raises a question. It raises a question about the independence of the professional civil service in this province. There is a distinction to be drawn between caucus staff – we have five, and they have an enormous number of people. [interjections]

Chair's Ruling Decorum

The Chair: Hon. members, there's really only one person that's supposed to be talking and asking questions at this time, and that happens to be the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. The other members that are offering their opinions right now can well do so after the hour has passed, and they will come in their turn and one at a time. The Premier can't possibly answer questions from 20 different people at the same time. I know that he's able to answer questions but not 20.

So right now it's the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Debate Continued

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman, I'm not trying to make the point that they have too many. Indeed, sometimes we think they could use more. But the point is that they have a large number of political staff who are entitled to write partisan political material. I'm not saying that we don't do it. I'm not saying that the Liberals don't do it. Certainly the Conservatives do it, Mr. Chairman, but the question is . . . [interjections]

The Chair: I wasn't signalling to you, hon. member. I was signalling to the hon. minister and the hon. member who is not sitting in his seat but sitting next to her that they might be named. Anyway, please continue, and hopefully they will cease and desist.

Mr. Mason: It must be Wednesday night, Mr. Chairman.

Okay. So, you know, Mr. Chairman, this is the question: whether or not the professional civil servants of this province ought to be engaged in partisan activity. I'm trying to say that I don't make that distinction for caucus staff, because that's political staff, but professionals in the Public Affairs Bureau, in my view, ought not to be producing this kind of material. I'd like the Premier's comments on that, and I'd like to inquire further about what other activities they might be involved in that might be of a partisan nature.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Chairman, I think I clearly outlined the function of the Public Affairs Bureau. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands alluded to many offices that indeed do have communications people working in them but have nothing to do with Executive Council and do not report to Executive Council. They might report to various ministries, or there might be other mechanisms within government for the reporting.

The ATB, for instance, has its own communications officer. I would imagine that the tire board, which is a designated administrative organization, would have its own communications director. I would imagine that AADAC – I don't know. The MLA who formerly chaired AADAC is not here, but I'm sure that AADAC had its own communications director. It did; I received a nod in the affirmative.

Mr. Chairman, the hon. member is right: they do. But they have nothing to do with Executive Council and are not part of the Public Affairs Bureau, as I understand it.

The information that I have is the information that is contained in the budget documents, and that is that the Public Affairs Bureau has 131 FTEs, and I broke down those FTEs for the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition: 78 to help government ministries to communicate with Alberta, 34 FTEs to provide Albertans with two-way access to government, 11 FTEs to publish and sell Alberta's laws and other government materials, 3 FTEs to manage the director's office, and FTEs to provide human resource and administrative services.

The note that I have is that the member is also right that the number of PAB FTEs has remained constant, and I'm advised that departments sometimes complement PAB staff with their own staff, and that is the department's decision not the PAB's decision. If a minister feels that he needs assistance, then he can contact the PAB, and the PAB will provide whatever assistance is necessary. These staff will assist with tasks such as web site management, handling calls from the public, writing tasks. These would include news releases.

I apologize – well, no, I don't apologize, because I don't think that government news releases are generally provocative and confrontational, unlike the news releases that are produced by the NDs. I'm inundated by news releases from the NDs that are very provocative, very confrontational, and often misleading and full of misinformation. So . . .

Mr. Mason: Oh, come on.

Mr. Klein: No. I am coming on, and I'm telling it like it is. I wish I had an example of a government news release and an ND news release. Perhaps someone up there can get me one because I would be very glad to read from a government news release.

9:00

Okay. This is a government news release.

Alberta 2003 Athletes of the Year announced.

Four outstanding Alberta athletes are being recognized as Alberta Athletes of the Year for their significant achievements, performances and contributions as amateur athletes at the international level during 2003.

Then it goes on to explain who's in the junior category, the open category.

These awards acknowledge the commitment, dedication, skill and character of each of the recipients who inspire athletes all across . . .

This is a very, very good news story, and it doesn't subscribe, of course, to the fundamentals that make for journalism. It doesn't subscribe to controversy, conflict, confusion, chaos, and confrontation. That is a government news release, and that is a good example of a government news release.

Now, here is an example of a New Democrat news release. I'm going to read it unemotionally.

Political connections are likely behind the 67% cost overruns in the Calgary courthouse project.

New Democrat MLA Brian Mason released figures today showing that the partners in BPC realty holdings, the consortium selected to build the courthouse, contributed over \$21,000 to the Alberta Conservative party over the last three years.

Oh, yeah, and it goes on. I mean, this is a controversial, confrontational press release.

Mrs. McClellan: Here's an industry news release in response.

Mr. Klein: An industry news release. You know . . .

Mrs. McClellan: In response to an ND news release.

Mr. Klein: Right.

But, Mr. Chairman, here is the tale of two news releases, one written in a positive manner. I don't think that it got an inch of ink, by the way, in the newspapers. Maybe in the rural newspapers. This got a whole bunch of ink. You know why, Tom? You know why? Because it's controversial, it's conflict, it's confusion, it's chaos, and it comes from the NDs. Anything from the NDs is good according to the media, the *Edmonton Journal* anyway. Anything that's written by the Conservatives in a very nonconfrontational manner gets about, well, luckily, an inch or maybe two. So don't tell me about confrontational press releases by the government. [interjections] Do you have some more? Send them over because I'll be glad to table them.

So communication staff do not do political work. They write well-thought-out press releases that state the facts, and communications do brief ministers on issues related to government business. That's what my briefings are for when I meet the media every day. They are straightforward briefings. Sometimes they allude to questions that may be asked, or were asked, if the briefing is after question period, and will say that Liberals mentioned this, this, or that, and here is a suggested response.

That is the way briefings are prepared, and I'm sure that the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition has his researchers and his people do the same thing. If I make a statement in the Legislature and it's anticipated that the media will ask the hon. leader for his response, then he will have prepared for him a suggested response. That's the way it works.

Relative to press releases it is reasonable, it is responsible, and, Mr. Chairman, above all and unlike the NDs, it is nonconfrontational.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's my pleasure to rise this evening to ask a few questions of our Premier in regard to the budget and the business plan, and frankly I appreciate the opportunity to do so. Now, normally during these questions you'd expect to hear questions on the budget intended to challenge expenditures with an eye to reducing them or justifying them. That's all well and good, but I expect that our opposition with their usual competence will overdo that this evening without my help. So my concern and my questions are slightly different, taking a different approach.

I'm wondering a bit about false economy. I'm wondering if we're spending enough, perhaps, in this very critical area to provide the best level of services that Albertans really want to see, services that are, frankly, worth every penny at this very critical level.

Now, our tendency as a government and certainly the Premier's tendencies are to lead by example and to keep our expenses to an absolute, bare-bones minimum. Of course, I totally support that direction as well, but sometimes I wonder, especially at this critical level, whether or not we're perhaps penny-pinching a bit and looking at false economy in our zeal to keep expenditures and taxes down.

Specifically, I'm going to refer to two areas that I'm wondering about. I'm wondering about staff working in the Premier's office. I mean these are people that get crabbed at, complained at, castigated continually – and I know it's a very, very tough, thankless, and demanding job – probably more so than almost anyone in our government. Whatever they're getting paid, frankly, I'm sure that they're more than worth it. In fact, I have the same views of our own constituency staff and assistant. So I question if they're perhaps getting paid enough to put up with all the abuse and keep a smile on their face and a chipper, cheerful attitude. You know, are their paycheques big enough to keep that inspired? After all, they are our front-line staff, our first interface with the public, and I'm wondering if the Premier is confident that they're earning enough and will be earning enough in coming years to keep them really happy.

My second area of concern with our expenditures is actually our public relations department. We've heard a lot of comments about it tonight, people in opposition talking about how big it is and so on. Frankly, I'm a little worried – you know, I'm seeing occasionally in the media, in our e-mails, et cetera, articles and comments that are very critical, misleading, misrepresenting, malicious accusations and so on – that many times there is no official response to those articles, none at all from our side to clarify the situation. In fact, I've collected a number of these, and I do try to answer them, but I can't. There are just not enough hours in the day.

So my concern is that if there is no response at all to such negative statements and columns and articles, maybe it has the tendency to create some doubt in the public's mind, doubt that perhaps we're afraid to answer or have no answers or that perhaps we aren't listening or that we don't care, didn't notice, et cetera. Because if we were or if we did have good answers and responses – and of course from my position I know that we do have excellent responses and answers – why wouldn't we want to set the record straight? Not for our benefit, not so that we look good, but for our citizens' benefit, for their peace of mind.

Frankly, I don't think that our citizens want to believe that this is an incompetent government that squanders their tax dollars on unnecessary plane flights and so on. I think that for their peace of mind it's important that we respond to these negative articles and set the record straight. So I'm wondering: are we perhaps a little short-staffed in our public relations department? We're not getting our good stories told so that people can be less stressed and sleep better at night knowing that their tax dollars and their governance really is in good hands, despite what they might be seeing or hearing from media and e-mails.

So the fact is, you know, that there is a whole other side to all these accusations and criticisms that our opponents are simply not going to be telling them, and as I said, it's for our citizens' peace of mind. You know, I'm specifically wondering: are we perhaps being lulled into complacency when we hear that our public relations department is a great secret weapon? Well, frankly, it shouldn't be a secret weapon. It's a public relations department. It should be high profile, very public, front and centre. So my question is: are we funding it enough to make sure that our side of the story gets out?

With that I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and look forward to the responses.

Mr. Klein: The questions and the statement made are somewhat

subjective, Mr. Chairman, in that if you were to ask, maybe, the PAB staff if there are enough of them and if they are being paid enough, they would say no, maybe. I don't know. If you asked the Liberals, they would probably say that there are too many and they are getting paid too much, and the NDs . . .

9:10

Mr. Mason: No. We'd just say that they're biased.

Mr. Klein: Oh, well, there is another. So the question is subjective.

Really, the manager of the Public Affairs Bureau, who is in the audience, makes a determination as to what is appropriate relative to the day-to-day operations of the bureau and also what is appropriate in terms of salaries. The salaries paid to PAB staff would be consistent with the salaries paid to any other person of the same level in any other component of the public service. So we try to be fair to all employees, and we do have a grid that categorizes an employee at a particular level. Within that level that an employee receives payment in the way of salary, either to the bottom of that grid or to the top of that grid.

An example would be a grid for ADMs, assistant deputy ministers, or division managers or people with particular expertise: lawyers, engineers, doctors, who all work in the public service. Basically, we try to treat everyone fairly. Now, if I were to ask Mr. Turtle, who's the head of the PAB, he would say: yeah, I'm worth more. Maybe he is. I'm sure that Gordon, if he went out into the private sector – and I'm not suggesting he do so, because he's doing a fantastic job – could make a lot more money than he's making here in government.

Relative to my own staff too, I guess, the question is somewhat subjective. If you were to ask members of my staff, although they wouldn't say it to me, they might say it to someone else: I deserve more money.

[Ms Graham in the chair]

I think that they are worth every penny that they earn because, as you pointed out, from Lynn Hall and Yolanta, who man the phones at the front office – you know, the front-line workers take a lot of unnecessary abuse, really – to Nargis and Colleen in my office; and Debby, who handles my scheduling; and Cathy; now Steve West and Jim Kiss, indeed, they deal with a lot of issues. Julian Nowicki, our deputy of Executive Council, I know for a fact could earn much, much more in the private sector. He knows it as well, but he is a dedicated public service employee, and he appreciates and understands what service to the public means.

So, yes, I would like to pay them all more, but unfortunately we are limited by the conventions of government and by the rules of government. We have to pay them what is deemed to be fair in relationship to what we pay other employees, but they do work very hard.

The Acting Chair: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, please.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Madam Chairman. In the spirit of the comments from the Member for Calgary-Currie and the response from the Premier, thinking back to when the Premier first took his position – I think memory serves me correctly here – he publicly listed the public servants in the province who were earning \$100,000 or more, which I thought was actually an effective thing to do.

So I have a couple of questions along these lines. Could the Premier provide a list of the employees of the Public Affairs Bureau

who make over \$100,000? Since there's actually, I think, a line item in the budget for bonuses – or certainly there was in the annual report – could the Premier also provide a listing of the number of bonuses paid out to Public Affairs Bureau staff last year and the size of each of those bonuses and the basis on which they're calculated so that we might have a sense of how that'll play out during this budget year?

Mr. Klein: Madam Chair, I don't have that information at my fingerprints as it is not detailed or itemized in the budget, but certainly our officials heard the question and will be happy to provide the information.

Having said that, you know, things have progressed since 1992. I know that my salary has increased somewhat.

Mrs. McClellan: Not much.

Mr. Klein: Not much, but salaries have increased generally. I'm sure that the manager of the department, who is ostensibly at a deputy minister's level, would earn well in excess of \$100,000, not \$200,000 but in the mid-range, \$150,000, and that would be consistent with generally what DMs are paid, and I don't know exactly what they are paid. I don't know if an assistant director would be at the \$100,000 mark. I'm just looking for a nod. I'm getting a shaking of the head in the negative. But I will try and provide you the detailed information.

The Acting Chair: Leader of the Opposition, are you finished?
Yes, Madam Deputy Premier.

Mrs. McClellan: I do want to just make a couple of comments about the estimates of Executive Council, and there's been a lot talked about tonight about the Public Affairs Bureau. I want to certainly put on record the importance of the function that they provide in providing information to the people of the province, and I can assure you, Premier, that we have known that first-hand in the past 11 and a half months with the incident of BSE that has rocked the agriculture industry in such a dramatic way.

Probably any success of getting through that is a good communication plan, and it was necessary that the communication plan come through government as to what we were doing. The Public Affairs Bureau played a very strong role in that, whether it was the members of the Public Affairs Bureau that are located with Executive Council or the person that is assigned to Agriculture through the Public Affairs Bureau to help with that communication. It was imperative that the 38,000 producers in our province were kept abreast as well as possible as to anything that was happening, positively or negatively. It was most important, I think, to the consuming public of Alberta that they be kept abreast of those issues, and I use that as an example.

We were talking about news releases earlier, Mr. Premier, and the importance of them being factual. I looked at a news release that was presented by government when we made a trip to Washington to make a case for the border reopening and talked about the importance of that exercise of ensuring that key leaders in Washington understood clearly our position and the fact that we were going to base our evidence on science and not on emotion or hysteria or politics, and that was important.

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

Then I looked at a couple of news releases that the beef industry, in fact, put out in early March in response to a rather inflammatory

and inaccurate news release put out by the opposition third party. This is the industry's; this is not mine. This represents four of the cattle-producing organizations: the Western Stock Growers, the feeders council, the Feeder Associations. Their quote is this: "The real shame from this entire episode of finger-pointing is that the needs of the province's beef industry are being ignored by the provincial opposition parties." That's a shame. But that was from inflammatory news releases and again stems from the comment that the hon. ND House leader has raised on Agriculture staff. All they said – and I'll paraphrase it – was that particular comment showed clearly how little the NDs knew about the cattle industry. That wasn't political. That was a fact that was raised by some information that was put out that was incorrect.

9:20

So, you know, you can get into this, but I say again how important the Public Affairs Bureau work is, how important it is that you have the opportunity to put factual information out, and I think that all of us, Mr. Premier, as members of Executive Council stand behind the factual material that is in the news releases that are put out through the Public Affairs Bureau to the people of Alberta. If we are not factual, we should be called to account. When we aren't factual, it should be based on fact, not innuendo, and that's the real harmful thing.

Mr. Chairman, I could go on and read excerpts from the Alberta Beef Producers letter, which is lengthy, which is a response to that same news release, and it really just shows the productivity deficit when you do things like that, and it causes a reaction and takes away from the important issues.

There is another area, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to ask a specific question of the Premier on the office of the Auditor General. As the Auditor General is an independent officer of the Legislature with the responsibility to audit the expenses of government ministries, I would like to ask the Premier to explain the Auditor General's role in reviewing Executive Council's expenses. I think that would be a point that we would all be interested in hearing.

Thank you.

Mr. Klein: Well, Mr. Chairman, I don't know if the hon. Deputy Premier has opened the door on this whole issue of expenses, but I'd be very happy to respond.

While much has been made about government expenses and particularly my expenses and the expenses of other ministers, there is a process. You know, today, for instance, in the Public Accounts Committee the Member for Edmonton-Centre was waving around a document and made the allegation that Peter Elzinga, my former chief of staff, was approving his own expense accounts. In fact, after the process was explained to me, he looks at it and then he puts a stamp on it and says, "This is basically what I spent," and that then goes to the Deputy Minister of Executive Council, who reviews that. Then it goes to the Finance department, and they do a further review, and of course it all becomes a part of the annual audit of the Auditor General.

So the Auditor General conducts an annual audit of Executive Council, and that includes all expense claims. It also involves the auditing of the financial statements and all transactions underlying these financial statements.

As I mentioned, the audit includes ensuring that expenses are authorized, complete, and accurate and have gone through the process; in other words, have been looked at by the employee or the government representative incurring the expense, have been properly examined by – I forget the name of the officer, but in this case the Deputy Minister of Executive Council; we'll call it the examining

officer – and then have gone through Treasury Board as well. The Auditor General, then, will look at the expenses overall to ensure that the expenses are authorized, that they are complete, and that they are accurate.

I understand that the Auditor General, as part of his mandate, in conducting his audits must get sufficient evidence to support his conclusions, and that, as I understand it, is what auditing is all about: the collection of evidence to support conclusions and recommendations. During the course of his audits the Auditor General has full and open access to our staff and full and open access to all financial information necessary to conduct his audits.

I can say that this government since 1993 adopted a policy of not shelving the Auditor General's reports but paying careful attention to the Auditor General's report and adopting his recommendations because his recommendations are based on evidence that something is not working right, and we want to make it work right. So we take very seriously the recommendations of the Auditor General, unlike the Liberals in Ottawa, at least under the former leader, who somehow seemed to ignore and pooh-pooh and disregard the recommendations of the Auditor General. At least this new leader, although he's being hoisted on his own petard, nonetheless is taking heed of what the Auditor General said about Ad-scams and is conducting an inquiry. Of course, the inquiry inflames controversy, and the media are having a heyday with it.

I would like to point out that the Auditor General is a very sincere individual who takes his job very seriously indeed, as did previous Auditor Generals.

In that regard, I would like to point out that in his 2002-2003 annual report, which is a public document, of course, the Auditor General has reported that the transactions and activities he examined in the financial statement audits, which include Executive Council – and in that audit would be all the expenses incurred by members of Executive Council – complied with the relevant legislative requirements. He never, never, never, never has reported any instances of noncompliance for Executive Council. That, unfortunately, has never been reported. Never been reported. I am not talking about in *Hansard* but by the media. I am confident that the Auditor General is reporting fairly, and if there were any reasons for concern with respect to Executive Council, he would have raised it in his annual report, and he didn't because he found nothing – absolutely nothing – wrong.

9:30

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have a few more questions for the Premier. Before beginning, though, I'd like to correct something that the hon. Deputy Premier said. She created the impression that the document, which we did table in the House, written by her professional bureaucrats and attacking the New Democrats was somehow in response to a really nasty news release that we wrote, and nothing could be further from the truth.

This Key Messages deals with the NDs' Public Accounts motion. The issue, it says, is that the NDs made a motion at the Public Accounts Committee calling for Alberta's Auditor General to conduct a value-for-money audit of the way BSE compensation was spent. This document was an attempt to discredit the New Democrats for asking for the Auditor General to get involved, something which the Deputy Premier herself changed her position on just a few days later and stood in the House asking for.

Now, I want to ask the Premier. I notice that the Executive Council is basically the cabinet, and I know that the Premier is interested in keeping the size of government down. In fact, he's

made his reputation on this. What's interesting to me is that since 1993 when this Premier took office, the number of ministries has gone from 17 to 24. That is a 41 per cent increase over about 10 years, Mr. Chairman, and I don't think the province has grown that much in 10 years, although I could be wrong. Certainly, I would ask the Premier why we have had this expansion of ministries. Why, for example, do we need a Solicitor General and an Attorney General? Why do we need a Finance minister and a Minister of Revenue, and so on and so on? Could the Premier talk about that?

Does he have any plans to try and shrink government again before the next election? One way to do that would be to reduce the number of ministries in the government. Each ministry has to have a deputy, has to have in most cases ADMs, needs to have communications staff, needs to have administrators, so there's a tremendous duplication of bureaucracy as a result of the expansion that has taken place in the number of ministries during the period that the Premier has been in office. I would ask him to comment on that and whether or not he has any plans to reduce the number of ministries again.

The Chair: The hon. Premier.

Mr. Klein: Yes, Mr. Chairman. To answer the hon. member's question, prior to 1992, when I became the Premier, I think there were 27 – I stand to be corrected – members in cabinet, and the size of the caucus was 53. I don't know how many MLAs there were, probably in the area of 80 or 83. I don't know whether that has changed that much, Mr. Chairman. You were around then. So was I, but I can't remember completely. But there were 27 ministries.

When our government was re-elected in 1993, I reduced the size of cabinet to I believe it was about 17 at that time, and we had 51 members. The Liberals had 32. The NDs were decimated; they were wiped out. They were the opposition. We increased our majority between 1993 and 1997 when two members of the Liberal Party and one member of the NDs . . . [interjection] Oh, I'm sorry. You didn't cross the floor. You ran for us. Two members of the Liberal Party – was it two?

Mr. Woloshyn: Three.

Mr. Klein: Three members of the Liberal Party crossed the floor and joined our caucus. I can't remember what the size of the cabinet was at that time. I believe it was around 20. Then in 2001, of course, we increased our majority again to 74 and, coincidental with that, increased the size of cabinet.

It remains to be seen – and that's a matter for ongoing examination. Certainly, it is the prerogative of the Premier to decide the size of cabinet, what he thinks is needed to run an efficient organization and provide accountability, and that decision will be made after the next election. I don't hear any opposition to that from the other side, so obviously they assume that we're going to win.

Mr. Mason: Don't assume anything.

Mr. Klein: Well, I will assume some things, and I'll bet you. I'll bet you right now. You want to put \$10 on it? [interjections] Yeah. Okay. Next time. Right. Anyway, we will do our best.

Mr. Chairman, the size of cabinet in some respects is in relation to the size of the caucus. We are cognizant and we're well aware of the need to have as little government as we possibly can and to economize where we can, but we also have to understand that elected people are elected to be accountable to the public and that they expect to receive services from various ministries, various departments. They would like to talk to a political figure who has

been elected in his or her constituency, who is responsible for either a department or a standing policy committee or a government committee headed by an MLA as opposed to a public service employee. That is the nature of government.

Having said that, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to point out something, because it's bothered me, relative to what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands alluded to, and that is the politicizing of the public service. I've been in politics now for 24 years and in the Alberta government now for 15 years, and I'm said to be the longest serving Premier in Canada. During the course of my tenure I've had the opportunity to be involved with various Premiers from British Columbia. I think I've gone through about seven. Many of them have been ND Premiers. We'll start with Mike Harcourt, then go to whoever was the interim, Miller, then Clark, then Ujjal Dosanjh. Right? Okay. So there are four. I got to know a little bit about them.

9:40

The one thing that the Liberal Premier there now, Gordon Campbell, said is that the most difficult thing to do is to reorganize government and rout out all of the senior posts right down to mid-management level that were filled by ND party hacks. They recruited from around the country and called in all of the NDs they could possibly find to fill all of the public service jobs.

You want to talk about the politicization of a public service? You need to look no further than what the NDs did in British Columbia. I have to say that they were masterful at doing it. As a matter of fact, one of his former colleagues, who used to be my critic, ended up in the public service in British Columbia. I think others did. Anyone with an ounce of political smarts became a bureaucrat in the ND public service in British Columbia. They were masters at it. Absolute masters.

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert. [interjections] St. Albert is the only one that's recognized.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to extend my appreciation, too, to you, Mr. Premier, for the opportunity this evening to hear you explain the organization and the various responsibilities through your office.

I would like to take this opportunity also, because I do have the honour of being the chair of a standing policy committee, to say thank you to and recognize the two fine women from Executive Council who assist us, Doris Porter and Kristine Oberg, who provide us with some very excellent advice and assistance and help us to correspond with Albertans in order that they can present to us and inform us of those issues and items that are very relevant to Albertans. Indeed, through your office we're able to service them and to respond to them and to articulate policy so that, we believe, through your leadership we can, again, as I say, serve Albertans.

You also mentioned, Mr. Premier, at the beginning of this evening's presentation that within your jurisdiction of office you have the Alberta Order of Excellence. I do notice that recently those who are responsible for that specific honour and Order of Excellence awards did make the most recent announcements to very deserving Albertans who have served our communities extremely well. So I would like to ask you if you could please, Mr. Premier, explain to us actually how it does work, where it does fall within your office and ministry, and if you could also provide us with your thoughts on the Alberta Order of Excellence, please.

Mr. Klein: You know, the question pertains somewhat to what I said earlier, and that is that there are so many interesting things and

wonderful things going on in this province that aren't reported, and the Alberta Order of Excellence is one of them. It's Alberta's equivalent to the Order of Canada, and many distinguished Albertans have received this award: ordinary citizens, doctors, lawyers, plumbers, pipefitters. Anyone who has made an outstanding contribution to his or her community has been honoured. It's the highest honour the province of Alberta can bestow upon a citizen. Quite basically, the Order of Excellence is to accord recognition to Albertans who have rendered service of the greatest distinction and to recognize them for singular excellence on behalf of all the residents of Alberta.

The ceremony is a very simple ceremony at Government House. The Lieutenant Governor presides and presents the recipient with the Order of Excellence, which is an emblem that is worn proudly by the recipients below their OCs, the floral pin. Many of them are also OCs, Orders of Canada.

As I said before, members of the Alberta Order of Excellence come from all walks of life, and their careers cover a wide range of things all the way from medicine, as I said, to plumbing, to the arts. The only thing that all members have in common is that they have made an outstanding contribution to their province or they've had an impact on the international scene. The Alberta Order of Excellence is about more than simply doing one's job well. It's about recognizing Albertans who have made a difference and who have served Albertans with excellence and distinction and whose contributions will stand the test of time.

[Ms Graham in the chair]

The Alberta Order of Excellence Council considers the nomination of candidates to the Alberta Order of Excellence, and that council is made up of prominent volunteer representatives appointed by order in council from across Alberta. So there is a very thorough adjudication of the worthiness of potential recipients for the Order of Excellence. I can tell you that last year I think that there were about 300 nominated, and I believe that only three or four are selected from all the nominees. I'm sorry; it's five. Five Albertans are honoured each year for their outstanding contribution.

Mrs. McClellan: Up to five.

Mr. Klein: It's up to five.

As I said before, unfortunately the Alberta Order of Excellence, although it's been around for many years, has had a relatively low profile. I would like to see an expanded profile for the Alberta Order of Excellence where more Albertans know about it and know about the people who have received it and then have the ability to nominate potential candidates or recipients. So I would encourage Members of the Legislative Assembly and all others interested to spread the message about the order and to encourage their constituents to nominate Albertans who are deserving of this great honour.

The Acting Chair: After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Executive Council for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:
Operating Expense

\$24,399,000

The Acting Chair: Shall the vote be reported?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Chair: Any opposed? The motion is carried.
The hon. Government House Leader.

9:50

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I'd move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Executive Council and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Ms Graham in the chair]

Mr. Tannas: Madam Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, as requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Executive Council: operating expense, \$24,399,000.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.
Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Any opposed? So ordered.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
 Third Reading
 Bill 27
 Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like tonight to certainly move third reading of Bill 27, Alberta Corporate Tax Amendment Act, 2004.

As mentioned previously, this act is to incorporate changes to the corporate income tax rates: 11 and a half per cent general rate and from 4 per cent to 3 per cent for the small business rate.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Ultimately, I would like to at least make one statement, I think, when we're asked about trying to make sure that we have the right structures for economic activity. I would like to actually quote something from the C.D. Howe Institute. There are many others with similar statements that we could quote. They said that the central cause of Canada's poor investment performance and the stagnant growth of the living standard is Ottawa's and the provinces' business taxation policies.

As C.D. Howe Institute studies have shown over the past five years, Canada's effective tax rate on capital remains one of the highest in the world and actually rose from 1987 to 2000. Businesses have been given some relief in the past three years, but Canada's competitors have been reducing business taxes even faster. A recent report showed that Canada's effective tax rate on capital has actually risen relative to the OECD average. Even high-tax countries like Sweden and the Netherlands have lower effective tax rates than Canada because they keep corporate taxes low.

So it is true that our averages have been high. It is true that when we go, certainly as I've said before, and talk specifically to the investment community in New York, when they are comparing effective tax rates and return on investment, business taxes are a very critical part of retooling investment, both machinery and equipment, creating jobs, taking the risk, attracting capital for high capital-intensive industries that we have in Alberta. It's very fundamental that we have the right structures that will attract the capital to create the jobs for all of us to have opportunities to live and work here in Alberta.

In that respect our GDP growth, our own estimates of creation, continues to show this province – it's not just because of price factors. Industries beyond oil and gas are growing here in Alberta. Both small businesses and large businesses are coming here. People continue to move here. We get the GDP growth. Our investment per capita is highest among all of the provinces.

These are all factors that when you ask in surveys point to – when CEOs are asked about some of their policies about where they're going to locate, the facts do come back to support Alberta being known and recognized for being a more conducive business friendly environment to come and locate. Even the banks will acknowledge that themselves when you talk to them about how they structure internally and even put some of their business in Alberta, Alberta being their western financial centre much because of this being the right place to invest. Tax structures are very fundamental to it.

So I would recommend that everybody give strong support to third reading of Bill 27.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I've spoken to this bill earlier, so I don't feel any need to prolong the debate this evening.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to not really prolong debate at all, but just to put on the record for one final time the opposition of the New Democrat caucus to the corporate tax cut plan of the government. This is a plan of moving corporate income tax down from 15 per cent to 8 per cent over what was originally four years. We take some credit for delaying it in one year when the Treasurer got nervous. So it's going to take them five years.

They have provided no evidence that this is necessary or will produce the types of results that they expect. The Auditor General has called for measures to determine what exactly is going to be achieved by this policy and a way to measure results against expectations. The government has not provided that, and we see it merely as part of their corporate mindset and acting on behalf of the corporate sector in this province to reduce the tax level on corporations, which will have a strong negative effect on the government's ability to continuously provide necessary services to the citizens of this province and make the province even more dependent on natural resource revenue and gambling revenue as an alternative to a solid and justifiable tax base, including corporate income tax, in this province.

So we want to go on the record once again, Mr. Speaker, as opposing this bill and want to indicate as well that we support the portions of the bill dealing with reductions to small business, but we can't vote for the bill.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 27 read a third time]

Bill 29

Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to move third reading of Bill 29, the Agriculture Financial Services Amendment Act, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, this is an important bill, and the proposed amendments will go a long way to help those in the agriculture industry and those in rural Alberta in particular, although not confined to them, to develop more business investment in their product and in their communities.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will allow individual farmers as investors to each borrow money from Ag Financial Services and then collectively invest in a project. Of course, as has been indicated through some of the debate on this bill, there is a strong interest in the communities – mainly rural I will admit, but obviously urban investors as well – to invest in more capacity in our slaughter area.

Through this bill individual shareholders will be able to access loans of up to \$2 million, which they could before, and be subject of course to the financing terms. None of that has changed or the requirements as they're set out. What this does is allow more than one investor to borrow up to \$2 million. It's a clarification of what the intention of the original program was.

10:00

Mr. Speaker, we do want to make it possible for entrepreneurs to invest in value-added opportunities in our province. There is no question that Ag Financial Services and now incorporated into it Alberta Opportunity Company have an outstanding record on loan losses of under 1 per cent, which I don't think anyone would really debate or argue is a bad figure.

Mr. Speaker, let me just conclude by taking the opportunity to say one more time that we grow a wonderful agricultural product and products here in the province of Alberta, whether it's barley or beef

or potatoes, sugar beets, lentils, and of course our emerging and growing small fruit industry, and we believe that our producers do deserve the opportunity to value add their product right here at home and keep the jobs right here at home.

I want to thank all members on all sides of the House for their support of this bill, and of course we'll urge all members to vote in favour of it in third reading. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. If the effect of this bill is to increase the productive capacity of the agricultural industry in Alberta, that's fantastic. I really hope that's how it plays out. There are of course risks with this, but we manage the risks. We take our risks. In many ways perhaps the risks are greater in doing nothing than endeavouring to put in place the mechanisms for Alberta's agricultural industry to expand here at home.

If we are able to increase the slaughtering capacity at home, the spinoffs of that are marvellous. I mean, every live animal we ship out of the country takes with it jobs, and if we can keep those jobs here, expand them here, develop them here, good for us. Let's hope it works out.

I'll certainly be supporting this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. minister to close debate?

Mrs. McClellan: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a third time]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 10:03 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, May 6, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 2004/05/06

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly some 20 bright-eyed grades 4, 5, and 6 students from New Brighden school. They are accompanied by parent helpers and drivers Twighla Christianson, Nicky Beynon, Delbert Pratt, Darren Simpson, and, if the House would indulge me some motherly pride, their teacher, my daughter Tami Cox. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly five very special guests. Nicolas Mancuso is a 13-year-old junior high student from Lyons, France. He's here as part of an education program where travel to other countries facilitates their studies in foreign languages. Nicolas is attending D.S. MacKenzie junior high school in Edmonton for three weeks. He's made the trip along with 24 other students, 16 of whom are in Edmonton and eight in Calgary. He's here today with his host family, who I'm proud to say are constituents in Edmonton-Whitemud, Ron and Karen Henderson, along with their children Lindsay and Thomas. In Lindsay's past she was an excellent ringette player; I'm sure she still is.

I might add that the Hendersons are ensuring that Nicolas will be taking some unique souvenirs back with him such as saskatoon jam and peanut butter and, of course, maple syrup, just to name a few. They will be going to Drumheller to the Royal Tyrrell Museum in the Deputy Premier's constituency. They'll be going to Lake Louise over the weekend. Nicolas's visit to Edmonton and to Canada is fast coming to a close, and I understand that Thomas is hoping to go back to France to do a reciprocal visit. I'd ask the five visitors to stand and please accept the warm traditional welcome of our Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I also have other guests today, and I'm pleased to introduce them to you and through you to members of the Assembly. They're here today to observe the estimates of the Department of Seniors. They're folks who are with the Elder Advocates, and my colleague from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview introduced them earlier this week and had a member's statement with respect to Lou and Ruth Adria, members of my constituency and people who constantly keep me apprised of issues in the community with respect to seniors and seniors' care.

Also, with them today are Anne Pavelich, Joe Green, Kathryn Kutt, Sam Francis, and Kay Reid. As I said, they're here to observe the estimates for the Department of Seniors. I'd ask them to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly family members of one of our Legislature pages, Vanessa Pillay. I would like to introduce her brother, Patrick Pillay, a grade 8 student at Kenilworth junior high school; her mother, Barbara Pillay, who works at the Northern Alberta Brain Injury Society; and her father, Joe Pillay, who works at the Boyle Street Co-op as a work experience co-ordinator. They are all very proud of Vanessa, as are all members in the Assembly. I would ask the family members to now please rise – they are in your gallery – and receive the warm welcome of everyone. Welcome.

It's also my pleasure to introduce four constituents of mine from the Edmonton-Mill Creek area who also are here this afternoon to observe the proceedings of the House and, in particular, estimates related to the Department of Seniors. We have with us Thomas Kennedy, Kathleen Kennedy, Henry Palindat, and Barbara Palindat. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome. Thank you all very much for coming as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly two constituents of Edmonton-Gold Bar. They are Frank and Joan Baer, and they live in the community of Forest Heights. Mr. Baer was born and raised in Edmonton. He's a retired plumber who worked for AGT, now Telus. Mrs. Baer at one time worked for the provincial department of agriculture. Together they raised two sons and two daughters, who all graduated from the University of Alberta and went on to complete their master's degrees as well. They now have nine grandchildren, six of whom live in Edmonton and three in Ottawa, and they are the proud grandparents of Legislature page Vanessa Pillay. They're in your gallery, Mr. Speaker. I would now ask them to rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise today on behalf of the Member for Livingstone-Macleod to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 14 bright, young, smart students from Glenwood, Alberta. They told me that that's true and that they would prove it by hard work and through their marks, so we'll hold them to that. They're accompanied today by their principal and teacher, Kelly Thomas, and his wife, Kathy. I would ask them to rise and please receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc.

Mr. Klapstein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have an introduction to make on behalf of the Minister of Learning. They are employees of Alberta Learning's corporate services division, and they are Mrs. Linda Warren, Miss Jenese Derby, Miss Tammy Embree, Mrs. Nadine Schrader, Miss Rita Craveiro, Mrs. Tasha Fadish, Mrs. Melanie White, Miss Erin Murray. I'd ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 17 very enthusiastic students from Kneehill Christian school, which

is just outside Linden, Alberta, and as you know, it's not very far from my place. They're here today accompanied by 10 adults, and I'll read their names off: Miss Terri Miller, their teacher; Miss Becky Baerg, another teacher; and parent helpers Mr. and Mrs. Virgil Unruh, Mr. and Mrs. Gary Klassen, Mr. and Mrs. Ron Isaac, as well as Mrs. Wanda Unruh and Mrs. Rosalie Unruh. I would ask them all to rise in the public gallery and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 21 very bright students from the Islamic school of Calgary. Among the students is my own niece, Samar Amery. The students are accompanied today by four adults: Rychelle Gibson, teacher; Chrefie Charanek, Hassan Ahmed, and Ryan Katchur. I'd like to ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly students from the Anne Fitzgerald school located in my constituency. They are of course studying politics as part of their curriculum and are here to observe the political process first-hand. I'd like to ask them to stand at this time. They're seated in the members' gallery. Along with the students are teacher Mr. Zenari and parents and helpers Mr. Ford and Mrs. Klassen. They should be standing, and I'd like the House to give them a very warm welcome at this time.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm pleased to introduce to you and to Members of the Legislative Assembly two guests from Tourism Medicine Hat. Tourism Medicine Hat operates two visitor information centres in southeastern Alberta, a year-round operation in Medicine Hat, as well as the Travel Alberta visitor information centre at Walsh on the Saskatchewan border. Serving as the gateway to Alberta, Canada's sunniest city welcomes travellers from across the continent and, indeed, around the world. Last year the Medicine Hat centre alone served nearly 50,000 visitors. In Edmonton to participate in training sessions to prepare for the upcoming tourist season, they are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask Dominique Hirsch, general manager, and Jennifer McKim, marketing manager, to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of all members.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To you and through you to members of the Assembly it's my great pleasure to introduce Luke Wilson. Luke attends Avalon junior high school in the city. He plays in the school band, he's a computer whiz, he's an honour and distinction student, and he is the brother of our page Natalie Wilson, who is profoundly proud of her younger brother. So we'd ask Luke to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed my pleasure to introduce to you and through you four special guests that are with us

today. As indicated by the carnation that is on your desk, May is MS Awareness Month, and I have several people connected with the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Alberta division, Edmonton chapter, that are with us today.

Before I introduce them, they asked me what the best way was to extend an invitation to all Members of the Legislative Assembly to get involved in a Super Cities Walk or the bike tours that will be held through the months of May and June to raise needed funds for research and programs for MS. I'm that conduit, so I am inviting you, my colleagues, to get involved. Please participate.

With us today is Mr. David Andrews, who is a board member with the MS Society, Alberta division; Joan Ozirny, who is the vice-chair on the board of the MS Edmonton chapter. Joan went to school with the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster and was telling me some very interesting facts prior to question period. Marie Iwanow is the communications manager, Alberta division, and is responsible for the many hundreds and hundreds of carnations that will go out across the province this month, and Alison Hagan is the director of development, Alberta division. I would ask my guests to rise and please receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a gentleman I have come to know well, particularly through his very fast typing fingers on the e-mail. I would like to ask Kevan Rhead to rise, please. He's in the public gallery today. Mr. Rhead is a seniors' advocate, and I'm sure that many of you have heard from him. So please join me in welcoming Mr. Rhead.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise this afternoon and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mario Molinari and Teresa Molinari. They are seated in the public gallery, and with your permission I'd ask both of them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to all of my colleagues in the Assembly a number of seniors. They are here today to observe the debate on the Seniors' budget estimates and to take part in the seniors' rally outside on the Legislature steps this afternoon. My guests are seated in the public gallery. I'll identify them by their names and ask them to rise and wait until they receive the warm welcome of the Assembly: Alan Dane, Nadine Hooper, Geraldine Ennis, Gordon Steele. Would you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly a constituent of mine who has been doing business in and has resided in Edmonton-Highlands for over 25 years. He is here today to observe the proceedings of the Legislature. I would ask Mr. Leslie Sax to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to

members of the Assembly a group of seniors who are in the public gallery today. They are here to observe the debate on the estimates for the Department of Seniors, and I would ask them to rise as I read their names and then receive the warm welcome of the Assembly: Pauline Ricard, who is a constituent of mine, Olive Thorne, and Irene Krasowski. I'd ask them to please rise if they're here.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two individuals from Toronto, Ontario, that are very special to our page Maya Gordon, who is also a constituent of mine. They are her aunt and uncle. I would ask Barbara Gordon, who is an actress in Ontario, and Doug Rodger, who is a playwright, to please rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Automobile Insurance Reform

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week the Premier challenged me to compare my auto insurance costs in Alberta to those in other provinces and table the results. Well, consider it done, Mr. Premier, and the proof is clear. For coverage equivalent to my family's, auto insurance is \$1,200 to \$2,000 a year cheaper in provinces with public auto insurance than it is here in Alberta. To the Premier: will this government finally consider public auto insurance given that it could save countless Alberta families thousands of dollars a year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, to address the preamble and the news release that was issued by the Liberals, the news release states, if you don't mind me using names, "Taft was challenged by Premier Klein yesterday in the legislature to prove that public auto insurance would reduce his premiums." That's not what I said at all, and if I recall, the challenge wasn't to this hon. member. It was to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. So that is not true and it's misleading.

Mr. Speaker, we are working through the process. No, we don't plan to go to socialized insurance like they have in Saskatchewan, the kind of insurance that the Liberals so adore. Our goals with auto insurance reform remain unchanged, and we're going to live up to our commitments. I'm not going to speculate about what the detailed regulations will involve and how they will impact drivers other than to say that we will fulfill our commitment that rates in Alberta will be comparable to those in other provinces. For the majority of drivers, including most members of the opposition, I'm sure that will be the case if it's not already the case.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I won't answer right now because I'm sure that there will be ample opportunity during the supplementaries to get into some of the details relative to his press release and his claims.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, does the Premier expect Albertans to be satisfied that under his government's plan premiums won't go up when under a public auto insurance plan like we're advocating, premiums could go down by thousands of dollars a year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, maybe the hon. member will explain to the media outside the House – I know he won't here – how he plans to dismantle all of the insurance companies that exist here in Alberta and say: with the great hand of government the Liberals will now socialize all insurance.

It sounds like Allende in Chile, you know, when he took over all the copper mines and said: the Americans are out; the government now owns all the copper mines, all the minerals, all the resources, all the mining, all the newspapers. Pinochet came in, Mr. Speaker – and I'm not saying that Pinochet was any better, but because of the only elected communist in Chile, Allende, and the socialist reforms he put in, Pinochet was forced, I would say, to mount a coup. As a dictator he was no better than Allende. Of course, the debate still goes on. All you need to do is to go to the web site. As a matter of fact, I did a paper on it, and I'll give it to you.

The Speaker: Thank you very much.

Speaker's Ruling

Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: You know, answers in this Assembly are oftentimes the result of the question. Can I just again repeat *Beauchesne* 409. *Beauchesne* 409(3) says,

The question ought to seek information and, therefore, cannot be based upon a hypothesis, cannot seek an opinion, either legal or otherwise, and must not suggest its own answer, be argumentative or make representations." Now, these are the rules.

The hon. leader.

Automobile Insurance Reform

(continued)

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll draw the Premier's attention to page 1210 in *Hansard* and the debate there.

My question: why won't the Premier concede that his current plan has gone way off the road and simply give Albertans public auto insurance now?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know if the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition can't understand or simply won't understand, refuses to listen. As I've said, the caucus of this government is currently developing regulations associated with this plan. Nothing has been finalized yet, but we do have some broad policy objectives to achieve. We want to make sure that good young male drivers are not penalized simply because they are male and between the ages of 16 and 25, we want to make sure that male seniors 65 years of age and over are not penalized simply because they are male and they are older, and we want to make sure that those in the mid-range are paying comparable rates.

Now, as much as the hon. Leader of the Opposition is trying to make a great deal out of this, there are all kinds of things that he misses in his press release. First of all, he fails to mention that there was a disclaimer on all three web sites from Manitoba, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan that his researchers researched, and those disclaimers clearly show that the figures may not be accurate and are provided as estimates only. In his news release he failed to mention that his wife had a speeding ticket and she is designated as a driver. We don't know if that information was included in the Saskatchewan, B.C., and Manitoba scenario.

The Speaker: I think we'll just go on to the second question. The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Education Funding

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government continues to send mixed messages about the actual dollars it allocates to public education, mixing past funding commitments with present and future commitments and leaving Albertans with the impression that the recommendations of the Learning Commission will be fully funded. Well, that's just not the case. Early indications show that school boards across the province will be carrying deficits this fall. My questions are to the Premier. Will the Premier fully fund the arbitrated teachers' settlement so that school boards like Calgary, Red Deer, and Edmonton do not have to start the school year this fall in the red?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Learning, as you notice, is not here. I will take the question under advisement.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, again to the Premier: why haven't school boards like Edmonton public been able to hire back all the teachers that were laid off last year if not for the lack of government funding?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, all I can say is that there was an increase in the budget of some \$284 million. That is not peanuts. We're talking about a lot more money than a \$27.50 jug of orange juice, which they like to talk about.

Relative to the question I will take it under advisement for the hon. minister.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that teachers in Calgary are on the verge of striking over classroom conditions, will the Premier admit that he's not keeping his promise to fully fund the recommendations of the Learning Commission?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, we're working through the recommendations of the Learning Commission.

Again, relative to the specifics I'll take the question under advisement.

The Speaker: The third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Gasoline Prices

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is very hard for the Premier to understand the impact on motorists of high gasoline prices when seven days a week, 24 hours a day an airplane taxi paid for by taxpayers is a phone call away. With gasoline prices around 80 cents a litre the Premier is now considering pre-election gasoline rebates, but in 2001 when gasoline was around 75 cents a litre, the Official Opposition called for an all-party committee from this House to study high retail gasoline prices and the Premier again waffled on the issue. My first question is to the Premier. After dropping the ball in 2001, will the Premier now immediately strike an all-party committee to investigate high retail gasoline prices here in this province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, first of all, to address the preamble, the airplanes are not a taxi service. The Liberal opposition, of course, save for one, won't know about the use of aircraft or anything else

because they're all from Edmonton. But I'll tell you that had the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar used taxicabs instead of his own vehicle, he would have saved the taxpayers probably thousands of dollars travelling around his constituency, incurring a cost last year of over \$10,000 to travel around a constituency that you could spit across.

Mr. Speaker, we will be visiting the whole situation of gasoline prices. You have to understand that this is not a phenomenon that is common to Alberta. I've just been advised by one of my colleagues that a friend of hers in British Columbia, in Nanaimo, was paying \$1.02 a litre. I'm advised by another colleague that of the price of gasoline approximately \$10, \$11 is in taxes, and almost \$7 of that goes to their federal cousins in Ottawa.

Having said all that, Mr. Speaker, we will be examining the whole issue of gasoline prices, and, no, we are not going to strike an all-party committee.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the Premier: given that the Premier has struck committees on high electricity prices and high insurance rates – this hon. member travels across the province trying to find solutions to the problems you created – why won't you now strike an all-party committee to study high gasoline prices? What are you afraid of?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, that's very interesting. I'm wondering if during the course of his investigations he charged mileage to the government, if he used his own vehicle, at 37 cents a kilometre, or did he by chance use a government aircraft from time to time? I don't know. You know, maybe he can respond to that.

Mr. Speaker, we're going to look at this situation.

You know, it's amazing. I have to commend the *Edmonton Sun* because really it was a suggestion of one of the columnists, Neil Waugh. Of course, the Liberals either steal it from the NDs – right? – or they steal it from the *Edmonton Sun* or they do their research in the *Edmonton Journal*. In this case, they're following up on an *Edmonton Sun* story that was initiated by one of their columns. This is a good example for all Albertans to observe of how the Liberals do their research and how they develop policy.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: instead of throwing pre-election money at the problem, why not deal with sky-high gasoline prices directly? Why are you refusing to tackle the problem?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, to say that we are refusing to tackle the problem is not telling the truth again. I have indicated to the hon. member that we will be having a caucus, cabinet, perhaps Treasury Board discussion relative to this issue. I indicated to the columnist that while it may sound like a good idea, and certainly all Albertans would like to receive some money, we would have to examine the downsides as well. Like everything else, you weigh the pros and the cons. All the Liberals do is stand up and spout off and say whatever is politically right. In other words, they find out which way the wind is blowing one day, hold their finger up, and, well, if the wind changes the next day, they change their tune.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Health Care Reforms

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past few years the Tory government has hiked seniors' health care premiums 30 per cent, long-term care fees by over 50 per cent, and eliminated universal eye care and dental benefits, but this is small change compared to what the government has in store for seniors in its still-secret health care plan. At the recent Tory party convention the health minister unveiled a proposal to cap or eliminate provincial drug coverage outside of hospitals, a change that would take more than \$300 million out of the pockets of the province's seniors each year. My questions are to the Premier. Given that the government has already hiked copayments on the seniors' drug plan by 30 per cent, why would the government add to the financial misery of seniors by hatching a secret plan to either cap or even eliminate seniors' prescription drug coverage?

Speaker's Ruling Anticipation

The Speaker: The hon. leader knows that the tradition in the House is that the day on which certain estimates are before the Assembly, questions will not be asked in the question period about the estimates of that particular department. As I understand, on the Order Paper, notice of which was given at least one week ago, this afternoon the main estimates consideration is the Department of Seniors. So if questions are dealing with that that will impact the budget or be a part of the budget, our tradition has been not to deal with it. If it's a question dealing with general policy, that's another matter.

If the Premier wishes to deal with this question, he can.

Mr. Mason: It's health care, Mr. Premier. It's health care. Nice dodge.

The Speaker: No, no, no. Please. Sit down.

To the third party House leader: that last interjection is totally out of order. There is no dodge. We are dealing with the rules of this Assembly, rules which the member himself has agreed to and has been an author of. You cannot play the game both ways, hon. member. That was an unnecessary statement.

I'm prepared to accept and recognize the leader of the alternate party to proceed with his second question now.

Health Care Reforms

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions relate to health care. The second question to the Premier: given that seniors receive three-quarters of the \$400 million in provincially paid drug benefits, why won't the Premier admit that drug benefits can't be capped or eliminated without hurting seniors?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, this whole question relates to health and health reform although it does relate in some ways to seniors. As you know, we are working through the health reform package right now, and it will be tabled sometime in June for all to see. There will be a public consultation process, and vis-à-vis drug costs as they relate to seniors or any other segment of society, the hon. member will have ample opportunity at that time to comment on what the plan says.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplementary to the

Premier. I'll be certainly happy to wait for the Premier's unveiling of a new plan. In the meantime when will the government accept the New Democratic opposition's proposal to eliminate seniors' health care premiums, thereby saving seniors living on fixed incomes \$90 million?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister of health may wish to supplement, and with your permission I'll ask him to do that, but I want to point out that approximately 165,000 seniors, or 50 per cent of the total seniors population, those over 65 years of age in this province, pay absolutely no health insurance premiums at all. Another 6 per cent of the seniors pay partial premiums. I would say that the estimated forgone revenue of health care premium exemptions for low-income seniors in Alberta is approximately \$100 million annually.

Mr. Speaker, when we dealt with this issue, we had some difficulty. It's always difficult to deal with seniors' issues, but we as a government have a fundamental policy and philosophy that we offer a hand up rather than a handout and that those who can truly care for themselves in society shall do so, whether they're young people, middle-aged people, or elderly people. Those seniors who have high incomes and can afford to pay premiums pay premiums. Those seniors who are in the low-income range – and I mentioned that 50 per cent fall into that range – pay no premiums at all. People in the mid-range who have not reached the peak and are somewhere in between pay partial payments relative to their premiums.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Gasoline Pricing

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Residents of St. Albert recently and in particular in this past week were shocked, surprised, and somewhat alarmed to see the rising high price of gas at the pumps. I'd include myself in that. The argument and the question that has been posed to me by my constituents and which I pose to the Minister of Energy in this Assembly: if we provincially own the oil and gas rights here in this province, why is the price of gas at the pump not lower in Alberta than other places in Canada?

Mr. Smith: Well, in fact, Alberta does average the lowest price per litre of gas in Canada over an average piece of time. A barrel of oil goes into the refinery, and roughly around 160 litres of gas are produced from each barrel. That is then distributed throughout Alberta, western Canada. We ship gasoline as far east as Winnipeg and as far west as the island.

2:10

There are certain market factors that do impact on the price of gasoline. Those are switching over from winter stocks and moving to a different octane rating in the summer. There is also the increased demand. Any time there's such tremendous economic growth in a province like Alberta, it strains the supply lines. Mr. Speaker, as you well know, there have been no new refineries announced to refine more gasoline and bring it to the marketplace.

So our gasoline is a function of supply and demand. There have been countless studies put forward through the Competition Bureau, through federal bodies. They have found no collusion, no interference from the industries.

If you look at the price of gas, you can see a substantial amount of tax attached to the gas, Mr. Speaker. I have, for example, a Petro-Canada receipt in my hand here. It says: provincial fuel tax, \$4.06. But then I go on: federal excise tax, \$4.51, and GST, tax on a tax,

\$2.43. Total taxes on a \$37 purchase: \$11. That's outrageous from a federal Liberal perspective.

Mrs. O'Neill: My one and only supplemental to the same minister: could you please tell this Assembly what the government has forecasted for the price of oil for the remainder of the current fiscal year and what assumptions the department has made for the price of oil for the remainder of this budget year?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I would direct the member to pages 98 through 100 of the business plans and the document Economic Outlook: Budget 2004, which points out the process by which the Department of Energy makes its forecast, to find out that in fact we're on the low side. It's a conservative forecast yet still progressive in nature. I think that I would much rather be on the low side of the forecast than the high side. We do take a number of experts' forecasts into play, and then we do make the calculation.

But we have to remember, Mr. Speaker, that today there are terrorist threats against the major supplier on the North American continent. Eastern Canada buys its oil to refine into gasoline on the high seas. So as much as we can control prices here with the production in Alberta, it's a very small part of the overall cost of gasoline that's added across Canada and across North America, and that in itself leads to the pricing of a commodity in a fair market competitive situation.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for St. Albert, are you finished?

Mrs. O'Neill: No. I'd like to have a second supplemental. My question, then, zeroes in on the question of assumptions that were made by the department. I'll maybe even rephrase it into predictions or the future of the price of oil or gas.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that the beaches are littered with those who have tried to make accurate oil forecasts. As early as three or four years ago oil was \$23 a barrel, and it stopped a great deal of exploration. The assumptions are that we try to forecast the orderly flow of supply from the Middle East. We try to forecast the demand, the amount that would go through refineries from the increased refinery base, and then, I guess, you stir it all together and you try to come up with an answer that fits the circumstances and world events of the day. Frankly, to see gasoline rise at this rate during the year of a presidential election is quite surprising. So there are a number of factors that go into it, some scientific and some just art.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Peace River.

SuperNet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Innovation and Science's analogy comparing the SuperNet to a firehose and regular Internet to a garden hose can also describe the flow of dollars from the taxpayers' pocket. With the garden hose taxpayers paid one charge for the Internet. The firehose, or SuperNet, involves a hookup charge, a service charge, and a separate Internet provider charge. What started as a trickle has now become a flood. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Given that the minister hasn't been able to tell us what the SuperNet is going to cost over the next 10 years, how do we know that taxpayers aren't going to be on the hook for another NovAtel?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, as I've discussed many times in this Assembly, the SuperNet is an infrastructure development that takes a data transmission network right across Alberta. Bell West as part of their commitment is investing a minimum of \$100 million into the base network. The Alberta government is investing \$193 million into the extended network, which completes the infrastructure build. That number has been the number that we've used when the contract was signed, has been used when we gave our estimates, and continues to be used today.

Ms Blakeman: Can the minister tell us who is going to pay for the equipment needed, such as new computers, video cameras, software, et cetera, for libraries and others to take advantage of the SuperNet and perform high-speed data transfers? Who's supposed to pay for that?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, businesses, companies, governments, and individuals have been buying computer equipment, software for years and years. That's no change from today. With the advent of technology – and I'm sure the hon. member would not want to go back to the days of eight-track – we can deliver more bandwidth, better services at efficient prices.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: when will the service contract between Axia and the government end? Is it 10 years after the 2002 signing or 10 years after the build is complete?

Mr. Doerksen: Well, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the specifics of that question I don't know the exact answer. It is a 10-year contract, and we can provide more of the exact details that she has asked for in writing to the hon. member, and we will do that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Peace River/Fort McMurray Connector Highway

Mr. Friedel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Transportation. We've heard a lot in the past months about using the P3 concept to facilitate capital projects in this province. A group of municipalities and industry stakeholders and consultants have expressed an interest in developing an east/west connector highway between Fort McMurray and Peace River using this concept. These folks have met with the minister on several occasions and have been received with interest and even some encouragement. They tell me, however, that when they approach department officials on this project, the responses are somewhat vague and that they feel they're getting a mixed message. I'm wondering if the minister could advise us whether this east/west connector highway is a reasonable candidate for a P3 project.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This particular stretch of road was studied this past year. The anticipated cost is about \$90 million. It is an important stretch of road to shorten trips to Fort McMurray from Peace River by many hours. In discussing whether the proposal of a P3 would be applicable to this particular project, I would say that the kind of public/private partnership that would apply to this will be similar to the Brazeau bridge, where a number of private-sector companies, mostly oil and gas, some forestry, came

together and said, "You know, we will share in the cost of this road; it will certainly reduce our operational costs over X number of years," and they'll do sort of a net present value calculation and come forward in a partnership of that sort. This would certainly move the project up on the general capital plan, especially when a number of private-sector companies come forward and offer some assistance.

Mr. Friedel: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker, and following up on his last remark: could he tell us more specifically, maybe, what this group could do to advance this project to a higher priority within the department and the overall capital budget?

2:20

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, perhaps I should use an example of what's presently happening on highway 2. There's a new interchange being built at Airdrie, and it's to deal with an ever-increasing amount of traffic because of a new subdivision. It would have been some time before a new interchange or an enhanced interchange would have been done on our capital plan, but with the developer coming forward and offering a million dollars toward the total construction of the enhancement of this interchange, certainly that moved it up significantly on the capital plan.

My suggestion is that we work together with private-sector companies and move this project on that kind of basis.

Mr. Friedel: My final supplemental to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: considering that P3s are somewhat innovative and depend on the private sector for a significant financial contribution, could the minister tell us what he's doing to ensure that the private sector is adequately involved in the development of the procedural guidelines for P3s?

Mr. Stelmach: The only project that we are proceeding with in a public/private partnership is the southeast leg of Anthony Henday Drive. Certainly, in developing the request for qualification, the request for a proposal, all those companies involved, whether it be in design, financing, maintenance, were involved in developing the proposal. I would suggest that the same holds true here.

This road would be not only good for industry but also an opportunity for the people living in that part of the province, the Peace River area, to get to Fort McMurray much sooner and, of course, participate in the excellent job opportunities that exist there today.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Prescription Drug Coverage

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Today Albertans learned about Kiernan Lang, a 22-year-old Alberta university student who is struggling with paying out of pocket for expensive cancer treatment drugs. It is this government's policy of making middle-income Albertans pay for medically necessary drugs that may leave Kiernan without enough money to attend university next year. This is not universal coverage. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. What is this minister prepared to do to help Albertans like Kiernan Lang who are being burdened by paying out of pocket for expensive, medically necessary drugs?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I can advise the hon. member, although he probably does know already, that eligible drugs that are used in the direct treatment of cancer are provided by the Alberta Cancer Board

at no cost to the patient. However, Albertans are responsible for the costs of prescription drugs that are used outside of hospitals.

Now, I'm not going to comment on the particular circumstances surrounding this individual. However, one of the things that is not covered entirely is the types of drugs that are associated with nausea, for example, while getting treatment for cancer, and as a result, Mr. Speaker, people who have the need for such drugs are generally covered by a person's supplementary health coverage.

Now, for Albertans without supplementary health coverage, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta government does offer nongroup coverage through Alberta Blue Cross to make sure that Albertans have access to an economical supplementary health benefits program. For a relatively modest monthly premium plan subscribers are covered for 3,700 different drugs under the Alberta drug benefit list. For individuals who are at lower incomes, there are subsidies for nongroup coverage available to those groups of people as well.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why is this government continuing with a policy that too often drives middle-income Albertans into poverty simply because they need medically necessary medication?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I've already outlined for the hon. member what program is in place for coverage of drugs. Those individuals that are subscribers under Alberta Blue Cross only pay 30 per cent of any eligible drug's cost up to a maximum payment of \$25 per prescription. That strikes me as being very good value indeed, sir.

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: can the minister indicate whether that plan is available to people who are diagnosed with a condition before they have the plan? Can they then get on the plan or not?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'll take that question under advice.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Beef Exports to the United States

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. All cattle producers were very pleased and relieved to hear about the April 19, 2004, USDA announcement that removed all restrictions on the import of beef from cattle less than 30 months of age. However, that relief was short-lived after R-CALF, a U.S. protectionist lobbyist organization, filed a court challenge and received a temporary restraining order against the April 16 decision. Recent stories claim that the USDA and R-CALF have reached a decision to keep the restraining order in place. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Can she explain how this decision affects Alberta's beef trade with the United States?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the April 19 announcement would have allowed bone-in beef and ground beef to move into the U.S. market. In fact, an easy way to identify what could move would be all edible parts, in essence, with the April 19 announcement.

The R-CALF request for an injunction, which was granted, was a huge disappointment to I think cattlemen on both sides of the border. R-CALF is a cattlemen's organization. They tended to be a litigious organization. Their name is cattlemen's legal defence fund, and we've experienced their litigation practices in the past. I think the largest disappointment is that this does nothing to further the

economic interests of the industry on either side of the border. However, having said that, Mr. Speaker, we live with the fact that this has happened.

The USDA apparently has come to an agreement with this group that they will not continue the plan to move bone-in beef into the U.S. Having said that, the USDA has also committed to putting out the final rule on the movement of live cattle and product from over-30-month cattle as soon as possible.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can the minister tell us what the trade experts in her department are telling her about why and how R-CALF was able to get a temporary restraining order?

The Speaker: Well, hon. member and hon. Deputy Premier, this is an item that occurred before, I guess, a quasi-judicial grouping in the United States. What we're talking about now is a very subjective view about something here. So if the hon. Deputy Premier has a specific answer, give one, but if not, we'll move on.

Beef Exports to the United States

(continued)

Mrs. McClellan: Yes. Well, Mr. Speaker, all I would say is that R-CALF successfully argued that the USDA did not follow its own administrative procedures. That was the argument.

Of course, what the USDA have told us repeatedly in our quest to have the border opened was that it was important through this rule-making process that they do follow their administrative procedures, which I believe is why they've been very careful to go through the comment period and to review the comments and follow those procedures to avoid this happening again. Of course, Mr. Speaker, that rule is what we're all very anxiously waiting for.

We've had some optimistic comments from the visit of our Prime Minister with the President. The President has said that they want to see the border open as quickly as possible. The President has stated publicly that the opening of the border will be based on sound science, and, Mr. Speaker, we are confident from our analysis that sound science would dictate that that border should open to live cattle immediately.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: Madam Minister, can you tell us what the next steps would be or how we as a government can help our producers to overcome this last hurdle?

2:30

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, my understanding is that the temporary restraining order will stay in place until the U.S. publishes the final rule. We're working with our federal government, with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, with the Canadian embassy to resolve, of course, this troubling issue and to clarify how this restraining order affects our facilities in Canada, our slaughterhouses. But the ultimate answer in this is a final publication of a rule of a border opening based on science, and we hope that that'll happen very soon.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Ophthalmology Services in Calgary

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 2002 the Minister of Health and Wellness approved an order to bring a pediatric ophthalmologist from Colombia to work in Calgary because there were no Canadian pediatric ophthalmologists available. However, the Liberal opposition has learned that not only were Canadians available; at least one of these pediatric ophthalmologists actually approached the Calgary health region to work in Calgary. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. How does the minister explain approving a part 5 designation to bring in Dr. Castro and her husband to work in Calgary when not only were Canadian pediatric ophthalmologists available; they were actually approaching, writing letters to the Calgary health region to work in Calgary?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I did answer this question in some detail on an earlier occasion with respect to the process of how part 5 designations are approved. If regional health authorities, through their heads of various departments, believe that there is a need to hire a physician with particular qualifications or a specialist designation, they give their best effort to go through a process by which they come up with the best person available for the job. They do seek to fill that position from among other Canadians, but should they not find a suitable candidate, then they make their best effort to find that individual from elsewhere.

In this case, Mr. Speaker, details elude me at this time. I'm caught by surprise by this hon. member's question, he having asked it before so long ago. Dr. Castro has come through a part 5 designation to provide important services to the regional health authority. Dr. Castro is also married to another Dr. Castro, who is also providing services to our public health system. I would refer the hon. member to my earlier responses, which provide more detail, he having advised me that he was going to ask the question in advance. I'd refer him to *Hansard* for a review of a more complete answer.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the minister's answer.

Will the minister investigate the potential conflict of interest that exists when foreign ophthalmologists are brought in to work at a private facility owned by the chief of ophthalmology for the Calgary health region while Canadian ophthalmologists are turned away?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, that's virtually the same question that he asked before, and I refer him to the same source of *Hansard*.

Dr. Taft: It's not at all the same question. We'll try differently. To the same minister: given that the minister has said in this House, quote, I have heard nothing but praise for the work that is being done by doctors Maria and Alberto Castro, end quote, will the minister release the results of a review undertaken by the health region into the work of Dr. Alberto Castro at the Holy Cross facility?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of any such report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Beef Industry

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today the House of Commons standing committee on agriculture recommended to the Canadian Parliament that Cargill foods and Lakeside Packers, as well as another packer, be found in contempt of Parlia-

ment for failing to open their books so that Canadians would know whether or not they profited unfairly from the BSE crisis at the same time that cattle producers were going broke. My question is to the Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Does the minister still believe, as she reported on March 11, 2004, that Alberta meat packers did not profit unfairly from the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis? If she does not, why not?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we reported in the release of a document which was a review of pricing was that we did not find evidence that would suggest that there were undue profits made.

However, if the hon. member will just take his recollection a little bit further, what we did do and say was that the Auditor General was reviewing all of the programs that we provided, the \$400 million, 90 per cent of which went directly to producers, to ensure that those funds were indeed put out to the people that the program intended them for.

I was surprised this morning to hear on one of the newscasts that we had avoided telling people where the \$400 million went. I mean, nothing could be further from the truth. We have said consistently since the beginning of this that there will be a record of every cheque that was written to every recipient with the amount on it. However, I have resisted doing this before the program was completed, and as soon as that is completed, that will be delivered. Then people can see the facts and draw their conclusions.

As far as the issue with the packers and their information before the House of Commons committee, that is clearly outside of my jurisdiction and none of my business.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. If the packers indeed refuse to open their books for the Auditor General in his investigation, will the government support the Auditor General and take action to force the packers to open their books?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, you know, that is the difficulty with questions from this hon. member. That's speculative, hypothetical. There is absolutely no indication at all that the Auditor General has had any concern about getting information.

You know, it's bad enough when you raise questions about issues that you have some basis for knowledge, but to put that out there is totally, totally wrong and unfair. If the hon. member can show me that the Auditor General has said or indicated in any way that he is having difficulty in obtaining information and that that is hampering his investigation, bring it to this House. But to put that suggestion out there in the public with no basis in fact is absolutely wrong. It's irresponsible. However, it is in the manner that I have become accustomed to from that hon. member.

Mr. Speaker, this does no service to this Legislature or to the industry that is suffering from the worst devastation it has ever experienced in its history.

The Speaker: I'm going to recognize the hon. member for his third question, but it should be noted as well that the Auditor General is a servant of the Legislative Assembly of the province of Alberta, not the government.

The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker.

Will the minister or will the minister not commit to encouraging meat packers like Lakeside and Cargill to open their books so that

Albertans can find out whether or not they have unduly profited by the BSE crisis?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, as you have clearly laid out, the Auditor General is an officer of this Assembly. The Auditor General is quite capable of managing his affairs, and he does not need interference, interjection, or assistance from me. If he does, if by chance he would want something, he would contact me, which he has not done. I am astounded by this line of questioning unless the Auditor General has contacted the hon. House leader for the third party. If he has, bring it forward. I'd be happy to deal with it.

Again, Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General is an officer of this Assembly. He will conduct the investigation in the manner that he should, and we will co-operate with him in any way we can to move this forward.

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness to supplement an answer given earlier. Our rules are that once you do that, there's an opportunity for the individual who raised the question to you to ask another one.

Mr. Mar: Yes, sir.

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Prescription Drug Coverage (continued)

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I took an earlier question from the hon. Leader of the Opposition. To the best of my recollection his question was: is this Blue Cross coverage available to individuals with a pre-existing condition? I'm advised that the answer is yes.

In further supplement, Mr. Speaker, with respect to copayment for nonhospital pharmaceuticals, I wish to indicate that there are copayments in the following countries for nonhospital pharmaceuticals: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and also the United Kingdom, sir.

Dr. Taft: That's fine. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I call on the first of four hon. members to participate today, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to Members of the Assembly a family visiting from Botswana, Africa. Their names are Virendra and Poonam Miglani and their daughter Paawan. They're accompanied by Mrs. Prem Khurana, a friend of the family. I would now ask these guests, who are seated in the public gallery, to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Stettler.

MS Awareness Month

Mrs. Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. May is MS Awareness Month. In 1998, much to my chagrin, I was diagnosed as having MS. Family history, none. However, MS is very prevalent in certain areas or pockets within the province. Two come to mind, one being Lacombe, the other Barrhead, and I happen to live in Lacombe.

Known as the mystery disease, MS manifests itself differently in each and every person. The cause is still unknown. As such, finding a cure remains our number one goal.

I am more fortunate than some as I have what is referred to as relapsing/remitting MS; 97.8 per cent of the time with medication my disease is manageable. However, on occasion, when I least expect it or want it to happen, I wake up knowing that today is going to be an MS day or days. This is a time when I very much need the support, understanding, and co-operation of family, friends, and my employer. Not giving in only worsens the condition.

I have long been an advocate for those with MS or those living with someone who has MS. Presently I'm honoured to be serving as a member on the MS Society of Canada, Alberta division board.

I would like to praise the good work of the MS Society, Alberta division and the many local chapters, and I extend a huge bouquet to my wonderful, knowledgeable, hard-working neurologist, Dr. Mary Lou Myles, for all her good work related to MS and MS research.

Also, special thanks and kudos to our Minister of Health and Wellness as this will be year 3 that Gary, Nancy, and wee Mackenzie have willingly participated. Our minister will once again be biking on June 13 from Lacombe to Sylvan Lake for those with MS. All pledges on his behalf will be gratefully accepted.

This month and next there will be numerous Super Cities walks for MS as well as bike tours throughout the province. As honorary spokesperson for the Red Deer Cities Walk I urge you to participate. Monies raised will go to needed research and programs.

Like the increase in incidence of diabetes, the numbers for MS are also on the rise. Please help us in the fight against multiple sclerosis. Only by working together can we make a difference.

Thank you.

The Speaker: As the hon. member had mentioned the name Barrhead in her particular statement, I would like to advise all Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta that the volunteers in the Barrhead area have an annual horse ride and in recent years have raised over \$250,000.

Energy Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Energy deregulation has been an absolute and catastrophic failure. Not only has it cost Albertans \$8 billion; it has also deprived children of swimming pools, left seniors out in the cold, and robbed many small business owners of their livelihoods.

The indoor pool in Ryley was forced to close its doors to children in September because utility costs soared by 175 per cent. Two Hills closed its pool in August because its energy bills rose from \$1,500 per month to \$5,000. Fortunately, the pool has since reopened.

The Caslan community hall is on the verge of closing because sky-high utility bills have zapped all of the hall's extra funds. The Lac La Biche Regional Recreational Board posted a deficit of \$30,000 last year, 80 per cent of which was directly due to huge energy costs. The curling club in Elmworth was forced to close after its utility bills skyrocketed from \$4,000 per year to \$12,000. The same worries have plagued a twin hockey arena in Edmonton whose power bills have doubled to \$2,400 thanks to electricity deregulation.

An employee at the Grande Prairie Salvation Army has publicly stated that there are seniors who are, quote, sitting out there right

now who have had their gas and power cut off because they can't afford to pay the high rates, end of quote.

A business owner from Vulcan had to close one of his two businesses because he couldn't afford the \$1,200 utility bill each month.

A number of businesses in Pincher Creek have closed their doors because they could not meet the cost of lighting and heating their stores. Several of these owners found a lawyer to discuss the idea of a class-action lawsuit against the Alberta government. Their lawyer believes such a lawsuit may have merit, stating, quote: this whole deregulation has been such a disaster, and people have suffered, end of quote.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

New School Initiative

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past five years intense residential development has been occurring in my constituency of Calgary-West, as in many periphery areas of Calgary and other locations in Alberta. The schools in the western new growth area of Calgary-West are and were very overcrowded while many in the eastern older part were very underutilized, resulting in a low utilization rate for my sector, far below the 85 per cent average required before new capital funding would be granted by the province for the construction of new schools. Sixty per cent of K to 12 students were and are daily leaving the new growth area to attend schools in the underutilized area and beyond.

Feeling the frustration of many parents, I started the New Schools Initiative, or NSI, Committee in October 2002, inviting key stakeholders – my alderman, CBE trustee, Calgary Catholic trustee, parents, the private sector, and the Department of Infrastructure – and they all attended regularly. They came because they cared about the needs of students.

All the committee work was focused on how to acquire many new schools as soon as possible using approaches other than the traditional. It focused on all sources of funding, the minimum physical infrastructure to ensure a quality learning environment, life cycle of infrastructure, public/private partnerships, and the model school as a cornerstone of the community, incorporating compatible facilities and services.

Mr. Speaker, there were many learnings because of NSI: that key stakeholders need to work with each other, that each key stakeholder brings a valid perspective to the table, that we all need to acknowledge roadblocks we create, and that we need to be flexible to bring about good change. The NSI has recently concluded its formal life, but its learnings and new relationships will carry on with each member of the committee.

Thank you to the Premier and the ministers of Infrastructure and Learning for their support and to the committee members, being Shelley Allchurch, Doug Balsden, Lawrence Bortoluzzi, Ellen Breen, Guy Buchanan, Lois Burke-Gaffney, Craig Burrows, Barry Day, Mike Irving, Mary Lou Mendyk, Dave Michie, Darlene Nyegaard, Carole Oliver, Stephen Stewart, and Lisa Hofmeister, my assistant in the Calgary-West office.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Comprehensive Arts Ticketing Service

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to recognize a new initiative for not-for-profit arts groups developed by Pump-house Theatres Society in Calgary. What started as a way to improve

Pumphouse's own ticketing service grew into a bigger vision for the Calgary arts community.

Making use of traditional ticketing providers has always been too expensive for small and medium-sized arts groups. Pumphouse was able to strike a deal with RepeatSeat, a Calgary-based global entertainment company, to implement a comprehensive ticketing service system for the benefit of the arts community at large. As part of the free service groups will also enjoy 35 hours per week of telephone sales and 24/7 Internet sales as well as full event reporting and data management.

2:50

Traditional ticket services frequently charge both the patron and the presenting group a fee for their services. Pumphouse Theatres will provide this service on a cost recovery basis with the cost passed down to the arts patron in a reasonable per ticket service fee.

The program developed by Pumphouse is a way for arts organizations to invest their limited financial resources into their art, where it belongs. We applaud the leadership and spirit of community demonstrated by Pumphouse Theatres.

Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition signed by 76 members from the Lethbridge Firefighters Union No. 237 petitioning this Legislative Assembly to support Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm presenting today a petition signed by 116 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to "pass legislation that eliminates health care premiums."

Thank you.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2)(a) to give notice that on Monday I will move that written questions 67, 70, 74, 82 through 88 be dealt with on that day. There being no further written questions at this time, there are none to stand and retain their places.

Secondly, I'm also giving notice that on Monday I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 88 through 105, 108 through 123, 128, 134 through 143, 146 through 162, 164 through 168, 174 through 180, 183 through 205, and 207 through 210.

Thank you.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Bill 33

Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave today to introduce Bill 33, the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a first time]

Bill 34

Income Trusts Liability Act

Mr. Hlady: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act.

In the past few years there's been significant growth in the area of income trusts. As this type of investment becomes increasingly popular, the need to protect investors also grows.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is leading the way with providing legislation that will protect investors of income trusts. Without this legislation there is the potential for an investor in an income trust to be held personally liable beyond their initial investment. This makes it a particular challenge for income trusts to attract smaller investors and some institutional investors that have restrictions relating to liability.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will help stimulate further investment in income trusts in our province and will have a positive effect on our economic growth.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 34 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 34 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Bill 35

Companies Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 35, being the Companies Amendment Act, 2004.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 35 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd move that Bill 35 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to table today responses to written questions 1, 4, 5, 15, and motions for returns 21 and 43.

Additionally, it is a pleasure to table responses to questions raised during Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's budget estimates in Committee of Supply on April 21, 2004. Mr. Speaker, I have forwarded those responses to the individual members prior to this tabling.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table with the Assembly today the requisite copies of the special areas trust account audited financial statements as of December 31, 2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Today I have to table five copies of the 2003 Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal's annual report. The Métis Settlements Appeal Tribunal is an effective dispute resolution mechanism for the Métis settlements of Alberta, and this annual report demonstrates the good work the board accomplished in 2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to table the required number of copies of the agendas and summaries of discussions from the meetings of the New Schools Initiative Committee for Calgary-West for the period of November 4, 2002, to April 8, 2004. The committee was comprised of many key stakeholders including my alderman, public and Catholic school board trustees and their planning representatives, parents, private-sector developers, and Infrastructure officials, all committed to addressing the need for new schools in high-growth areas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two tablings today. The requisite number of copies of results of studies of 19 million U.S. teleworkers in the teleworking industry. Two quick highlights include AT & T savings of \$550 million due to reduced office expenses while seeing major productivity increases. Also, a finding important to Albertans, every single day now 590,000 tons of carbon monoxide, 31,000 tons of nitrogen oxide, and 39,000 tons of hydrocarbons are kept out of the air by telecommuters not driving to work any more in the U.S. That much every single day.

My second tabling is the requisite number of copies of a parking ticket which I got last Sunday. The parking rate was \$2 an hour from a machine. I was a few minutes late. The ticket is for \$37.45 if paid within seven days but \$69.55 if paid on the eighth day or thereafter, which strikes me as just under 100 per cent interest per week. I'm not sure if these parking tickets are legally enforceable or not, but they are being handed out to Alberta citizens.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Further to the questions asked in question period by the Leader of the Official Opposition, I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of automobile insurance quotes for a 1997 Dodge and a 2002 Volkswagen owned by the Member for Edmonton-Riverview and his family. This includes quotes from a private company in Alberta and also from the Manitoba, ICBC, and Saskatchewan public auto insurance schemes.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table for the information of all hon. members of the Assembly The King's University College graduation program from May 1 of 2004. This is The King's University College's annual graduation ceremony. It is a vital institution in the community of Edmonton-Gold Bar. This year's convocation address was delivered by Dr. S. Keith Ward, vice-president academic, who in two-months' time is retiring after 25 years teaching there.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there others? Well, then, hon. members, let's sit back, relax, and enjoy the hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is truly an historic day today. I'm very pleased to stand before you and, as required by the Alberta Official Song Act, table with you and all members of the Assembly the report of the Alberta Official Song Committee.

Before I make the tabling of that report, which includes the committee's recommendation, I wish to introduce the composer of the song that has been selected. May I therefore ask you, Mr. Speaker, to ask for unanimous consent to . . .

3:00

The Speaker: Just proceed.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, sir. I am very excited to introduce to you and through you, Mr. Speaker, to all members of the Assembly the composer extraordinaire from Rivière Qui Barre, Alberta, Mary Kieftenbeld. If she would please stand. Mary, of course, has the honour of being the composer of the song that has been selected by the Official Song Committee. She's joined today by her husband, Ed, and by their children Jeremy, age 10; Kagen, age 8; Haley, age 6; and Emma, age 5, who are probably just as excited as Mom. I would ask all of them to please rise and receive our warm thanks. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, as part of this historic tabling all members should be reminded that we had 335 entries for the Alberta official song contest, and that represented over 100 communities throughout the province of Alberta.

Our Official Song Committee members need to be briefly thanked. In particular, I'd like to thank the MLA for Calgary-Fort, whose idea it was to have an official song. Also, I'd like to thank other members who served on the committee: the MLA for Edmonton-Centre, the MLA for Calgary-Bow, the MLA for Edmonton-Meadowlark, and the MLA for Barrhead-Westlock, that being yourself, Mr. Speaker, who was an ex officio member of the committee.

Other members included Barry Allen from the Alberta Recording Industries Association; Carol Dand from the Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta; Kelly Jerrott from Music Alberta; Neil MacGonigill from the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada; Gary McDonall from the Alberta Recording Industries Association; Gladys Odegard from Music Alberta; Judy Reeds from Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta; and Wayne Saunders from the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada. They did a great job and a very difficult task indeed.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the act requires me to table the lyrics and music of the song recommended by this illustrious committee. The lyrics, of course, are contained in the report, but the music only exists on a CD as submitted by the composer. Therefore, I'd like permission to play that CD, which is of course the demo version of the song as submitted by the composer. I need to remind individuals that this is not necessarily the final version, obviously; it is the demo version only. Other forms of the song will be professionally produced and made available in sheet music to suit a variety of purposes including choirs and bands and orchestras and small combos, reflecting different genres and styles. Nonetheless, today with the kind agreement and permission of the song's composer I'm privileged to play for you an excerpt from the song selected by the Alberta Official Song Committee.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of all Albertans may I say thank you to the committee, and congratulations to the composer, once again. Here now is a sample of a song called *Alberta*, as recommended by the committee and which the Legislative Assembly will be asked to endorse as Alberta's official song to be used in conjunction with centennial celebrations in 2005.

[An excerpt was played from the song *Alberta*, recommended to become Alberta's official song]

Mr. Zwozdesky: And there's just a brief sample.

[Applause]

head: **Projected Government Business**

Ms Blakeman: According to Standing Order 7(5), I would ask the Deputy Government House Leader to please share the projected government House business for the week of May 10 to May 13, 2004.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Monday, May 10, in the afternoon under Introduction of Bills we'll deal with Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004, then we'll be following that with Written Questions and Motions for Returns and private members' public bills. In the evening we'll deal with motions other than government motions, followed by second reading of Bill 31, Highways Development and Protection Act; Bill 33, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004; Bill 34, Income Trusts Liability Act; Bill 35, Companies Amendment Act, 2004; and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Tuesday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders under second reading we'll deal with Bill 32; Government Motion 17, the Alberta official song motion; Committee of the Whole for bills 31, 33, 34, 35. Tuesday evening under Government Bills and Orders under second reading we anticipate dealing with Bill 32 and Committee of the Whole and/or third reading with bills 31, 33, 34, 35, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, May 12, in the afternoon in Committee of the Whole we anticipate dealing with Bill 32 and otherwise as per the Order Paper. On Wednesday evening under Government Bills and Orders, Committee of the Whole, we anticipate dealing with Bill 32.

On Thursday afternoon under Government Bills and Orders, third reading of Bill 32. We're expected to deal with Government Motion 7, that was agreed to on February 18, regarding the spring sitting duration of the House, and otherwise as per the Order Paper.

Thank you.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order. Before we proceed, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm delighted to see the turnout of people that has joined us in the public and the members' galleries today. There are a few people representing organizations that I would like to introduce. I'm assuming that

they've joined us. If they have, please rise when I say your name. Otherwise, I know that they'll be joining us within minutes.

Pat Brownlee is here representing COSA, the Coalition of Seniors Advocates. Pat would have come from Calgary. I see her standing. Sandy Reid is here from the Alberta Council on Aging. If she could please rise. I believe Ron Ellis, who is the new chairperson of SUN, Seniors United Now, is also here. Albert Opstad, who is the former chairperson of SUN, Seniors United Now, is here, and I think that Hilda Campbell, chairperson of the Seniors' Committee of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, Edmonton branch, is also joining us. I would ask the Assembly to please welcome those people representing those organizations.

Thank you very much.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Seniors

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, as per our Standing Orders the first hour will be dedicated between the hon. minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister of Seniors.

3:10

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm extremely pleased to be here doing the estimates on the last day of estimates and very pleased to see the galleries full. We haven't had that for any department yet, so thank you very much, each and every one of you, for attending. On that note, Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask all of the seniors who are here for the estimates to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly so that the members can have a good chance to have a look at you folks who are interested enough in the estimates. Could you all please rise and receive the welcome of the Assembly. Thank you very much for coming.

I have some department staff here also whom I would like to publicly thank, but I won't go through the process of introducing them individually. They, as we all know, are responsible for the functioning and the good management of the government.

The 2004-07 business plan will see the ministry continue to develop and deliver services, programs, and information that contribute to the well-being and independence of low-income seniors, persons in need of housing supports, and clients of the office of the Public Guardian. Last year, Mr. Chairman, Alberta Seniors' mandate was expanded to include the office of the Public Guardian, homeless shelters, and the room-and-board and housekeeping portion of long-term care facilities. Our 2004-07 business plan reflects the full integration.

In 2004-05 our ministry business plan budget is \$470 million. That's an increase of \$73 million from 2003-04. This includes funding for the Seniors department and the Alberta Social Housing Corporation. This increase will enable us to enhance benefits for low-income seniors and accelerate the development of more affordable housing in the province. I'll go into more detail on these initiatives later in the presentation.

The 2004-05 operating budget for the Seniors department is \$406 million; \$377 million, representing 93 per cent of the department's budget, is being targeted in the form of grants and programs to assist low-income seniors and low-income Albertans in need of housing supports.

My ministry's business plan supports the fourth pillar of the government's strategic plan: "Making Alberta the best place to live, work and visit." We work to achieve this by providing supports to those people who are in greatest need, including low-income seniors,

people in need of housing supports, homeless people, and people who are unable to make their own decisions. By doing so, we can ensure that Albertans will be self-reliant to the greatest possible extent and that those unable to provide for their basic needs will receive help.

As we work towards that vision for Albertans, my ministry will ensure that the programs, services, and planning initiatives we deliver are effective and, most importantly, sustainable. We envision a vibrant province where Albertans live with dignity as full participants in society and experience the best possible well-being and independence.

We're working towards fulfilling this vision through the administration of three core businesses: firstly, providing services, programs, and planning for seniors and the aging population; supporting the provision and ongoing management of basic housing and emergency shelter for lower income Albertans; and thirdly, providing programs, services, and supports to enable appropriate substitute decision-making. For each core business we have identified several goals to ensure effective and sustainable program delivery.

Our 2004-05 budget identifies the resources to deliver the programs. Under our first core business \$245 million has been identified to provide services, programs, and planning for seniors and the aging population. We have three goals. The first is to ensure that "seniors in need have access to financial supports that enable them to live in a secure and dignified way." The ministry has two major financial assistance programs that support this goal: the Alberta seniors' benefits and the special-needs assistance for seniors.

The Alberta seniors' benefit is an income-based program that provides low-income seniors with monthly financial benefits and calculates Alberta health care insurance exemptions. Approximately 185,000 seniors, or 56 per cent of the 331,000 seniors, receive benefits under the Alberta seniors' benefit program. Of those seniors, cash benefits are paid out to over 126,000. Approximately 165,000 seniors in Alberta, or roughly half, pay no health insurance premiums, and 20,000 pay partial health premiums. The average annual cash benefit through Alberta seniors' benefit is \$1,248 per senior and \$1,512 per couple.

The budget for Alberta's seniors' benefit program has been increased from \$155.6 million in 2003-04 to \$198.8 million in 2004-05, an increase of some \$43.2 million. This increase will be used to assist low-income seniors residing in long-term care facilities and to address volume increases in our program. Ten million dollars of the increased funding will be used to provide further assistance to seniors most in need. We're finalizing details on how this funding will be used. An announcement will be made prior to commencement of the new seniors' benefit year on July 1.

The special needs assistance for seniors program is an income-tested program that provides lump sum cash payments to help low-income seniors who do not have the financial resources to fund one-time or extraordinary expenses. The program helps seniors meet the costs associated with special needs such as medical, optical, dental, and the cost of essential minor home repairs. Last year this program provided assistance to some 36,000 seniors. In 2004-05 the special needs assistance budget totals \$33 million and includes a \$6 million base budget increase.

The reality is that we are committed to ensuring that the financial needs of Alberta's low-income seniors are met. Our maximum Alberta seniors' cash benefit of \$2,820 is available to seniors living in apartments and lodges and is the highest in Canada. We provided funding in addition to this to seniors living in long-term care facilities. Our income eligibility thresholds for single seniors and senior couples are also the highest in Canada. The special needs assistance program for seniors is the only one of its kind in Canada.

Mr. Chairman, my ministry's second goal is to ensure that information on our programs, services, and initiatives for seniors is accessible, accurate, and consistent. This information is provided in several ways, including telephone information services, the seniors' information services offices, publications, and the ministry web site. In 2003-04 the Alberta Seniors web site received almost 1.1 million visitors, almost 300,000 more than in the previous year.

An information package is mailed to all Albertans three months before their 65th birthday. This package includes an application form for the ASB program and informs the senior of the availability of the Programs for Seniors information booklet. This booklet contains information on all programs that are available to seniors. In addition, if seniors have not applied for the ASB program by the third month after their 65th birthday, we follow up to ensure that they are aware of their eligibility to apply.

Last year the seniors division responded to approximately 153,000 calls, and the eight program support officers had more than 55,000 personal visits. Information is also provided through publications such as the Seniors Programs and Services Information Guide as well as through participation in cross-ministry and external planning and program initiatives. Seniors already contribute significantly to the Alberta economy. As this sector of the population continues to grow, seniors' contributions will become even more important to the provincial economy.

3:20

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The third goal of our business is to ensure that "government policies, programs, and plans effectively anticipate and respond to the needs of current and future seniors." As noted earlier, my ministry is now responsible for the accommodations component of long-term care. Since taking over this responsibility, we have established good working relationships with long-term care operators, regional health authorities, and Alberta Health and Wellness to ensure that operators remain accountable for the services that they are providing. We are also working towards the development of a fair spectrum of room and board support options ranging from lodges through supportive living to long-term care. This will help ensure a balanced distribution of financial support throughout the system.

Our second core business is housing services. Two hundred and twenty million dollars have been identified to fund the ministry's second core business, which is to "support the provision and ongoing management of basic housing and emergency shelter for lower-income Albertans." This \$220 million is used for programs and services such as the lodge assistance program at \$15.7 million; grants to seniors and community housing providers, \$16.9 million; rent supplement, \$15 million; the Canada affordable housing agreement, \$51.2 million; special needs housing and home adaptation program, \$5.9 million; support to the homeless, \$17.1 million; operation of the Gunn centre, \$2 million; and debt servicing costs of the mortgages we have on our portfolio applied about \$41.3 million.

Our housing portfolio provides emergency shelter for the homeless and subsidized housing for low-income families and individuals and persons with special needs as well as affordable housing. For low-income seniors we offer affordable and appropriate apartments and supportive housing facilities that provide additional services such as meals and laundry.

Currently the ministry supports 40,000 housing units that house approximately 68,000 Albertans who need assistance in accessing appropriate and affordable housing. As our first goal we work to ensure that our housing portfolio is efficiently and effectively

managed and appropriately utilized. To achieve that, we are working on a number of initiatives, which include targeting our systems to those in greatest need and fostering community-based solutions.

Alberta Seniors provides support to over 10,000 community housing units that provide low-income families with safe and affordable housing. In recent years operators have been faced with increasing operating deficits due to increased costs associated with utilities, taxes, maintenance, operations, and administration. In 2004-05 we're allocating an additional \$1.9 million to community housing providers and seniors housing providers to assist with the increasing costs. With these funding increases a total budget for community and seniors housing providers will be some \$16.9 million.

Last year we introduced a new way of allocating the funding for the lodge assistance program. The new formula provides management bodies with a per diem grant of \$5.50 for each low- and moderate-income resident in a lodge unit. An additional subsidy of \$7 per unit per day is provided to existing lodges with 33 or fewer units. This new formula enables us to more effectively target and increase our assistance to low-income seniors in need of housing supports. At this time about 87 per cent of the 8,800 lodge units are occupied by lower income seniors. We're allocating an additional \$1.5 million to the lodge assistance program to accommodate an increasing number of low-income seniors in the lodge system. The additional dollars will bring the total budget for lodge assistance grants to \$15.7 million.

As I mentioned earlier, my ministry now provides grants to assist homeless shelters. In 1997-98 provincial funding to homeless shelters amounted to \$6.9 million. Provincial funding now totals \$17.1 million for homeless shelters and homeless initiatives. An additional \$2 million is allocated to the Gunn centre shelter for men with mental health/addiction problems. Yet, even with an increase of almost 150 per cent in funding over the last six years, capacity pressures on the homeless shelters continue to increase. We are undertaking a review of the emergency homeless shelter system to ensure that our shelter system is most appropriately and effectively targeted. We're also working to foster independence among homeless people by creating long-term solutions such as transitional and affordable housing.

The second goal of this core business is to ensure that the "development of a range of housing for lower-income Albertans is supported by the ministry." To address Albertans in need of housing, my ministry works in partnership with housing organizations, community organizations, and other levels of government to identify local housing solutions.

Alberta Seniors signed a bilateral agreement with the federal government in 2002 to fund the development of affordable housing in Alberta. We are currently on track to provide \$134 million in total funding under the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement. To date \$58 million has been allocated by the provincial and federal governments for development of approximately 1,300 affordable housing units in Edmonton, Calgary, Fort McMurray, Fort Chipewyan, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Cochrane, Brooks, Leduc, Rocky Mountain House, and other northern remote communities.

An Hon. Member: Rocky is not a remote community.

Mr. Woloshyn: Rocky is not remote, but it's one of the ones we helped.

Some of these units, Mr. Chairman, are directed at seniors. For 2004-05 provincial and federal governments have committed a further \$51.2 million. With that I can assure you that Alberta's

commitment to the creation of affordable housing for low-income people is unparalleled anywhere in Canada. As a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman, I understand that we are the first province to have units occupied under that program.

We are also recognized for our efforts to direct our program at a broad range of Albertans in need. The federal government has announced an extension of their support for the affordable housing program. We're currently having discussions with the federal government about extending the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement and providing additional funding beyond 2005-06. Mr. Chairman, if you can believe it, we are doing such a job of this that the federal government actually approached us to extend that agreement.

The third and final core business is to provide services and supports to enable appropriate substitute decision-making for those unable to do so for themselves. We do this through the Public Guardian program. Over \$5 million has been allocated to support this goal to ensure that the best interests and well-being of Albertans unable to make decisions are served through appropriate and timely substitute decision-making.

In carrying out my ministry's mandate in 2004-05, I can assure you that my ministry will continue to do an excellent job, and we will ensure that anything we can do will result in programs that will be efficient, effective, and sustainable in the future.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I will entertain questions regarding the budget estimates, and if I don't answer all of the questions – the ones that are relevant to the budget – I will have staff reply to them from *Hansard* in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I don't know that anyone has noted it, but today there has been accommodation made in the members' gallery for captioning for those that are hard of hearing, also called hearing impaired. I wanted to particularly note the assistance of one of my staff members, who went to work on trying to organize this when it was brought to her attention, and that's my constituency manager, Penny Craig. Penny, at my suggestion, contacted the Speaker's office and the Clerk's office, and it went from there. When I walked in today, the Clerk informed me that in fact it was all happening, and I can see them joining us in the gallery. So thank you to the Speaker's office and to the Clerk's office, and, I'm sure, visitor services. I wanted to make special note of my staff's effort to accommodate. In fact, it was possible to do, and I'm glad to see it.

3:30

Now, I have a number of issues that have been brought to my attention by various seniors' organizations in the province, Mr. Minister. What I'd like to do is sort of go through those comments and get your reaction to them, and in some cases I have specific questions that are arising from that. I also have a series of very specific financial questions and then some more general questions, and then I'd like to go on to the homeless and housing section at the end. So I'll probably have to get two or maybe three at-bats to get this all in, and hopefully I'm pitching strikes.

The first group that I have on my list here is CARP, the Canadian Association of Retired Persons. What I did was send an e-mail out to all of the seniors' groups, and I said: "This is the day that the debates are going to take place. Please come if you would like to hear them, and if you have questions you would like me to raise or concerns you want to put on the record through me, please corre-

spond.” They did. So that’s where this is coming from. They’re fairly recent concerns that are being raised for the minister, just so he doesn’t think I’ve dug back into my dusty files to two or three years ago. This should all be within about the last six weeks.

The issues raised by CARP in particular were around health care premiums and when they could expect to see the elimination of health care premiums for seniors. Of course, the minister is well aware that the Liberal opposition’s stance on that has been to eliminate health care premiums for seniors and indeed for all Albertans; that’s an unnecessary tax for us.

I’m aware that the minister has been on the record saying that he’s in favour of that as well, and a number of the organizations and I are wondering what we can do to assist the minister. Are there particular ones among his colleagues that could do with some helpful phone calls to move them down the path of supporting this initiative to eliminate health care premiums? Would a letter or cards or e-mails be helpful? What could we do to help move your more recalcitrant colleagues along? The minister is on record as saying that he’d like to see it, but we don’t see any movement. So it’s not him; it must be somebody else. Who can we lean on here?

Also raised was the elimination of the seniors’ extended health care. Now, the minister will respond that, in fact, for low-income seniors they did move some money from that program into the special-needs benefit, and I will come back to some more specific questions on that a little later on.

There were issues raised around long-term health care costs. Of course, we all know that last June, just about a month after the House rose, there was an announcement that long-term care rates would increase between 42 and 48 per cent. This has in fact caused hardship to a number of seniors. I’m interested in whether the government has done any studies or follow-through to determine whether in fact this did, as the minister claimed, turn out not to be harmful to people. I’m seeing the opposite, and I’m wondering if the minister, with his larger resources, has done anything to study this in a way that we could have a look at. So if he could share that with us.

Also, concerns raised about threats to Blue Cross benefits. Now, over 65 there is a special Blue Cross package which is provided to seniors, but for those senior couples where one spouse is under 65, then you have one of them paying, usually cash, for their Blue Cross coverage, but the partner who is over 65 is not. So eliminating the nonprofit tax exemption for Blue Cross and having those rates go up is going to affect senior couples because it’s going to affect the one that isn’t a senior. What’s the minister’s comment to that? Has he looked at it? Does he understand what the repercussions of that could be for seniors in Alberta?

SALT is the Seniors’ Action and Liaison Team, a very active seniors’ advocacy group, and their mandate flows beyond seniors. They have a reaction to the budget that was announced in late March. Just a couple of their concerns are around the government continuing to say that health care is not sustainable. They quote a number of other studies back, noting that spending on health care has actually decreased over the past 10 years: 5.3 per cent of GDP in ’93-94 and 4.9 per cent of GDP in ’03-04. They’re using information from the Canadian Institute for Health Information and information from the government of Alberta.

They continue to be concerned about using the pretence of unsustainability to argue for curtailment of services and for greater public-sector involvement. They have concerns around private, for-profit surgical facilities, P3s to build hospitals and other public facilities, and private, for-profit insurance companies.

They also raised the issue of automobile insurance and its effect on seniors. I would like to have the minister comment on what work

his department has done. What was his presentation to the all-party government committee that looked at automobile insurance rates and setting that grid? What was his input on behalf of seniors in Alberta to that committee? What effect of the institution of the government’s policy on automobile insurance does he expect to flow back to seniors? I’ll come later to some more pointed statements about that, but I’d like to know what work his department did.

SALT also raises the issue about failing to eliminate health care premiums. They also raise some social justice issues.

Seniors United Now raises the concern about exemption from health care premiums.

They also raise the loss of the program that seniors used to be able to apply for around a credit or a reduction in school property taxes. That continues to be a real concern for seniors that are trying to stay in their own homes. With the increase in electricity rates and other utility rates, including telephone interestingly – it’s also gone up – as well as heating costs and the increase in the property tax rate, more and more seniors are finding it difficult to age in place, which is supposedly one of the goals or aims of the government, to facilitate that. So the government appears to be working against itself in helping seniors or creating conditions where seniors can stay in their own homes and continue to have independent lifestyles.

Seniors United Now also raises the concerns around reimbursements for prescription drugs, eyeglasses, hearing aids, and the cost of dental. Again, that’s around the extended health benefit program, particularly optical and dental benefits.

They also raise the loss of the renters’ assistance program, which essentially was the other side of the coin, the equivalent to the property tax rebate available for homeowners. The renters’ assistance applied to those that were renting their accommodation.

SUN notes that the cost of living since ’93-94 has gone up by 25 per cent and that the cost of health care premiums has increased by 37.5 per cent. They also raise the question of what we can do to help the minister lobby his colleagues to get them on-line.

In ’92-93 seniors’ benefits paid by the government were 7.7 per cent of total revenue collected by the government. Eleven years later the seniors’ benefits paid by the government were 5.9 per cent of total revenue collected. That’s significant because we’re doing significantly better than we were then, but they note that seniors are worse off in the actual dollars and the value of those dollars has decreased. So it’s a double whammy for them.

They raise concerns about seniors liquidating their assets to be able to have enough money to continue. So that’s part of that issue around: they can’t stay in their own home because of all of the costs.

3:40

Now, the Alberta Council on Aging is not specifically an advocacy organization. Well, they’re not an advocacy organization; they provide information and programs and services to seniors. But they did do a very good study which was released on March 8, 2004 – International Women’s Day, I might note – and that survey looked at a number of things including the cost of utilities and what people were paying, how many of them were paying more, less, or the same, and raised the issue of insurance and also long-term care and caregiving.

What really struck me was the section about what was affected. In order, starting from the most to the least, of the things that seniors had to forgo, the most was social activities. So at the very time in their lives when they think they might be able to have more leisure time and more fun and catch a movie, maybe go on a trip and visit the grandkids, treat themselves to a round of golf or a facial or whatever, the very first thing they’ve got to cut out is social activities, and a significant number of the people responding did in fact

drop their memberships in various social clubs and that kind of thing.

The second thing affected was transportation, followed by food, followed by health care. Now, what does that mean? Well, it means that where there were supplements that had been recommended by a doctor that are not prescription and therefore aren't covered, those would be taken out. Maybe somebody delays getting newer, better-fitting dentures or getting their prescription for their eyeglasses updated. Well, what does that matter? That's just good thinking to put that kind of stuff off.

Well, I would argue that it isn't, in fact, and that it has a long-term cost effect on our health care system. People that can't see as well are more likely to trip or misstep and fall and cause injuries which would end them up in the hospital. If you don't have properly fitting dentures or your teeth aren't good, you're not going to be eating the kind of healthy fresh fruit and vegetables that we are told every day we should be eating. Well, all of a sudden you're not; you're looking at day after day after day of oatmeal and things like that because you can't handle the other kinds of food any more. So this is not contributing to an independent lifestyle that's full of choices and health.

Another thing that I found very useful from the survey from the Alberta Council on Aging was the comments that came back from people that were recorded. I'm not going to mention any of them, but I just did pull out a couple of them where they're talking about accommodations. Comments made: "My house needs repairs but I can't afford it." "Sharing a house with family." "Older home, needs insulation. Very cold in winter." "The cost of utilities is going to limit our time in our own home."

Why does this matter? Because eventually they're likely to end up in a facility that is subsidized or completely paid for by the government's budget, so we're better off all the way around keeping people independent and in their own homes. Having comments like, "This is going to limit their time in their own home," is not a positive mood.

Here's one about the property taxes: "A \$400 school tax increase in one year with no one in school. These tax increases will cause many seniors to lose their homes."

Around the utilities they say, "Privatization of utilities affects low-income pensioners the most." "It's a shame that we have to bundle up in our own homes and live in dread of the utility bills." "The cost of power itself is not so bad; it's . . . the extra charges they put on." Someone else has taken in a boarder to help reduce the costs.

Car insurance. This is where I was asking: what was the minister's contribution to the automobile insurance debate? Was he advocating for senior drivers, and how was he advocating for senior drivers? This is one of the issues where I'm getting maybe a phone call a month from a senior – but that's representing a lot more seniors that aren't calling – that are saying: "You know, I had one little accident, and now I'm cut off. What gives here? I was a perfect driver. I'm in good health. I've got a car in good repair that isn't too old. One fender-bender in the shopping mall and that's it; I'm out." So there's a question here of what's happening with insurance companies that are looking, I think, to dump older drivers, and that's why I'm interested in what the minister has done to advocate here.

This jeopardizes in a couple of ways. I think it jeopardizes seniors' independence. You know, they're using their vehicle to go out and go shopping, to get to doctors' appointments, but a few other things, Mr. Minister, things like volunteering in the community, from which we all benefit. Maybe they're going out and looking after a neighbour or a friend. Again, we all benefit from that.

There is a cost to giving up that transportation and having to rely

on others. Perhaps they have to change doctors that they've had for a long time because they have now got to get one on a bus route. It's different choices like that that you don't want to have to be making in your senior years. Not that seniors aren't vital and able to make all of these decisions, but it's not what they were expecting when they got to retirement.

Here are comments on car insurance. "Don't know why, I have a clean driving record, never any claim or traffic ticket." "Can't really afford it but need my car for shopping and doctor's appointments." "Have no choice; I need my car to go to work." "Have to pay it – there is no other transportation in rural areas." "They are punishing us seniors – give us a break!" So those are the issues raised around that.

Long-term care. "The 40% increase in the cost of [long-term care] is too much – our pension has gone up only 2 or 3%." This is another comment: "[Long-term care] is a big burden. My husband has Alzheimer's and I do not get any pension for 2 more years." So there's an example of a couple with one senior in care and one who's not a senior yet.

Can he update us, please, on the status of involuntary separation? The federal government was very up front. It was on their web site what the deal was to qualify for that. In other words, that's a program where you point out your circumstances, that one of the couple is now in care somewhere and that it's not voluntary, that you didn't want to be separated, that the other one is still at home, and that's going to cause a financial burden, especially if they continue to be considered as a couple with the limits that are in place for a couple's income rather than looking at it as one person's income.

I'm also interested in how someone in Alberta finds out about that program or whether they can apply and have effect through Alberta? I know that the feds were very up front about it. It was easy to find the information. I haven't found that so, but I'll admit that the last time I looked would have been in the fall, so six months ago. Can he give us an update on where we're at with that involuntary separation program?

I'll note that at the minister's party's convention there were resolutions to take actions on seniors. Do we have any indication from the minister on how that resolution from his party is going to flow through into government policy, whether we can expect to see any action that's taken in the fiscal year that's been presented to us as a result of those resolutions?

As an update from last year's estimates, Mr. Minister . . . [Ms Blakeman's speaking time expired] I'll have to come back. I'm sorry.

The Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'll try as best I can to answer these concerns. I'll start with long-term care. I'd like to point out that when the long-term care rates were reviewed and changed, at about that same time, the housing portion that we're dealing with, what portion the individual pays, was transferred over to my department. We agreed on the rates, and, yes, they were significant increases.

However, as part of the process there were some things that were made mandatory by the providers as a part of these rates. One was cable television, another one was wander bracelets, a third one was all incontinent supplies, and the fourth one was bathing as required. The hon. member I'm sure at one time would have had concerns in these areas. As a part of it we didn't get into the discussion of whether it was health or housekeeping, if you will. We said that these things must be done, and that was a part of the whole process.

3:50

Along with that – and I think this is extremely significant – two or

three other things happened that improved it for all folks in long-term care. Number one, seniors on the seniors' benefits program for the most part – I'd like to say each and every one, but there's always an exception somewhere. Not only was the increase in the cost absorbed by our increase in supports to them, but we also ensured that they would have \$265 of income left, the same as if they were in a lodge. The rate at \$42 a day may sound excessive, but it fits us in at about the second lowest or third lowest in the country. That's significant.

The significant thing about how we operate the programs is that they are all income tested as opposed to asset tested. So if a person owns a home or has other properties, we don't ask to delve into that. That is not the case in Atlantic Canada, where it's all asset based.

However, there is the concern that was identified by some of the comments, and that is when you have couples split between the two facilities. We do within our program whatever we can to treat them as singles to maximize their benefits, but in addition to that, we have had very good success by having the people with problems go directly to the operators, and then we'd work out solutions, and very frequently Alberta Seniors staff would get involved.

There are some that we haven't been able to capture that weren't necessarily seniors. You pointed out the one there, for example, not on pension yet. If that particular individual has not contacted Seniors, please have them do so. We may be able to help them, and if we can, we certainly will. That's just a comment. I can't tell you where that will go.

What has happened in there is that we've ensured that the people know what they're getting and we know what the rates are. What I think we have to keep in mind is that what the tenant pays is only a portion of the cost. The average care cost, I believe, in addition to this is some \$95 to \$100, which is paid for by Alberta Health, and it flows through, obviously, the various health authorities.

That number in and of itself, I believe, translates into some \$650 million annually for health care for people in these facilities. As you know, even though they have the same residual income as in a lodge, they get all their drugs and whatnot covered while they're in the facility. But, again, we do have a concern over the people who on an individual basis don't meet the system, and those we want to hear about to see what we can do to assist them.

The long-term care one I think has worked out extremely well. We are also putting in a monitoring process, working with other departments, to ensure that we can get some consistency, as I indicated in my comments, in the overall operations.

The other part. To avoid a catch-up jump – and that's what this was. We can quote percentages wherever we want, but this increase was necessary as a matter of catch-up. We were having some not-for-profits, if you will, that were on the verge of closing their doors if they weren't able to access some funding from somewhere, and the majority of that funding flowed from my department through to the individuals. It also goes to our philosophy of helping the individuals as opposed to doing the block dumping into the building. So as it shakes down, that will work out I think very well.

The whole area of insurance is one of concern. It's a concern on liabilities, it's a concern on volunteer groups, it's a concern on minor hockey groups, and it's a big concern in car insurance. I will say this much to you: the seniors as they pertain to that and as you heard in question period here earlier, when the Premier made a reference to seniors and that whole insurance package – I don't want to comment on that too much until it plays its way through. We'll see what we have. At that time we'll go.

Certainly, my people have been working with them to identify the needs of seniors, and there are other things to do with seniors. How often should they have medical tests? How do you get a disability

sticker? All these other things that work into a part of being a senior and a driver. I certainly advocate very strongly on behalf of all seniors, and we want the ones who are able to and can to drive for as long as possible for the very concerns that you listed there.

One of the other themes that you brought forward was property taxes. That certainly is a concern. If you add up the 2 and 3 per cent a year over 10 years, there has been a significant jump, far more perhaps than what the program before could be.

We are currently looking at – and I don't know our outcome because we have to get some co-operation from the municipalities. I want to look at some way of stabilizing, freezing, looking at assistance for senior homeowners, and that would be applicable across the board. So that's in the works, if you will.

With respect to some of the other assertions, I have to point out something here. I'm sure you're familiar with our card on the programs that we have. When you look at a renter or person in a long-term care centre and in a lodge, one is supplemented far beyond what shows on the card here. A couple that is renting a home, if they are at the bottom end of the income and the maximum seniors' benefits, could get somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$4,200 a year plus their premium exemption plus they have, if they are eligible, special-needs assistance.

I think it's important to note that Alberta seniors do not pay for Blue Cross premiums – it's premium-free – and in that you have drug coverage. People quickly say, "Oh, it's 30 per cent," but I think it's important to note that that 30 per cent is a maximum of \$25 per prescription. Some of the prescriptions are in the hundreds of dollars. People on low incomes can also apply for assistance through special needs if they can't afford these \$25 ones, if you know what I mean. Also, there are a couple of other little coverages in there.

The cost to Alberta Health, I believe, on Blue Cross payouts, on the premium-free portion last year was some \$365 million. That doesn't show up in my budget. That would show up in the health line as one of the supports for seniors. You add to that the \$650 million that is paid for long-term care and then the home care and the others.

On the health side of it, yes, we'd like to see improvements. I'm certainly a strong advocate for it. We're tossing ideas around in the department on how we can address the issue of glasses and dental specifically. What you pointed out in your comments with respect to having good dentures and having good eyeglasses is a health issue; I certainly agree with you one hundred per cent. That's something that we would want to see happen, and we'll be working on these kinds of things. Whether it will come to fruition or not, I don't know.

I think the important thing to note in here is that we do focus on the people who are most in need, which brings us to the whole idea of thresholds and where they cut in. Would I like to see them go higher? Yes. We've been able since I've been in charge of this portfolio to lift them quite significantly from time to time, but if you look at where we cut in, for example, for a partial premium exemption, a senior couple, if you will, who earn less than \$37,881 pay no health care premium. That's quite generous if you compare it to other parts of society where we deal with thresholds and whatnot.

The other comments that you made with respect to sustainability of health care and that. As you well know, we're looking at that, and hopefully we can make it sustainable. We're not going to go after and wholesale hurt seniors' programs. I don't think any of my colleagues would be willing to support anything like that.

4:00

I believe, for the most part, that answers, in general terms, most of

the issues that you brought forward. If I have missed some there, you may repeat them.

The thing that I'd like all people to understand: our programs are income, not asset, based, and that's very significant. That means that we're not asking people who have the hard assets to liquidate in order to pay their way. So I would say that, overall, if we can deal with things like property taxes, utilities, insurance rates – yes, those are problems. We're trying to address all those issues. Hopefully, with respect to the seniors end of it, I'll be able to do something more with respect to the property tax issue as it comes.

Certainly, you're right: I'm advocating on behalf of the seniors with respect to health care premiums. We have a process that we have to go through, and I'm just going to keep on pushing, and if you can help me push, I'll thank you for it.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Thanks very much. Thanks, Mr. Minister. I'm going to just launch into the next round of questions.

Is there sufficient information now available to establish a baseline for the percentage of eligible seniors receiving Alberta seniors' benefits? That was what the minister put in a letter in response to a question from me during last year's debate, and the reasoning was that there wasn't sufficient information that had been gathered to establish the baseline. Do you now have it? And has the ministry been able to assess the extent to which Albertans in need of low-cost housing are able to access it?

I'd like to look at some specific questions about line items in the budget, so I'll refer the minister to page 322 of the estimates book, vote 2.2.3. The special needs assistance grants have dropped this year. They're almost \$6 million less. Can the minister give us a reason as to why that's happened? Are there fewer people requesting it, or was there something being offered that's no longer being offered? Could I have the details, please, on what's been reduced or what's been eliminated?

Under vote 3.5.2, which is on page 323, there's a million dollars less for homeless support there. Again, could I get the details on why that's dropped from \$18.134 million to \$17.109 million? A million dollars less. Why? I think the minister has heard from me enough that there needs to be more support for the homeless. Maybe he's moving money between line items. I don't know, but I'd like the explanation, please.

Still on page 323, vote 3.5.3, could I get an explanation about what the other grants are. They're receiving \$7 million less than they were last year. What are those other grants that are no longer there? It just says "other grants" and doesn't give us any description, but that program is basically gone. It has gone from \$7,860,000 down to \$410,000, so it's gone. What was it? Could I get the details on that, please?

Vote 3.5.5, still on page 323. There's a quarter of a million dollars less for the home adaptation program. Now, this is one, I'm assuming, that seniors could have accessed specifically. Could I get some details, please, on why money has been reduced there? It was \$1,025,000, and it's gone to \$765,000, so a quarter of a million is gone. Why? I would've thought that that program would be in even greater demand these days, not less demand, so why have those gone down?

On page 330 in the estimates book I note that we've got six more full-time equivalents, six more staff in the department. Could the minister tell me what those staff are doing, please, and describe which program they're allocated to?

I also would like to look now at the business plan, page 377, the

performance measurements. This is part of the question that I started with. Under the performance measurements we've got a new baseline, and then the targets for everything, '04-05, '05-06, are to be determined. So how is this a useful performance measurement?

You know, I'm getting frustrated. The government actually did do a good thing with their financial program and particularly with the performance measurements. This is the eighth budget that I've now debated. What I see is that the departments tend to not build upon their performance measurements so that they're a useful management tool and a useful tool for the opposition and for members of the public in evaluating the performance of the department. What happens is that either we've got satisfaction polls that are used as performance measurements, which are not useful at all; we get performance measurements that are a hundred per cent achievable, which aren't useful; or we get what I'm seeing here, which is a constant renewal – or a constant jettisoning is more accurate – of the performance measurements.

So it's always: well, we're working on a new baseline, and we haven't established the targets yet. Then the next time I look, well, now they're developing a new one. So you hardly get it into place before it's been dumped. Its usefulness as the tool it's meant to be is not there. That one is specific to the "percentage of seniors provided with the opportunity to apply for Alberta Seniors Benefit." What are you trying to achieve there, and when is it going to be a useful measurement for us?

You know, with the performance measurement further under goal 2, "satisfaction with information services," you're at 90 per cent right across the board, so is that giving you useful management information?

A couple of other things that arose out of comments that the minister made, one that came from a note that has come into my hands, a reminder to remember Jennie Nelson's death in continuing care. Now, that doesn't fall under the minister's jurisdiction except that she was a senior and he is the delegated minister in charge of seniors. What programs or changes has the minister's department looked at as a result of the death of Jennie Nelson in care?

There were also some issues around the facilities review committee of Bethany care in Calgary. I acknowledge that this is not the minister's responsibility; nonetheless, I'm expecting that the minister is doing some work with his staff to look at what can be done to make it safer. Or how is he advising his colleagues? There are always intergovernmental, interministry committees that are all working together on something, so what work is this minister doing to try to address the care of seniors in nursing homes and long-term care facilities?

I've got some rebuttal for the minister. I always find it interesting because the minister gets up and goes, "we've got the best program in Canada." But I've heard from others that go, "we've got the best program in Canada," particularly in the north. So I'm wondering if the minister has ever done an apples-to-apples comparison of exactly what programs and services are offered and done a direct comparison between those things, and if they're not the same, then they get cut out of the mix. I suspect that Alberta may well do some things better or offer more benefits but that they may not be offering the whole package that others are offering.

4:10

Some things to make note of. Seniors' benefits in British Columbia, for example – they have a property tax reduction: \$450 for those under age 65, \$745 for those over age 65. Although B.C. is the only other province that charges health care premiums – tsk, tsk; for shame, for shame – their health care premiums are lower. Finally, a senior's driver's licence: in British Columbia, again, \$17

for five years; in Alberta, \$64 for five years. That was brought to my attention by Mr. Nykiel from COSA, so thank you, Mr. Nykiel, for those notes. I'm interested, of course, in the minister's response to that.

This was in your opening comments, Mr. Minister. You talked about that you were looking at room and board situations and trying to be balanced and fair. I'm wondering: could you give us some more details on what you are working toward here or what you're looking at? I'm hoping that I'm not going to have to deal with another summer where there's a whopping increase in rates somewhere. It certainly made my summer more exciting than I was expecting it to be; let me put it to you that way. I'm looking for the details on what that statement you made actually means and how it shakes down.

I have a question as well on specific funding for shelters for abused seniors. Now, there's a specific shelter attached to the Kerby Centre in Calgary. I'm checking on whether their funding is remaining the same, going up, or going down. Can I get an answer on that? Also, in Edmonton I believe the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired funds some spaces. It's not a specific shelter; it's some apartments, I think, or spaces where abused seniors can find temporary shelter. That funding always seems to be in jeopardy or comes up when they've run out and they're looking for assistance again. Can I get something from the minister that indicates that that funding is secure and that that group doesn't have to keep going to the media to try to get assistance?

Can I get a specific breakdown, please, on the \$134 million that he mentioned regarding the new housing? He said \$134 million. Then he talked about \$58 million that has already been allocated, and it gave us 1,300 units. The \$58 million: is that both pieces, the feds and the province together? He's saying yes to me. So the province's piece of that is actually \$29 million. He's talking about another \$51.2 million in '04-05, so I'm assuming then that the province's piece of that is going to be about 25 and a half million dollars. If I can just get confirmation on that.

Finally, the issue around property taxes. I think this has put seniors in a difficult position. There are two issues here: one is the property tax issue, and one is the school tax issue. I hear from a lot of seniors that talk about: why are we paying a school tax when we don't have any kids any more? I will argue back against them and go: because it's a societal responsibility. If we want, you know, children in our society and if we want people to have families, we all pitch in on that; we all accept some responsibility, particularly around educating children. I'm more than happy to pay my school property tax in order to have children well educated in this province.

But the property taxes themselves put the municipalities in a squeeze because they're the only ones that have to keep actually raising their property taxes to get enough money to cover what they need. There's a huge infrastructure deficit that's been created by this government, the provincial government, in reducing all of the grants that went to the municipalities in the last 10 years. That created that infrastructure deficit that the cities are now left with, so they have to raise their property taxes. The school property tax is the provincial government's piece of that. I'm aware that it puts the squeeze on seniors, but I also have to point out that the municipalities are doing the best they can there with a rather lousy hand that they've been dealt by the province, plus the school property taxes are entirely flowing through from the province, so it's a squeeze, but it's not the municipalities' fault.

The increase to the Alberta seniors' benefits. We went from \$177.4 million to \$198.8 for Alberta seniors' benefits. I think that this is a volume increase, that you're expecting more people to be subscribing to this. He's shaking his head. Okay. He's going to

give me the numbers then. I would also like to know how many seniors the ministry is forecasting will receive a partial health care premium subsidy, how many seniors the ministry is forecasting will receive a full health care premium subsidy, and how many seniors the ministry is forecasting will receive full health care and the cash? So how does that break down by the numbers? I'd like to get that information, please.

I'm going to move on to the homeless shelter questions. Last year the minister initiated a shelter intake form for homeless shelters to track people using their facilities. Now, the forms were taken out of use very quickly, but I'm wondering: how much did the development and introduction of these forms cost, and what is happening with the project? I note that I do have a written question on this, but I'm trying all possible avenues open to me, and this one came open first, so I'm going to ask it through this venue.

The minister admitted at a government standing policy committee meeting last year that the progress the province has made to address remote housing issues wasn't as good as he would have liked. On February 18 of this year the province allocated \$2.5 million to remote housing. Does this contribution fully address the problem as the minister would have liked, or is there additional work that can be done here, and what is it specifically?

I'd like to know how much the ministry has paid for its department to be hooked up to the SuperNet or any other SuperNet fees, connections, hookup services, Internet provider service fees that this ministry has been involved in paying. I'm also interested in how much the ministry is going to pay to the SuperNet service provider, Axia, to maintain any connections that they have.

Last fall the Minister of Seniors proposed charging homeless people a fee of up to one-third of their income, if they had one, to stay at a homeless shelter. The proposal also suggested that money would be saved for the client in order to pay for a damage deposit on an apartment down the road. Well, my question to the minister is: what made the minister believe that withholding funds from an individual would magically create skills and abilities that they did not previously possess? The minister was quoted at the time as saying that this was going to encourage responsibility, and a few other things were on the list. I'm wondering: what made him think that? What had you looked at that made you believe that this was going to help these people achieve these things? Was there a study he looked at? What?

Also, the minister released on July 6 last summer a news release about the Sunalta Shelter. He talked about an accountability component for shelter operators and clients. Can the minister please expand on what he was talking about there? I believe that the Sunalta Shelter is again slated for closure. Can I get some background on that, please? Why is it closing? Can we get a cost-benefit analysis? Why is the province choosing to close that down?

4:20

Finally, what is the minister doing with regard to housing mentally ill people? I know that there are some that receive some accommodation, but I'm wondering whether there's anything upcoming that we can look forward to for housing of the mentally ill.

I think I've just about used up my second 20 minutes. I appreciate the opportunity, and I look forward to the responses from the minister.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you very much. Again, I'm going to have a hard time getting all this in, but I'll do the best I can. I'll start at the back and work upwards.

With respect to Sunalta Shelter, that thing is going to close whether I like it or not. There's a permit from the city that expires in about a year or so. The shelter, in my mind, is not appropriate. It's an emergency shelter. It's not appropriate because it's a room this size. It's got good showers, and they treat the people well there, but there are mats on the floor; lines and lines of mats. It is indeed what it's called, an emergency shelter.

I still believe – and I was hoping that I would get better cooperation from shelter operators – that if you want to get an individual to become self-sufficient, one of the pitfalls they run into on leaving a shelter, if they have some small source of income, is that they go from paying zero for room and board to having to hit a damage deposit and the first month's rent. That becomes a big impediment.

Remember this: that suggestion is not novel. Mustard Seed in Calgary charges; the Salvation Army charges. So the idea isn't novel, and I'm saying to the operators: where people have the money, why shouldn't all the operators charge it? Not to cut down our costs but to help the individual in some way, to move them through. At the same time, as you're aware, through our programs we've been working with the federal government on transitional housing. Some of it has been successful; some not so successful.

Moving now to the accountability of the shelters. We have to determine how much support should be coming for a shelter and who should be paying for program support. If you look at the variety of services provided and the variety of costs, it's virtually everywhere. What we want to get is something that we can put a finger on. We have not been successful in lowering the demand. I was pleased last winter that in Edmonton we never hit a crisis point. In Calgary we didn't, but Calgary went ahead and contracted a few more temporary spaces.

One of the problems we have is that every time there are spaces that are temporary, suddenly people want to make them permanent. There would be no end to the number of spots we would have. We have to work some way to get these people out of the shelters. Maybe some will never be able to leave – I don't know – and we'll have to deal with those differently. Certainly, that whole business of the shelters is something we're going to continue to look at.

With respect to the form that was there, it was a good form. It was run by FOIP and everybody. The only reason I cancelled it is because we were getting the information in an alternate way. The cost of it was staff time. The actual cost was zero. A couple of staff put it together and ran it by the proper processes. So whatever the staff time would have been in terms of a portion of their day: I don't know what that is. I couldn't even give you an answer. The actual cost expended to develop a form out of a budget line is zero. Did some staff work on it? Yes. It was just a simple kind of thing, because a lot of the questions asked were already being asked. It wasn't a great big revelation. So the cost of the form was quite frankly a bit of staff time and not very much at that. Remember, we got into these shelters April 1, and that form issue was in May, June.

One of the issues surrounding the shelters, from the minister's point of view, was simply the reporting back to government. Some operators were reluctant to do so. They chose to try to give us numbers three months old through other bodies that dealt with them. I felt that if we were going to be responsible, we had to ensure that we knew what we were doing. I was very pleased this year. Virtually all of the shelters have been very good on their daily reporting, as I indicated to you a couple of times in the House in question period. So we'll continue to work on that.

There wasn't actually a decrease in the allocation for the homeless shelters; a slight increase, as a matter of fact. What you're seeing, the difference in the spending: we had Westgate; we had a couple of

other costs in there that I hope won't be there. I'll be very honest with you. I don't intend on increasing the homeless shelter budget. I don't intend an increase in the budget. Whether I will be able to stick with that or not, I don't know, but when we're spending more on homeless shelters within a five- or six-year period than we are on our whole lodge assistance program, there's something out of balance socially here. We want to find out what it is, and we want to find a way to help these folks end up in homes so that they aren't in the shelters.

Part of the affordable housing program is now being directed more and more at getting sizes of rooms that people on low incomes can afford and are happy with. As you're probably aware, there's one converted restaurant for sure that was done on 95th Street, I believe, that was targeted at very, very low income. So that's sort of more or less what's happening there.

The low-cost housing accessibility is variable. We've worked the program, and it seems to be working very well to where the communities determine. For example, an affordable level of rent may be different in Fort McMurray than it is in Brooks.

The projects have been going very well. I gave you the numbers of what they were, but I would like to point out something that's rather interesting. Edmonton has had the most projects and the most amount of money by far. That wasn't because of any kind of effort from the department's or the minister's side. They came forward with the projects, and I have to commend the various groups that did that. As you know, some of those were directed at people who needed extra help, and whether the programming came from the Mental Health Association or somewhere else, the whole idea is that we want to get a housing stock there that becomes, as I said, sustainable.

What I didn't mention in my opening comments was the fact that the federal program is a 10-year program for affordability. Alberta's program is 20 years. We are double the timeline on it, in other words, before any kind of funding goes into these projects, whether it be municipal, not-for-profit, or private developers, some of which are doing a very good job, incidentally. Some of the lowest rents coming up in the next cut of Edmonton projects are with a private developer. But those things must remain affordable for 20 years. I think that that's reasonable. By then properties depreciate, and you have a lot of other things to look at.

What we're trying to do with the room and board – you have a variety of levels of need. You have your basic lodge, and you have supportive housing, assisted living, designated assisted living, long-term care facilities. We want to establish a room and board pattern that makes sense, that doesn't arbitrarily go here, there, or elsewhere. The Alberta Senior Citizens' Housing Association, ASCHA, has done quite a bit of work with us on that. We'll see. There may be some little variances in rent depending upon the services you get.

Then it opens up the debate of how much an individual is responsible for. One of the ways we're addressing that, as I indicated in my comments, is that we've switched our funding from bricks and mortar to individuals, which means that the support follows the individuals, so depending on where they go, the money goes with them, which is also looking to the future. Hopefully the day comes, as more people with private incomes come on the market and less support is required, if you will, when these lodges will then be able to rent at whatever is a reasonable rate and the government would not be supplementing in lodges people who don't need supplements. I don't think anybody can argue with that.

You made reference to performance measures. I'm frankly of the mind that if you have a performance measure, you should make it work. We were having difficulty with those, so rather than trying to put a smoke and mirrors thing, my staff put the facts down. We

haven't figured it out yet. When we figure out a good measure that will work, we'll have it down there. Until then, I'm not going to have something on there just for the sake of having it there.

4:30

With percentages it gets to be difficult. Some things measure themselves, if you will, and there are some areas that are very difficult. Satisfaction: if it's under a hundred per cent, I'm not happy. Am I ever going to get to a hundred per cent? No. But the idea is to push and push and push as close as you can get.

So when you see that the performance measures are not in there, we're not slacking off; we're just trying to find a better system. When the better system comes in, it will be brought through there. I would imagine that you could go with that one.

You made reference to the tragedy in the nursing home, and I'd say this. In any private home, institution of any kind, whether it be a senior or nonsenior, a person with a disability, there's no defensible excuse for something like that happening. I wouldn't ever want by that statement to intimate that there was any kind of criminal intent. Somebody did something wrong.

One of the suggestions that has been coming forward – and the Capital health authority I think has moved a little bit on this one – is that the water that goes into these tubs should be on what they call a blender, where you can't go above a particular temperature no matter how hard you try. That's a very good first step.

Another suggestion which I would have is that they have a floating thermometer that doesn't have numbers on it but has visual colours – if the needle's in the red, you don't touch it; if it's in the green, it's safe – in addition to blenders and so on to make sure that an error can't happen, because if it's mechanical, it can happen. That's one of those tragedies that's there.

We're trying to work with the operators on best practices. I don't like to comment too much because I'm not privy to all of the circumstances surrounding how that happened. I will only stand by the statement I'm making here and now: it should not have happened. We certainly will be looking at ways to ensure that it doesn't reoccur anywhere else, and Alberta Health I'm sure would be just as adamant about that as I am.

Remote housing: that's an interesting one. We have a real challenge there, a real challenge – and we're working on it – and that's to make the thing accessible and also sustainable, and we're making progress there. Am I happy with the progress to date? I'm happy that we've got some good initiatives going, and we've got I believe an allocation there yet, that we'll have more money going in. Hopefully, we'll get a system going that has a higher degree of sustainability in it than some of the remote housing currently has. There are a lot of issues surrounding that one that make it awkward to go for. One of them is even the ability to pay rent, if you will.

The increase to seniors' benefits – you were right. I shook my head, but you were right. Part of it is a volume increase; part of it is picking up of the difference that we received and allocated for the support for seniors in long-term care. Part of that will go there. Ten million of that has not been designated. That was what I was referring to. We will be targeting that into the special-needs program to a specific area. We've got some particular things in mind but have to work it through the system. That will be announced prior to July 1, a \$10 million infusion somewhere in the special-needs program. But the way I am, I won't fudge it. We've got some good ideas of where it should go, and it's going to help a specific group somewhere in the special needs that need the help.

Your comments with respect to taxes. I don't accept your side comments about how terrible the provincial government has been to the municipalities, but I suppose we can agree to disagree on that.

However, the basic issue that we share is that rising taxes, whether it be education or municipal, are becoming too burdensome on fixed-income people, whether they be seniors or not. On that, I'm totally in concert with you. We're trying to work out some sort of a program that will address that very issue. How successful we'll be I guess time will tell.

The whole idea of property taxes impacting people's ability to stay in their homes is a concern for me, and you will see things like market value assessment, all these things enter into it. So we have to find some mechanism that is workable and ensures that people can in fact stay in their own homes and that taxes aren't the driver for them to get out.

Axia. I understand that we don't give Axia anything. I'll give you a bit of expansion on that answer. If I'm wrong, I apologize, but I believe that we don't have anything going into Axia, and we're not really into that whole business. We'll try in the written answers to give you an explanation because, quite frankly, I don't know all of the answers on that particular question to do with the Internet, and I'd just have to get it for you anyhow. But I'm pretty dam sure Axia is not a part of it.

I think that's most of the things that you asked me, hon. member. We'll be looking at *Hansard*, and if there are relevant budget items that we've missed, we'll be glad to give them to you in writing.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I know that in estimates members of the government don't often participate in the debate, but from time to time I think it's really important that we do and that we also put our thoughts on the record.

I understand perhaps more than many in this room what the role of opposition is in a parliamentary democracy and how they have the obligation and the responsibility to oppose because it's that opposition that strengthens the legislation that the government will impose. It's often said that the opposition will have its say and the government will have its way, and that's the way the parliamentary system works. So from time to time we just have to sort of sit here and bite our tongue and say: gosh, that's just not fair. But that's the way life is, and that's the way it works.

I first want to recognize the work that this minister has done in this portfolio and, reflected in this ministry, the good work that's being done at the service level by this ministry. Generally speaking, when people are in need and address this ministry, the need is very often acute. People are frightened, concerned, very, very vulnerable. When these people connect with the government, to whom they are looking for comfort and security and direction, that has to be done with sensitivity, and from everything I've heard, this department has met that obligation and met it well. Thank you.

Now, unlike the opposition, who are able and capable and very good at hooking up with a specific interest group in order to promote a specific cause, which is the way it's done, and a specific group who may or may not have a specific interest, in this case seniors, who have been represented by various seniors' organizations here, ensuring that their voices are heard, that their interests are heard – they know that this Legislature listens not only to their voice but must listen to every other voice in society and then aggregate interests. That's what our responsibility is: it's to aggregate interests in the common good. So that's what we're charged with doing. It's not as if there is an infinite amount of resources available. We have to do with what we have, and we have to make the best choices long term.

That brings me to the heart of the comments that I wanted to put on record, Minister, and that is this. Next month I'll be 62.

An Hon. Member: How old?

Mr. McClelland: Sixty-two. In three years I'll be 65. So the question is: do I become entitled because I'm 65? That's the elemental question. Does entitlement come as a result of age, or should public funds go where they're needed? Is want the determination or is need the determination?

4:40

Let me illustrate it this way. The opposition has made mention and seniors' groups and seniors individually have made representation to me with regard to the extended health care program in which every senior because they were 65 years of age was eligible for a hundred dollars for glasses, dentures, whatever it might be. This was a nice program, but if seniors had independent health care insurance or if they had other insurance, that insurance paid net of the hundred dollars which was to be paid out of the common tax base. So there we were paying our premiums to get the insurance to cover it, and the insurance company would pay, as they're wont to do, net of the hundred dollars that they would get.

Now, what about the senior that didn't have any coverage at all? That senior would get the hundred dollars, but what happened if the senior didn't have the other \$400 to get the dentures? They'd have the hundred but not the \$400 and would be nowhere.

So the point is that if we make the distinction for public benefit based on need not want, then what has happened will happen, and that is that the senior that needs the \$500 will get the \$500, get the service they require. It's a question, then, of ensuring that we get the best results for the money spent or the money that's available.

That brings me to the notion of health care premiums based on age. Now, I'm on record as suggesting that health care premiums are a tax. They're a regressive tax, and I don't think that we should have health care premiums for anybody in Alberta. We have to pay it. We all know that we have to pay it. But do people somehow because they are age 65 all of a sudden become unable to pay? Wouldn't it make more sense that the capacity to pay health care premiums, as long as we've got them, is based on need, not on age? Doesn't it make sense that a young family trying to get by have just as much need of support as someone that is post-65 but better off, substantially better off?

I suspect that intuitively seniors understand that as well because many people that are seniors have grandchildren. Somehow we who are grandparents know that there's a magical transformation that takes place. There's a concern for our grandchildren that seems to transcend the concern that we have for our children. It's entirely different. I think it's fair to say that the majority of seniors are just as concerned with the ability of their grandchildren and other grandchildren to have the same opportunities in life that they have enjoyed and that the transfer of wealth is not intergenerationally from one generation to another.

That's the problem with the Canada pension plan. It's not interprovincially unfair; it's intergenerationally unfair. Someone in my age group would have paid into the Canada pension plan something in the nature of 80 cents for every dollar I'll get out of it if I live to an actuarial age. Someone 20 years older than me would have paid something in the order of 50 to 60 cents. Someone starting off today would pay into the Canada pension plan a great deal more, 10 per cent of their income, 5 per cent from them, 5 per cent from their employer, unless, of course, they were self-employed, and then it would be 10 per cent, or around \$3,500 a year, for which after 40 years they would get something in the order of 80 cents for every dollar they put in, with not one cent appreciation of capital. Not one cent. That is a great proportion of the amount of money that young people can put away for their own futures.

We have a societal responsibility to do what's fair. We absolutely must in my view do something to ensure that seniors are able to stay in their homes and not be inflated out of being able to stay in their homes. People who have done everything right in their lives – they've put their kids through school; they belong to the community leagues; they've built the community – find themselves, because we're living longer and healthier, living beyond their capacity to survive on what they've put away.

It's kind of like having your boat tied to the jetty, and the water's coming up, and you're going to be swamped. We've got to be thinking about how we can hold seniors harmless from the numbers that eventually will get them because of inflation, and maybe it means freezing property taxes on seniors. We've talked about that often because that would be a good way to ensure that seniors can stay in their homes, and the property taxes would catch up when the home is sold, just like they do in California.

I don't think that most seniors, or seniors that have the resources, begrudge the school tax that goes into paying for future generations. It's part of our social responsibility to each other. Even if we don't have children, even if we don't have grandchildren, our social contract one to another is for our society, and that includes educating future generations because it's future generations that build the country for the future. It's how we renew ourselves. That's why families and children are so important, and that's why we have community.

I know that there are other people that want to join in this debate, and I know that there are not many questions to the ministry in my comments, but I thought it was really important that we put this on the record, Mr. Chairman, because I am often contacted by seniors full of umbrage. They think: my God, look how we're getting screwed, and you're doing it to us; look how badly off we are. But when I explain what is actually taking place, I have yet to have hear one single individual say, "Hey, wait a minute; I didn't understand that. Well, of course I agree." You know something? It doesn't matter whether we're younger or middle or seniors, we've all got a stake in our society. I really do think that what we are doing together is going to result in the kind of society that we want.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Before I call on the minister to perhaps reply, I wonder if we might have consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mrs. O'Neill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have the honour this afternoon to introduce to all members of this Assembly someone who is seated in the public gallery, whose son perhaps is better known to us than he, but we are very honoured because he is here in Edmonton to be the guest speaker tomorrow evening at a fundraising gala for early literacy and intervention programs in conjunction with Capital health and with the school boards in Edmonton. He's going to speak at the Magic Moments Gala tomorrow evening. He has been accompanied here at the Legislature by our Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms, Mr. Ed Richard. He is also accompanied by his friend Mr. John Wilson, who was a neighbour of his in Brantford, Ontario, and who now resides just north of Spruce Grove. So I would ask everybody in this Assembly to extend the warm welcome to Mr. Walter Gretzky, who is seated in the public gallery. Please rise, Mr. Gretzky.

head: **Main Estimates 2004-05**

Seniors (*continued*)

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the estimates on the Seniors ministry. I want to acknowledge the presence of seniors throughout the afternoon on both sides of the House, the members' gallery and the public gallery. It's nice to see citizens taking interest in debates which deal with their tax dollars and their benefits and their well-being.

4:50

Mr. Chairman, I just want to quickly make a few observations on the business plan I looked through. I remember that several years ago, a little over three years ago, when this ministry was established following the last election, the minister spoke with high hopes about his ability to advocate on behalf of seniors. I just notice that the word "advocacy" or the responsibility of this department to advocate on behalf of seniors has simply disappeared from the text of the business plan for the Ministry of Seniors. I want to make note of it, and I suppose the minister will perhaps respond as to why it is that the advocacy role of the department is not only perhaps downgraded but simply is no longer spoken of in the business plan.

Another quick observation on the business plan, Mr. Chairman, that I want to make has to do with the issue of long-term care and the radical increases, ranging from 40 to 50 per cent, that were introduced some time ago and have hit seniors very hard. They were introduced, I guess, in last October or September. We've been hearing with increasing frequency the hardships that seniors who use long-term care facilities have been forced to endure as a result of this, but one justification that was made when this massive change in long-term health care payments was introduced – this justification was used both by the private providers of this care and also by this ministry – was that additional charges are justified to guarantee and to deliver enhanced quality of long-term care.

I find in the business plan absolutely no mention specific to any performance measure that is specially designed to deliver on this promise that the ministry made, that it is committed to making sure that the additional funds that will be raised, although they would result in economic hardship will also deliver, in turn, enhanced quality of health care to seniors who use long-term care facilities. Where is the performance measure indicated in the business plan which reaffirms the commitment of this government and this ministry to follow up on that undertaking that it gave and the justification that was offered by you to increase those very, very unjustified and unpopular huge long-term care charges at the time? So that's the second question related to the business plan.

I want to now return to this afternoon's question period, Mr. Chairman. When I asked the first question, I was advised that the question that I asked is appropriately to be asked of the Minister of Seniors, so he might want to take an opportunity to answer the question. I'm going to read into the record the preamble and then the question that was put to the Premier, but on the advice of the Speaker the Premier did not rise to address this question. Here was the language of the question, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Speaker, in the past few years the Tory government has hiked seniors' health care premiums 30 per cent, long-term care fees by [close to] 50 per cent, and eliminated universal eye care and dental benefits, but this is small change compared to what the government has in store for seniors in its still secret health care plan. At the recent Tory Party convention the health minister unveiled a proposal to cap or eliminate provincial drug coverage outside of hospitals, a

change [in policy] that would take more than \$300 million out of the pockets of the province's seniors each year.

That was the preamble, Mr. Chairman.

My question that didn't get answered because of the intervention from the chair was:

Given that the government has already hiked co-payments on the [provincial] seniors' drug plan by 30 per cent, why would the government add to the financial misery of seniors by hatching a secret plan to either cap or even eliminate seniors' prescription drug coverage?

So the Minister of Seniors does have the opportunity to heed the advice of the Speaker to address this question that I raised during question period, Mr. Chairman.

Following up on this question of the potential threat that was implied in the Minister of Health and Wellness's proposal at the time of the Tory convention in Banff, that the coverage may be removed or under consideration to be removed, I want to draw attention to the fact that the 30 per cent copayment that seniors are responsible for for their prescription drugs was increased by 5 per cent. It increased from 25 to 30 per cent some years ago. Although the percentage of 30 per cent has remained stable now for a few years, we do know that the actual drug costs have been rising at a much faster rate than any other item in the health care costs category.

Even though 30 per cent has remained 30 per cent, the cost of drugs has been increasing at a rate of about 17 per cent. So actual costs, even at 30 per cent, to a senior who uses medication on a regular basis have been going up. They have not been stable. They have not been static. There has been an increase in the cost to seniors on an annual basis with respect to the amount of dollars that they have to pay in order to get necessary medication, medications that are prescribed for them to remain reasonably healthy or to recover from illnesses and chronic problems of health that they experience.

I wanted to just draw the attention of the House and of the minister to the various ways which are not really visible and noticeable to us in which seniors get hit by other increasing costs and to dollar amounts that they have to find somewhere to pay for these increasing costs. They have limited incomes and stagnant incomes in many cases, incomes that grow, if they grow at all, at a very, very small, minuscule rate.

Issues have been raised with respect to how various other living costs, you know, resulting from the deregulated electricity plan of this government, the property tax hikes for seniors and others, and many other sources of the costs to seniors are increasing. That point has been made, so I don't want to belabour this. Given that we're hearing from seniors ever more frequently about their sense of economic insecurity, about their fear of not being able to pay their costs, I don't hear from the government benches or from the ministry any serious attempts to address these concerns.

I was looking at a document here where the minister makes an assertion that the low-income seniors are better now than they were five, six years ago. Well, insofar as the minister's statements are correct – and I question this statement in itself – I think the rest of the seniors, those who are not considered by the minister as low income, are the ones who are feeling worse off. So it's they who are being asked by the minister to pay for the marginal improvements that he claims have happened in the plight of the low-income seniors.

It's strange, straight off, if the non low-income seniors have to pay and have to feel impoverished to pay for the improvements that the minister claims are being experienced by low-income seniors. Seniors do pay taxes. Seniors do pay property taxes, income taxes, and many other service taxes which are indirect and invisible, just as anyone else pays, so they're not trying to get a free ride. They're

doing their bit, and they have done so all their lives. They built this province, and to be told what they're told here is, I think, unfair to them.

5:00

On the long-term care issue I have one quick question for the minister. I was looking at Extendicare's business report that I think our staff took off the Internet, in which Extendicare, which is one of the private, for-profit providers—not the major one, perhaps, but one of the for-profit providers of long-term care—claims that its revenues have gone up by 50, 60 per cent. They say that out of this some money will be used for improvement of quality. The rest, they say, will be used of course to help the shareholders of the company. I ask the minister: has the minister got any real performance measures that will hold such companies and such providers to account for their undertaking to improve the quality of care for seniors?

One other matter that I want to raise, Mr. Chairman, very quickly—time is running out—has to do with the management authorities that deal with seniors' housing. I have been receiving complaints from within my own constituency from residents in some of these housing complexes which are managed by these authorities, and the complaints are serious.

When they make these complaints and put them on paper, some of them have been threatened with eviction if they don't stop doing this. I find it a matter of a great deal of concern. I think it's disturbing to see this happen. When seniors living in these places are already vulnerable, they then come under pressure from these management authorities and are threatened with eviction if they open their mouths and complain about the quality of care or don't get explanations for the questions that they have, questions that are quite legitimate.

I have been hearing from my constituents who use these facilities on a regular basis, and in fact I've got a letter on my table which threatens eviction unless these people who complain stop the complaints, and I would like the minister to do something about it.

In that regard, the findings of the Auditor General I think are germane. I was looking at the findings reported in the 2002-2003 Auditor General's report, and they say:

We found that:

- the Ministry did not receive business plans for 4 management organizations, and another 4 of the business plans were not current—out of 11 management organizations we tested.

There are hundreds of those management organizations looking after these facilities, Mr. Chairman, and 4 out of 11 means about 40 per cent of the facilities do not simply have business plans which are clear enough or current enough based on which they can be held to account. That's why, I guess, the problems with seniors arise.

"The management of the operational reviews had the following deficiencies," and there are several of them listed. I'm sure the minister knows about them.

I looked at the department's response to these recommendations and findings of the AG's department. I don't find a very satisfactory response to these very serious concerns that the AG has expressed and which certainly translate into the concerns that my constituents have drawn to my attention with respect to the difficulties that they are faced with when they are dealing with these management authorities.

So these are some of the observations and questions. My time has run out for the moment. I will take another opportunity later. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very distressed by the extremely misleading comments that were brought forward by the questioner. Very misleading.

Number one, the prescriptions. I don't want these comments to go uncorrected, because I don't want seniors here or perhaps hearing this outside the House to be unduly concerned. The copayment is 30 per cent, but you forget to mention up to a maximum of \$25 even if their prescription is \$500. So if it went up 17 per cent, that money came out of the Health budget, not out of the senior's pocket, so please put all the facts on the table.

I find your comments with respect to long-term care rates very interesting, very exorbitant, extremely exorbitant. Maximum cost in Alberta for a private room, \$48. Maximum cost in British Columbia, \$66.30; Saskatchewan, \$53; Ontario, \$66; Northwest Territories, \$23; Yukon, \$21. Quebec is 2 cents cheaper than us, \$48.28. So we're second lowest. They're the lowest. Nova Scotia, \$208.19, asset tested; New Brunswick, \$134, asset tested; Prince Edward Island, \$117 for the government's and \$150 for the privates, asset tested; Newfoundland, \$92, asset tested.

Now, you're going to sit there and tell me that to have the lowest rates in this country is exorbitant. Where do you get that from? I just find that totally, totally shameful. You talk about advocacy. Under my tutelage of the seniors the thresholds have gone up, the benefits have gone up when we have expanded programs, and we have taken care of the low-income seniors very, very well, thank you very much.

I'm on the public record, as well as some of my colleagues, although it's not government policy and I don't advocate premium supports, but I work within a team system, and as long as I'm the bottom end, I will accept that. But I will continue to advocate for it, and I feel very comfortable advocating in a democratic caucus that respects my views. If I can't convince my colleagues, I guess I'll accept the responsibility for that.

I'd like to know where you get your crazy notions of what happened at our convention in a session that I didn't have the opportunity to attend, but here you are getting information about how the minister of health is going to do these terrible things to people when we haven't even had the meeting. We don't even know what you're talking about, but you've got all the facts.

With respect to management bodies in the Auditor General's report, I've had discussions with the Auditor General off and on and will continue to have them. I find it difficult for us to list assets as a part of government that aren't a part of government, although they manage some of our assets and some of theirs.

If there are any written complaints on any management body in this province that some individual is being unfairly treated, I want those things in my office because they'll go to the department and they will be looked into to see if in fact there's validity to it. [interjection] Well, bring them over. You haven't sent me a single complaint, yet you stand here and say that you've got a desk full. Bring them over. I don't appreciate that kind of nonsense going on in here when you don't have facts. You haven't contacted me, you haven't contacted the staff, and you're making allegations against people who are doing a service not only to seniors but to low-income people, to folks who are in need, and you're sitting there telling me that they are terrible folks. I just don't accept that, thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the members, especially the Member for Edmonton-Centre, who went through the budget, had legitimate questions. I hope I've been able to answer the majority of those. The ones that we can't answer, we'll forward to you. You had reviewed that, and I appreciate the fact that you took the trouble

to go through it and find questions. I don't hesitate to give credit where credit is due, and you did a good job of that.

5:10

To the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, I appreciated his comments, because one of the things that I'm very proud of is the fact that the people in the Seniors department, when they deal with the public, are very sensitive. They do try to help. They do go the extra mile. No, we can't fix everybody's situation. Certainly, I guess it would be nice if we could. But when they are recognized publicly, I certainly endorse that, and I appreciate that being noticed.

Getting back to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, I don't know what Extendicare's bottom lines are. I do know this much: they are a cross-Canada operation, and I believe beyond Canada. Where they get their profits from I'm not too terribly sure.

What I do know is that I had a visit with the Caritas group in the Edmonton General hospital at the request of the residents. They were feeling the pinch there also with the lack of funds. So what is going to happen with the extra money that the Caritas group is collecting at the Edmonton General? This was said to all the residents. They had two major concerns. One was the menu; they wanted it enhanced. The commitment was made in front of me that that menu was going to be enhanced. The other thing was that they had a concern with not sufficient staff to meet their needs. I was told that they were going to try to enhance their staff too. So I'm very comfortable that that particular group is sincere, that they've directed their efforts to it, and I'm very pleased that we were somehow able to get some money into the mix for them to in fact do that.

The rates went up effective August 1, I believe it was. There hasn't been the opportunity in three or four or five months to suddenly make all of these hundreds of millions of dollars. It's going to take time for them to accumulate a bit in there. We expect in every single facility in this province appropriate, proper, safe care for every senior, not only seniors but everybody in an extended care facility, because, quite frankly, it's not all seniors. I believe it's 8,800, and a few thousand over that are nonseniors.

We are, I think, looking at situations that arise, whether they be through Health, whether they be through the Seniors end of it, but we make sure that we address the issues and approach them as best we can with appropriate solutions, ones that have meaning and, if it comes to money, ones that have sustainability.

The Chair: I regret that I must interrupt the hon. Minister of Seniors, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoon, and this being Thursday afternoon, I must now put the question after consideration

of the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Seniors for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005.

Agreed to:

Operating Expenses and	
Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$406,422,000

The Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply now rise and report the estimates for the Ministry of Seniors.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, for the following department.

Seniors: operating expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$406,422,000.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? The motion is carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On that note I would move that we now call it 5:30 and get out and enjoy some of that beautiful landscape and spirit which the song so well reflected, the song *Alberta*, a little bit of which was played earlier today.

Let's call it 5:30, Mr. Speaker, and adjourn until Monday, May 10, at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; at 5:16 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, May 10, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/05/10

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon. Welcome back.

Let us pray. Author of all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, we ask for guidance in order that truth and justice may prevail in all of our judgments. Amen.

Now, hon. members and to all the people in the galleries today, would you please join in the singing of our national anthem. We'll be led today by Mr. Maurice Lorieau. Feel free to participate in the language of your choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Thank you. I think that only one thing more has to be said: go, Flames, go.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly eight seniors from the Riverside Lions Village from my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. I had an opportunity to meet with them a little bit earlier today. They're here in the members' gallery: Mr. and Mrs. Bill and Margaret Manning, Mrs. Ella Ozubko, Mrs. Natalie Kuch, Mr. and Mrs. Doug and Jean Whyte, Mrs. Vickie Deagle, and Mrs. Norma Johnston. They're accompanied by Mrs. Michelle Kraeling, who is their recreation/leisure consultant. I'd ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Jonson: Mr. Speaker, today it is my pleasure to be able to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 27 students from the Rimbey elementary school. They are accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Jim Moore, and parent helpers Mr. Dallas Mannix, Mrs. Marnie Bland, and Mrs. Laureen Morton. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to other members of the Assembly Katie Hobday. Katie will be assisting me in the Calgary-Glenmore office this summer.

Mr. Norris: A huge challenge.

Mr. Stevens: A huge challenge indeed.

Katie, Mr. Speaker, is just finishing her third year at U of C in a five-year, double degree program in economics and political science. When she's not studying, she's writing for the university newspaper, *The Gauntlet*, and working on a variety of clubs. If Katie could please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm really very excited and proud to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly one of two very special men in my life in Calgary: my son, Mike Kryczka. Mike truly represents Alberta's entrepreneurial spirit. Years ago now, he ran his own landscaping company while attending the University of Calgary in the petroleum land management program. He has successfully built and sold two junior oil and gas companies in southern Alberta and has launched his third, Bowood Energy. He's not as old as you're thinking he is. He loves masters badminton, skiing, and golf and even fly-fishing, but most importantly Mike is a wonderful husband to Sarah and father to Emily, Jacob, and Joshua. I would ask Mike to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I'm also very pleased today to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly 72 visitors from Webber Academy, 63 grade 5 students and nine adults. Webber Academy is a private school in the constituency of Calgary-West, and their goal is to prepare students for university and beyond as leaders in the community and in society.

I would just like to say a few words about Dr. Neil Webber, their president. As many of you may or may not know, Neil was an MLA and minister for 14 years in this Legislature, from 1975 to 1989, for the constituency of Calgary-Bow. He held four portfolios, and I told him that I'd only mention two at this time, Energy and Education.

He also has with him teachers Ms Janice Chan, Ms Janet Wushke, Mr. Daniel Mondaca, and parent helpers Ms Virginia Hughes and Mrs. Carol Celli. I would ask the Webber Academy students – I believe they're in the public gallery – to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and other members of the Assembly three members of my family who are visiting today from Red Deer. Actually, they belong to the Red Deer-North constituency. They are seated in your gallery. They are my sister, Audrey Graham-Thievin, her husband, Tom Thievin, and my niece, Kayla Thievin. Audrey is a jazz musician and a music teacher. Tom is a piano tuner. Actually, they're all musicians. Kayla was a member of the Red Deer Royals for many years, and she just finished her first year at NAIT in business. So I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a real privilege for me to be able to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a group of very dedicated people. I'm honoured that they are under contract through my office as the government caucus whip to look after the needs of the private members on the government side.

Mr. Speaker, in my office there are three young people working: Mr. Jason Zwarg, our director of caucus; Mr. Bartek Kienc, the whip's administrative assistant; and Gerald Proctor, the whip's legislative assistant.

Going to the research branch, our senior researcher is Mr. Jason Ennis. Our researchers are Matthew Steppan, Greg McFarlane, Frank Ostlinger, who's leaving us right away to move over to Government Services – we wish him all the best over there – Jordon Copping, Emir Mehinagic, Richard Westlund, Andrea Hennig, Dan Hanson, Mike Simpson, and David Williams, who will be starting with them next week.

The legislative assistants are, in alphabetical order, Jan Aldous, Deb Arcand, Darlene Beckstrand, Chris Brookes, Jon Buck, Darla Cowdell, Daryn Fersovich, Carmen Frebrowski, Gladys Gammon, Mike Gladstone, Brenda Goebel, Phyllis Hennig, Cheryl Koss, Donna Krasowski, June Lam, Cheryl Lees, Stacey Leighton, Barb Letendre, Brendalee Loveseth, Bethany MacGillivray, Marie Martin, Shelly McCrae, Leah Ritz, Diane Todoruk, and Joanne Williamson.

These are the people who keep us on track year-round, Mr. Speaker, not just when question period is on, as we're all up here working with them all the time. They work with our constituency assistants as well, and they keep us well informed. I'm very grateful to them for their dedicated duties to us. I would ask them all to rise – they are in both galleries – and receive the warm welcome of this House.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce – and I'm not sure that they are here, but they'll be joining us very shortly if they're not – a group of students from Lloyd Garrison school in Berwyn. Berwyn is between Fairview and Peace River, about five and a half hours' drive from here, so it's quite an effort for them and quite a pleasure for me to get a school group to visit the Legislature. They're accompanied by teachers Mr. Rob Hoban and Ms Shaunna Regal and parent helpers Suzie Reyda, Bruce Warren, Mrs. Sandra Eastman, Mrs. Greit Heimstra, Mrs. Kim Alexander, and Mrs. Gwen Sukeroff. I don't believe they are here, but I'd ask the Assembly nonetheless to wish them a warm welcome. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've got two introductions today. I'll start with the first one. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Mary Elizabeth Archer, who has been working as sessional support for the New Democrat opposition during the current session of this Assembly. Mary Elizabeth has an exceptional work ethic and brings an enormous amount of energy and cheerfulness to her work. So I take this opportunity now to thank her for her valued work and contribution to the work of the caucus. She is seated in the public gallery. I would now request her to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure as well to introduce to you and through you to the House Ms Elena Napora. Elena Napora is a member of the Edmonton Friends of the North Environmental Society. She is here this afternoon to observe the proceedings of the Assembly. Ms Napora is seated in the public gallery, and I would now ask her to rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce four people to you today. The first one is my summer student. She is visiting us here to spend a couple of days to see how business works between the Legislature and constituency offices. Her name is Melanie Fic, and I would ask her to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, the other three that I have to introduce today I'm truly honoured and humbled to introduce to you. These three gentlemen are here to observe, hopefully, with any luck, the passing of Bill 206 today in the Legislature. These three gentlemen actually have felt the wrath of our federal government and, unfortunately, were thrown in jail. They served a total of 90 days in jail for nothing more than the crime of selling their wheat to someone other than the Canadian Wheat Board. I would ask Jim Chatenay of Red Deer, Bill Moore of Red Deer, and Ron Duffy of Lacombe to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a couple of introductions today. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a bright young woman who has come to work for us for the summer as part of the summer temporary employment program. She's an honours graduate from the University of Alberta with a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology. She's also a committed community volunteer. She's currently working with the World University Service of Canada and the Edmonton Immigrant Services Association, and we're very pleased to have her working with us for the summer. I would ask Ms Janina Strudwick to rise and receive the warm recognition of the Assembly.

My second introduction, Mr. Speaker, is to introduce to you and through you to other members of the Assembly Héctor González and Leo Campos, two well-respected leaders of the Chilean community in Edmonton. Like thousands of Canadians of Chilean ancestry they were forced to flee their homeland because of the brutality and oppression of the Pinochet dictatorship. These two gentlemen are seated in the public gallery. I would ask Héctor González and Leo Campos to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a bit of a surprise to see the students from Webber Academy here today as I was talking to one yesterday and she failed to advise me that they were going to be here. It's a pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly my granddaughter Mackenzie Symonds. Mackenzie, if you would rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Automobile Insurance Reform

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government's auto insurance plan is seen as a failure even by government MLAs. One of them said about the plan this weekend, quote, there's nothing in it for the average Albertan, end quote, and, quote, this is a long way from what the Premier promised Albertans, end quote. My questions are to the Premier. The Premier's own backbenchers say that the government's auto insurance plan is a failure, so why won't the Premier himself admit it?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the government's ultimate goal is to establish a system of fair and affordable premiums that rewards good drivers with low premiums and doesn't penalize drivers based on age, gender, or factors that don't relate to your driving record.

Now, Mr. Speaker, we've taken steps to address immediate concerns such as freezing insurance rates, and we continue to work through the rest of the reforms. We continue to work through the rest of the reforms. Auto insurance, needless to say, is a very complex subject and very individual, and the government is still discussing the details of insurance reform. Bottom line: the strength of the system is that it's based on personal responsibility to be a good driver. Good drivers will pay fair and affordable premiums, and bad drivers will pay surcharges.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, an all-day standing policy committee meeting is scheduled on May 27 to finalize the reforms, and I would think it would be appropriate to comment at that time.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that public auto insurance plans in other provinces don't collect information on age and gender when you're applying for policies, as I discovered, will this government make it illegal for auto insurance companies in Alberta to collect this information, specifically age and gender information, from auto insurance policyholders?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know what the policies are of the various insurance companies operating in the province, but certainly since one component of automobile insurance is compulsory – and that is the public liability and property damage component – we are in a position to regulate that component only.

Relative to the information that they seek, I don't know if that will be moot or not, because what we are saying is that we want to end the discrimination that insurance companies might gather relative to age and gender. Mr. Speaker, it stands to reason that they would gather information relative to driving records because a bad driver should be penalized.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Well, given the Premier's comments that so offended the Chilean-Canadian community made in response to a question on auto insurance last week, will he apologize for his remarks?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will have more to say on that later. I understand that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands will probably be asking a question.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

1:50

Achievement Testing

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Information has come out in the last couple of days that young students who do not pass their grade 3 achievement tests will be retested in grade 4. This has been widely condemned by educators, and various school jurisdictions in the province have said that they will not co-operate on this matter unless they're forced to. My questions are to the Premier. Can the Premier tell us if the tests being proposed for grade 4 were developed in Alberta specific to the Alberta curriculum, or are they being imported from out of province?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as the minister responsible is not here, I'll take the question under advisement.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll look for the answer tomorrow.

Can the Premier tell the Assembly if the government is also planning to retest in grades 7 and 10 students who do not pass their achievement tests in grades 6 and 9?

Mr. Klein: Same answer, Mr. Speaker. I'll take the question under advisement.

Dr. Taft: And once again I'll look for the answer tomorrow.

Can the Premier tell this Assembly what the costs of this testing scheme will be?

Mr. Klein: Again, Mr. Speaker, I'll take the question under advisement.

Government Travel Expenses

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, in October 2001 this government announced an immediate hiring freeze and made announcements to reduce government spending. Last week at the Public Accounts Committee meeting taxpayers were advised that all hosting expenses incurred by the government exceeding \$600 are listed publicly in the *Alberta Gazette*. My first question is to the Minister of Economic Development. How much money did the Department of Economic Development save when in October 2001 it was announced that international travel would be deferred to reduce government spending?

Mr. Norris: Well, I think some clarity, Mr. Speaker, should be brought to the question the hon. member is asking. As I recall, in the fall of 2001 there was a fairly catastrophic event that caused us to review the safety of ministerial travel. I don't believe it had anything to do with the cost of the travel, so the question is I think twofold.

In answer to his original question, I will get him dollar figures, but in actual fact – and the hon. minister of international and government affairs may want to comment as well – it was seen as a safety measure primarily. Once it was deemed that it was safe to travel again, we did so because Alberta is a remarkably strong exporting province, Mr. Speaker. We have to sell our message around the world, and we're going to continue doing it.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister and this time regarding dollar figures: why did the Economic Development department spend close to \$20,000 on a lunch and a reception in Mexico City on September 23, 2002, when this government was telling Albertans back home to reduce their expectations and make do with less?

Mr. Norris: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, with all due respect the question has no relevance to what he's asking. Our job as Economic Development is to sell the best economic model in the world, which is Alberta. It's a very simple equation. We have the lowest tax regime, we have the best employment, and we have opportunities in forestry and agriculture and oil and gas, so our job, quite frankly, is to get out there and sell it. One of our largest trading partners – I believe it's number 3 in the list of the top five – is Mexico, so clearly, as any businessman would, it behooves us to go get in front of our clients.

With reference to the specific lunch I don't know if there were 50 people or 500, but I can tell you one thing. [interjection] Our trade with Mexico – and I'm hoping you'll be silent long enough to hear this – has gone up approximately 500 per cent in the last four years, Mr. Speaker, from about \$600 million to about \$1.2 billion. I know that the hon. members who are very, very passionate about the agriculture industry will be pleased to know that our border is open to Mexico, and the agriculture minister may want to supplement as well. But I don't understand; if the reference is that we spent money promoting the province of Alberta to create more jobs, I'll never ever stop doing that.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, this time to the Premier: given that all other government departments must list hosting expenses over \$600, why is the Premier exempt from the credit card policy directive issued under the Financial Administration Act, which is one of the rules regarding documentation to support ministry-related business expenses? Why are you exempt?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I think that names on credit cards are pretty well exempt under the FOIP legislation, which was supported by the Liberals.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Automobile Insurance Reform (continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last October the Premier promised Albertans that all good drivers would see reductions in their insurance premiums. He subsequently modified this position to promise that most drivers would see reductions, then more recently that a few drivers would see reductions. Martha and Henry could be forgiven for wondering why Jackie and Ron in Saskatchewan or Mary and Tom in B.C. are allowed to enjoy cheaper public auto insurance while Albertans are left lining the pockets of profitable auto insurance companies. This is to the Premier. Given that Gordon Campbell, Grant Devine, and Gary Filmon, none of whom are strangers to the Premier's own Conservative ideology, have each recognized that public auto insurance is the best way to deliver lower rates to drivers, why won't this Premier?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, our goal, as I pointed out to the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, is to establish a system of fair and affordable premiums using the free enterprise and entrepreneurial system, at least that portion of the system that is regulated by government as it relates to public liability and property damage insurance, which is mandatory in this province. We want to arrive at a system that rewards good drivers with low premiums and doesn't penalize based on age, gender, or other factors that don't relate to driving records.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that B.C., Manitoba, and Saskatchewan have all developed public auto insurance programs without being threatened with bloody coups, how can the Premier continue to dismiss the Consumers' Association of Canada report that showed that public auto insurance delivers the cheapest and best product for drivers?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, historically and traditionally we've had

private insurance in this province, and there hasn't been a problem with it until this government identified the problem. [interjections] This government identified the problem. It wasn't the opposition parties that identified the problem; it wasn't the third party NDs that identified the problem.

It was this government and the hon. Minister of Finance who brought the matter to caucus and said – and I'm paraphrasing right now – we have a problem, and the problem is that it's hurting the economy where young drivers, because they are male between the ages of 16 and 25, cannot be employed because of high insurance rates, nor can they afford to drive a personal car because of high insurance rates. She also pointed out that older males, males over 65 years of age, were being discriminated against because of their age and because of their gender. She said that we have to deal with this problem, and that's precisely what is happening right now.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Will the Premier apologize to Alberta's Chilean community for trying to conceal his government's bungled insurance reforms behind praise for ruthless and murderous dictators?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, you know, they say, "Bite your tongue," and I plan to do just that, because I am not hiding behind a ruthless killer.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify my remarks about the Pinochet regime in Chile. I'm not an historian, nor is the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, but I recently completed a paper for one of my university courses on some aspects on Chilean history. It was entitled Allende, Pinochet and the Chilean Media. I received a mark of 77 per cent, not great but not bad.

My research for that paper made me very aware that the Pinochet government was responsible for an untold number of deaths and for the destruction of the lives and hopes of many, many Chileans. I've since had the opportunity to visit Chile and have seen that things have stabilized there tremendously. I know that many people of Chilean origin living in Alberta still bear the scars and painful memories of that dark period in Chilean history, a history that lasted until 1989, if my memory serves me right, when free elections were held again.

2:00

My comments last week were not meant in any way to suggest personal support or admiration for the Pinochet regime. Quite the contrary. Again, I'll be glad to table the paper, that points out that Salvador Allende was elected president in 1970, the first communist ever to be elected in a democratic vote. The paper sets out the moves he made to nationalize a number of industries in Chile and the wrath that he incurred from the CIA and the Americans, ostensibly over the socialization of the copper mines.

My only purpose for making those remarks was to point out that socialism can often lead to unintended and negative repercussions in societies, and unfortunately that's what happened in Chile. It did. The remarks were made in the context of a discussion about the merits of socialism.

However, let me be clear. I had no intention of appearing to argue that the Pinochet government was in any way preferable to its predecessor. As a matter of fact, it was a brutal government.

I very much appreciate the contributions and the integrity of Chilean communities in Alberta and want them and all Albertans to know that I am aware that the mere mention of the name Pinochet

can resurrect great sorrow. For that reason I will endeavour to be more appreciative of those concerns even as we debate important and timely issues in this Legislature.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I'd be glad to table my term paper. The Chilean community and members of the opposition can read it and assess it, and maybe my learned friend across the way will give me a better mark.

Addictions Treatment for Youth

Ms Graham: Mr. Speaker, late last year I was appointed chair of the board of the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission. Since that time I have gained an appreciation for the excellent programs that AADAC sponsors and the very good people that are delivering these services to Albertans who suffer from alcohol and other substance abuse as well as gambling problems. However, it has come to my attention that we do have a gap in our continuum of services in that we lack detoxification and residential treatment services for the youth of our province. I was surprised to learn of this, because we do provide this for adults in the province at several locations. This is the number one unfunded priority for AADAC. My questions this afternoon are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Is the minister in support of AADAC's plans to develop these services for the youth of our province?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I share the concern expressed by the hon. member, and I would suspect that we could speak on behalf of all Albertans when we talk about concerns for addiction, whether those addictions are caused by gambling or alcohol or drugs. It is a problem that can be significant to individuals. It's a cost that is borne by all of society.

We are working very hard, Mr. Speaker, at coming up with comprehensive, integrated, and balanced programs that can help deal with these. AADAC has been involved not only by itself but working in collaboration with Alberta Children's Services and the Department of the Solicitor General. Youth services are important, and I know that AADAC does consider this to be a great priority. The priorities of AADAC have changed over time.

Mr. Speaker, I can say that I'm supportive of AADAC moving forward in making sure that its top priorities are dealt with. If AADAC believes and if the hon. member in her capacity as chair believes that this is a top priority, then I presume that it will come through as a top priority in future business plans for the operations of AADAC.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one other question to the same minister. In the face of growing substance abuse problems, including the use of the very destructive crystal meth drug, and given that there is a growing demand from the community, from parents, from child advocates, from a resolution at our PC conference two weeks ago, where it was unanimously supported that we do this, I'm wondering if the minister is prepared to act quickly to establish at least one detox and residential treatment centre in the province for children.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, it's difficult for me to answer as an individual expressing my support for such a program. I can say, though, that through the process of business plans we do fund the top priorities put forward by agencies of government like AADAC.

I think it's worth noting, Mr. Speaker, that in the year 2003-2004 AADAC did receive an increase in the magnitude of 25 per cent. A

large portion of that increase was dedicated towards a tobacco reduction strategy, which was also considered to be a very high priority. For the 2004-2005 year a 10.3 per cent increase was tabled in the budget.

We do of course need to maintain the important services that AADAC provides, and it's a question of priorities. If AADAC were able to find within its budget the ability to move forward on a residential treatment facility for youth and they view it to be a priority, then I would certainly support it.

Electoral Reform

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, Alberta is the birthplace of many of the major democratic reform initiatives in Canada, including recall and citizens' initiatives, but now the government of Alberta just points a blaming finger at other jurisdictions while it lags behind in implementing democratic reform. One way the government could improve its democratic record would be to implement a citizens' assembly. My questions are to the Premier. Will the Premier follow the lead of other provincial governments and look at alternative electoral systems to replace the outdated first past the post system?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the system has served us quite well over the course of history. Other than the question raised by the hon. member, I must say that I don't get a lot of cards and letters on this particular issue. Mind you, there is a small portion of the population who become involved in democratic reform, so to speak.

Quite frankly, I've spoken on this subject in the past, and I've said that this is precisely the kind of thing that the Alliance and the Conservatives had to put aside in order to focus on the big-picture items and the matters that are of concern to most Canadians and, I would say, most Albertans. Those are health, education, good infrastructure, safe communities, protection of the environment, responsibility for those less fortunate in society, and all of the other core services that government offers.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Premier: what plans does the government have to increase voter participation in provincial elections by people under 30?

Mr. Klein: That's an interesting question, Mr. Speaker. I wasn't aware that there was a problem relative to voters under 30 years of age. I would say to the hon. member, as I would say to anyone: "Get out there and vote. It's your democratic right. If you're over 18 years of age and a Canadian citizen, get out and vote. Vote for the party or the person of your choice, but please vote."

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Again to the Premier: what are the reasons that this government won't put a citizens' assembly on electoral reform in place?

2:10

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I said before, nobody is asking. I guess it's a fundamental policy of this government that if it's not broke, don't fix it. Traditionally and historically we have operated a system here that has served the people of this province quite well.

If I can get political just for a moment, it's no wonder that the Liberals are upset with the system the way it is, because the majority of Albertans prefer a Conservative government. That's why there are 74 of us and seven of them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Oil Sands Tailings Ponds

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The oil sands are in many ways the economic heart of this province, but the environmental impact of these megaprojects is a consideration. Potentially even more significant, however, is the environmental damage that might result should any of the safeguards that protect the environment from the waste generated by the oil sands fail. Ponds that hold the hazardous by-product, or tailings, of the oil sands are often built right next to rivers, separated from them by only a small earth dam. My questions are all to the Minister of Environment. What safeguards are companies required to have in place to ensure that these tailings ponds will not fail?

Dr. Taylor: Well, first of all, let me assure the member that the tailings ponds are built only when absolutely necessary, and as the technology improves, we will need fewer and fewer of these tailings ponds. So that's the first thing.

Secondly, before any tailing pond can be built, it has to receive the approval of Alberta Environment, has to receive the approval of my colleague's ministry, Sustainable Resource Development, and it has to receive the approval of the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board. All of these hearings are public, so people can participate in these hearings and present their objections to this if they have any. It's a very open and public process. These tailings ponds are designed by experts, engineers that can do these things. So it's, as I say, a very open, public process only done when necessary and under the strictest regulations.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the minister tell this Assembly who would be responsible for the damage that would result should one of these tailings ponds fail or leak and destroy the surrounding environment?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, it would be the responsibility of the people that built the tailing pond. As part of the construction of any tailings pond or a big plant like that, the company that builds it is required to put up a security deposit of some sort. It may be a bond. It may be a letter of credit, whatever is appropriate. As we move forward, if that company were to fail or didn't have enough money for whatever reason to reclaim a tailings pond if it needed to be reclaimed or in the unlikely event of some failure, then the bond or the letter of credit would be called into effect, and that bond or letter of credit would cover the cost.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: who is responsible for reclaiming these ponds back to a healthy state so that they don't leave a legacy of toxic waste for our children like the Sydney tar ponds?

Dr. Taylor: Well, once again, Mr. Speaker, under the act it's the oil companies' responsibility. We're talking about oil companies right here. If it were a chemical company and they had to reclaim something in the area of the chemical company, it would be the chemical company's responsibility. Remember that whether it's a chemical company or an oil company, we do have the bond, we do

have the security deposit, and if they were not able to pay for it, that bond or that security deposit would pay for it. It would not come out of Alberta taxpayers' pockets.

Ophthalmology Services in Calgary

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, the Liberal opposition has obtained a copy of a letter sent from Dr. Megran, chair of the Medical Advisory Board of the Calgary health region, to a group of medical specialists in Calgary who have continually raised concerns over the current chief of ophthalmology in the Calgary health region. These physicians have raised their concerns several times that the current chief of ophthalmology is putting his and his family's business interests ahead of his duties as chief of ophthalmology for the region, and I will table the letter. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Has the minister taken any action to resolve concerns raised by physicians over the current chief of ophthalmology for the Calgary health region?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition was good enough to provide me with a copy of the letter to which he refers, which, I understand, he will be tabling at the appropriate time. It was difficult to read because he I think highlighted all of the pertinent, most important portions of it, and by doing so, when he photocopied it, he blacked out much of the portions that I think he wanted to bring to my attention.

But let me say this, Mr. Speaker. I recognize the issue of the bylaws of the regional health authority as it relates to conflict of interest. The regional health authority is in the process of revising their conflict-of-interest bylaws, and I think that has been largely because of the Medical Advisory Board supporting the need to do this, and I think that that's appropriate for the regional health authority to do.

Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member is making allegations about the allocations of surgery time, allocation of surgery time at the regional health authority is really done by the chiefs and department heads of surgery, who once a year meet, and over the last two years they have discussed the block allocation process, and they've determined to keep it as it is.

So, Mr. Speaker, I have looked into this matter, and if the regional health authority thinks that it should change its conflict-of-interest bylaws, I think that's an appropriate step.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister ensure that someone from outside the Calgary health region and preferably outside the province investigates conflict-of-interest allegations surrounding the current chief of ophthalmology?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I haven't seen any need to do that. I think the regional health authority is doing an appropriate set of steps right now to deal with the issue.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Given that new conflict-of-interest guidelines for the Calgary health region have been sent to the minister in the past, fairly recently, and more than once for approval, can the minister explain why it is taking him so long to approve them?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we've had reviews of conflict-of-interest bylaws and bylaws from throughout all of the health regions. One

can appreciate the magnitude and size of such a job. We take the care to go through it in some fine detail. That's the reason. It's as simple as that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

WorldSkills Trades Competition

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Skills Canada announced today some great news, that Calgary has been chosen as the host city for the 2009 WorldSkills competition. Great work by the bid committee. Now, Mr. Minister, I understand that WorldSkills brings together youth from around the world to compete and demonstrate the skills of their various trades and technologies against some very demanding international standards, but how will hosting this event benefit Albertans?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, this has been a good week for Calgary: lacrosse with the Calgary Roughnecks and, of course, the "Go, Flames, go" that we're all so enthused and thrilled about.

In terms of benefits there are at least two that we could talk about immediately from WorldSkills. It would be estimated at this time that there would be something around 750 competitors – they're going to bring families; there will be coaches; of course, there will be judges – that will come from other countries and have to be housed and fed and all of that in Calgary during those competitions. I'm briefed, Mr. Speaker, that it's likely to be a benefit of something in the order of \$46 million to Alberta and then, of course, more specifically Calgary.

The biggest thing is the attention that skilled trades will get through this competition. I attended the WorldSkills in Montreal in 1999, and if you want to see an Olympic-like event or perhaps even an Oscar-like event, I mean, this is it. They have the parade with the flags. They have at the end the gold, silver, and medal presentations. I mean, this is a big deal. We've been trying for many, many years to find a way to show young people in Alberta that there's great money, there's a great career, there's great work in the skilled trades in this province, and we hope that this will take us a long way down the road to proving that.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister. I understand that the provincial Skills Canada Alberta competition is currently taking place in Edmonton. How is this event related to the WorldSkills program?

Mr. Dunford: Well, again, I think it might be obvious. We're trying to draw the similarities in the skills competitions to the way they deal with athletics. You know, you have local competitions, then you move on to provincial competitions, to national competitions, and then of course to world competitions.

So really what's happening in Edmonton – I think it starts tomorrow, and I would encourage all members to write it into their little agendas to try and get over there, especially members here in Edmonton, that would have perhaps a little better access. In any event, again, it's the idea that we spread the skills competition into the high schools and into first-year apprenticeships right across this province, give them a provincial competition to work toward, and then the winners will move on to Winnipeg later this year for the nationals.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Captive Wildlife Standards

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Near Three Hills, Alberta, the GuZoo animal farm continues to operate despite significant animal welfare and human safety concerns, which were exposed as long as five years ago. The permit for this farm continues to be renewed on a temporary basis year after year despite the fact that it has not complied with the majority of recommendations that were issued to it by an Alberta Environment assessment team back in 1999. My first question is to the Minister of Environment. Why has the government renewed the permit for this establishment when it has failed for five years to comply with the recommendations from the Alberta Environment assessment team?

Dr. Taylor: I think that when we changed the ministries, that has been moved from my ministry to the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development. If it hasn't, I'll give you your answer, certainly, tomorrow.

But I'll ask the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development to supplement.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am aware of the situation that the member is bringing forward, and within two weeks I plan to tour the facility personally and personally inspect it to see what the issue is. In fact, the opposition members are welcome to come with me on a tour if they want. We have nothing to hide. It's an issue that's out there, and if it needs to be dealt with, we'll deal with it at that time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: will the minister now finalize the updated captive wildlife standards manual before any further zoo permits are issued in the province of Alberta?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, again, that's a good question. As a minister that is responsible for a ministry, we always on an ongoing basis review our policies as we move forward as a government, and I'll look at this policy. If there is a need for change, of course we always do that.

Ms Blakeman: I'll try that again, Mr. Speaker. The question to the minister was about finalizing the updated captive wildlife standards manual, not a sort of constant review. When do we get a final version of this?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Again, you know, when this process is finalized, then of course it will be available to the opposition also.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Government Accountability

Dr. Pannu: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, when does a government

choose to become accountable? Is it when, after 33 years in power, it becomes secretive, arrogant, and out of touch, or is it when it repeatedly fails to deliver on its promises like cheaper auto insurance, lower power costs, or smaller class sizes? My questions are to the Premier. When will the government choose to become accountable for its failure to deliver auto insurance rates on par with public systems in the rest of western Canada?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I said previously, we have not finished the exercise. There is an all-day standing policy committee meeting scheduled for the 27th of May to finalize the reforms. We will then require cabinet and caucus approval, and then we can begin communicating the entire package to the public. All we're getting now are bits and pieces and dribs and drabs, I guess, that are being unfortunately leaked or somehow obtained outside of SPC meetings that indicate to the media that this is going to be government policy when in fact there is no government policy relative to the regulations surrounding insurance at this time.

I would say to the injury lawyers and the insurance companies who are running ads battling each other and battling the government and to the NDs and the Liberals to stay cool and stay calm and stay tuned, because we will deal with this issue and we will come out with a policy paper relative to the regulations shortly after the 27th of May.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When will the government choose to become accountable for the failure of its deregulation policy to deliver lower electricity costs to homeowners and businesses?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I forget how the question was framed, but immediately we'll become accountable for deregulation.

As to why we will be and are accountable, I'll have the hon. minister explain.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question, because in fact accountability always starts at the onset. In 1994 when the first discussion about deregulation or creating a competitive market for electrical generation came through, it was estimated that we would not need the power that we're using today until 2014. So it's a record of this Premier's policies on balanced budgets and reduced debt coupled with the ability to deliver a fundamental underpinning for economic growth called electricity which is the reason why we're the most prosperous province in the dominion of Canada today.

Dr. Pannu: My final supplementary to the Premier, Mr. Speaker: when will the government choose to take responsibility for failing to fund the Learning Commission recommendations for reducing class sizes?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will take most of that question under advisement and have the hon. minister respond in more detail when he is present in the Legislature, but I can tell the hon. member that we have begun the process of undertaking the recommendations of the Learning Commission. I'm not sure how many were rejected.

Mr. Hancock: Two were rejected.

Mr. Klein: Two recommendations were rejected. I think that they referred to administration more than anything else. But all of the other recommendations and particularly those recommendations as

they affect the classroom, classroom size and so on, have been adopted, Mr. Speaker. It's just a matter of implementing those recommendations over a period of time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Innovation Strategy

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has launched four pillars that provide a plan for this province to guide it for the next 20 years. One of these pillars is "unleashing innovation," and it's no secret that our advantage above all and other jurisdictions rests upon us unleashing innovation to its greatest potential. As chair of the Alberta Research Council I find it extremely important that this province develop the components of an integrated, province-wide innovation system, identify specific value-added opportunities, and align its policies to support this strategy. My questions are to the Minister of Economic Development. What is the minister doing to develop such a strategy?

2:30

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank the hon. member for not only his question but his involvement in ASRA. As he knows, we had a joint meeting in Calgary recently with the board of directors of AEDA, the Alberta Economic Development Authority, and ASRA to talk about specifically these kinds of issues. It was determined with the hon. Minister of Innovation and Science that we do need a go-forward plan, and as such we've released the value-added strategy. That was done about a week and a half ago.

What it calls for primarily, Mr. Speaker, is to seize the opportunity that we have right now with a remarkable economy and to look at how we will work with industry, clearly not telling them how to do it, because that's not the way we operate in this government, to understand and identify what the barriers are to value added and unleashing innovation. To that end, of course, as I said, the strategy was released about a week and a half ago. I am sure the hon. member has a copy, and I would be happy to discuss it further with him at any time, as I would with any member of the House.

Mr. Johnson: Securing Tomorrow's Promise I believe is the name of this plan that you talk about. How does it further the opportunities available for rural Albertans such as those in my constituency?

Mr. Norris: Well, I mean, this is really the remarkable part of the program, Mr. Speaker, in that we have a rural development strategy that was co-chaired by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and the hon. Member for Wainwright, and it talks about some remarkable opportunities. The agriculture department, quite frankly, under the current minister has done a remarkable job identifying their particular program, which is called 20-10 by 2010, which refers to \$20 billion in manufactured products and \$10 billion in primary products by the year 2010. Very, very aggressive targets but it does look at it.

What we are trying to do, to answer the hon. member's question, with rural Alberta leaders and industry is understand what their barriers are to value adding specifically in agriculture but also in forestry. To that end, the hon. Member for Dunvegan and I the other day went up to a forestry conference to talk about value-added strategies in their particular industry. I know that the Member for Airdrie-Rocky View has a very significant value-added forestry opportunity.

So the long and short of it is, Mr. Speaker, that what we are doing is what we've always done, which is consult with industry. Whether

it's located in rural or urban Alberta does not matter to us one iota. It's about jobs for Albertans, and it's about where the opportunities are, and we will continue to work with rural Alberta and the leaders to find out what the opportunities are.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Pure Lean Inc.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The now-closed Pure Lean plant near Oyen did not go through all the steps of inspection. An NRCB decision report completed on August 28, 2003, illustrates that the NRCB and Alberta Environment decisions were fast-tracked. My first question is to the Minister of Environment. Given that the report states, quote, this proposal was exempt from the Alberta Environment provisions related to the design of facilities, approvals, and notifications, end of quote, can the minister please explain why?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, Pure Lean was coming with new technology. Most hog farms have technology that puts hogs in a real tight space and real small pens, and Pure Lean was coming with some new technology. There were big pens, and they handled manure in a different fashion. In fact, the fellow, Bob Notenbomer, that developed the Pure Lean technology is a constituent of mine. It was new technology, so some of the old regulations didn't necessarily fit the new technology. As the program moves forward, of course, it's ultimately the NRCB that decides, and Alberta Environment works closely with NRCB as it moves forward.

Mr. MacDonald: Again to the same minister: is it common practice to fast-track applications for intensive livestock operations by not having Alberta Environment studies completed at the time of an NRCB decision?

Dr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, really the only thing we're involved with is the water decisions around the approvals of intensive livestock. With any intensive livestock decision they have to apply for a water licence, and there's a full approval process, and on a water licence there is an appeal process as well. That's a decision that's made by a director, and there is the Environmental Appeal Board that people can appeal to. The one that's got the most press recently certainly is the Capstone one in Red Deer, where a director made a decision that was appealed.

With the intensive livestock we are only involved at the water licensing level. There is a process for the water licence, and that process is appealable to the Environmental Appeal Board.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I want to just make a clarification so that there is an understanding in the House that this project began prior to the new Agricultural Operation Practices Act being introduced and the NRCB taking over the handling of intensive livestock. The development permit for that project was provided by the municipality, and Alberta Agriculture was involved to some extent at that time. The NRCB came into the picture on this particular project over an issue on composting some time down the road. I don't want to leave the impression that this was approved under the present legislation and operation of the NRCB.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. This time to the minister of agricul-

ture if she's willing: what role did Alberta Agriculture play in the development, then, of the Pure Lean plant near Oyen. What exactly was their role?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated in my earlier supplemental answer, it was the municipality who granted the approval for this operation, as was the practice at that time. Any support that Alberta Agriculture would have would be of a technical nature to provide technical assistance to, one, the municipality, if it was asked for, and/or to the proponents and to look at different aspects of the operation.

Again, Mr. Speaker, this was prior to the NRCB assuming responsibility for the Agricultural Operation Practices Act.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we participate in Recognitions, there are a number of items that I'd like all members to observe. First of all, let me call on the hon. Deputy Speaker.

Legislative Assembly Pages

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Chairman and I would like to draw to the attention of all hon. members that we are going to lose five of our wonderful pages when this spring session ends. They are Maya Gordon, Greg Andrews, Andrea Balon, Natalie Wilson, and Lara Kinkartz. These fine young people will be leaving their duties in this Assembly following the close of the spring session, whenever that might occur. I ask all hon. members to join me in recognizing the great efforts of our pages, who daily showed patience and understanding of our many demands. They carry out their tasks with attention to duty and in good humour. Oh behalf of all hon. members I would ask our head page, Maya Gordon, to give each retiring page our gift and with it our best wishes to each and everyone. We are honoured to have had you work with us in the Alberta Legislature.

2:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, these are remarkable young people. They sent me a letter dated May 10, 2004. The subject is retiring pages, and it's addressed to me, but it's addressed to all of you. I'd like to read it to you. It says:

Mr. Speaker,

The Page Recruitment posters state "Get More Than a Job", and nothing could be more true. We can say, without a doubt, we all received more than a job. To us, our time at the Legislature is also a lesson in life and politics that no university, however well funded, could provide. It could also be thought of as a social life for a busy student, meeting like-minded peers that we shall hopefully keep in contact with for years to come. Even when nothing else, our time here was entertaining, and perhaps it is a pity that Question Period is not broadcast during prime time.

We believe there is a popular misconception within the public that politicians are to be superhuman, and as Pages, this misconception was corrected quite fast. Indeed, the members of the House are very much real people; real people with real gifts, flaws, and quirks. By observing them, we see that it is quite possible for real people to do great things with their lives, and stands as an inspiration for ourselves to aim higher than we might have previously thought possible.

There is no amount of thanks that would truly express our gratitude to you, the Sergeant at Arms, and all members of the Assembly for the opportunity to work among the honourable people of this prestigious building. Indeed, being a Page is an invaluable experience that will hold worthwhile throughout our entire lives. If every citizen of this province was as informed as we are now, parliamentary democracy in Alberta would certainly be better served. Although such is impossible, it is now our duty to use our

knowledge of the political process to improve society in whatever path we chose.

For nearly a century, the laughter and footsteps of Pages has crisscrossed through this building, and we truly are blessed to have been able to experience every moment in the Alberta Legislature. Thank you, and everyone, for this unique and wonderful opportunity.

Farewell, and please don't forget about us!

Greg Andrews, Maya Gordon, Andrea Balon, Natalie Wilson, and Lara Kinkartz.

[applause]

Hon. members, I'd also draw to your attention that in the latter part of the 20th century, the very, very late part of the 20th century, the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane came into the world. Happy birthday.

Now might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: Then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. McClelland: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the request of one of our soon to be departing pages, Natalie Wilson, it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to other members of the House two constituents who are seated in the members' gallery. Angela Bentley and Felicia Mathison are both attending the University of Alberta, Faculty of Science. They both received academic excellence awards and Rutherford scholarships. We'd ask them to stand and receive the recognition of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's my pleasure to reintroduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly our group from Lloyd Garrison school at Berwyn who are here observing the workings of the Legislature. It's my pleasure to welcome Rob Hoban, the teacher, and Ms Shaunna Regal, a teacher that's accompanying the group, as well as parent helpers Mrs. Suzie Reyda, Mr. Bruce Warren, Mrs. Sandra Eastman, Mrs. Greit Heimstra, Mrs. Kim Alexander, and Mrs. Gwen Sukeroff. Certainly, they've travelled a long way to be with us today, and I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, and then would you carry right on with your recognition.

Ms Blakeman: Happy to. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a great teacher and artist who is largely responsible for the strong reputation of the theatre design section of the University of Alberta fine arts department, David Lovett. You will hear more about him directly. With him is one of his students and an award-winning designer in his own right, Robert Shannon. I would ask them both to please rise and accept the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Recognitions**
David Lovett

Ms Blakeman: Mr. Speaker, it is my very great pleasure to recognize David Lovett for his contribution to Edmonton's and Alberta's

theatres, opera, and ballet. As we anticipate his retirement from the renowned University of Alberta fine arts theatre design program, we can be thankful that David chose in 1969 to emigrate and take a job teaching here.

He went off to UBC in 1972, but Tom Peacocke, then department chair, wooed him back in 1976 to teach theatre design. David has also designed for Theatre 3 and Phoenix Theatre in Edmonton, designed the production of *Romeo and Juliet* which opened the new Citadel Theatre in 1976, and designed numerous productions at the Banff Centre for the opera and ballet sections and for Alberta Ballet's first *Nutcracker* and *Firebird*. We even loaned him to Stratford Festival.

David also designed the first production of *South Pacific* for Edmonton Opera. The second production was recently designed by his student Robert Shannon. "More, better, faster, grow," was David's favourite instruction.

Thank you, Mr. Lovett, for bringing us such fabulous designs. You enriched your students, the artists, and the fans of theatre, opera, and ballet. Thank you so much for your contribution.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

National Nursing Week

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize Nursing Week, which will be celebrated May 10 to May 16, 2004, across Canada as well as internationally. The theme for this year is Nursing: Knowledge and Commitment at Work, which is reflective of the fact that care provided by nurses is knowledge-based and that nurses deal with increasingly complex cases and issues in the workplace.

Registered nurses make a difference. They play an important role in our health and in our communities. They are dedicated, compassionate, caring, and make a very important contribution to our health care system.

Nurses are appreciated, and I hope that by my rising today in the Legislature, the people of Alberta will take a moment to thank nurses for the job they do 365 days a year.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Leaders of Tomorrow Awards

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the recipients of the leaders of tomorrow awards handed out in my constituency recently. The awards are designed to honour young people in the community that stand out in their efforts to make a difference by volunteerism and service to individuals in their community in general.

Awards were handed out in both Camrose and Wetaskiwin, and the recipients were well deserving. Out of 33 outstanding nominees from the Camrose ceremony the leaders of tomorrow were Ryan Koehli, Jen Ross, Jarett Rude, and Kelsey Symyck. In Wetaskiwin there were 22 nominees, and the winners of the awards were Katrine Maygard, Rachael King, and Melissa Henke.

It gives me great pleasure to congratulate the nominees and award recipients for the contributions they make to our communities and for the important work they do as volunteers. They are the leaders of today, and their services and generosity will surely make them leaders of tomorrow. It is with great pride that I recognize my young constituents today and wish them continuing success on their way to a promising future.

Thank you.

Alberta Summer Games

Mr. Tannas: Mr. Speaker, today it is my pleasure to recognize the great efforts of volunteers in High River, Okotoks, and the MD of Foothills who are hosting Alberta's 2004 Summer Games from July 22 to July 25. Volunteer committee members Diane, Ellen, Carol, Shawn, Doug, Lee, Marg, Traci, and countless others are eagerly preparing to host teams and visitors from across Alberta. Teams will compete in events as diverse as badminton, baseball, BMX, canoeing, golf, basketball, football, soccer, softball, rugby, swimming, athletics, field hockey, and many more sporting endeavours.

Mr. Speaker, all Albertans are invited to attend. Information and details are available by calling (403) 652-3005 or through the web site www.albertagames.com. I hope to see you all there.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

National Nursing Week

Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. From May 10 to May 16 Canadians across the country are getting together to celebrate National Nursing Week. Nurses are the front-line workers in our health care system and are dedicated to restoring, maintaining, and improving the quality of life for all Canadians. From delivering community health programs to providing life-saving care in hospital situations, nurses are involved in many aspects of their patients' well-being.

In 1985 the Canadian Minister of Health established National Nursing Week to recognize the many contributions of the nursing profession to the health of Canadians. Every year National Nursing Week falls on the second week in May to coincide with Florence Nightingale's birthday on May 12.

This year the theme for National Nursing Week is Nursing: Knowledge and Commitment at Work. Nurses are working in an increasingly complex environment, and to best serve their patients, nurses need to stay up to date on the latest research and technology. The theme this year recognizes the commitment of nurses to provide the best care possible by combining new information with more traditional best practices and lessons learned.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Wamer.

2:50

Apex Youth Awards

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to rise in this Assembly to recognize four outstanding young individuals from my constituency. On Wednesday, April 7, Melissa Krizsan, Gloria Layton, Virginia Layton, and Kristen Reti were honoured as winners at the third annual Apex youth awards. These awards were created to recognize remarkable young citizens and are hosted each year by the Rotary Club of Taber and the *Taber Times*.

The Apex awards are unique because they do not focus on athletics or academics but rather acknowledge extraordinary individuals who illustrate dedication and commitment to serving their communities. These are exceptional individuals that unselfishly dedicate their time and effort to helping others.

Mr. Speaker, I ask that members of the Assembly join with me in congratulating the four winners of the Apex youth awards and the 21 nominees for their exceptional service and dedication to their communities.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Art from the Heart

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday, on May 7, the Rotary Club of Calgary Sarcee hosted its sixth annual Art from the Heart dinner and auction at the Red & White Club at McMahon Stadium. Over 400 people attended the very successful, fun event.

What is amazing about Rotary Sarcee Club is that it is one of the youngest and smallest in Calgary, but the 25 members are confident that if they indeed raise their goal of \$40,000, they will have raised \$235,000 in total to benefit many worthwhile projects, including Salvation Army Children's Village, Closer to Home Community Services, and Rotary Challenger Park.

This year the money raised will provide the YWCA's Mary Dover House, an emergency residence for women and children in need, with an urgently needed community kitchen. In 2002 Mary Dover House provided shelter for 1,800 women and 422 children who required crisis or transitional accommodation.

First Calgary Savings, the YWCA, and Ernest Manning high school volunteer club also provided support to the fundraiser.

My husband, Gord May, and I are proud to be members of the Rotary Sarcee Club, and I heartily congratulate this Little Club That Could and did and continues to do so.

Thank you.

head:

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Bill 32

Appropriation Act, 2004

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004. This being a money bill, Her Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor, having been informed of the contents of this bill, recommends the same to the Assembly.

[Motion carried; Bill 32 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Bill 211

Alberta Personal Income Tax (School Tax Credit) Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being the Alberta Personal Income Tax (School Tax Credit) Amendment Act, 2004.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this bill. Its purpose is to amend the Alberta Personal Income Tax Act by introducing a nonrefundable tax credit to help parents pay for additional costs associated with education worth 50 per cent of the costs to a maximum of \$3,000 which would be available to parents with children enrolled within a primary or secondary school. The credit could be used whether children are attending public, separate, or independent schools. Parents who home-school would also be eligible for the credit, and it could also be used for tutoring expenses.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 211 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Bill 212

Alberta Association of Former M.L.A.s Act

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 212, the Alberta Association of Former M.L.A.s Act.

This bill will create a nonpartisan association of former Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. This association would be able to use its knowledge and experience to promote the ideals of parliamentary democracy in Alberta and throughout the Commonwealth.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 212 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Bill 214

Public Automobile Insurance Commission Act

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Public Automobile Insurance Commission Act, otherwise to be referred to as Bill 214.

Mr. Speaker, this bill calls for the appointment of a public automobile insurance commission, its function being to review existing legislation governing automobile insurance, to hold public hearings, and to make proposals to the Legislative Assembly regarding the implementation of public automobile insurance in Alberta.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 214 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Bill 215

Alberta Official Folk Dance Act

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 215, the Alberta Official Folk Dance Act.

Mr. Speaker, the bill asks for square dancing to be declared as the official dance of Alberta.

[Motion carried; Bill 215 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Bill 216

Low-cost Electricity for Alberta Act

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. I request leave to please introduce a bill being the Low-cost Electricity for Alberta Act. This bill will be known as Bill 216.

It will recognize that electricity should be treated as an essential service and not a commodity subject to radical price swings, and it will implement a manner in which we can once and for all unplug this province from electricity deregulation.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 216 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Bill 217

Government Accountability (Identification of Expenditures) Amendment Act, 2004

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In recent years Albertans have seen continuous rising in our public expenditure. However, myself and my constituents are concerned with the creeping effect of budget increases. Bill 217, that I'm introducing today, is to provide a mechanism for the government departments to improve their accountability for each budget increase over the prior year. Each budget increase should be justified, account for its purpose, and be tracked and reported for its results.

The Speaker: I would sincerely ask the hon. member to move first reading.

Mr. Cao: Yes. I request leave to introduce this bill being Bill 217, the Government Accountability (Identification of Expenditures) Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill 217 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Two quick tablings. My first is a tabling of a letter to Mr. Bob Nicholson, president of Hockey Canada, congratulating him and all members of Hockey Canada for a second straight gold medal win at the 2004 World Hockey Championships in Prague, Czechoslovakia. I might note that Team Canada has done its part for the country, and we all wish the same for the Flames: to do their part for the province in the Stanley Cup. I'm sure they will.

My second tabling is to Mr. Brad Banister, president and general manager of the Calgary Roughnecks lacrosse club, congratulating them on winning the 2004 Champion's Cup.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. the Premier, who indicated in question period the other day and again today that he would table the appropriate number of copies of his paper Allende, Pinochet and the Chilean Media in response particularly to the misapprehension of what was said in *Hansard*, which was that as a dictator he, meaning Pinochet, was no better than Allende.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre on behalf of.

Ms Blakeman: I have two tablings, and one is on behalf of. Thank you. The one on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview is the appropriate number of copies of the letter that he referred to, which is on the issues of conflict of interest in the ophthalmology department and the Calgary regional health authority.

The second is documents that I referred to during one of my questions, that being five copies of concerns raised by Zoocheck Canada on the GuZoo facility, including some very distressing photographs of how animals are being treated.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With your permission I would like to table the appropriate number of copies on behalf of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar – this is under the Financial Administration Act – of Treasury Board directive 14/98, and it was dated at Edmonton, Alberta, the 16th day of December 1998.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you very much. I would like on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to table the appropriate number of copies of a memo outlining all the concerns the Auditor General raised regarding the need for detailed documentation to support ministers' expense reimbursements. This came from a deputy minister to cabinet ministers.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Highlands to table two letters. The first letter is addressed to the Premier from hundreds of members of the Chilean community expressing their outrage at the "offensive, disrespectful, and inaccurate remarks" made here in the Assembly the other day by the Premier concerning the terrible events in Chile in 1973.

Mr. Speaker, the second tabling is a letter dated May 7, 2004, written by Leo Campos Aldunez to the *Edmonton Journal*. The letter again is asking the Premier to apologize to the thousands of Canadians of Chilean ancestry who fled their homeland because of the brutality of Pinochet's dictatorship.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings, annual reports. The first is the annual report for 2003 of APEGGA, the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta.

The second tabling is the financial statements dated June 30, 2003, for the Certified Management Accountants of Alberta.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Written Questions**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, proper notice having been given on Thursday, May 6, it's my pleasure to move that written questions 67, 70, 74, and 82 through 88 be dealt with today. There being no further written questions, there are none to stand and retain their places.

[Motion carried]

Trade Director's Dinner

Q67. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

What was the government purpose that resulted in the trade director for Mexico, Central America, and Caribbean charging \$226 to the Alberta taxpayer at the Four Seasons restaurant on September 30, 2002?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Economic Development I'm pleased to indicate that we are prepared to accept Written Question 67.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. We thank the minister for that and wish that that could happen with all of the written questions we've asked.

[Written Question 67 carried]

Utilities Service Quality Plans

Q70. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.

What established service quality benchmarks is the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board using to ensure quality customer service following its December 19, 2003, announcement to implement service quality plans for regulated gas and electric rate tariff providers and electric-wire owners effective January 1, 2004, and how were these benchmarks determined?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Although this ministry is responsible for the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, it of course does not direct the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board. In that light, there has been discussion between the ministry and the utilities board. Of course, it is well known that the bulk of this information is found in abundance in the public domain. Recognizing the reduced assets of a party that's moving from seven to five, we will be very pleased to ensure that the EUB can provide this information for them.

Mr. Bonner: Well, I'd like to thank the minister for his co-operation in providing that information and certainly inform him that the five that are here plus the other person that I think he referred to is here as well to keep him accountable.

Thank you.

[Written Question 70 carried]

Utility Companies' Performance Reports

Q74. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.

How often are utility companies in Alberta required to submit performance reports?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not going to spend a great deal of time talking about the inadequacy of the question; in fact, what type of performance report? What factors should it cover? How would they define the word "performance"? How would they define the word "report"? But to be extremely, as usual, charitable

and transparent and accountable, I will answer the question by saying that the utility companies provide the Energy and Utilities Board with quarterly reports once every three months on their customer quality of service plans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. On behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar I'd like to thank the minister for his response.

[Written Question 74 carried]

3:10 Tuition Fee Policy

Q82. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Learning measure whether the tuition fee policy and its related programs are effective in making postsecondary education affordable to students?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm privileged to respond on behalf of the hon. Minister of Learning and indicate that the government is prepared to accept Written Question 82.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. I'd like to thank the Minister of Learning for that response.

Thank you.

[Written Question 82 carried]

Tuition Fee Policy

Q83. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Learning require public postsecondary institutions to comply with the tuition fee policy?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you. Once again on behalf of the Minister of Learning I'm prepared to respond, indicating the government's willingness to accept Written Question 83.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. Once again I'd like to thank the minister for his co-operation.

[Written Question 83 carried]

Department of Learning Grant Processes

Q84. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the government taken to implement the Auditor General's recommendation contained in his 2002-2003 annual report that the Department of Learning improve its grant processes by not approving the money before defining the nature and extent of the grant commitment or establishing accountability criteria?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you. I'll respond and indicate that the government is willing and prepared to accept Written Question 84.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Once again we'd like to thank the minister for his co-operation on this particular issue.

[Written Question 84 carried]

Management of Parks and Protected Areas

Q85. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the Ministry of Community Development taken to conduct an evaluation of the cost effectiveness of "service delivery alternatives" to managing parks and protected areas to correct serious flaws in its implementation as indicated in the Auditor General's 2002-2003 annual report?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to indicate that I'm prepared to accept this question with amendments, which I'll get into shortly. Those amendments, of course, were shared with the opposition prior to 11 this morning as per procedures.

Now, as to the amendment, Mr. Speaker, I have reviewed this question quite carefully, and in the interest of trying to respond to it accurately, I'm proposing that we do amend the question to more accurately reflect the specific recommendations made by the Auditor General. I believe those amendments have been circulated.

I should also take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to briefly explain the rationale for these minor changes to the question in order to better reflect the exact wording used specifically by the Auditor General as opposed to the wording used by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, which I think will be helpful in considering the question.

The change in wording from "to managing" to read "for operating" reflects what we are considering here as better ways to operate our sites and not alternatives to parks and protected areas management altogether.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, nowhere in the Auditor General's report is it suggested that there are serious flaws, as the Member for Edmonton-Centre has indicated in the original wording. In fact, the parks agency is merely looking at better ways to evaluate the cost effectiveness of service delivery alternatives and to get the best possible service for Albertans.

That having been said, I'm pleased to amend Written Question 85, and it would now read as follows:

What measures has the Ministry of Community Development taken to conduct an evaluation of the cost effectiveness of "service delivery alternatives" for operating parks and protected areas as recommended in the Auditor General's 2002-2003 annual report?

Thank you.

The Speaker: On the amendment, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It comes as no surprise to us that the minister wouldn't accept a written question that indicated that his department had serious flaws in it, so we are not surprised at the amendment but, in fact, are pleased that he would at least consider this written question. So we are in support of the written question as he has amended it.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We appreciate it whenever we can get information from this government, so we thank the minister for this.

[Written Question 85 as amended carried]

Park Management Contracts

Q86. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that the following question be accepted.

What measures has the Ministry of Community Development taken to implement the changes to the process for awarding and monitoring park management contracts to private operators as recommended in the Auditor General's 2002-2003 annual report to ensure that taxpayers' dollars are not being wasted?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will accept Written Question 86 with amendments. I would just indicate to the House that the amendment, as I will read shortly, was shared with the opposition prior to 11 a.m. today as required by procedures of the House.

Now, specifically to Written Question 86 I should just point out again that in order to fairly and accurately represent what the Auditor General's recommendations were and in particular as they relate to the question here before us, I need to explain briefly the rationale for the changes that I'm suggesting for the House's consideration to the original motion.

Again, what we're talking about here, hon. members, is making improvements, not making dramatic changes, hence the need for the question to be amended.

Secondly, once again for all members' ears, I would ask people in the House to please choose their words as carefully as possible, because in fact no taxpayer dollars are being wasted anywhere in our provincial parks or our protected areas. Those dollars that come from taxpayers that are allocated to those areas, Mr. Speaker, are being stretched to the max, and they certainly are not being wasted.

That having been said, we are looking to improve some of the processes, and therefore I would move that Written Question 86 be amended to now read as follows:

What measures has the Ministry of Community Development taken to improve the process for awarding and monitoring park management contracts to private operators as recommended in the Auditor General's 2002-2003 annual report?

Thank you.

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, this minister and I are never going to

agree on whether or not this government is responsible for wasting taxpayer dollars, but we will accept the amendments.

[Motion on amendment carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

3:20

Ms Carlson: Mr. Speaker, we'd like to thank the minister for providing the information to us.

[Written Question 86 as amended carried]

Commission on Learning Class-size Recommendations

Q87. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that the following question be accepted.

What progress has the government made and what measures have been put in place to implement all the class-size recommendations of the Alberta Commission on Learning?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will respond and indicate that the government is prepared to accept Written Question 87.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close the debate.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you. We appreciate the information being supplied by the minister.

[Written Question 87 carried]

Utilities Disconnections

Q88. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that the following question be accepted.

How much money has the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board distributed to energy customers whose utilities were disconnected in error between January 1, 2004, and March 9, 2004?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I just feel this afternoon that my life is an open book, and as such and in the spirit of such transparency we'll of course accept again the question.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to inform the minister that we certainly appreciate his co-operation.

[Written Question 88 carried]

The Speaker: Well, that clears that section of the Order Paper.

Motions for Returns

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Proper notice having been served on Thursday, May 6, it's my pleasure to move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions 88 through 105, 108 through 123, 128, 134 through 143, 146 through 162, 164 through

168, 174 through 180, 183 through 205, 207, 208, 209, and 210.
Thank you.

[Motion carried]

Capital Plan Transfer of Funds

M88. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount broken down by transaction of funds transferred into and out of the capital plan between April 1, 2003, and February 17, 2004.

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, the answer is nil, and therefore we have to reject. I think the hon. member is referring to something else. We don't transfer money in and out of the capital plan at all. If she is talking about something else, maybe the capital accounts, then she might want to phone me and I'd be delighted to give her the summary, but we would have to reject this motion as it's written.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to conclude the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We will request that information from you. Thank you for that. We stand corrected.
Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 88 lost]

Fiscal Stability Fund Transfers

M89. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount broken down by transaction of funds transferred into and out of the Alberta fiscal stability fund between April 1, 2003, and February 17, 2004.

Mrs. Nelson: Again, Mr. Speaker, I think we're onto a different track. We don't have a stability fund in the province of Alberta, so we're going to have to reject the motion for a return. I'm gathering – and I'm making an assumption – that she's probably referring to the sustainability fund. Again I'll make the same offer. If that's what you're looking for, just give me a call and I'll provide the information. But we have to reject the motion as it's written.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We will reword that motion and forward it to you. Thank you for agreeing to provide the information.

[Motion for a Return 89 lost]

Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development IT Initiatives

M90. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent on information technology initiatives within the Department and Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development broken down by initiative for the fiscal year 2002-2003.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Deputy Premier I accept Motion for a Return 90.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're very pleased to get the answer to this question. I believe I asked a similar question to other ministries last week and was denied, so thank you very much.

[Motion for a Return 90 carried]

Drilling in Parks and Protected Areas

M91. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number of oil and gas wells drilled within 25 kilometres of a park or protected area in Alberta between January 1, 1985, and February 17, 2004, broken down by the type of well and the number of wells drilled for each year.

Ms Carlson: This becomes quite critical information when we're talking about managing the wild and protected areas of our province and particularly in terms of managing wildlife corridors and habitat. So I am hoping that the government will provide this information to us.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, we'll not be able to provide that information; therefore, we're accepting the rejection mode of questioning here. In fact, the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board information service collection offers a huge, huge amount of data on oil, gas, and oil sands drilling and well information.

We're rejecting the request not, certainly, out of a mean heart or more work; we're just rejecting it in the fact that we don't think the question is in fact answerable, because we cannot be sure that the exact information the member is seeking is available from the board in the form she desires. For example, the number and the size of parks and protected areas have changed considerably since 1985 as this government has moved forward to fulfill its commitment of protecting well over 12 per cent of the available land base.

I know that after the next elected event in which she participates, the member is going to have ample time to be able to do a great deal of research in finding the answer to this question.

Ms Carlson: Well, Mr. Speaker, the sarcasm does not become him. That information is available. We know that it is. We will put another motion for a return on the Order Paper, then, asking for that information by specific year, and perhaps he could answer the question at that point in time.

[Motion for a Return 91 lost]

Drilling in Urban Areas

M92. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total number of oil and gas wells drilled within 50 kilometres of an urban area in Alberta between January 1, 1985, and February 17, 2004, broken down by the type of well and the number of wells drilled for each year.

Ms Carlson: Now, perhaps the urban areas have not been quite so movable as the park boundaries have and this information will be more readily available.

Mr. Smith: Well, in fact, Mr. Speaker, the urban boundaries are extremely movable. I think that any administration that has seen since 1992 the explosive growth in Alberta coupled with the creation of almost a half a million jobs, balanced budgets, orderly debt paydown – we've seen a tremendous infusion of welcome people

from across Canada. Of course, well over 600,000 people have moved to this province, and that has created tremendous changes in the urban makeup of this great province and, in effect, would make it again extremely difficult if not impossible to reflect on the member's question.

So I would have to refer to my previous answer and again reject the motion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to close the debate.

3:30

Ms Carlson: Well, Mr. Speaker, if I believed that this minister was acting in good faith – some other ministers have this afternoon – we would have seen at least an amendment where he would have given some information for one or two or three years past. In fact, anyone who thinks of the kind of growth that we've had in this province, it hasn't changed the urban boundary such that this information would be impossible or even hard to provide. Once again, he is trying to deny information to Albertans.

[Motion for a Return 92 lost]

Premier's Office Bonuses

M93. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the office of the Premier over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by position and amount paid to each official.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Motion for a Return 93 you may recall, as I hope other members here will as well, that we did deal with this matter when we discussed Motion for a Return 34. Subsequent to that discussion we of course approved an amendment for Motion for a Return 34 and tried to list all departments as being covered under the amendment. So the amended Motion for a Return 34 as passed currently reads:

A breakdown of the aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to employees within the government of Alberta listed by department over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by the range of bonus dollar amounts and the number of employees who received a bonus within that range.

That having been said, Mr. Speaker, Motion for a Return 93 is addressed through the amended Motion for a Return 34 because, of course, issues in this regard that pertain to the office of the Premier are in fact included under that amended motion. With that having been said, there is no need for Motion for a Return 93 to be pursued any further since the essence of it is covered in the amended Motion for a Return 34, as I've indicated. So we'll be rejecting this one.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 93 lost]

Executive Council Bonuses

M94. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within Executive Council over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by position and amount paid to each official.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For the same reasons that I just indicated regarding Motion for a Return 93, it is not necessary to have Motion for a Return 94. It is already covered under the amended Motion for a Return 34, that I spoke to just moments ago. So, on that basis, we're able to reject Motion for a Return 94 since it is essentially covered also under Motion for a Return 34 as amended.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 94 lost]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Natural Gas Pipelines

M95. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the number of natural gas pipeline ruptures, bursts, breaches, and leaks that have occurred in Alberta in the calendar years 2002 and 2003 broken down by location and level of environmental damage.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would direct the member to the Energy and Utilities Board's information service that includes information such as a field surveillance inspection incident list and the annual field surveillance report. Information is available on incidents from as far back as 1975, including information on pipeline hits. It is available for viewing at no charge, or the member can get information by annual subscription updated monthly and pay for the service, as does everyone else.

Therefore, with that abundant amount of public information in the domain today we are compelled to reject the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to conclude the debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my understanding that the environmental damage is not listed there and/or any moves that they have made to repair such damage. So what he's suggesting isn't adequate information.

[Motion for a Return 95 lost]

Department of Economic Development Bonuses

M96. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the Ministry and Department of Economic Development over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by position and amount paid to each official.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Economic Development I'm going to indicate that the essence of this motion for a return is already addressed through amended Motion for a Return 34, that was accepted by this House. I won't bother to go into all the explanation in that regard, because I covered it, I think, adequately a few minutes ago when we were talking about MR 93 and 94. On that basis, MR 96 is not required, because it's already taken care of through MR 34 as amended. So we can reject it, in other words.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie?

Ms Carlson: No. Thank you. Question.

[Motion for a Return 96 lost]

Department of Environment Bonuses

M97. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the Ministry and Department of Environment over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by position and amount paid to each official.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, the essence of Motion for a Return 97 is covered under Motion for a Return 34 as amended. We'll just be reminded of the comments I made earlier this afternoon when addressing motions for returns 93 and 94, which make MR 97 essentially covered by MR 34 as amended. So, on that basis, on behalf of the Minister of Environment we are able to reject MR 97.

[Motion for a Return 97 lost]

Department of Sustainable Resource Development Bonuses

M98. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the Ministry and Department of Sustainable Resource Development over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by position and amount paid to each official.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Motion for a Return 98 it, too, is covered under MR 34 as amended and approved by this House earlier this year wherein all departments of government will be responding and addressing the issue of bonus dollar amounts and numbers of employees and so on. So, on that basis, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development I can indicate that MR 98 is not required and can therefore be rejected since its essence is also covered under MR 34 as amended.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 98 lost]

3:40 Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations Bonuses

M99. Ms Carlson moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total amount of each bonus and aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to senior officials within the Ministry and Department of International and Intergovernmental Relations over the 2002-2003 fiscal year broken down by position and amount paid to each official.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations I'm going

to indicate that MR 99 is also covered under MR 34 as amended and approved by this House, and it will provide for a breakdown of the aggregate amount of all bonuses awarded to employees. It'll be listed by department and so on. So, on that basis, MR 99 is not required and can be rejected accordingly.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 99 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Municipal Affairs Department

M100. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Municipal Affairs.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs I just want to indicate that this particular motion for a return is of course addressed specifically to the Department of Municipal Affairs, as you've just heard from the hon. member opposite, but in fact amended Motion for a Return 24, that was approved and accepted by this House earlier this year, opens up that particular motion to include all government departments. As such, we do not need to address them individually as each MR is suggesting here. They are going to all be addressed under MR 24 as amended, and as such we are able to reject Motion for a Return 100 on that basis.

I'll just quickly read this once, Mr. Speaker. MR 24 as amended indicates the following:

A statement of all credit card expenses for the fiscal year 2002-2003 incurred by all deputy ministers, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders in aggregate for each government department categorized by accommodation, travel, hosting, and miscellaneous expenses.

So that information will come forward under MR 24, as I've indicated.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member to conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 100 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Revenue Department

M101. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Revenue.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of the hon. Minister of Revenue to indicate that Motion for a Return 101 is also essentially covered under Motion for a Return 24 as amended. So for the reasons that I just put on record a couple of minutes ago regarding the information requested, we are able to reject MR 101 since, again, its essence is covered under MR 24 that was amended and approved by this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member to conclude debate? No?

[Motion for a Return 101 lost]

**Business Credit Card Statements for
Transportation Department**

M102. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Transportation.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Transportation I can indicate that MR 102 can also be rejected since it is essentially also covered under MR 24 as amended and approved by this Assembly, wherein a statement of all credit card expenses, et cetera, will in fact be provided through that particular MR as amended. Transportation is of course one of the many ministries within government, so it is going to be reflected therein. Therefore, we can reject MR 102.

[Motion for a Return 102 lost]

Department of Transportation IT Contracts

M103. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Transportation on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to Motion for a Return 103 I can indicate on behalf of the hon. Minister of Transportation that this motion is essentially covered under MR 10 as amended and approved earlier by this Assembly, wherein it was amended to read as follows:

An order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the government of Alberta on contracts for information technology services and a listing of vendors providing these services for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

That having been said, the information is going to be provided under Motion for a Return 10 since the Department of Transportation is of course going to be reflected therein. So, on that basis, we are able to reject Motion for a Return 103.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 103 lost]

Calgary Courthouse Public/Private Project

M104. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all correspondence received by the Premier between January 1, 2002, and November 18, 2003, regarding potential conflicts of interest over the usage of a private/public partnership to build the Calgary courthouse.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, I have to advise the House that on behalf of the Premier and the government I'm rejecting the question. There are a number of reasons for rejecting the question.

First of all, under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, all members of the House should be aware, correspondence that's written to the government is not necessarily public and can only be made public in certain circumstances if the writer of the letter agrees. So it wouldn't be within our purview to accept a question under an order of the Legislature to deliver documents which might otherwise not be deliverable under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and, in fact, without the permission of the writer of the letter.

Secondly, the question is far too broad and ambiguous. It's not clear from the question what conflicts of interest they might be talking about. There are a number of different areas. I don't want to make their case for them, but one might look at some of the questions which arose earlier in the project relative to the concern of the judiciary with the possibility of there being conflicts that might arise if other businesses were collocated in a courthouse with them, the conflicts of interest that might come out from that perspective.

Or they might be asking for letters which refer to a potential conflict of interest with respect to somebody who might be bidding on the process. If it is the process, then I can assure the hon. members that the process has been open and transparent in every way. There was a request for information which went out, and as the Minister of Infrastructure has said in this House on numerous occasions, many parties responded to the request. The next time it went out, it was a request for qualifications, and there were some 15 organizations, groups that responded to the request for qualifications. Then that was narrowed down to a request for proposals, to which four groups responded, and those were narrowed down to three groups and then ultimately to two groups before, finally, the final group.

3:50

With respect to all of that process, there was a fairness commissioner put in place precisely to deal with the issue of potential conflict of interest and to ensure that everybody bidding on the process had the same information and the same opportunity to participate.

So if they're talking about conflict of interest with respect to the process itself, again FOIP wouldn't allow the release of the letter automatically, if there was one. I'm not aware that there are any, but if there were letters, they wouldn't be releasable, because you'd have to get the permission of the person that wrote them. In order to answer this question, you'd have to explore the full gamut of what they were talking about in terms of potential conflicts.

Then, finally, Mr. Speaker, the process is still underway. The Minister of Infrastructure and his department in conjunction with Justice and Finance are working as we speak with the parties involved to finalize the contract with respect to building the courthouse.

So for all those reasons, Mr. Speaker, the question is not appropriately framed and can't be answered appropriately, and I'd ask the House to reject it.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry to close debate.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I thank the minister for his comments, but I think as well, when we've seen how this whole process for the building of the Calgary courthouse is

unfolding, that it is even more important that this information be shared with all members of this Assembly and with the public.

It is my understanding that we've had comments from some members of the judiciary who have expressed the potential conflict of interest that can occur if the Calgary courthouse were run under a P3 model. As well, we also have seen tremendous cost overruns that have occurred. When we start talking here about conflicts of interest, I think there were also some concerns that one of the companies that would be involved in the private/public partnership also has a number of court proceedings that are taking place right now.

This is a very timely question. It is also a question of openness and transparency, that certainly has not occurred. This is certainly the reason that this motion for a return was put forward. If there ever was a time when this government could be open and transparent, this is it, and I would urge all members of the Assembly to support Motion for a Return 104.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 104 lost]

Public/Private Partnerships for Infrastructure Development

M105. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all reports in the possession of the government detailing a cost analysis for the use of private/public partnerships for infrastructure development.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I've outlined many times in this House to the member the process that a proposal goes through. They all have to present a business case for the proposal. There's a very detailed analysis of that done, and any project that is found to be in the public interest can move forward, but until they get to that point, then in fact they can't.

The information that we are given is very much in confidence and proprietary, and as the members quite well know because they served on the all-party committee dealing with freedom of information and protection of privacy, that kind of confidential information just simply cannot be released.

So for those reasons we find it necessary to reject this particular question.

[Motion for a Return 105 lost]

Region 1 Child and Family Services Authority IT Contracts

M108. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the region 1, southwest Alberta, child and family services authority on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you very much. Well, it's a pleasure to respond and indicate that the government is prepared to accept MR 108 with amendments, specifically moving that the amendment include "and each of the child and family services authorities or their predecessors, referred to in motions for returns 108 to 116 inclusive and 121," after "region 1, southwest Alberta, child and family services authority."

Mr. Speaker, the rationale for that is fairly obvious. It will enable

us to be more effective in moving the motions for returns. It will encompass the intent of 108 and all of the motions that follow, up to and including 116 and 121. Also, we have shared this information with the opposition colleagues prior to 11 this morning, and I believe it was circulated to all of the members today.

The Deputy Speaker: On the amendment, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is in fact a very, very helpful amendment, and we thank the minister for providing it and taking the request for information seriously when it was in fact a serious request. So we will be supporting this amendment and once again thank her.

[Motion for a Return 108 as amended carried]

Public/Private Partnership for Calgary Hospital

M117. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Mr. Bonner that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the business and cost analysis for the proposed private/public partnership for the hospital in south Calgary including any analysis of the savings accrued by using a private/public partnership over a public model.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that we don't have much information on the south Calgary hospital. It's in its infancy. Therefore, we have to reject this motion.

4:00

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member to conclude debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you. It would seem that there are some costs or some projections that should be available to share. We would at least anticipate a future commitment for you to provide that information as it is available.

[Motion for a Return 117 lost]

Premier's Travel to Asia

M118. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount of and a copy of all receipts for the Premier's trip to Asia between January 11, 2004, and January 21, 2004, broken down by travel costs, dining costs, costs for hosting events, entertainment costs, accommodation costs, and miscellaneous costs.

Ms Carlson: We think that these kinds of trips definitely should be scrutinized by taxpayers and hope that they provide this information.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to indicate on behalf of the Premier that he has obviously said in this House that he'll be making information available very shortly with respect to this matter. So I believe the issue being requested in MR 118 will be addressed through that process, and I understand it will be very soon. Therefore, Motion for a Return 118 can be rejected at this time on that basis.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 118 lost]

Community Development Minister's Travel to India

M119. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount of and a copy of all receipts for the Minister of Community Development's trip to India between January 11, 2004, and January 21, 2004, broken down by travel costs, dining costs, costs for hosting events, entertainment costs, accommodation costs, and miscellaneous costs.

Ms Carlson: In fact, it's not just our caucus who's interested in these receipts. As the minister knows, his own constituents would like to see them.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I indicated in response to MR 118, there will be more information coming out very, very soon regarding international trips. This was a trip which, for the most part, was also one I made on behalf of the ministry and in conjunction with the Premier, so that will be addressed in that information release that is coming out very soon. That having been said, I won't take up more of the House's time other than to say that Motion for a Return 119 can be rejected on that basis at this time.

[Motion for a Return 119 lost]

Treasury Board Minutes

M120. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all minutes taken at meetings of the Treasury Board between January 1, 1994, and February 17, 2004.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Motion for a Return 120 requests copies of all the minutes taken at meetings of the Treasury Board between January 1, 1994, and February 17, 2004. The deliberations of Treasury Board are in fact confidential. They allow fiscal directions to be determined and options to be evaluated before finalizing their budget. Now, the culmination of the decisions from the Treasury Board are very obvious within the budget documents that get presented in this House and that in fact are debated in this House by ministry.

Further, I would refer hon. members to *Beauchesne* 428(gg) for reference to this that actually reaffirms the position to reject this motion for a return.

[Motion for a Return 120 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: We have a request that I would like you to hear. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity. I would like to ask for unanimous consent of this Assembly to revert to private members' bills at 5 o'clock this afternoon.

Thank you.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Ministry of Solicitor General IT Contracts

M122. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total

dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Solicitor General on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. Solicitor General I would just indicate that the essence of MR 122 is also covered under MR 10 as amended and approved by this Assembly earlier this year, wherein it reads that

an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the government of Alberta on contracts for information technology services and a listing of vendors providing these services for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

That having been said and because the Ministry of Solicitor General is one of our government departments, it will be reported on through Motion for a Return 10 as amended. Therefore, Motion for a Return 122 can be rejected at this time.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 122 lost]

Ministry of Infrastructure IT Contracts

M123. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Infrastructure on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Infrastructure I just want to indicate that MR 123 is also covered under MR 10 as amended and approved by this House. I won't repeat everything I said just three minutes ago, but on the same basis as what I said, Motion for a Return 123 can be rejected at this time since it's already covered under MR 10 as amended.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 123 lost]

4:10

Personnel Administration Office IT Contract Tendering Policy

M128. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of the current information technology services contract tendering policy and process for the Personnel Administration Office.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, thank you. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment I just want to indicate that Motion for a Return 128 has essentially already been addressed and covered by Motion for a Return 16, and we may refer back to that as a precedent if you wish. That having been said, we can at this time reject Motion for a Return 128 on that same basis.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member to conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 128 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Department

M134. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Dr. Taft that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I've already indicated that previous motions for returns are able to be rejected on the basis that they are covered under other motions. This particular one is covered under Motion for a Return 24 as amended, and a statement of all credit card expenses, et cetera, will be provided for each government department. Therefore, since Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development is one of our departments, it will be addressed under MR 24 as amended, and as such we're able to reject MR 134 before us at this time.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 134 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Justice and Attorney General Department

M135. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Ms Blakeman that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Justice and Attorney General.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General I can indicate that MR 135 as requested will be addressed through the amendment to Motion for a Return 24, wherein each government department will report. As such, Motion for a Return 135 is not needed and is able to be rejected at this time since the Department of Justice and Attorney General will be covered under MR 24 as amended and approved by this House earlier.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 135 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Children's Services Department

M136. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Children's Services.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, with respect to Motion for a Return 136, again, the essence of this one is already referred to and covered under MR 24 as amended. For the same reasons I've indicated earlier regarding other motions for returns, this one can be rejected at this time because the information essentially will be provided under MR 24 as amended and approved by this House earlier.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 136 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Learning Department

M137. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Learning.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Learning I can indicate that MR 137 is also being addressed through MR 24 as amended, wherein a statement of all credit card expenses, et cetera, will be provided for all the positions and titles for each government department, and that includes the Department of Learning, of course. So on that basis we can reject Motion for a Return 137 at this time.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 137 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Innovation and Science Department

M138. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the deputy minister, all assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, directors, branch heads, managers, and unit leaders for the Department of Innovation and Science.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Innovation and Science may I just indicate that MR 138 is also going to be addressed under MR 24 as amended and approved by this House earlier this year. That having been said, Motion for a Return 138, regarding the provision of credit card expenses and so on, is not required at this time, and we are able to reject it.

Arigato.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 138 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: May we have consent to briefly revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have with us today in the members' gallery a group of 20 elementary school teachers from the Seoul metropolitan office of education in Seoul, South Korea. This is a public school district in Seoul, and they serve approximately 1.6 million students from kindergarten to grade 12.

The Korean teachers are here for a month-long teacher development program, the fifth such program provided under contract to Edmonton public schools. These teachers will study in 14 different elementary schools where they will observe western teaching methodologies, practise teach in classrooms, and share lessons about Korean education and culture with district students. They will reside in homestays with staff at Edmonton public schools. We welcome this sort of collaborative, crosscultural education program, which speaks to the quality of programming available in our schools and the competence of Alberta teachers.

They're accompanied today by Ann Calverley, Nina Brown, Caroline Letourneau, and Sharon Lougheed, in whose class a couple will be observing later this week. I'd ask them to please rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: 4:20 **Motions for Returns**
(*continued*)

Business Credit Card Statements for Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development

M139. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development may I just indicate that Motion for a Return 139 is also essentially addressed under Motion for a Return 26 as amended and approved by this Assembly earlier this year. That having been said, of course, that particular ministry is one of the government departments that will be reporting a statement of credit card expenses, et cetera, as outlined, and therefore Motion for a Return 139 can be rejected at this time, as I said, on that basis.

To our guests in the gallery may I just say: anyo hasayon. Kamsam hamnida. [As submitted]

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 139 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Minister of Energy

M140. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Energy and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Energy with respect to Motion for a Return 140 I can indicate that this is also going to be addressed through Motion for a Return 26 as amended and approved by the House. That having been said, MR 140 can be rejected on that basis.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 140 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Minister of Children's Services

M141. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Children's Services and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Children's Services I can indicate that Motion for a Return 141 will also be addressed through Motion for a Return 26 as amended and approved by this House earlier this year. Therefore, Motion for a Return 141 is able to be looked at through that particular mechanism, and we are on that basis able to reject Motion 141 at this time.

Kamsam hamnida. [As submitted]

[Motion for a Return 141 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Minister of Innovation and Science

M142. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Innovation and Science and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Innovation and Science I can indicate that Motion for a Return 142 will be addressed through Motion for a Return 26 as amended and approved earlier this year by the House. Therefore, a statement of all credit card expenses related to members of Executive Council, their executive assistants, and so on with the breakdowns provided for will be addressed. So on that basis MR 142 can be rejected at this time.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: To close debate?

[Motion for a Return 142 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Minister of Learning

M143. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Learning and the minister's executive assistant.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Learning I just want to indicate that Motion for a Return 26 as amended and approved by this House earlier this year will address this matter. As such, Motion for a Return 143, before us at the moment, can be rejected on that basis.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 143 lost]

Ministry of Children's Services IT Contracts

M146. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Dr. Massey that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total dollar amount spent by the Ministry of Children's Services on contracts for information technology services broken down by company and total dollar amount for each for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Children's Services I just want to say that Motion for a Return 146 is not required since the issue of information technology services, the contracts and the vendors and so on, has been addressed through Motion for a Return 10 as amended and approved by this House earlier this year. As such and on that basis, we are able to recommend rejection of Motion for a Return 146.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 146 lost]

Utilities Consumer Advocate

M147. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, correspondence, and recommendations from the Utilities Consumer Advocate to the government regarding consumer utilities issues between September 22, 2003, and February 17, 2004.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This request would involve hundreds of documents that contain personal billing, consumption, and other information entrusted to us in confidence by Alberta's electricity and natural gas consumers. It would also contain sensitive business intelligence entrusted to us by Alberta's electricity and natural gas utilities under a similar protection of privacy. Therefore, Government Services is prepared to reject this Motion for a Return 147.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate?

[Motion for a Return 147 lost]

4:30

Utilities Consumer Advocate

M148. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies

of all documents, including but not limited to correspondence, business plans, budgets, and contracts, related to the creation of the Utilities Consumer Advocate office between September 22, 2003, and February 17, 2004.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We'll be accepting Motion for a Return 148.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Yes. Mr. Speaker, we would like to thank the minister for his openness in providing us with that information.

[Motion for a Return 148 carried]

Shut-in Natural Gas Wells

M149. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents regarding government compensation to companies whose natural gas wells in the Athabasca-Wabasca-McMurray region have been ordered shut in by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board.

Mr. Smith: We'll reject that.

The Deputy Speaker: To conclude debate, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If he isn't going to give us any information, he could at least tell us why he won't give us any information.

[Motion for a Return 149 lost]

Coal Bed Methane

M150. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents regarding the development of regulations and/or guidelines for the development of natural gas in coal, or coal bed methane, between January 1, 2001, and February 17, 2004.

Mr. Smith: We'll reject that, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on the motion.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, you know, it's my view that the minister, in rejecting a legitimate request from the opposition to table this thing . . .

Mr. Norris: Can't hear you.

Mr. Mason: I'm sorry. I'll start over. Thank you very much, hon. minister.

It seems to me, Mr. Speaker, that the Minister of Energy, when he rejects a legitimate request for information from the opposition, ought to at least have the courtesy for members of the House to stand up and explain why that might be. You know, in this particular case the whole issue of coal bed methane is a very, very serious issue

facing the future of this province. We've seen in other parts of the continent – particularly I think it's Wyoming if I'm not mistaken – that there has been tremendous damage to the environment by this process.

The minister has on a number of occasions talked about how much different Alberta's situation is, yet the fact of the matter is that the process of drilling for coal bed methane is going ahead and without adequate consideration, without adequate testing or research to determine what is going to be the effect on the environment and on the water table and all kinds of things. Many, many people are concerned about this.

Such a cavalier approach on the part of the minister to these kinds of matters and showing a lack of respect for members of the Assembly by just saying, "Stand up, all you trained seals, and vote this down because I tell you so," is not just showing a lack of respect for the opposition but showing a lack of respect for the government members in particular, and I don't think they should stand for it, Mr. Speaker.

We'll wait and see if the minister has anything to add to this before we have further debate on the matter and on subsequent motions that might be addressed by that minister this afternoon.

With that comment, Mr. Speaker, I will take my seat for now.

The Deputy Speaker: The chair would observe that the hon. member is asking for something that's an impossibility. By the rules of our House, to which all sides have agreed, the minister is not allowed to reply to your comments.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to conclude debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very disappointed that this minister would refuse to share any information with us about what is going to be the largest new industry in this particular province in the future. Now, it's going to be critical in terms of the balance between business and energy sector development and environmental needs for the province and for the people that this information be public, be open, and be open for debate.

The kind of arrogance we see reflected not only by this minister's rejection of the questions but rejection of any reason for not disclosing information is indicative of how he intends to proceed in the future, and that does not bode well for the future of this province.

I would request that he reconsider his answer and provide some level of detail in writing to us in the very near future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion for a Return 150 lost]

Coal Bed Methane

M151. Ms Carlson moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, including but not limited to correspondence, meeting agendas, and meeting minutes, of the natural gas in coal multistakeholder advisory committee between January 1, 2003, and February 17, 2004.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I will be rejecting this motion as well and feel compelled to reply to the earlier comments of the member. I will do it briefly and succinctly out of respect for the private members of this Assembly, whose precious time we are taking answering these questions that they know full well how to get answers to. I'm trying to move quickly through this so that private members' business, particularly important ones of the Canadian Wheat Board, can proceed. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Whoa. We're in Motions for Returns, right now, hon. members.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands on Motion for a Return 151.

Mr. Mason: The minister started by saying that he was going to answer the question and do it succinctly, and all he did was attack the opposition for asking the question and say that the opposition was trying to hold up the private member's bills. [interjections]

4:40

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, the House has a level of courtesy, which I'd hoped a number of people would return to; that is, we have one person speaking at a time. Right now, the only person . . .

Mr. Lukaszuk: Why would we revert to that?

The Deputy Speaker: That doesn't invite a comment, hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is the one that's been recognized.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. All the minister has to do is give three or four sentences explaining why the information is not going to be forthcoming. That's all that is asked. You know, if he showed as much respect for the opposition's role in this place as he claims to do for the backbenchers and their private members' bills, maybe we could get on with both today.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie to conclude debate.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have for the past three weeks given unanimous consent to this House to revert to private members' business, putting aside our questions. We have had to revert to Written Questions and Motions for Returns because this government refuses to provide information, refuses to be open and accountable, and refuses to share any information about their future developments with the people of this province. This is in fact the only recourse left open to us, which they are once again denying us access to.

We have had some cases of extreme co-operation here this afternoon from ministers other than the Minister of Energy. We have had several ministers here provide excellent information to us. The Minister of Children's Services agreed to provide detailed information and consolidate a number of motions for returns, which we also agreed to in order to speed up this process. So I would say that we in the opposition are acting in extreme good faith, and this government, particularly the Minister of Energy, is acting in extreme bad faith.

[Motion for a Return 151 lost]

Crude Oil Royalty Marketing Process

M152. Mr Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all economic reviews and evaluations of the Alberta crude oil royalty marketing process between January 1, 2003, and February 17, 2004.

Mr. Smith: A report is being done, Mr. Speaker, that in the fullness of time will direct an answer to this question. Therefore, we are compelled to reject.

The Deputy Speaker: To reject?

Mr. Smith: To reject.

[Motion for a Return 152 lost]

Electricity Transmission Development

M153. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, business plans, and correspondence regarding the government's electricity transmission development policy between January 1, 2001, and February 17, 2004.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, we'll reject this motion and direct the member to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, where it can be dealt with more appropriately.

Mr. Bonner: Once again, for the minister who more often than anybody else in this House tells us that his government is open and transparent, that type of a reply to Motion for a Return 153 is certainly unacceptable, Mr. Speaker.

We have not had such a boondoggle in this province since we went to electricity deregulation, that has cost Albertans somewhere in excess of \$8 billion to this point, and it is continuing to soar. Certainly, as the price of oil and natural gas continue to rise at rapid rates, the cost of electricity generation is going to increase as well. So for the minister not to be open and accountable and not to share these documents with all of us in the Assembly and all Albertans is unforgivable.

[Motion for a Return 153 lost]

Redwood Energy Well Blowout

M154. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, reports, statistical data, and correspondence regarding the blowout of a Redwood Energy well located near Edson between June 7, 2001, and February 17, 2004.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the process compels us to reject this motion and would direct the member to the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, that can provide any interested person with extensive information about this and other events.

[Motion for a Return 154 lost]

Electricity Deregulation

M155. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all documents, business plans, performance measures, and statistical data regarding the government's deregulation of electricity between January 1, 1992, and January 1, 2001.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I would direct the member to business plans and performance measures all readily available in the public domain and, therefore, am compelled to reject Motion for a Return 155.

Mr. Mason: I'm compelled to rise on this one, Mr. Speaker, because it was more than just the business plans and the performance measures contained in them that was asked for here. Now, this is

probably one of the central requests before the Assembly today. Here is the paper trail on electricity deregulation. I commend the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar for asking this question because he's basically asking: what has the government been doing on electricity deregulation? Why did they do it? What's happened? What have they been doing to monitor and analyze the situation as it progressed? You know, the public of Alberta and certainly the opposition parties really are perplexed about why it is the government has stuck with electricity deregulation all along.

In the face of it, it would seem that it would be almost an irrational course of action given the dramatic increase in electricity prices and the growth of bureaucracy, which the government claims to be opposed to. It's far more complex than it used to be. There's a lot more bureaucracy. There are more bodies running it. More people have to be assembled and documents kept and so on. This is a critical piece of the package of information that we need in this Assembly in order to analyze whether or not there's some rationale behind the government's actions in essentially doubling the cost of power in this province. Why would a government do that and persist in that course of action in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, Mr. Speaker?

So I would urge members of the Assembly to vote aye for this particular motion for a return because this is probably one of the key ones of the entire session.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:50

Mr. Snelgrove: As we carefully weigh the extreme relevance of this motion, could the minister tell us before we cast our vote on this, considering this goes back up to 12 years, how much time and how much cost this might actually be in his department to consider answering this motion?

The Deputy Speaker: That's probably a very good question, but under our rules that all sides have agreed to, the minister can only reply once, and he's already had his crack at it. The proposer may have a response to conclude.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, in support of the comments made by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands, the cost of providing this information compared to the eight billion dollars plus that it's cost Albertans through the whole deregulation process of electricity is minuscule. It is very, very small, so I would think that's a very good question and that the minister should reconsider very quickly about allowing everybody in this Assembly and all Albertans access to this very important information.

[Motion for a Return 155 lost]

Electricity Deregulation

M156. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all correspondence between TransAlta Corporation, including any subsidiaries, and the government regarding electricity deregulation between January 1, 1990, and February 17, 2004.

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm trying to move quickly out of deference to important matters of private members in the House. Again, we'll reject this motion. Anybody who has been in this House for any length of time, which the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has, knows full well the details surrounding the freedom of information act, knows full well that that's third party information, and knows full well that that is prohibited by law to be released.

[Motion for a Return 156 lost]

Electricity Deregulation

M157. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all performance measures and statistical data regarding the effect of the government's deregulation of electricity on residential and small- and medium-business customers between January 1, 2001, and February 17, 2004.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, there are no documents available to respond to this motion; therefore, we could accept it and say that there are no documents available to this motion, or we can in fact reject it because there are no documents responsive to this motion. I leave it in the hands of the Assembly.

[Motion for a Return 157 lost]

Electricity Deregulation

M158. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the total cost of all reports commissioned by the government regarding electricity deregulation between January 1, 1990, and February 17, 2004, broken down by the cost for each report.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, there's no evidence that I know of that any reports addressing the wide-ranging subject of electricity deregulation exist in the department. So again I leave it to the good minds of the members of the Assembly to make this decision.

[Motion for a Return 158 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Minister of Finance

M159. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Finance and the minister's executive assistant.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Finance I can indicate that Motion for a Return 26 as amended and approved by this House earlier this session in fact addresses this issue, and a statement of all the credit card expenses et cetera for the minister and for executive assistants and so on for all government departments will be provided pursuant to MR 26 as amended. On that basis MR 159 can be rejected at this time.

[Motion for a Return 159 lost]

Business Credit Card Statements for Minister of Infrastructure

M160. Mr. Bonner moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of all monthly business credit card statements for the fiscal year 2002-2003 issued to the Minister of Infrastructure and the minister's executive assistant.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Infrastructure I just want to indicate again that Motion for a Return 26 as amended and approved earlier by this House does address this matter, and the statement of all credit card expenses will be provided, including the Ministry of Infrastructure, which, of course, is part of government. On that basis MR 160 can be rejected at this time.

[Motion for a Return 160 lost]

Electricity Deregulation

M161. Mr. Bonner moved on behalf of Mr. MacDonald that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing a copy of all business plans or business models prepared by the government regarding electricity deregulation between January 1, 1995, and March 16, 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister will be rejecting that motion.

Thank you.

[Motion for a Return 161 lost]

The Speaker: Hon. members, I understand that earlier this afternoon unanimous consent was granted in the Assembly that we'd now move from this particular order of business on to an additional order of business.

head: 5:00 Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 203 Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Ms Kryczka: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've already heard substantial debate surrounding Bill 203, and I would like to thank all my colleagues for their support and for their comments.

To summarize Bill 203 very briefly, Bill 203 provides ex-spouses and separated couples a choice in how best to divide their assets pertinent to their individual circumstances. The current problem in Alberta is that when a signed agreement between ex-spouses or ex-partners waives the right to future claim on each other's CPP credits or pension, this contract agreement is not enforceable. This does happen because we don't have provincial legislation in place to ensure that an ex-spouse will not renege on the waiver in the agreement already agreed to.

Bill 203 prevents an ex-spouse from applying for a credit split without the other ex's knowledge and especially after both had mutually signed a divorce agreement to waive future claims to each other's CPP benefits. Bill 203 prevents the effect of creating a future entitlement for an ex-spouse. Only one of the ex-spouses or ex-partners needs to apply for this split, with the consent of the other individual not being necessary. An appeal can be made that can only challenge the information provided on the application such as the time the couple spent together. One of the exes could make an application to split the other ex's CPP credits many years after the

original agreement was signed, up to 10, 15 years later.

The Canada pension plan allows for the provinces to opt out of the credit-splitting program through section 55.2. However, the provinces must enact legislation allowing for spousal agreement. This legislation must make specific reference to the CPP. Without provincial legislation spousal waivers with respect to CPP credits may not be upheld. Bill 203 provides the provincial legislation necessary to legitimize spousal agreements. Section 55.2 of the CPP act grants provinces authority to opt out of CPP credit splitting.

Bill 203, as I said, would provide that legislation. Agreements back to June 1986 will be honoured. Bill 203 allows both parties to make sure that they resolve all assets when divorce or separation proceedings are done, even CPP benefits. Bill 203 brings closure to a divorce or separation.

An important point regarding splitting CPP benefits: a credit-split decision is never changed or returned to an ex regardless of a change in circumstances. An ex who discovers later that he or she didn't receive any CPP benefits is still entitled to those benefits as long as he or she did not sign an agreement that stated no future division of CPP credits.

Other jurisdictions have recognized the importance of choice. British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Quebec all have legislation to opt out of the CPP credit-splitting program. Manitoba plans to introduce a pilot project this year.

Mr. Speaker, I move third reading of Bill 203, the Canada Pension Plan Credits Statutes Amendment Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill 203 read a third time]

Bill 204 Blood Samples Act

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much. It's an honour to begin debate in third reading of Bill 204. Before I comment on the bill, I would like the record to show my gratitude to my researcher, Mr. Matthew Stepan, who has worked tirelessly on this bill, Barb Letendre and Cherry Robinson in my respective offices, and definitely Ms Diane Paltzat from the Edmonton Police Service, who has provided us with a great deal of technical information.

Mr. Speaker, the concept of taking blood samples to help infected and injured health and emergency workers was formally presented by the Alberta federation of police chiefs. Although they are big supporters of this legislation, they are not the only professionals that will benefit from this bill. I have presented petitions from the Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Taber, and Camrose police services; also the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police. The Blood Tribe police have also sent a letter and a petition urging this Assembly to support Bill 204.

This bill is a necessary response to the trend by some people to use the threat of disease as a weapon. The deputy chief of the Blood Tribe police has stated that some police officers have been exposed to bodily fluids in the past and that this bill could have helped them access the appropriate information to assess the severity of their injury.

The Alberta Fire Fighters Association and the Lethbridge Firefighters Union have also voiced their support for Bill 204. Firefighters, as we know, are often the first to arrive at the scene of an accident. As a result, they also face the same dangers as police officers.

I have also tabled supports from the Alberta correctional officers

and the correctional services workers as a great deal of debate has focused on police officers, firefighters, and health care providers; however, the chair of the AUPE Local 003 has expressed gratitude for this bill because it will help create safer working conditions for those people who work in Alberta's prisons.

The bill will also assist in the treatment of correctional staff victimized by inmates with blood that could be contaminated with a blood-borne disease. Correctional workers are often engaged in hostile and violent situations with inmates. This bill will help workers understand the extent of their injury when they are bitten, scratched, or spat at by an inmate.

Emergency workers in Calgary and the Alberta College of Paramedics are also supportive of this bill.

Mr. Speaker, all of these groups are faced with the growing problem of people using blood or the fear of potentially fatal disease to torment these workers. It is true that most of the support for this bill comes from personal experiences of emergency workers; however, this bill will help infected workers understand the severity of the exposure. I am confident that most reasonable, caring Albertans will support this bill.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is also before this House because of the growing danger of people using the threat of disease to abuse or torment the men and women who keep all Albertans safe and healthy. The order for taking a mandatory blood sample is not a knee-jerk response to a few isolated cases. This bill is part of a co-ordinated response to the danger of blood-borne diseases. The order is one of the most important pieces of a system that effectively addresses the danger of these diseases.

There are those who believe that this bill is an infringement on the privacy or the rights of anyone who comes into contact with an emergency or health professional. Mr. Speaker, nothing is stopping someone from challenging this legislation in court; however, before proceeding, they should realize that the taking of a blood sample to help health care or emergency workers understand the significance of their exposure is within the parameters of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is worth repeating that the Charter of Rights is not absolute. It is not above the law, and it cannot be used as protection after harming another person.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will help ensure that exposed persons and their medical staff are given enough information to assess the severity of their exposure. I encourage all members to support Bill 204, and I look forward to the debate on this floor.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak to third reading of Bill 204.

This is the third time I've risen to address the bill. In the second reading debate I indicated that I would be opposing the bill. Then, during the discussion in committee stage I indicated that I was undertaking some contact with some of the groups that were in support of the bill and was, I guess, in a position of being undecided based on some of the things that I've heard.

I can tell the House, Mr. Speaker, that I have had discussions with the police association of Alberta. I have discussed this with the Local 003 leadership of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, which represents correctional staff in provincial facilities, and I have discussed this with the Edmonton Fire Fighters' Union local president over the weekend.

It's clear to me, Mr. Speaker, that all of those groups support this approach, and all of them have indicated to me that this is not a theoretical problem for them. This is a real and recurring issue that

their members face on a regular basis, that is extremely difficult for their members to deal with – for police officers, firefighters, and correctional officers – that it has a serious impact on their personal life, and that it is indeed an issue that warrants some serious measure.

5:10

Now, the concern, of course, Mr. Speaker, is that some of the other groups that have contacted us are opposed, and certainly HIV Edmonton is one of those organizations. There is a real concern that people's civil liberties may be infringed upon or that particular groups in society, particularly low-income people, people on the street, people of aboriginal descent, and people from the gay community, may in fact be unfairly targeted under the provisions of this bill. That is the dilemma that I find myself in today.

I will be paying very close attention to whether or not this bill, which is clearly going to be passed today, does in fact infringe upon those groups. I think all members of the Assembly need to monitor that situation, and if those types of things occur on a frequent basis, if there are patterns of abuse that exist under this legislation, then I think we have a duty to amend or rescind the legislation.

However, Mr. Speaker, I am convinced for the moment that this bill is in fact necessary, so I will be prepared to support the bill at third reading. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort has risen.

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege for me to join in the debate in support of Bill 204. Most of the time the potential carrier of blood-borne disease who infects a worker with their bodily fluids will agree to a voluntary blood sample. They may take time to prolong the intimidation and taunting, that was mentioned. Most of them agree eventually.

The intent of this bill is for the relatively few occasions where the suspect absolutely refuses to agree to a blood sample. In these cases the reason for not submitting a blood sample has nothing to do with the Charter of Rights or privacy violation. The reason they refuse is to make life difficult for the potentially infected person.

As I see it, there is a process for taking and analyzing a blood sample already existing in Alberta in the health care system. The process for issuing a court order at any time also already exists in Alberta's justice system. The circumstances for forcing a blood sample from someone, as explained in section 4, will hopefully never need to be used. On the other hand, the mere presence of this bill will help convince people who are not co-operating to agree to provide a blood sample.

I say that this bill's intent is to address new dangers to these professional workers on a daily basis. We know for a fact that criminal suspects or inmates currently use biting or spitting on police officers, law enforcement officers, correctional officers as a form of intimidation. This isn't something that the average Albertan would deal with in their normal workday, but for the professions defined in section 4(2), this is becoming an area of constant concern.

So looking at this, I want to express my support and call on other members to vote for this bill.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to make a few comments with regard to this bill. I have listened intently to both sides of the argument: why we should pass this legislation and why we shouldn't. While I, too, certainly respect the concerns that those who are opposed to this bill have, I have to say that on the whole at

this particular time I'm going to be supporting this legislation.

It seems to me that our first area of concern has to be for those people in the services that are protecting us. If they are spat on or bitten or have needle punctures or are helping individuals who are covered in blood, they have the right to know as soon as possible whether or not they are infected with any particular diseases. In fact, AIDS doesn't concern me as much as hepatitis C does, and that's a real concern for us in this day and age. So not only should those people who are serving Albertans know quickly but their other family members as well – their spouses and their children and those who might otherwise be infected – so that they can take the proper precautions as soon as possible.

I, too, have some concerns about how this bill may unfold, and we'll be watching intently to see that it is not abused in any capacity. I'm expecting that it won't be, and I'm hoping that it won't be, and certainly there will be a huge outcry of concern if it is. So at this point after due consideration I will be supporting this bill at third reading.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to make a few brief comments, as well, to Bill 204, the Blood Samples Act. I want to commend the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs for the amount of work he put into this bill and certainly commend the great efforts that our police officers, our peace officers, our firefighters, our emergency workers, and even good Samaritans do in order to assist people that are injured, people that are in violation of the law. This bill shows that we in this Legislature have a strong support for families. With the increase in the incidence of hepatitis C, with the increase in other communicable diseases this is a bill that's certainly going to give confidence to those families, particularly when one of the members in that family has been exposed to bodily fluids, which could potentially cause the spread of AIDS.

I do think it is a very good bill. I'm certainly glad to have heard the input that others in the Assembly have given in regard to the comments made by those particular organizations that have members who are involved in these types of situations.

In closing, I think it's an extremely good bill. I would certainly hope that all members of the Assembly would support this particular bill and that those emergency workers or police officers or firefighters or whoever is exposed to these types of situations will definitely be able to have some confidence that when they return to their families, their families will not be infected with these diseases. So, once again, thank you very much for the opportunity to make some comments.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs to close the debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 204 read a third time]

head: 5:20 **Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 206
Alberta Wheat and Barley
Test Market Amendment Act, 2004**

[Adjourned debate May 3: Mr. Hlady]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View. I believe there are about two minutes left.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be quick.

Mr. Speaker, I want to speak because we can implement this bill with no change to the Canadian Wheat Board Act. This is about getting our farmers an export licence. Today our farmers are forced to buy back their grain before they can get an export licence. Farmers in the designated area, which is Alberta, must sell their grain to the board at an initial price. Then they have to buy their own grain back at a board-set price. Well, the board sets the price at an international price or the best market price out there, so any value-added money that the farmer could have made actually goes to the board. They don't get that.

Mr. Speaker, I want to speak quickly to what I did last week, which was the \$85 million deficit that the board had last year. That is just the tip of the iceberg. That deficit was created because they missed a marketing opportunity when the highest prices in history were not taken advantage of at the time. Our farmers, too, lost at that time: \$60 per tonne on 5 million tonnes across this country, \$300 million that the farmers did not receive last year because of the poor marketing of the Canadian Wheat Board. That's the fundamental. Then they come back asking us for money or needing money because they can't make it because of the poor marketing happening out there.

Mr. Speaker, marketing choice is the only choice to allow us to get to the \$20 billion in farm receipts, which is a target of this government, and see value-added increased in Alberta. I sure hope we get a chance to have a vote on second reading today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad to have an opportunity, at least for a couple of minutes, to speak on this bill. It is an important issue. It's incredibly important to me just as an individual. I spent time not only in agribusiness but in the actual grain business.

One of the things that I want to say is that the Wheat Board has been problematic for a very long time, and anybody that has spent any time in the grain business knows that. The reality is that I'm not sure that this bill will get us where we want to be or where we should be, and that's what concerns me, not the intent of it but just the legality or the constitutionality of it. There isn't anybody more willing to want to take a chance to try and do the right thing by our grain farmers than I am, but I want to make sure that I don't end up being responsible for having somebody sitting in a jail. I think that what happened to our barley growers and our wheat farmers was horrendous, and I don't want to see a repeat of that.

The truth is that a couple of years ago we passed a bill called Bill 207, and the sponsor was the sponsor for that one. It's an outstanding bill. What it did was it said that our minister was to go to eastern Canada to meet with her federal counterparts to try and get us marketing choice, and she has been working on that. Mr. Speaker, it's really unfortunate that we got a little bit sidetracked by an issue called BSE for the last year, trying to sort that out and hopefully get our border reopened for our cattle to be able to be exported, but that doesn't mean that the work for this has not been going on. Marketing choice is something that does matter.

One of the things I wanted to say, Mr. Speaker, was that a number of years ago when I was involved with Palliser Grain, we worked very hard with the farming community to get oats out of the Canadian Wheat Board. One of the reasons we were successful in getting oats out from under the board and keeping canola out from under the board, which they were also trying to take control of, was because we had thousands of farmers in this province writing letters

not only to us but to our federal counterparts saying that this had to change. In fact, the Wheat Board didn't have much interest in oats, so that was a great thing. They finally let it go, and oats now is a great crop in Alberta again.

On the other side of this my hope would be that if we can move further down the marketing choice train, we could in fact get our domestic barley and our domestic wheat use out from under the Wheat Board, if not all of it out from under the Wheat Board at least select something that we could possibly work on. My understanding is that the federal ministers have agreed to continue to meet with our minister on this issue in the hopes of developing a marketing option plan, a trial market for 10 years. Yes, I agree that a bill like this puts pressure on them, and I'm not averse to putting pressure on them, but I have to caution my colleague across the way that I am very much averse to passing a bill that might see some of my fellow ranchers and farmers going to jail because we did something that led them to believe that it would be legal when, in fact, we can't implement it this way.

So, hon. member, I'm very concerned about that, and I do not think it should be downplayed in any way, shape, or form. I'm not afraid of a good fight with the feds or the Wheat Board. I am afraid of leading anybody in this province down a path that indicates that it's okay for them to do something when, in fact, it might not be.

On that, Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to address this bill.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak to Bill 206, the Alberta Wheat and Barley Test Market Amendment Act, 2004. I think that the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View has put her finger on something that's seriously flawed with the bill, and I urge her to live to fight on another day. Don't do yourself in just because you find me agreeing with you, hon. member. It's really just not worth it.

Mr. Speaker, I don't know if there's any guidance that any member of this Assembly can provide, yourself or anyone else, about what to do when you feel that a bill before the Assembly is ultra vires. If you feel that it is unconstitutional and it is outside the powers of the provincial Legislature, what do you do? Do you just let them pass it and then wait for the courts to overturn it? I don't know what the appropriate approach is.

I would say that I believe that this bill is outside the constitutional powers of the province to enact and outside this Assembly's area of responsibility. I also know that the provincial government takes great exception to the federal government when they intrude on areas of provincial jurisdiction. They are always talking about that. They talk about firewalls. They talk about different things. Former Premier Lougheed used to talk about moving them off the porch, you know, get them out of the living room, onto the porch, and then say good night and go in and lock the door. Here we have the provincial Legislature of this province being asked to do something very much the same, and I think that that's not correct.

Now, I also have another problem with the bill, and that is that I fundamentally don't agree with the approach. Members always talk about the Wheat Board and how it enforces, you know, a whole set of requirements on farmers and interferes with their rights and their choice and so on, and I don't think anything could be further from the truth, Mr. Speaker. The Wheat Board imposes this type of situation in order to support wheat farmers, and it does so as an organization that is democratically elected by wheat farmers, and despite the government's propaganda to the contrary those districts of the Canadian Wheat Board that overlap Alberta have in the

majority returned pro single-desk Wheat Board directors in the last election and before that as well. If the wheat farmers were to elect directors that were against the single-desk in a majority, then the Wheat Board could change the policy. What people are asking to do here is to be able to undercut their fellow wheat farmers and sell their wheat into the United States on their own, and the result would naturally be a decline in the amount that the other farmers, the majority of the farmers, were able to receive for their wheat.

For example, when oats dropped out of the Canadian Wheat Board

single-desk selling in 1989, the value plummeted by 47 per cent, Mr. Speaker, in the first year alone, while over the same period barley values jumped 61 per cent. Statistics . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Assembly stands adjourned until 8 o'clock tonight.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Monday, May 10, 2004**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 2004/05/10

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

head: **Motions Other than Government Motions**

Legal Drinking Age

508. Mr. McFarland moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to raise the legal drinking age in Alberta to 19, as is the current requirement in the neighbouring provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

[Debate adjourned May 3: Mr. Maskell speaking]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to say that I believe this government should take a serious look at raising the legal drinking age as part of its strategy. I believe that raising the drinking age would fit in well with other initiatives designed to prevent drinking and driving not only by youth but also as a whole. Also, I believe that having an age that is consistent with what our neighbours are doing would further reduce the number of drunk drivers on our collective roadways.

I would like to once again thank the Member for Little Bow for putting forth this interesting idea and thus allowing us the opportunity to speak to this issue.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow to close debate.

Mr. McFarland: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I just want to very briefly thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. I wanted to thank the Member for Calgary-Bow, who, I think, made a very important distinction, one that kind of counters the arguments that I've had, and that being: if you're old enough to vote and go to war and enter into a contract at 18, why shouldn't you be allowed to drink? The Member for Calgary-Bow enunciated it very well when she reminded us that things like drinking, things like driving, are not rights; they're privileges and subject to arbitrary dates and different ages.

I will refer everyone to maybe an old adage. It's a toast, Mr. Speaker, that some people after they had had a few used to say, and it went like this: I drink to you because I love you, my steadiness to improve; last night I got so steady, I couldn't even move.

Now, Mr. Speaker, that has always been meant in jest, when you're having a good time sitting around the bar, but I do really hope and I honestly want young people especially to not end up being the literal stiff. Be careful. I do accept that there are many, many of the young folks that I'm trying to appeal to here with this motion that are very responsible, but I still think this one small step would very much supplement some of the other regulations and laws that we currently have in place.

I thank you for the opportunity of being able to present this to the Assembly. I'd like to call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion Other than Government Motion 508 carried]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 8:03 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

For the motion:

Abbott	Hlady	Mar
Bonner	Jablonski	Marz
Cao	Jacobs	Maskell
Cardinal	Johnson	McFarland
Coutts	Jonson	Nelson
Danyluk	Klapstein	O'Neill
DeLong	Kryczka	VanderBurg
Doerksen	Lord	Yankowsky
Evans	MacDonald	

Against the motion:

Amery	Graham	Pham
Ducharme	Graydon	Snelgrove
Dunford	Griffiths	Stevens
Fritz	Knight	Tarchuk
Gordon	Lukaszuk	Zwozdesky
Goudreau		

Totals:	For – 26	Against – 16
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[Motion Other than Government Motion 508 carried]

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

509. Ms Graham moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to take measures to establish a dedicated fund for the purpose of conducting research to develop scientifically credible information about the safety and effectiveness of complementary and alternative medicine, CAM, that will assist health care professionals, health policy-makers, and the public in making informed decisions.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure this evening to rise and speak to Motion 509, which I am sponsoring. I am going to use the acronym CAM, standing for complementary and alternative medicine, just to shorten things.

Before I talk about the purpose and intent of this motion, I would like to describe what is included in CAM, and this will not be an exhaustive list. Generally speaking, CAM therapies are divided into five categories including alternative medical systems such as homeopathic medicine and naturopathic medicine, which I am sure we are all familiar with.

The second category is mind/body interventions of the like of meditation, prayer, mental healing, yoga, as examples.

The third category is biologically based therapies, which include substances found in nature such as herbs, foods, and vitamins. Some examples include dietary supplements, herbal products, and the use of other so-called natural but as yet unproven therapies; for example, using shark cartilage to treat cancer.

The fourth category is manipulative and body-based methods, which include chiropractic, osteopathic manipulation, and massage.

The fifth category, energy therapies, involves the use of energy fields, and they include such things as reiki, therapeutic touch, and chi gung, which are probably areas that are familiar to members.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I would then like to answer why I have brought this motion, and it is because currently there is very little scientific evidence existing to evaluate CAM therapies. For the most part, there are very key questions that have yet to be answered through well-designed scientific studies, questions such as whether these therapies are safe and whether they actually work for the diseases or medical conditions for which they are used.

The big problem underpinning this lack of scientific evidence, Mr. Speaker, is that public funders of medical research tend not to fund this type of research, so there's no body of scientific knowledge existing.

8:20

Just by way of background, Mr. Speaker, in Canada our Canadian government does provide some funding for research into the effectiveness and safety of natural health products, a whole \$1 million for the country, but it does not specifically earmark any funds for research into the effectiveness and safety of CAM therapies, and that's primarily what I am aiming at.

Some of the reasons that might exist for this reluctance of funding organizations to give money to alternative medicine research is that there is the difficulty for CAM researchers to compete with researchers who have an established publication and funding track record in conventional medical research, and these are the kinds of researchers that the CAM researchers are up against when promoting their projects. There are also difficulties meeting the standards of conventional medical research in the CAM setting. So this is the reason for my motion, Mr. Speaker.

We need a designated research fund devoted to CAM therapies to provide a necessary kick-start or a leg up for these CAM research projects so that we can see develop a reliable body of knowledge to help ascertain the usefulness and safety of a wide range of CAM products and therapies that are already in use.

Mr. Speaker, you might ask: who will be assisted by this research? Well, it will be Albertans like you and me. There are different estimates existing as to the numbers of Canadians that actually use CAM therapies, and it is suggested as a result of some surveys that have been done in this area that approximately 21 million Canadians are using CAM therapies and that we spend, it is estimated, as Canadians some \$2.4 billion per year compared to Americans, whose population is much, much bigger than ours, spending \$2.7 billion U.S. So this means that per CAM user Canadians spend over five times more on CAM than do their American counterparts and over 12 times more than Australian users, as an example.

While Canada has the largest proportion of CAM users and spends more per capita than any other western nation, CAM in Canada has developed largely without official government support or sanction. Mr. Speaker, I think this is quite remarkable considering how technologically and scientifically oriented our society is now, that we as Canadians in the absence of hard scientific evidence do go ahead and use these therapies, but maybe that's because they really do work and we receive messages from our friends and relatives on an anecdotal basis, or maybe we just intuitively know that they work. But the evidence does not exist in significant amounts to really support our decisions. I think it's also remarkable that policy-makers, of which we are a part, aren't apparently concerned about this when we are faced with the knowledge that so many people are using these therapies.

So I can only think, Mr. Speaker, that with the creation of a fund such as I am suggesting, resulting in good scientific evidence to support the effectiveness and efficiency of these therapies, this can only support the health and well-being of Albertans in a very positive way.

Obviously, another group that will benefit from this research will be policy-makers like ourselves in health care, either elected or those that work in the bureaucracy, and this is particularly important in view of the tremendous pressures on our health care system in Alberta and elsewhere to be more effective and efficient. We've heard many times from our minister of health that costs are rising in the health care system 8 to 10 per cent per year while revenues are averaging 4 per cent, and even with the increases that we provide in the health care budget, we're still not keeping pace with the costs.

I do believe, Mr. Speaker, that there's a great potential for cost savings to our health system if we incorporate these CAM therapies to in some cases replace traditional medicine therapies or to support them. I think it does behoove government to start paying attention to the high usage and the fact that people are gravitating to these therapies, and we must investigate them by funding research. So it's in the public interest that we do this both from a health perspective and from a cost-savings perspective.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that ultimately what makes sense is integrative medicine, integrating conventional medicine with CAM therapies. We shouldn't use either one to the exclusion of the other, but we should use what makes sense in the particular situation for the particular patient.

I will conclude my remarks later.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, it's a pleasure at this time to participate in the debate on Motion 509, and certainly it is an interesting proposal. The hon. member talked about the changes that are occurring in health care, and we have to always be mindful of the public interest, the public safety, and certainly consumer protection when we're talking about alternative medicines and different health practices.

There are cases where this has not happened, and with some of the remedies that one can find on the Internet, I think this is a very good idea. Some of the remedies and some of the snake oil salespeople who are peddling these remedies on the Internet have to be controlled. I'm not saying that this is the way to do it, but it is reason enough to support this motion.

There seems to be a need for more scientifically credible information on complementary and alternative medicines, CAM, as the hon. member has said, but the friends that we have south of the border put this idea through Congress six years ago. The Americans have the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, that is charged with exploring complementary and alternative healing practices within the scope of science. There does not appear to be an equivalent centre or institute in Canada, and perhaps there is need for one.

Now, a great deal of discussion is currently occurring on the issue of health care and health care reform. It's going on in this province, perhaps not on the floor of this Legislative Assembly as it should be, but it's certainly going on in the province. It is the number one issue of debate, and it should be. For reasons unknown to this member the notion of public health care is under siege.

8:30

Now, it would be an important part of the debate if we could better explore the safety and the effectiveness of complementary and alternative medicine to determine what it can add to our present public health care system. Perhaps there's a potential, as the hon. member across stated, to lower costs and improve patients' health if we can scientifically prove the benefits of some complementary and alternative medicines. However, Mr. Speaker, we must be careful

not to treat complementary and alternative medicines as a panacea. Complementary and alternative medicines have the potential to play a positive role in our public health care system, but it is far from the solution for some of the challenges facing our public health care system today.

It is important and, I would remind all hon. members across the way, perhaps more effective if the Alberta government explored options of working more closely with the federal government in setting up a fund similar to the one that is being proposed in this motion. In the United States the centre exploring complementary and alternative medicine is a national one. The research coming out of the fund proposed under this motion would be a benefit to all Canadians. Perhaps we should look at pooling our resources with other provinces and the federal government to create an institute similar to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the United States.

There is already a great deal of existing research going on. There are bodies and institutes set up both provincially and federally that may be interested in funding research on these topics. In fact, many of these groups may already have, and perhaps some hon. member can explain not only to this member but to the entire House what role the following organizations could play in this proposed research: the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and the Alberta Science and Research Authority. I wonder how they would feel about this.

Is there a need for a whole new fund at the provincial level to explore complementary and alternative medicine? I think it is difficult at this time to say, but there is definitely a need to explore the safety and effectiveness of complementary and alternative medicine. Whether that is done through existing institutions or in co-operation with other provinces and the federal government is the question at this time that needs to be addressed.

Overall, I think this motion is a sound one, and it is certainly one that I would support for those reasons. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity. It's a pleasure to speak to and in support of Motion 509. What are now often called complementary and alternative therapies here in North America are in fact practices, methods, and therapies that have been used for hundreds and even thousands of years in other parts of the world. They include acupuncture, reflexology, aromatherapy, reiki, chi gong, to mention only a few. Today many people rely on these therapies for relief from chronic and debilitating health problems. Following such treatment many individuals around the world have reported significant improvements of their health.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, what is not entirely clear is what exactly is the range of benefits offered by these therapies, nor do we always know about any potential hazards. By establishing a mechanism to fund research in this field, I believe that we would be in a position to better assess the usefulness and safety of these alternative therapies. As the chairman of the Alberta Research Council I see no reason why the Alberta government would not want to delve further into researching complementary and alternative therapies. After all, the possibility does exist that doing so may very well ease the strain on our health care system.

The fact that there is no established fund in our province for research on complementary and alternative medicine provides the strongest rationale for taking Motion 509 to heart. There is a clear need for more qualitative and quantitative research in complementary and alternative medicine here in Alberta as well as in the rest of

the country because there is so little research that is being done presently. Alberta could really emerge as a leader in advancing and promoting increased and improved knowledge in this field.

Thus, Mr. Speaker, I believe that Motion 509 presents the Alberta government with a tremendous opportunity to show both leadership and commitment to health and well-being. The Alberta government has shown its commitment to take Albertans into the 21st century through its support of the Alberta Research Council. Scientists and researchers there have carried out groundbreaking work in the discovery and production of carbohydrate-based pharmaceuticals which have the potential to provide new treatments for diseases such as asthma, arthritis, cancer, and AIDS.

Establishing research funds for complementary and alternative medicine would therefore only further the already long-standing history of high-level research in this province. It would, I believe, further solidify Alberta's status as a leader in medical and scientific research. What's more, a solid body of evidence of the efficacy and safety of complementary and alternative medical therapies could pave the way for integrating conventional medicine with complementary and alternative therapies.

In 2002 the U.S. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, NCCAM, suggested that public and private resources be increased to strengthen the infrastructure for alternative medical research. Currently, NCCAM's research priorities cover an extensive array of research projects that range from alternative therapy approaches to the treatment and prevention of asthma and allergies to the study of antimicrobial and analgesic effects of complementary and medical therapies on infectious disease, especially HIV/AIDS.

In Great Britain, like the United States, the integration of complementary and alternative therapies is progressing steadily. Britain's increasing reliance on alternative therapies represents a reversal of opinion in British attitudes towards the medical establishment. A number of British hospitals make available various complementary and alternative therapies in addition to conventional therapies.

These patterns are repeated elsewhere. In Australia 57 per cent of the population now use some form of alternative medicine. Meanwhile, 46 per cent of Germans find complementary and alternative therapies helpful, and in France 49 per cent of the population use complementary and alternative therapies of one kind or another. Considering the research efforts already underway in the United States and Great Britain, I believe that Alberta may be left behind if we don't take action to start conducting our own research in alternative and complementary medicine.

So, Mr. Speaker, I join my colleague the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed in urging the government of Alberta to provide funds for the express purpose of researching the efficacy and safety of complementary and alternative therapies.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Lord: Good evening, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to the merits of Motion 509 tonight as well. I'd like to begin my remarks by congratulating the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed for having the vision and foresight to introduce this motion. The intended purpose of Motion 509 is I think quite consistent with the notion that we need to develop new and innovative approaches towards health care in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, ours is a time, it seems, when so much of what we do revolves around science and technology. A look around us can be very revealing when it comes to making clear just how prevalent and ubiquitous all manner of gadgets have become as well as how so much of what we do is tied to science and technology. We have cellphones that enable others to talk to us most anywhere, and

there's the Internet, which allows us to reach most others almost anywhere as well. As I speak, spacecraft are preparing to leave our solar system, making them not only the first spacecraft ever to do so but also the most well-travelled man-made objects ever.

Closer to home, scientists have already cloned sheep and monkeys, and with some regularity we hear how a new and revolutionary cure or treatment procedure is being pioneered. Personally, Mr. Speaker, I'm in favour of cloning because I could use three or four of myself just to keep up. Anyway, such is progress. Yet for all our scientific advancement and our technological prowess there seems to be a resurgence of complementary and alternative medicine, much of which involves methods that have been practised for hundreds or even thousands of years, such as acupuncture or homeopathy. In addition, many people in our society use various herbal remedies on a regular basis. Names like echinacea, St. John's wort, and ginkgo biloba are if not names of products that we use certainly names with which many of us are quite familiar if for no other reason than that they are mentioned in the news or because we have seen commercials and advertisements for them.

8:40

What I find so interesting about this, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that even though there's so much science and technology around us, there's nevertheless a large number of people in our society who prefer complementary and alternative medicine over conventional medicine. For whatever reason, they find that there are some definite benefits to be had by relying on these decidedly nontechnological therapies rather than on what we may call mainstream or conventional medicine.

But, Mr. Speaker, how do they know that the therapies they receive work? How do they know that the herbal food supplements that they take do not cause harm or have adverse side effects, especially if taken in conjunction with other products, with other herbal remedies, or modern medicines? I get the impression that much of the clout of these complementary and alternative therapies is anecdotal in nature. I don't use the word anecdotal in a pejorative sense; rather, what I'm getting at is that in the absence of what we might call hard and empirical data derived through clinical and scientific trials, personal testimonials make up the bulk of the evidence, for lack of a better word.

In some cases, the evidence has a bit more heft than just personal testimony. Take acupuncture, for instance. This ancient form of healing predates recorded history, and as a philosophy it is rooted in the Taoist tradition, which goes back over 8,000 years. Aside from that, most people seem to know that acupuncture involves needles and needles being inserted at specific points on a person's body. Among the illnesses and predicaments for which acupuncture is said to have benefits, we find migraine headaches, depression, and heart disease, and people have also been known to use acupuncture as part of smoking cessation. Aside from personal testimonials and in some cases long histories of use, however, there is very little in the way of scientific evidence to back up the claims that this or that complementary and alternative form of medical treatment actually works.

Quite often what seems to be entirely absent are rational explanations that show why or how these therapies work. In other words, if you use a particular nonconventional therapy, then this particular effect will be had, which in turn will yield a particular desirable result. Even in cases where such data is said to exist, it is often questioned at best or even considered fraudulent at worst, yet people keep using these products and treatments. Do they know something that we don't know? Do they know something that advocates of modern medicine don't know? It would almost seem like it, wouldn't it?

For most of us proof merits greater attention than do personal anecdotes. If someone says to us, "Here, this is a really good car," I would say that we'd be less inclined to buy that car than a car that had been subjected to extensive testing whose results were subsequently published in some sort of car buyers' guide.

Now, that's why Motion 509 is so important. There is a large number of people in our society who find health benefits in using various complementary and alternative medical therapies, but there is little evidence to show why or how they work or if indeed they work at all. By establishing a fund whose sole purpose would be to facilitate research on the utility and safety of complementary and alternative medical therapies, we would incur several benefits. First and foremost, Mr. Speaker, the public, health care professionals, and makers of health care policy would really know what if any benefits complementary and alternative medicine has to yield. By the same token, we would also learn what harm could possibly come from these therapies.

Another advantage to having a dedicated fund for this purpose is that it could help in the efforts to broaden the scientific body of knowledge. As any other medical research does, research on complementary and alternative medical therapies would add to our knowledge base. This would not be limited to knowing if a particular therapy is safe or if it causes more harm than it does good. For example, other information to be gleaned may involve how a particular nonconventional therapy interacts with a conventional therapy. Are there side effects when combined? Does one cancel out the benefits of the other? Do they amplify each other's benefits? Without a doubt, having such knowledge would be of considerable assistance to health care professionals, health policy-makers, and the public in attempting to make informed decisions.

Yet another benefit to be had from this kind of research fund is that it could actually facilitate a dialogue between what now quite often appears to be two rather adversarial camps. Many proponents of modern medicine have little use for complementary and alternative forms of medicine and use a wide range of epithets to characterize them and those who provide them. In the absence of scientifically credible data these therapies have at best marginal results, most often a placebo effect, and at worst they make their users sicker rather than healthier. On the other hand, advocates of nonconventional medicine often take the approach that modern medicine has become too specific and relies too much on chemicals whose long-term impact is not yet known. They argue that rather than treating the whole person, modern medicine treats symptoms in isolation, therefore causing perhaps greater problems.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, it does seem quite reasonable to suggest that having a scientifically credible body of knowledge in the area of conventional and alternative medicine could very well increase the availability of qualified and knowledgeable practitioners of conventional medicine and of nonconventional medicine alike. Ideally, this would also enhance collaboration among them, which would expand the range of care and treatment options available to Albertans.

With this in mind, Mr. Speaker, I offer the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed my wholehearted support for Motion 509, and I urge all members of this House to do the same. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure to be able to speak to Motion 509 in the Assembly this evening. Tonight I'm going to focus my comments on the need for correct health information and the concerns that many Albertans have regarding the information that does or does not exist surrounding complementary medicine.

This motion will go a significant way towards including alternative medicine treatments and techniques within our health care system. As such it is an important motion to discuss and debate this evening, because it is clear that the jury is still out on the benefits of these alternative treatments.

There exists a bit of a rift between complementary health practitioners and the medical community. To a degree this rift is based on legitimate concerns from one side or the other regarding the dangers of both new, untested techniques or complementary health practitioners and concerns of overmedication by the traditional medical practitioners. Other parts of this rift are caused by financial concerns each side has. Each side wants to make the money, and each wants to ensure that they will not lose business. So there are two sides to this conflict, Mr. Speaker.

That being said, we need to move beyond whatever squabbling does exist and look out for the best interests of Albertans. Given that Albertans are looking to complementary medicine, we need to know what the bright spots are and where the dangers are. If we can prove that a medicine works or that a treatment works, then we've passed phase 1 of deciding whether or not it's justifiable to fund that medicine or treatment.

That's the problem with alternative therapies. Most of the proof that these treatments work is anecdotal. If a person takes vitamin therapy and then their health improves, then it's said to work. On the other hand, the stories which raise red flags surrounding alternative therapies are also anecdotal. If someone takes St. John's wort for depression and then goes into a deeper depression, the St. John's wort might be blamed for the depression.

We in this Assembly have to take into account that many Albertans are turning to alternative therapies and for a variety of reasons. Some Albertans have had little luck treating certain problems with the traditional health care system so will try other avenues to see if they'll do better. Other Albertans are beginning to become more and more concerned about the degree to which the health care system relies on pharmaceuticals. These sorts of Albertans are somewhat leery of using pharmaceuticals to a large degree; therefore, if they can avoid it, they're not willing to seek treatment within the traditional health care system.

Alberta is now home to many immigrants who have grown up with what we call alternative therapies in their countries of origin and continue to want to receive treatment that's in accord with what they're used to using. This is a part of the debate that we often forget. While alternative medicine is new and alternative to us, it's been a regular part of life in many countries in which the various treatments originate.

If Albertans are using these treatments, it does make sense that as a government we would position ourselves to provide valuable health information on the effectiveness of these products. It makes sense that we would move beyond anecdotes and provide some solid figures and recommendations regarding the use of these products. Mr. Speaker, this is reason number one for developing this fund. If we operate under the premise that health care is one of the most important undertakings of individual Albertans and of this government, then we need to provide the best health information possible to Albertans.

Our minister of health has taken great steps in the areas of wellness and health information and ought to be commended. It's my belief that passing this motion puts one more tool in his belt as he works to inform Albertans about the various health choices that do exist. In this light I think it's important that we pass Motion 509. It's our duty to ensure that Albertans have the opportunity to know more about these products.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

8:50

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to join debate on Motion 509 urging the government to establish a dedicated fund for researching complementary and alternative medicine. I would first like to thank my colleague from Calgary-Lougheed for having the vision to sponsor this motion.

Some alternative medical procedures are centuries older than conventional medicine. It's ironic how western societies depend on manufactured pharmaceutical drugs to cure pain when acupuncture has been used very successfully by numerous cultures for centuries. The majority of Albertans turn to conventional medical procedures to recover from illness or injury. Therefore, the majority of medical research grants are awarded to projects that address conventional medical questions.

Some Albertans already use alternative medicine and know that it works. Whether this is mind over matter, which can be more powerful than medication or treatment at times, scientific evidence is still very important. Alternative medicine is not seen as relevant as other health research that addresses common health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and cancers. That is why the vast majority of grants from the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research go toward conventional medical projects.

Mr. Speaker, alternative medicine may be more easily accepted as safe and effective by the medical community if there is formal research in place. Funding targeted for alternative medicine is not without precedent. Canada, Great Britain, and the United States, among others, have set up funds in an effort to promote alternative medicine.

Motion 509 proposes an interesting policy decision for the provincial government. If passed, a fund dedicated to alternative medicine could set several precedents. First of all, many in the conventional medical community view alternative medicine with a great deal of suspicion because of the void of scientific research, so this fund may not be viewed as an appropriate investment of public dollars. It is regretful that alternative techniques that can heal and promote wellness, faster in some cases than conventional techniques, are ignored and denigrated by the medical community.

In 2003 the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research awarded grants for projects dealing with kidney disease, home care, mental illness, and improving the health of Albertans. Although it would be difficult to argue that alternative medicine is more pressing than these issues, those who have benefited from alternative health care feel that these areas would also benefit from the savings that would be generated by using alternative medicine in the right places.

I personally know of a young person who could not be helped through conventional medicine. He was examined by the best doctors in Alberta and Spokane, Washington, and was unable to walk without pain in his knees. He was treated by a touch-for-health therapist and went from walking with constant pain in his knees to dancing up and down long staircases without pain.

A dedicated fund for alternative medicine would likely fall under the scope of the Auditor General. In the event that research projects were unclear and the peer review process continued to award grants to these people, it would be brought to the attention of the Alberta government.

As the sponsor mentioned earlier, the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research has funded projects that test the effectiveness of some alternative medical procedures. However, the deck seems to be stacked against people who seek grants to investigate alternative medicine. Medical research is very important, and it's also very

expensive. Since the fund was created, over \$750 million has been granted to support health research in Alberta. However, over the past six years only approximately \$310,000 has been granted to four proposals related to alternative therapies. I believe that a dedicated fund is necessary. A dedicated fund, separate from the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, would elevate some complementary procedures to mainstream medicine.

The Alberta government has talked about looking at the best practices from other health care systems to improve health care delivery and stabilize funding. Alternative medicine may be able to improve the health care system by achieving better results faster and cheaper in some cases than the conventional health care system. A research fund dedicated to alternative therapies may be an opportunity to spend money on research that could provide savings to Alberta's health care system and improve the health of Albertans.

I believe that this idea merits more debate and consideration by the Alberta government. There are many factors that can be influenced by the fund proposed in Motion 509. A new health procedure has to be effective, reasonably priced, and above all safe for the patient. The fund proposed in Motion 509 could help other alternative therapies gain credibility.

After experiencing the benefits of alternative health care and with the intent of having others experience these benefits, I wholeheartedly support Motion 509, and I would ask that my colleagues also support this motion. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a pleasure to join debate in support of Motion 509 sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Health care and healthy living are important issues in North America. This Assembly is aware of the incredible cost of pharmaceutical drugs and the success of drug companies who research and develop their product.

I've been a consumer of natural medicine for many years. However, sometimes I wonder if current sources of information provide reliable and safe advice about natural medical products. I wonder if consumers are buying the right medicines for their health problems or throwing their money away on products that don't work. There is a great deal of information on natural medicine available on the Internet, in magazines, and from health food clerks, but how accurate or reliable is this information?

A research fund could give people using natural medicine at least some direction about the necessary product. Research dedicated to natural medicine could also verify which products are the most effective.

Mr. Speaker, this motion calls for research to develop scientifically credible information about the safety and effectiveness of complementary, natural medicine to assist health professionals, policy-makers, and the public in making informed decisions. I think a dedicated fund for this research is long overdue, and I urge all members to support Motion 509.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed to close debate.

Ms Graham: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the observations and comments by members who have spoken in support of this, and I thank them very much for their good comments.

I think it's pretty clear, Mr. Speaker, that it is in the public interest that we pass this motion and do this kind of research both for the

health and safety of Albertans who do use CAM therapies or who would like to and also for the potential cost savings to the health system. If we are going to move to integrative health, combining traditional medicine with CAM, then we need this research to be done. Otherwise, we can't rely on what we are doing.

Before I call for the question, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Bud Rickhi and his institute in Calgary, the Canadian Institute for Natural and Integrative Medicine. He did not solicit me to do this, but I am very interested in what he is doing. It's very important work. I think he is a visionary, and he is highly regarded across North America and beyond. He established his clinic in Calgary 11 years ago with the encouragement of the department of health, which was then wanting to go in this direction, but cutbacks occurred. He hasn't really had any help since, and he has persevered. He wants Alberta to be number one in integrative health, and he wants to do outcome studies linked to cost.

I'd now call for the question.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion Other than Government Motion 509 carried]

head: 9:00 **Government Bills and Orders** **Second Reading**

Bill 31 **Highways Development and Protection Act**

[Adjourned debate May 5: Mr. Stelmach]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I do have a few comments on Bill 31, the Highways Development and Protection Act. I'd first of all like to thank the minister for the opportunity that he afforded my researcher and me to meet with him and his people in the department and for the briefing that we got on this particular bill. At the briefing it was indicated that there was much consultation that went on before this bill was brought forward.

It is a bill that amalgamates the Public Highways Development Act and the City Transportation Act, and it also consolidates the minister's powers over controlled roads into one act. As well, in amalgamating these two acts, there are some changes that do occur. One of the changes is the definition of a provincial highway to include all designated primary highways. The act also defines freeway as "a multi-lane controlled highway or controlled street." This bill allows for any existing or future highway to be designated as a freeway, almost the same as a highway, and it removes secondary roads from the designation section.

The bill also allows the minister to decide a fair and just amount to be paid for reparation of the roads, and this is no change from the previous act. It also places the highway authorities in charge of maintenance instead of the minister, who was directly responsible in the previous act.

As well, Mr. Speaker, it adds a freeway size of 115 metres from the centre line to the regulation controlling highways, and it adds telecommunications to the act: prohibitions of 30 metres from controlled highways, which were formerly our secondary highways, and 60 metres from a highway and 115 metres from a freeway.

This act also gives the right to the minister to remove access roads made by citizens onto controlled highways. This, I think, is a very important point because particularly in areas where there are freeways and highways where the speed limit is up to 110 kilometres per hour, certainly we have to have stringent controls on how traffic is entering these particular highways.

What this act will also do is provide compensation for citizens' loss of access. I think of a situation just in the last couple of years where access to a set of businesses was cut off. This was right on the boundary of the constituency of Edmonton-Mill Creek and the county of Strathcona. It certainly had a great deal of impact on those businesses when that access was cut off, yet where there were overpasses within a few kilometres in each direction, from a safety standpoint it was a good decision. So we do have some strengthening of rules for the highways with this particular act. It also allows no person to create an access onto a highway without a permit, again another very good point because it does allow us to control that access onto highways and certainly do it in the safest possible way.

As well, the act allows bylaws from city council to be sent to the minister and "the Minister may approve the bylaw in whole or in part."

Now, then, also in Bill 31 section 38 says that the province takes ownership of any road plans that it cancels within municipalities that connect with highways. Certainly, one of the questions that I think is of concern to larger urban areas is the question: is this the way the province is going to gain control of ring roads? What control does this give the minister over future development of highways in cities?

As well, under the act the minister may make regulations on highway use for exploration under the Mines and Minerals Act. I think this relates back to questions that were asked in the House earlier of the minister on how this would, for example, affect the highway 3 development in order to get the magnetite mines going in southern Alberta.

So, certainly, a number of good points. This bill, the Highways Development and Protection Act, will also modernize and amalgamate the City Transportation Act and the Public Highways Development Act.

I don't see anything too contentious in here at all, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I will have no trouble supporting this bill. Thank you very much.

[Motion carried; Bill 31 read a second time]

Bill 33

Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure on behalf of the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General to move Bill 33, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, at second reading.

As has long been the practice in this Assembly, this bill comes to the floor of the House only after all parties have agreed to its contents. So, in that light, Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that we move on with second reading of Bill 33.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Any other speakers? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Certainly, I will be brief. In regard to the miscellaneous statutes I appreciate the comments from the hon. Minister of Community Development and Deputy Government House Leader. The consultation process has been getting quite vigorous in regard to the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, Bill 33, to say the least. There seems to be more and more legislation incorporated into it. I think the more discussions we have

in this Assembly in regard to legislation the better off the province and the citizens are.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development to close debate.

Mr. Zwozdesky: I just want to say thank you to all members of the House on all sides for agreeing to this particular bill.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a second time]

9:10

Bill 34

Income Trusts Liability Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I stand and move second reading of Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act.

In the past few years income trusts have grown considerably as another investment vehicle for many Albertans. Right now there are approximately 150 trusts listed on the TSX, with a market value of nearly \$90 billion.

An Hon. Member: How much?

Mr. Hlady: Ninety billion dollars.

Mr. Speaker, the main purposes of this bill are to deal with issues around personal liability and investor protection that maybe limiting the participation of certain investors in this type of investment. No matter what the entrepreneurial spirit of an individual might be, most people are uncomfortable with the risk, however remote, of being held personally liable for more than their initial investment when investing in a company or an income trust.

This bill defines an Alberta income trust as one that was created in Alberta and is governed by Alberta laws. It also provides that an investor in an income trust cannot be required to cover the liability of a trust in the event that the trust's assets are insufficient to cover that debt. It is similar to the protection that is already afforded to investors in corporations or limited partnerships, and it makes sense to put this in place.

The other key area that is addressed in the legislation is that of investor protection. This bill contains consequential amendments to the Securities Act to ensure that regardless of the way the income trust is organized, investors will receive the information they need to make informed decisions by strengthening existing disclosure rules as they apply to income trusts.

The bill also provides that all those who may be in possession of material, nonpublic information, are caught by the definition of "insider" so that they are prevented from using their privileged position or knowledge in the trading of income trust units.

Investor protection is closely tied to governance-related issues. I understand that the government plans to release a discussion paper in June on additional governance issues relating to income trusts to receive further input from key stakeholders, and over the summer Alberta government officials will consult with stakeholders on additional issues relating to income trusts, including the rights of investors.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I would like to point out that this bill does not mean that these investment vehicles are without risk. Potential investors in income trusts need to research and understand

all potential risks before making an investment decision, much like any other investment. This legislation simply puts the investor in income trusts in a similar position to that of shareholders in corporations with respect to investor protections under the Securities Act and limited liability under the Business Corporations Act.

I urge all members of this Legislature to give support to Bill 34. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is legislation that certainly on the surface looks like it is worthy of support. The first idea I had that this legislation would be coming during this sitting was of course during the hon. Minister of Finance's budget. It was mentioned in the fiscal plan on page 25 that income trusts and unlimited liability corporations "are becoming a significant part of Alberta's business sector and another source of investment in Alberta." It notes here also that income trusts were long established in the resource sector, becoming increasingly popular, and are now being used in other sectors of the economy, and that

by transforming themselves into income trusts, companies can significantly reduce, or entirely eliminate, their corporate income taxes. Instead, they flow their income directly to investors, who then may pay personal income taxes on the income.

Now, it goes on to say here in the budget:

Market opportunities for income trusts have increased and the industry is growing throughout Canada. Income trusts provide for the distribution of the available cash flow to the investor while retaining liability in the operating entity. The trust sector has asked several provincial governments to pass legislation explicitly confirming the limited liability provided to investors . . . Nova Scotia is currently the only jurisdiction in Canada where an unlimited liability corporation can be incorporated.

There have been various reports that have been slightly different than that in the news media, but to see this legislation introduced now is quite interesting.

Now, there can be significant reductions in corporate income taxes, as stated in the budget document here. They can be significantly reduced. If we go, Mr. Speaker, a little further along in the budget to page 33, to the page concerning tax revenue, to the third paragraph down, after we're talking about total tax revenue and personal income tax revenue, which is expected to grow strongly in the next three years, the hon. minister gets to corporate income tax revenue. It states here:

Corporate income tax revenue is also forecast to decline in [fiscal year] 2003-04, due to about \$200 million in refunds for 2002 and prior tax years that were paid in 2003-04. After adjusting for this, corporate income tax revenue is expected to grow only modestly over the next three years to \$2.1 billion by 2006-07. Corporate income tax cuts in 2004-05 and assumed declines in energy prices are expected to mostly offset growth from Alberta's strong economy.

We can cut corporate income taxes. This side of the Assembly has supported those measures, but we have to be careful here. I would like to know how much money will be saved in the corporate sector with the use of income trusts. Now, if we see that there have been about \$200 million in refunds for the year 2002 and prior tax years that were paid out, how will this bill change that? Will there be more refunds? Will there be less refunds?

Two hundred million dollars is a significant amount of money. We could build a lot of schools in Calgary. We could repair a lot of schools in Edmonton. We could maybe go a long way to building a new hospital or maybe the Victoria school of arts, the new one, the \$60 million school that hasn't been built. You know, if there's a

shortage of cash, we should have a look at this. I would like to know who is going to benefit and how much before we consider supporting this legislation. If there is going to be a significant reduction in the amount of money that corporations are going to pay in tax, who's going to pick up that amount? What other sectors of the economy are going to have to pay?

Now, certainly, the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View – I always think of Bridgeland, but it's Mountain View. I don't know why I want to call it Calgary-Bridgeland, Mr. Speaker, but I do. It's Calgary-Mountain View. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View has talked about the income trust unit holders being personally liable for defaults or other legal measures, such as paying for an environmental disaster, for instance.

Ray Turchansky, who is a freelance writer and income tax preparer – I wish I had got him to do my income taxes this year actually – writes:

R. Malcolm Gilroy, an expert in global capital [funds], wrote in this month's issue of *The FundLetter*: "Many legal experts believe that the possibility of personal liability ever taking effect is almost nil."

He goes on to write:

Regardless, concern over liability was a major reason why income trusts were not included in the S&P/TSX Composite Index, after S&P committee deliberations in the fall of 2002.

So there has been an interest in pursuing this from various parties, and I believe the Ontario provincial government is going to address the issue. The Canadian securities commission, an umbrella group of the 13 provincial and territorial securities regulators – it says 13 here – proposed a policy to govern the income trust industry. So this is certainly fitting. Whenever you look at other jurisdictions, there is a need for this bill.

9:20

Mr. Speaker, when we look at providing limited liability for unit holders of Alberta income trusts, I think this bill is also going to improve the transparency of income trust operations and strengthen controls on insider trading, which the hon. member has mentioned, and by improving investor protection, it is notable that the government aims to increase investment in income trusts. There is certainly, as the hon. member has stated, a market value of close to \$90 billion, if not a little greater, and income trusts are a significant part of Alberta's business sector.

Now, is this legislation going to be held over for the summer until this consultation process takes place, or are we going to pass this legislation through the Assembly this week? Hopefully, we can come back next week and have some more discussions and hold the government accountable, but if not, I would like to reserve judgment on this bill until the consultation process is complete. In light of the fact that there don't seem to be many examples, if any, of personal liability by investors in the cases of income trusts to date, I don't think there's a sense of urgency here. Hopefully, the consultation process that the hon. member has discussed will take place and we can hear from any parties over the summer and early in the fall, and we could conclude debate on this bill at that time, Mr. Speaker.

With those remarks, I will cede the floor to another member of the Assembly. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just would like to enter debate for a few brief moments to compliment the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View for bringing forward an important bill at an important time. I think the urgency of the bill is

also duly noted given the state of the industry and the progress being made to date.

Some elementary history, Mr. Speaker. Some years ago, in about 1996, 1995, this industry, the oil and gas industry in Alberta, was somewhat starved for capital. Generally, it takes about 120 per cent of cash flow to keep growing in the oil and gas business, and people were looking for increased rates of cash flow. The industry traditionally returned about 3 to 4 per cent return on capital. So a number of companies went to Wall Street, to the New York investment bankers and dealers there, and they had some short but curt advice given to them by the New York banking community, and that was: go big or go home.

So at that time some grew big, and I think we saw the amalgamation of PanCanadian and Alberta Energy Company into a very, very successful Canadian industrial called EnCana. We also saw what usually occurs in Alberta, a unique entrepreneurial solution to a difficult issue, and that unique solution became the capitalizing on the existing income trust rules. That grew, Mr. Speaker, to the point where today that represents over 12 and a half per cent of total activity in the oil and gas industry. That trust mechanism is critical, and it's very important to the onward and continued growth of this industry as we continue to supply important reserves to our biggest customer, the United States, and also as we continue to keep people in Toronto working on Bay Street and in other areas.

In fact, if you look at Canada from an exporting perspective, Mr. Speaker, the number one product that is exported in Canada is energy, and in fact the number one investment product in Canada is the oil and gas sector, at some 27 billion dollars plus. We have an opportunity to make something that is good even better, and I think that we want to take advantage of this time, to move with both alacrity and dispatch to deliver an appropriate amendment at an appropriate time.

I can say to those who have followed the work of the Minister of Environment and looked at those liability restrictions that are necessary for reclamation, site reclamation and reclamation in that perspective, I think that that matter is appropriately covered there.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, to those who feel that there is a leakage or that we have either a tax abatement or tax leaving Alberta, I would say that I think we have seen the benefit in some studies that indicate that the return, the investment, the growth, the productivity, the economic turn that that money takes in Alberta far outweigh any type of tax leakage that we would see. In fact, limiting this liability, as is proposed by the member, would in fact expose trust units to a much broader investment community, that being the United States, where they can hold these trust units for appreciation and not be so concerned about the tax implications.

So I think it meets an important test of legislation. It's appropriate to the marketplace, and it's extremely timely that this bill be passed. I commend the member for bringing it forward at this time.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I certainly listened with interest this evening to comments by numerous members that have participated in the debate on Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act. I do it with a lot of interest because like so many people, I think, in this Assembly we really don't understand all about income trust liabilities.

I think, as well, that our responsibility here is not only to supply capital for oil companies. I think it's also an excellent opportunity, when things are going right, for people to invest and get a very good return on their money compared to what you can get in a savings

account or even the mutual funds, especially after today. So there is an opportunity here.

Again, what we are dealing with in the energy sector is a sector that has over the history of its existence here in the province had a boom and bust type of activity. If we go back to the early '80s, when things were not too rosy in the energy sector and the price of a barrel of oil dropped dramatically, then what I have to question and what I have to certainly get some answers for as we move further into the debate and get into Committee of the Whole and whatever is: what happens to these income trusts if, for example, we do have OPEC deciding that they aren't going to have quotas on oil production, that we are going to have unlimited oil production, if we do again get into a situation where the price of crude drops dramatically in the world, where we have a glut on the market, where we have perhaps some companies folding because they don't have enough capital? What sort of protection is the average Albertan that invests in these income trusts going to have?

I think those are very serious questions. We have to realize here in this Assembly that we are not only here for big business that requires capital to do business – and I think that's a very valid point that the minister brought out – but as well we have to as legislators provide a certain degree of protection for the average investor. I don't know how many times all of us have sat in this Assembly and heard discussions as to how people have to take care of themselves in the future, that they have to plan for the future, that we have to do more than just a pension plan, if we're fortunate enough to have it, because we will not have adequate funds for retirement. So if we have people that are putting a great deal of the money that they are banking on for retirement into an income trust, then certainly there has to be a certain level of protection for them so that they do have some security when they are investing this money.

We have seen the disastrous results when people aren't protected. I think that all we have to do is look at Enron, I believe it was.

9:30

Mr. MacDonald: One of many.

Mr. Bonner: One of many, definitely, where many people had their life savings wiped out by accounting irregularities. I'm not suggesting that that would happen here, Mr. Speaker, but certainly in a bust part of the cycle in the energy sector we could have a situation arise where many people could lose their life savings.

With those comments, I will take my seat and listen to more comments on Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act, and certainly hope that I can get some answers to my questions. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29. Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View to close debate.

Mr. Hlady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the members for Edmonton-Gold Bar and Edmonton-Glengarry for their questions this evening, and I would like to thank the Minister of Energy for his excellent comments, adding value and explaining and letting people understand how this works inside our number one industry of energy.

To add just a couple of quick comments to that, Mr. Speaker, it's understanding the cycles. In the last 20 years we've seen at least three cycles happen, seeing the investment money and the circle that goes on about seeing new companies start up again. It's been pretty historic in the last couple of years when the income trusts come in

and buy up some of the assets that are here to allow the flow of cash. They've been paying some premium prices, paying very good prices.

Well, that money goes to our smaller and our medium-sized oil and gas companies. Those oil and gas companies in turn reinvest that money back into Alberta, which creates the jobs in Alberta that everybody wants, the high-paying jobs in the oil and gas sector. It's a very, very exciting piece, and it's a part of the cycle that will continue. By seeing that external money from all over the globe investing through income trusts back into Alberta, we'll continue to see our economy grow and see us be able to have the revenues that we do have in this province through royalties and other ways. So that's a main piece of what I hope helps the hon. members understand where we're at.

I hope to get into Committee of the Whole tomorrow, and I will answer the other questions that they had today at the beginning of tomorrow. Let us move forward with the question for this evening.

[Motion carried; Bill 34 read a second time]

Bill 35 Companies Amendment Act, 2004

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to move second reading of Bill 35, the Companies Amendment Act, 2004.

This is a very simple and small modification to the act. The Companies Act allows not-for-profit companies to incorporate under part 9. At least 50 per cent of the board members of every company must be Alberta residents, and business cannot be transacted at a meeting unless 50 per cent of the board of directors present at the meeting are Alberta residents.

What's transpired to bring forward Bill 35 is that an Edmonton company, an Alberta company, technically is breaking the law. In 1999 the Cancer International Research Group incorporated under part 9 of the Companies Act, and since then CIRG, as they are known, has grown into an international research organization and has a board that has grown to reflect the international community. We've grown into quite a global marketplace and community, Mr. Speaker, and it is very important that we make this slight adjustment to the act.

I saw a case when I was at the Glenrose rehab hospital where one of the doctors had several million dollars worth of research money, and he was enticed away from our city, our province, and the money went with him. In the case of CIRG they are advising the province that unless we make changes to the residency requirements in the Companies Act, they are going to have to leave. So that's jobs and dollars for Edmontonians and Albertans, and we certainly don't want to see that happen.

So that they will remain within the law, we're making this slight adjustment to the Companies Act to give the Lieutenant Governor in Council the authority to exempt companies from the application of the Alberta residency and meeting requirements. We certainly do want to have this company stay. This isn't *carte blanche*. We are leaving it up to the Lieutenant Governor in Council to make this exception. If there should be any others after this, we don't know, but at the present time we certainly want this company to stay and continue to do their research. Therefore, I would like to see this moved in second reading.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to get an opportunity to speak to Bill 35, the Companies Amendment Act, 2004. This is legislation that originally had been discussed as part of the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, Bill 33. I am pleased to see that it is legislation that is being brought forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, and all members of the Assembly will have an opportunity, if they so wish, to discuss this bill. Certainly, we have to do everything we can to facilitate research into, hopefully, a cure for one of the most horrible diseases that affects pretty well every family in the province and in the country and probably around the globe.

Now, when we are going to allow the Lieutenant Governor in Council, in this case upon the recommendation of the Minister of Government Services, to exempt a nonprofit organization from certain provisions of the Companies Act, particularly the requirement that at least 50 per cent of its board members be residents of Alberta, this is not a one-time deal, as I understand it. This amendment could affect many different organizations, and I think that's why it's important that it stands as a bill on its own.

Certainly, the hon. member talked about this bill and how it relates to one Edmonton company. In fact, I believe a researcher from this city started this company, and now as a result of an expansion of those efforts there are 450 people doing cancer research around the world. Fifty of them are here in Edmonton. Some are in Los Angeles. Some, I understand, are in France, but there are contracts from different industries, large industries, to do research. The pharmaceutical industry, I believe, finances a lot of this research. I hope it continues, and I hope it continues in Edmonton.

9:40

Mr. Speaker, with those comments I think it's important that all members have a close look at this legislation. We've been told by Government Services representatives that, you know, there's a chance this medical research organization could move to as far away as France or to Los Angeles and that without this amendment Alberta would definitely lose a very vital organization. The city of Edmonton would lose an important research facility as would the University of Alberta. But when we're having a look here at amending the Companies Act, we have to recognize that this is more than just housekeeping, because we are leaving the door wide open for ministerial discretion at a future date for there to be other changes.

I would have to remind all hon. members of this Assembly of this member's reluctance to support this bill in the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, because sometimes, if you can imagine, this government acts in very secretive ways. [interjection] I hear, "Oh, no, it doesn't," but I had to work very diligently to find a ministerial order from last December that set up the Utilities Consumer Advocate, and that was at the discretion of the minister. I was naive I guess, Mr. Speaker. I thought all ministerial orders were public knowledge, but to my amazement they are not. Anything could happen with this current government, so I think the more we discuss initiatives like this in the Assembly, the better off all Albertans are.

There's certainly no sense of urgency on this side of the Assembly to have an end to the session. We have a role to play, and that's to hold the government accountable. If the government is open and as transparent as they claim, well, then our job certainly would be easier.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would urge acceptance of this bill,

Bill 35, but let's be very, very careful about how we use this legislation in the future.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 35 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It has indeed been a very electrifying evening of debate and discussion. We've all been hugely impressed. On that note I would move that the Assembly stand adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 9:44 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, May 11, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/05/11

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Guide us all in our deliberations and debate that we may determine courses of action which will be to the enduring benefit of our province of Alberta. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased today to have the opportunity to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two staff members. Leanne Smalley is with the ministerial correspondence area, and Dan Paquette is a student in public relations from Grant MacEwan College. I would ask the members to give them the cordial welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly special visitors in both the members' and the public galleries. I have 160 students from Percy Baxter school in Whitecourt. I think that's the largest delegation we've ever had from one school in this Assembly, half of which are here now, and the other half I'd like to introduce at 2:30: teachers/group leaders Leslee Jodry, Kirsty Greenshields, Jacob VanVliet, parent helpers Cindy Brook, Virginia Kipling, Michelle Vandenhouten, and a lifelong friend of mine, Lynn Starman. I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Mr. Maskell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm proud to be able to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the hon. members of this Legislature my mother, Stella Bell. My mother is one of those remarkable Alberta pioneers who along with countless others did so much to create this province we're so proud of. She retired just before her 80th birthday, and that was only because her husband and business partner, Woody Bell, died suddenly. They were successful people in the village of Sangudo and area and just couldn't retire. Did I say that already? I'm worried about the Speaker here.

Mom reluctantly left Sangudo and now resides in Edmonton to be closer to three of her children. She has had a couple of hip replacements and may be a little slower, but she's as feisty as ever. When she's told to be careful and slow down, her favourite response is, "Don't put me in a rocking chair."

Mr. Speaker, as we approach our centennial, I want members to know that Mom is from one of Alberta's oldest families and from one of North America's oldest families. Her grandmother, Florence Mowat, is recorded in the 1891 Edmonton section of the Alberta census and her uncle in the 1881 census. On her father's side her family arrived in Massachusetts in 1651.

Accompanying my mother is my sister, Kathy Korol, one of the best door-knocking partners and recruiters of new PC members one could ever want. She's also a very successful businesswoman. They're seated in the public gallery. Mom and Kathy, would you

please rise – and, Mom, carefully – and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: I think the hon. member should be more concerned about what his mother thinks than what the Speaker thinks.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members in the House a young lady who is joining my staff at the constituency office to work as a summer STEP student. Her name is Katharine Julien. She's a native Edmontonian, she's an honours graduate from Old Scona academic high school, and she's currently studying public affairs and policy management at Carleton University. She has brought some experience from Parliament Hill with her, and I want to welcome her to the beautiful Edmonton-Mill Creek constituency office. I would ask all members here to join me in that welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hon. members, today I'd like to acknowledge the service of two employees who have served the Legislative Assembly Office with integrity, dedication, and who have recently announced their impending retirement.

Vivian Loosemore has built a career with *Alberta Hansard*. She joined us in 1977, became managing editor of *Hansard* in 1991 and manager of the public information branch in 2002. In developing and changing with *Alberta Hansard*, Mrs. Loosemore has been witness to the political views and debates of hundreds of MLAs that have shaped the laws in Alberta for close to 30 years. Vivian has recently overseen the transition to the use of digital recording in the production of *Hansard*, ensuring that our operation continues to utilize the most up-to-date technology.

Bill Gano began his career with the public service in 1974, initially working as a programmer in the formative years of the computer age. His career progressed and brought him to the Legislative Assembly Office in 1989 to oversee the development of our computer systems. Bill is the director of two branches: information systems services and financial management and administrative services. He also serves as a senior financial officer and has responsibility for records management, freedom of information and protection of privacy issues. Bill is a founding member of the Canadian Association of Parliamentary Administrators.

I would ask that Vivian and Bill rise in your gallery, Mr. Speaker, and receive the recognition and thanks of all members of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions today. First of all, I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Riverview Anna Lund. Anna will be the summer constituency assistant for the Edmonton-Riverview constituency office and has received many awards including the Louise McKinney postsecondary scholarship, the *Edmonton Journal*/dean of arts award of excellence, the dean's list, and these repeatedly. Quite accomplished. She has just completed her fourth-year honours in political science at the University of Alberta, and this fall she's enrolling in her first year of law. Anna is seated in the public gallery. I would ask her to please rise and accept the traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I'd also like to introduce to you and through you to

all members of the Assembly the staff that support me in the Edmonton-Centre constituency office. We have Penny Craig. Penny, if you'd rise. She is the constituency manager. For those of you that have phoned and heard her voice, you would recognize her as an on-air radio personality from a few years back with Edmonton radio stations. Jim Draginda is our outreach worker. He originally started with the *Edmonton Journal* and then changed careers into arts administration and marketing. Lisa Claire Lakaparampil is our summer student this year. Lisa, please rise. Lisa has also worked with me on getting out the youth vote, and she's involved with the women's vote as well.

So I would ask them all to please rise again and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you. It gives me a great deal of pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Mrs. K. Hryciw, who travelled here today from Thorhild, Alberta. She is the grandmother of our page Andrea Balon and is an avid watcher of the proceedings of the House. Mrs. Hryciw is accompanied by her granddaughter Kristin Balon, Andrea's sister. Kristin is currently entering her third year of nursing at the University of Alberta and resides in the constituency of Edmonton-Glenarry. With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I'd ask both Mrs. Hryciw and Kristin to please rise – they are seated in the members' gallery – and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

Thank you.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two guests this afternoon. The first is a good friend and supporter, Judith Axelson. Judith is a distinguished educator who now has a position at the University of Alberta, but she is also the president of the Edmonton-Mill Woods constituency association and has been since 1993, where she's gearing up for another successful election when it's called provincially.

The second guest, sitting with Judith, is Weslyn Mather. The Mather name is well known and very prominent in Edmonton-Mill Woods, Mr. Speaker. Weslyn is the assistant principal at J. Percy Page high school, where she's been very instrumental in developing the telelearning centre. She's also the nominated Liberal candidate in Edmonton-Mill Woods, where we are working very hard to ensure that she succeeds me in the Legislature. I'd ask Weslyn to wave and I'd ask Judith to stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to rise and introduce to you and through to members of the Assembly two very special guests visiting the Legislature today. They are from Singleton, Australia. Steve Hamson has come to Edmonton as the new head coach of the Edmonton Gold rugby team. Steve's advanced international coaching experience should prove beneficial for this team, which will be vying for the Canadian Super League national rugby championship this summer. Simon Lewis is accompanying Steve and hopes to play at an elite level of rugby here in Canada. This being his first trip to Canada and especially to Alberta, I'm sure he will never want to go back to Australia, unless it starts to snow again later today.

I'd like to wish both Steve and Simon and the rest of the Edmonton Gold rugby team, where my legislative assistant, Gerald Proctor, also plays, the best of luck this season as they compete with Calgary in yet another battle of Alberta. That's not quite what Gerald had written in here, but I'm not going to say that I'm hoping Edmonton beats Calgary.

They are seated in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to introduce to you five employees of Alberta Innovation and Science. Among the duties that these individuals do very well in their areas of responsibility is the development of the highly acclaimed Innovation and Science web site. I'd like to introduce to you Lisa Tsen, Cory Payne, Kim Sawada, Zoran Mijajlovic, and Anita Moorey. If they'd please rise and receive the traditional warm greetings of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and to all members of this House two very hard-working young men who have joined us today to observe the proceedings of this House. They're seated in the public gallery. One of them is my constituency assistant, who keeps my office in Edmonton-Strathcona running smoothly. His name is Doug Bailie. Assisting him this summer with the operations of the office thanks to the summer temporary employment program is Roland Schmidt. Mr. Schmidt is in his fourth-year bachelor of arts with a double major in history and philosophy at the University of Alberta. I would like to ask both of them to rise and receive my warm thanks for providing excellent assistance to me and also great services to the constituents of Edmonton-Strathcona. Now I'll ask that my colleagues join with me in welcoming them to the Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to introduce to you with a great deal of pleasure some members of the Edmonton committee on the National Day of Healing and Reconciliation. They are Shirley Armstrong, Maggie Hodgson, Yi Yi Datar and her daughter Nisha Datar, Maggie Mercredi, Iris Wara, and Geraldine Wardman. They're seated in the public gallery, and I would like to ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and introduce to you and through you to this Assembly two very hard-working young women who have joined us today. One is my constituency assistant, who helps keep everything on an even keel in Edmonton-Highlands, Ms Mary MacKinnon. Assisting her this summer with the operations of the office thanks to the STEP program is Suzanne MacLeod. Miss MacLeod is going into her final year at the University of Alberta. She's on the dean's list and is completing her bachelor of arts degree with a major in anthropology. She is also an accomplished flutist, performing with the Edmonton Youth Orchestra for the past seven years. I would ask them both to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly. Thank you.

My second introduction of the day, Mr. Speaker, is Mr. Mike Fekete and his grade 5 class. It gives me great pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you this grade 5 class from Rundle school in my constituency of Edmonton-Highlands. They are

accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Mike Fekete, and a parent volunteer.

Mr. Fekete's class is currently learning about the democratic system first-hand, Mr. Speaker. They're launching a campaign to push for mandatory seat belts in school buses. They have developed a petition that they will be taking through the community, and they've written letters to me outlining the reasons why they would like to see seat belts in school buses. I will be tabling these letters later today in the Legislature.

As they move up to grade 6 in the fall, Mr. Fekete will be moving up with them, and they will continue their campaign, their goal being the presentation of a private member's bill in the Legislature, and I have indicated that I am prepared to co-operate with them on that. I'm very proud of their involvement in the democratic process and very pleased to have them rise today and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Appointment of Returning Officers

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is the government's democratic duty to appoint returning officers who will oversee provincial elections in a fair, impartial way to ensure a credible result. Unfortunately, this government has chosen to appoint returning officers with political party connections, throwing the integrity of the next election into doubt, especially in constituencies such as the new Edmonton-Decore, formerly Edmonton-Glengarry, where a recount was required in 2001. My questions are to the Attorney General. Why is this government jeopardizing the integrity of the next election by appointing the former Tory constituency president of Edmonton-Glengarry to be the returning officer for the same constituency, now called Edmonton-Decore?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I wouldn't suggest for a moment that it imperils the democratic process. Returning officers are people who have experience in the democratic process, understand the democratic process, and understand what it takes to deal with an election.

Ms Blakeman: To the Attorney General: will this government investigate whether it violated its own code of ethics for public service employees by appointing returning officers who have a conflict of interest?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, returning officers are not public employees. They are employees of the Chief Electoral Officer and by definition employees of the Legislature because the Chief Electoral Officer is an officer of this Legislature, not an employee of the government. So a returning officer is not a public employee in that sense and isn't a part of that code.

Secondly, a person taking an oath of office as a returning officer takes an oath of office of neutrality and drops any political involvement that they have at that stage. There are examples across this country of people who've been appointed returning officers. In most cases I would suggest that they've had involvement on one side or the other of the political spectrum. There would be, I would hazard a guess, a number of Liberals who've been appointed as returning officers in this province, perhaps federally, perhaps provincially. I don't know. I don't ask people's political affiliation before I bring forward an order in council appointing someone as a returning

officer. I never have, never will. What's important is that they understand the process, that they're prepared to be neutral in the process, and that they're prepared to take direction from the Chief Electoral Officer, not from the government or anyone else.

1:50

Ms Blakeman: They're actually covered under section 5 of the Election Act.

My third question to the Attorney General: will the minister review the appointments of all the returning officers in light of their Tory party connections?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, by definition, when somebody is appointed a returning officer, they do not have Tory party connections. If they have been involved with political parties, they at that point drop their involvement with the political parties. They work with the Chief Electoral Officer, and they are neutral and cannot have political party involvement. So by definition they are not in conflict of interest or in any other way partisan.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Automobile Insurance Reform

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From the beginning auto insurance reform has been one closed-door meeting after another, with the public, those paying the highest insurance rates in the west, being shut out of the debate. Yesterday, after rifts amongst the government's own members became too apparent to ignore, the Premier mused about consulting with his colleagues on the finance standing policy committee to see about making an important May 27 meeting on auto insurance reforms open to the public. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. Is it a policy of this government to hide from public scrutiny when debating contentious issues such as auto insurance reform?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, we've gone through a very lengthy process on this change and reform of insurance within the province of Alberta, and we've had lengthy consultations with stakeholder groups over the last year. We have shared that information I think quite well with the people in this Assembly and with the public. We're in a process right now, since we have passed the legislative framework to put the new structure in place, of pulling together the regulations that back up that legislative package. It's a lengthy process, and we have had a number of very well-attended standing policy committee meetings where our caucus members have been debating the regulations and the recommendations of these regulations, and they've had excellent input.

I can tell you that the process that we follow through our standing policy committees has been very, very successful. Our members have the ability to have that open debate and dialogue back and forth and bring the views of the people that they represent to the table and put them on the table. So the process is governed through our standing policy chairs and our whip's office, and we will continue on with the process that we've used to date. It's been most successful.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: how many times have insurance company representatives attended finance standing policy committees compared to representatives of consumers' groups?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, there again, Mr. Speaker, the member obviously hasn't heard or followed the process for our standing policy committees. We have a number of groups for all of the standing policy committees that approach the chairs and ask to make representations to those committees. Quite often those are made in the open. Members of the opposition have even attended those meetings; at least your researchers have. So there have been a number of times when a number of groups have made representation and have been given the opportunity to appear before the standing policy committees. The insurance industry is just one of those many, many hundreds of groups.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the same minister: given that public scrutiny of the government auto insurance reform policy to date is sadly lacking, will this minister now commit to making the May 27 meeting public, not only for members on this side of the House but for members at large?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, we have a process that we follow, but let me make one thing clear. We are a work-in-progress right now. We have not finalized the regulations for this new structure. We have not done a final approval on this new structure. So until such time as our caucus, through our standing policy process, reaches a conclusion that is a recommendation to go to the cabinet and to the caucus, we will not be going out into the public and debating this out there, because we haven't come to a conclusion in our own caucus. So when that happens, we will be delighted to talk to people.

In fact, up to now I've had thousands of letters and phone calls that we have responded to with information, as people have asked us questions on the process of the renewal of the insurance industry within the province and the renewal of the new structure. So we have been responding up to now, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue with that. But no – no – decisions have been made or finalized.

Hamelin Creek Culvert Project

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, when referring to the Hamelin Creek culvert project, there are a number of inconsistencies between the information found in the print version of the *Alberta Gazette* versus the on-line version of the *Alberta Gazette*. The print version documents a cost overrun of 60.45 per cent, whereas the on-line version documents a cost overrun of 60.61 per cent, a difference of almost \$53,000. The date of approval for this cost overrun is also inconsistent, listed as September 30, 2003, in print versus December 8, 2003, on-line, a difference of over two months. My questions are to the Minister of Transportation. Why are there inconsistencies in cost overrun amounts for the Hamelin Creek culvert project?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. gentleman obviously pays a lot of attention to all of the information that we put out, and I will take his question under advisement and get back to him tomorrow with the answer in terms of the difference between the two information pieces.

Mr. Bonner: Then at the same time could the minister also find out why there are inconsistencies in the date of the approval for the cost overruns for this project?

Mr. Stelmach: I will undertake to do so.

Mr. Bonner: Also to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that

there were ongoing problems with the Hamelin Creek culvert, why did preliminary engineering reports fail to identify the factors that have led to the current cost overruns?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I can't answer that question at this particular time, but I do know that there are other parties involved. Whenever there is a creek crossing, we have to involve the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and also the coastguard gets involved under the navigable waters act. So there are a number of parties we have to consult with before the final decision is made.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Highwood.

BSE Compensation Payments

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development promised over two months ago to provide a detailed accounting of who got what in the \$400 million in provincial BSE compensation payments, yet here we are a day or two away from the end of the spring sitting and the minister has still not kept her promise. The government seems to share the same interest as the big U.S. meat-packing companies in hiding the facts from Albertans. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. If the BSE payouts were already 97 per cent complete two months ago, why is the government deliberately delaying the release of the detailed accounting of BSE monies until after the adjournment of the spring sitting of this Legislature?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, the timing of the spring session has absolutely nothing to do with the timing of the release, and obviously this member has some information on the ending date of this Legislature that I don't have. I assume that the House will conclude when the House business is finished.

However, Mr. Speaker, it's a timely question. I asked my department yesterday when we would be ready to release this information. We are on target. We had thought it would take us till late May, early June to conclude it. We still have perhaps a half a dozen accounts that have some work left to be done on them.

I have made one thing clear, and I will stand by that. These accounts will be released when they are complete. I have said that consistently. I was not putting out a partial list. I do not think that that is appropriate, Mr. Speaker.

I will remind the hon. member that on the one program I did bring an update that some 1,564 claims had been settled. I would remind the hon. member, also, that we had five programs that dealt with BSE recovery. It is my intention to release all of them with the exception of the market cow/bull program, which will not conclude until later this year.

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the minister promised two months ago that these would be released soon, and I quote, why should anyone accept that she's doing anything other than stalling until the Legislature is finished?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I am certainly not stalling. I have said consistently that we will provide those documents when they're complete, and we will. We have absolutely nothing to hide. Every cheque was made out and is being made out to the owner of the

cattle. Every cheque is going to a person who qualifies under the program guidelines. I will remind the hon. member that we have moved 1.2 million head of fat cattle through the system with those programs.

I will remind the hon. member, with much regret as I do, that we are approaching the anniversary of one of the most devastating – devastating – incidents that has ever occurred in the agricultural community in Canada, and our industry today remains hurting but in business. That was the objective of these programs, Mr. Speaker, and I am proud of the fact that the industry in this province played a leadership role in the design and implementation of these programs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister, then, tell the House how many cheques remain to go out and for how much money?

Mrs. McClellan: I think I explained to the hon. member in my last answer that we had I believe about half a dozen accounts that were not completed. Mr. Speaker, we have done a random audit throughout this process. That took a little bit longer, but I think it was necessary. I can't give him the exact number of dollars that remain, because of course with each account it varies. They could be large; they could be minimal.

What I can tell him, again, is that I am proud of the beef industry in this province, who designed the programs to assist the industry. I will remind the hon. member that the people who designed all programs were some 65 individuals from small and large packers, from small and large feedlots, from the five organizations that represent the total beef industry in this province, including the retail industry and, at times, the people who convey these animals. Mr. Speaker, this was truly an industry/government partnership, and it was successful.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Sports and Fitness Strategy

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With the excitement of the current NHL hockey playoffs, Canada's gold medal victory at world hockey, the 2004 Olympics in Athens, and numerous local sporting initiatives, we're reminded of the important role played in our everyday lives and the personal benefits that accrue from active participation in sports and fitness activities. My questions today are to the Minister of Community Development. What positive outcomes can we expect for Alberta arising out of the recent meeting of federal, provincial, and territorial ministers who are responsible for sport?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much for the question. Mr. Speaker, I was privileged to attend on behalf of the province of Alberta the recent federal/provincial/territorial ministers of sport meeting in Quebec. At that meeting we made some very significant progress.

The first thing we did was endorsed a new Canadian policy against doping in sports, which affects all of our young athletes.

Secondly, we developed a strategy to increase sport, fitness, and activity levels among all Canadians. Having increased that by about 10 per cent last time, we set a similar target for this year.

Thirdly, we discussed and developed a framework that would

advance the cause of new infrastructure that is needed both indoors and outdoors.

Fourthly, we also talked about a new strategic framework, which we're just finishing off now, regarding our Canadian and in turn our provincial international sports hosting policy so that all bids going forward for these larger events have a fair chance in that they'll be regionally balanced without penalizing provinces, such as Alberta, who have a great reputation for doing the same.

So those are just some of the highlights, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you. My supplemental is to the same minister. What policies and plans do you and your department have to encourage more young Albertans to become more involved in sports and fitness activities?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're very engaged as a department and a ministry with the promotion of programs such as SummerActive, which is going on right now, launched in Calgary by myself just last week.

We also provide about \$5.8 million through our Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation specifically towards 77 of our provincial umbrella organizations in sport, most of whom are very much targeted at youth.

Thirdly, I just recently signed a bilateral agreement with the government of Canada that will see \$1.2 million flowing out to some of the underrepresented groups, which include young girls and youth in general. Aboriginals, of course, are included.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, we are investing a great deal in projects such as our Alberta Summer Games, which this year will be occurring in High River and Okotoks and the MD of Foothills in July. I believe it's July 22 to July 25. Those Summer Games provide a tremendous showcase for our youth. They function as stepping stones, and we're very proud to sponsor them. I look forward to being down there to unveil them later this summer.

Thank you.

Twinning of Highway 4

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the change from the eastern route to the western route on the twinning of highway 4 as it goes through Milk River is a bad decision both monetarily and for children's safety. The new western route will close farms, move businesses, and move a portion of the CPR right-of-way. The eastern route does not have nearly the same problems. To the Minister of Transportation: why did the government choose to change the route from the east side of town to the west side when the cost of this change could be up to \$10 million more?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The issue that the hon. member is referring to was one of the first decisions that as a minister I had to make with respect to routing of the north/south trade corridor. There were tons of information that went into making the final decision. There was a second engineering review by a third party to give us additional information, and we made the decision based on the best evidence available at that particular time.

Just further with respect to the proposed additional cost, Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of the additional cost running into the \$10 million. They looked at the topography of the land. They looked at issues cited around Milk River with their sewage lagoon. There is

also an intersection crossing on a secondary road. All of that information was put together, and that decision was made many years ago.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that the western route will force highway 501 to go through town, what will be the cost to protect the children from the newly planned route of highway 501, that will go right past their school?

Mr. Stelmach: All of the safety evaluations were made by a number of consultants on that particular project. The information coming back is that the road is safe and that it's going to protect the integrity of the north/south trade corridor, the purpose of which, of course, is to move goods and services as efficiently and as safely as possible.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that in a private survey done by the residents of Milk River 63 per cent of the residents wanted the east route and only 29 per cent wanted the west route, why is this government choosing to ignore the town's citizens and develop the costly western route?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I personally attended a public meeting. That was probably four years ago, maybe more, when we had made that particular decision. Like I mentioned before, it was one of the first decisions made as I was appointed Minister of Infrastructure, and it was a difficult decision. But, again, it was based on the best information and evidence delivered by professionals in the field that they professed to be professional in.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:10 Calgary Ring Road

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A few weeks ago there was a historical announcement in the city of Calgary.

Mr. Norris: The Flames made the playoffs.

Mrs. Ady: Beyond the playoffs, Mr. Speaker.

The Premier, the Minister of Transportation, and the chief of the Tsuu T'ina nation signed an agreement that begins negotiations for a major piece of the ring road around the southeast side of the city of Calgary. Some say that this particular negotiation began some 50 years ago, and for many years this was just a dotted line on the map and called the missing link. While my constituents recognize that this is just the beginning of the process, they have some questions. My questions are for the Minister of Transportation. Can the minister let my constituents know what this request for proposal means? Will we be leasing the land, purchasing the land? Who will have control of this roadway?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the agreement in principle signed by the Premier and the chief of the Tsuu T'ina nation . . . [Several members hummed *Happy Birthday*] It's a good thing we're not going to have 53 questions today.

But getting back to the question, the agreement in principle was reached after considerable negotiation, really, amongst three parties: the city of Calgary, which of course brings its own needs to the table; the First Nations, the Tsuu T'ina nation; and of course the province of Alberta.

What Calgarians and Albertans have told us is that they want total

access and control of the right-of-way. Whenever the road is built, at the end of the day we want total control and access to the road, and this first agreement has given us that. The next step, of course, is to go through the engineering design and to proceed with further negotiations.

The Speaker: For all hon. members, those watching, those listening, and those in the gallery, something happened two seconds ago that perhaps needs an explanation. On this day at a date in the early part of the 20th century the hon. Minister of Transportation was born.

Mrs. Ady: I'd also like to offer the hon. minister a happy birthday.

For my final supplemental. There has been some question about whether this road will be tolled or not. Can the minister let me know whether this is being considered?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, till today I still feel sorry for my mom.

The question about tolls has come up a number of times. This came up as a result of questions posed by the media in the signing ceremony. All the Premier had mentioned at that time – and we support this – is that we're open to all options. It could be a public/private partnership. It could be funded directly by the province. It could be even a capital bond.

One of the issues tied to a toll, of course, would be the existence of an alternative route available to Calgarians to use. They would make the decision whether they want to pay a toll on a new road or use an existing route. The question is: is there a suitable existing route?

That is a question, perhaps, that we'll leave to later in terms of how we fund. There are months and months of negotiations. We anticipate that the detailed engineering study will take about 18 months because, again, we have three balls to balance here. Those are the city, the province, and the First Nations, and the First Nations have certain needs as well. So we'll wait until such time as the preliminary design is done. We'll have a better appreciation of the cost and then proceed from there.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Wainwright.

Alberta SuperNet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Innovation and Science likes to refer to the SuperNet as a highway, but actually the highway that Albertans paid for is more like a P3 toll road. Albertans don't own all of the SuperNet and can't use it without continually paying the companies that are building and servicing it. It's a true government P3: a poorly planned project. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Given that the minister has signed a 10-year deal with Axia for all the departments in the government but can't tell us when it begins, can he provide the total on the amount that will be paid to Axia to service the SuperNet for the entire government of Alberta?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, it's always good to get up and talk about the positive benefits that the Alberta SuperNet is going to bring to every region of Alberta.

There are really two elements to the SuperNet project. One, of course, we've talked about at length, and that is the construction of the infrastructure, which would be similar to when you pick up the telephone to talk to somebody. Your voice has to travel over infrastructure. When you log a computer onto the Internet, your data has to travel over an infrastructure, Mr. Speaker. So the Alberta

SuperNet infrastructure is being built across this entire province to provide that infrastructure to every Albertan.

The second element relates to the operation of the network. Mr. Speaker, with that, the government of Alberta has granted a licence to Axia SuperNet Ltd. to operate and maintain the Alberta SuperNet. The term of the agreement – and I couldn't provide this specific information on Thursday when she asked this question last, so I'm glad that she gave me the opportunity today. The contract is effective July 2001, but the 10-year term actually doesn't begin until 33 per cent of the network is finalized and signed over to Axia. That is when the 10-year term begins and goes forward from there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. To the same minister: given that the government owns the extended network, not the core or the edge devices that are required for this network to work, what contingency plan does your ministry have if one of these contracted companies goes under?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, the entire network is under an operating agreement with Axia SuperNet Ltd. It's their responsibility to manage the network. As part of that contract, particularly in the early years as the revenues from the network may not be sufficient to cover the operating cost, Bell West is in fact obligated to provide the operating cost to make sure that we get through the interim period.

So, Mr. Speaker, we have done a very thorough job in signing this contract to make sure that we have all of the possibilities, whatever events might happen – and that's pure speculation – covered. I do commend our department for doing a thorough job on the contract.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. To the same minister: given that your ministry will have to continue to pay Axia millions of dollars each year to run the SuperNet, will the minister now admit that the \$192 million paid for the initial set-up of the SuperNet is in no way a reflection of its total cost to the taxpayer?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, as we've mentioned many times, the infrastructure cost of the contract is \$193 million, and we've explained that before. For illustration on the operating side, currently in our budget estimates we've talked about the \$14 million that the government currently spends on access to data networks. As we move from the AGNpac over to SuperNet, at the same price we'll have more connections, greater bandwidth, and better service.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Riverview.

Reliable Water Supplies for Rural Alberta

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many of my constituents are worried that this is going to be a very dry summer and that they may not have enough water. In recent consultations on rural development my colleague from Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and I heard that reliable water supplies for agricultural, industrial, and household use are vital to sustain rural development. My questions are for the Minister of Environment. What is Alberta Environment doing to ensure that reliable water supplies exist in rural Alberta and that our rivers and economies of our smaller communities don't dry up?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, he raises a very interesting question.

The Speaker: Which one could spend four days on, but to the point, please.

2:20

Dr. Taylor: I was going to ask you how much time you would allow me, but obviously not four days.

We do have, as you are aware, Mr. Speaker, a very unpredictable water supply in Alberta. It has to do with the nature of our runoff in the spring. Early in the spring we get the supplies rushing down the rivers, and we have an agreement with Saskatchewan that commands us to pass on 50 per cent of the natural flow. Most years we would pass on probably 80 per cent, in the 70 to 90 per cent range. We have to conserve water both on the demand side and the supply side. On the supply side conserving water means building storage so that we can in the spring collect some of that runoff that is legitimately ours. So we need to build more storage. What form that will take, we don't know. But to answer some of the member's questions, we need to build more storage.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you. Given that the Battle River is facing increased demands and lower supplies of water, how will the minister ensure that the many groups competing for water supply from this river will have their voices heard?

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, what we're doing in our water for life strategy is recommending a watershed policy, watershed committees. So on each basin we will establish and we will help fund a watershed committee. On those watershed committees all members of the community will be involved. You'll have industry involved. You'll have the public involved. You'll have the aquatic groups that are interested in aquatic health involved.

A good example of what is done, Mr. Speaker, is the Bow River Basin Council, and that council is made up of a broad spectrum of groups: municipalities, industry, rural municipalities, First Nations. Everybody that has an interest in the Bow River is on that council. Because of that, because of the job that council has done, the Bow River is now one of the healthiest rivers in the world. That's how we see these watershed councils operating: everybody contributing, everybody making decisions, and those decisions coming forward to the government.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister consider piping water from the underutilized North Saskatchewan basin to the Battle River basin for the benefit of the people and the economy in that area? [interjections]

Dr. Taylor: Well, the members opposite are just saying no. Mr. Speaker, I will very clearly not just say no. Right now we have the first phase of the Battle River management plan just starting. We expect that it will probably take a year or 18 months to look at a plan, a watershed management plan around the Battle River. To do that, we need to understand the current needs of the Battle River and the aquatic needs and the economic needs of the Battle River. We also need to understand the future aquatic needs and the future needs for economic growth in that Battle River area. Once we understand that, we will look at all options, including piping water from the North Saskatchewan.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. leader of the third party.

Access to Rituximab

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Government efforts to end age discrimination in auto insurance are out of step with its current policy of age discrimination with regard to funding the cancer drug rituximab. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Why is the Human Rights Commission and not the Department of Health and Wellness or the Alberta Cancer Board ending up charged with determining whether or not cancer patients regardless of age be funded for treatment associated with the drug rituximab?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, it's the Alberta Cancer Board that is charged with such a responsibility. The Cancer Board is made up of a number of people whose expertise we rely upon to determine what drugs make the most sense for particular age categories of individuals. There may be drugs that are effective for people that are older, and there may be drugs or different therapies that may be available for people who are younger, even though they might suffer from the same kind of diagnosis of a particular type of cancer.

The Alberta Cancer Board tomorrow is going to be dealing with the issue of its current policy of providing rituximab for those over the age of 60, and they are giving consideration to whether or not it should be provided to people under the age of 60. I can assure the hon. member that it is not the government that decides the original policy that rituximab be given to those only over the age of 60. It is based on the best clinical evidence that the Alberta Cancer Board has available to it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that rituximab has been proven to increase life expectancy in virtually all patients and has been prescribed to patients under 60, what action will this government take to ensure that Albertans have universal access to this life-saving treatment?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I just want to remind members of the Assembly that the Leader of the Opposition's doctorate is not in the matter of medicine. I just want to point that out.

We do rely upon the Alberta Cancer Board to provide their best advice on what drugs should be covered and in what circumstances. For the hon. member to leave the impression here that all of the evidence suggests that rituximab is universally the best thing for all people with cancer I think is not entirely supportable. I again say that we do rely on the expertise of the Alberta Cancer Board to make such decisions.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me rephrase that question then. What action will this government be taking to ensure that Albertans have access to this drug when it is prescribed regardless of their age?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, again the issue is not one's age. The question is: what therapies are best for individuals regardless of their age and regardless of their sex? The fact is that there's no discrimination with respect to this. We rely, again, on the best clinical evidence that's available to the Alberta Cancer Board.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Automobile Insurance Reform

(continued)

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After almost a year of trying, the government caucus remains hopelessly divided on its so-called auto insurance reforms. Even government MLAs are admitting now what Albertans have long suspected, that the government will break its promise to deliver premiums for all Alberta drivers on a par with those in provinces with public auto insurance. My question is to the Minister of Finance. Given that successive small "c" conservative governments in other western provinces promised to dismantle public auto only to reverse themselves when confronted by the resulting high premiums, why does this Conservative government stubbornly cling to a private insurance model that will not deliver lower premiums for most drivers?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, when we had the debate on the options a year ago as a caucus and we assessed where we were going, we made the determination that we felt that we wanted the private sector to continue to offer automobile insurance within the province, and we're confident that they can do that job quite effectively.

Now, has it been an easy road? No. Are we completed? No. We're still a work in process, but we are on target for the timetable that we set as a caucus for implementation of a new insurance program within this province. It has been a difficult road. It would be more helpful if the leader of the third party would read the information that we have given through numerous dialogues back and forth and through letters back and forth and help with this process instead of always being on the negative, because it is a process that I believe will be successful, that will meet the goals of having affordable, accessible, available, and comparably priced insurance in the province of Alberta for the consumers.

Dr. Pannu: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: what will it take for the government to admit that its so-called auto insurance reforms will inevitably fail to deliver on the government's promise and instead adopt a public insurance model that has delivered lower and more stable premium rates for all drivers in other western provinces?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, when we have come to the completion of our deliberations and we present the package to the people of Alberta, I'm sure that they will agree with our caucus that we have delivered on our promises and we've delivered a package that, again, meets the overall objectives that we've laid out: to have an affordable, accessible, comparably priced insurance package available to all Albertans. That has been our focus.

Dr. Pannu: My final supplementary to the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is the government waiting till after the adjournment of the spring sitting before making public so-called auto insurance reforms that will not provide rate relief for 80 per cent of Alberta drivers?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, I've made it abundantly clear that we were going to need about 90 days to debate the regulations attached to the legislation that we have passed, and we are on target in that debate. It's a work in progress. We didn't gear it towards when the session may or may not be in. We geared it to the reality of bringing forward a reform package that we could implement by this summer,

and we are on target for doing that. If it's not convenient for the leader of the third party, that's unfortunate.

We have worked very hard on this program, and we will not be rushed into completing it to meet his agenda. We are going to do it right, so we're going to take the time and make sure that we have the right regulations to back up the legislation that we've put in place. If that takes 90 days, it takes 90 days. I'm not going to hurry it up to satisfy that hon. member's agenda.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

2:30 Farm Assessment and Taxation Report

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At a recent annual meeting that was well attended by hundreds of Albertans many of the delegates asked about the status of the farm assessment and taxation report recommendations. More recently the mayor of Calgary was questioning the inequity of the current system and how it deals with urban versus rural farmlands. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: could the minister tell me if and when the recommendations of the farm assessment and taxation report will be implemented?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to say clearly to the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills and also to the hon. members for Little Bow and Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan that they played an important role in terms of collecting data from stakeholders relative to the input of this final report.

Now, it's interesting to know that we wanted to ensure that the taxation process recognized current practice in agriculture, and that's clearly what we heard from the hon. member and his committee. The final report, though, came back. What happened was that as we were ready to take it into the government process, something called BSE occurred, and as we all know, the agriculture industry over the past year has gone through a lot. So at this particular point in time, to the hon. member, Mr. Speaker, we are reviewing the status of it, but certainly we are allowing the dust to settle relative to what the agriculture industry has just gone through in this past year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: would the minister be willing to implement the recommendations as a pilot project in two or three municipalities on a volunteer basis to evaluate the effects of it before implementing it province-wide?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member again, with the information that he's collected, raises a very good point that, certainly, I'll give serious review on relative to the potential of a pilot example to see how this can work in a particular area. I also ask the hon. member if, in fact, he has suggestions on where stakeholders think perhaps this pilot should first start.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Taxation Policy

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers study called Tax Facts and Figures shows that average income earners in Alberta pay more taxes than those in B.C. and Ontario. In fact, the only Albertans who pay the lowest taxes of the provinces are those who make more than \$80,000 a year. To the

Minister of Revenue: why does the Alberta tax advantage only exist for those who make over \$80,000 a year?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, when you look at our business plan, one of the objectives is that the overall personal taxes remain the lowest in this country. It is true that when you look at all the personal tax loads, not just personal income tax itself but all of the taxes that individuals pay, we still remain the lowest among all of the provinces in this country.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will this government drop its flat tax fairy tale and admit that flat taxes unfairly discriminate against middle-income earners?

Mr. Melchin: Well, we're glad, Mr. Speaker, that the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition is reading his fairy tale books in the evening. This government is not going to stop with respect to having the objective of having the best environment to attract highly skilled people and individuals and all people to come to Alberta for a good place to work and find jobs. It is important that we maintain tax policies that do that. There's no reason why we should penalize those that want to work hard and be industrious and earn income, that just because they make more income, they should be penalized. That's a particular aspect of this tax structure that I'm pleased to say that we will retain.

Dr. Taft: Given that average earners, severely normal people in B.C. and Ontario, pay the lowest taxes because of progressive tax rates, will the Revenue minister return Alberta to a fair, progressive tax rate?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, I've just said that it is fair to have a single, simple, fair, uniform tax applied to all. All Albertans should have the opportunity to contribute to the services they receive. In that respect, why should one be penalized, as viewed progressive, by paying more at a higher rate just because they make more money? The Alberta advantage is alive and it's well and it exists in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Small Business

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently the province released a report called Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity, which talks about a plan to increase Alberta's GDP by upwards of a hundred billion dollars by 2010, which is clearly very exciting news. My question for the Minister of Economic Development is: given that small business is often credited with creating most new jobs and most new wealth and that almost all business is small business, will this plan create a lot more focus on small-business issues and obstacles in order to help more small businesses succeed?

Mr. Norris: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, who I know is a former small businessman like myself and is vitally concerned with the success of small business. Unbeknownst to a lot of members, it might amaze you that some 95 per cent of businesses in Alberta qualify as small businesses. So it is obviously of vital concern in the value-added plan that we look at this, and we have in a number of different ways.

Some of the things the strategy calls for, in specific answer to the member's questions, are to increase management and leadership capacity through training courses, support mentoring and monitoring for small enterprises. We do that through the Business Link here in Edmonton and the Business Link in Calgary. We want to of course continue with our regional economic alliances, Mr. Speaker, which are regional economic alliances throughout the province that focus on small business. Of course, we want to continue working on access to capital, which continues to be one of the concerns brought forward by small businesses, and to that end the Minister of Science and Innovation, the Minister of Revenue, and myself are working on a report to bring back to government. All of these things meant specifically to help small businesses succeed.

Mr. Lord: Again for the same minister: what performance benchmarks and objective measurements such as monitoring small-business success and failure rates will be put in place in coming years to ascertain whether the plan is working or not?

Mr. Norris: Well, let me say this about that, Mr. Speaker: I'm a big fan of benchmarks, as you can well imagine. [interjections] This is a very tough crowd. A tough crowd.

With respect to the hon. member's questions, clearly we wouldn't enter into any government program without having some kind of benchmark, and of course with this program we do, not only in relation to the growth which we've set, taking our target from \$150 billion in GDP to some \$250 billion over the next 10 years, but also in the success rates of small business.

There are a number of ways we can monitor that. Obviously, the number of business bankruptcies, which I'm very pleased to report is down this year over last and down last year over the previous year. Furthermore, the number of business start-ups is a way to monitor this.

Of course, on a microlevel we want to make sure that industry-specific sectors are being targeted and looked at. I would ask the hon. member and all members present to pick up a copy of this wonderful and very helpful government publication called *Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity*. On page 12 you will see outlined what our benchmarks are by industry. They're highlighted for my reference but not for yours, so page 12. If you look at that, Mr. Speaker, you will see that we have set out some very specific benchmarks, which we will endeavour to monitor in the fullness of time, the rigours of the process, and with attention to detail.

Mr. Lord: My final question, Mr. Speaker, is for the Minister of Innovation and Science. Given that small business is often credited with creating most new innovation, what will your department be doing differently for small business in order to secure tomorrow's prosperity?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Most of us are familiar with stories where individuals have started out in their garage and built very successful large companies. That kind of innovation we expect out of Alberta and we anticipate will continue to happen.

In Innovation and Science our basic approach is to make sure that we create the right climate for an innovation culture, and that can be around anything from in terms of finding mechanisms that encourage access to capital to helping find mechanisms for companies to commercialize their technology. Mr. Speaker, the strategic plan that the Minister of Economic Development referred to contains strategic directions that show us how we're going to get there.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we go on, let me just say thank you to you, to all of you, for your co-operation both yesterday and today. Yesterday we were able to go through 13 sets of questions. Today we went through 14. That concluded my whole agenda, so that's very, very positive.

A few seconds from now we'll call upon the first of several members. Might we first, though, revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head:

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I'm very honoured to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a group of young adults who have served as members of the Youth Advisory Panel of Alberta. These are very special young people who have dedicated many long weekends over the past few years towards helping to improve the lives of youth in Alberta. I would ask them all to stand and remain standing as I call their names: Trevor Brown, Jeeshan Chowdhury, Chris Kooistra, Daniel Lee, Victoria Molnar, Julie Spatz, Jessica Tanghe, Kimberly Wagner, Mathew Wildcat, Myron Wolf Child.

With them are members of the YAP support team: Cynthia Farmer, Harriet Switzer, Dionne Nobrega, Robin Danyluk, David French, Graeme MacDonald, and Ross Mitchell, and from the Calgary and Edmonton offices of the Children's Advocate, Sherry Wheeler and Donna Servetnyk. I ask that the members of the Assembly join me in extending the traditional warm welcome of this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly special visitors in the members' and public galleries. The second half of the students from Percy Baxter school in Whitecourt have joined us, and with them are their group leaders Tammy Lee, Louise Reid, Shirley Bennett, James Muir, Donna Buchanan, Amy and Chris Spink. I'd ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head:

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Medicine Hat Tigers Hockey Team

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you can plainly see, I rise today confident that my attire in no way contravenes any Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly. That confidence is because unlike last year, or in the case of another hon. member earlier this year, I am not required to wear the jersey of another team because I lost a hockey bet. For you see, this year I won every bet I made thanks to the outstanding success of the Medicine Hat Tigers.

After finishing first in their division during the regular season the Tigers swept through the playoffs with a record of 16 wins and only four losses, including a final round four-game sweep of the Everett Silvertips to capture their first Western Hockey League championship since 1988.

Next week the Tigers will represent the WHL in the Memorial Cup being held this year in Kelowna. The Memorial Cup is emblematic of major junior hockey supremacy in Canada. The

Tigers are proud to have qualified for the fourth time in team history and look forward to bringing home their third cup.

I would like to extend my sincere best wishes to the players and staff as well as the owners, Darrell and Brent Maser; the general manager, Rick Carriere; and the head coach, Willie Desjardins.

What a team they are, Mr. Speaker. This is a team that led the league in scoring. They had seven 20-goal scorers as well as another with 19. All four lines are capable of scoring, and their power play is the most productive in the league. Their aggressive forechecking strikes fear in the hearts of every team they meet, but the Tigers can play defence too. In the playoffs goalie Kevin Nastiuk recorded four shutouts and a goals-against average under two.

Mr. Speaker, this team has shown the rest of the league and will soon show the rest of the country why Medicine Hat fans have supported them with nearly 60 consecutive sellouts. The Medicine Hat Arena is probably the most intimidating place to play hockey in Canada and is without a doubt the loudest barn in the dub. The people of Kelowna are about to experience what it's like to feel the noise of the orange and black.

Go, Tigers, go.

The Speaker: I should also remind the House before I call on the hon. Member for Red Deer-North that there was a unanimous decision of the House compelling the hon. Member for Red Deer-North to undertake a certain gifting to all members in this Assembly. To my knowledge this has not transpired yet.

The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's still on its way.

Alberta Youth Advisory Panel

Mrs. Jablonski: Today I rise to honour the work and dedication of some very special young people who have served as members of the Youth Advisory Panel, also known as YAP. YAP, formed in June 2000, is a group of youth selected from across Alberta that meets six times annually to provide feedback on proposed recommendations and findings and to suggest improvements to enhance the quality of services to youth. Its key role is to ensure a solid youth perspective on all work done by the Youth Secretariat, of which I am the chairperson.

The members of YAP have played a very important role in a number of critical issues and policy changes for the government of Alberta. They have invested their time and effort on a volunteer basis into the planning and implementation of some very important events related to youth and children for the province.

Some of the discussions and activities that YAP members have participated in over the last few years include children and youth forums and the Future Summit, review of Alberta mental health's report on services for children and youth, review of the Child Welfare Act, review of the youth in transition policy framework, alcohol and drug use among Alberta's youth, FASD, teen pregnancy, the CALM curriculum, and much more.

Today we presented these members with a coat of arms plaque and a special clock to remind them of the time that we spent working together on issues for Alberta's youth. I would like to sincerely thank the following YAP members for their dedication, their honesty, and their hard work: Trevor Brown from Lethbridge, Jeeshan Chowdhury from Edmonton, Jade Humphrey from Grande Prairie, Chris Kooistra from Calgary, Daniel Lee from Calgary, Jen McKinley also from Calgary, Victoria Molnar from Edmonton, Shauna Parks from Calgary, Julie Spatz from Innisfail, Jessica Tanghe from Slave Lake, Kimberly Wagner from Edmonton,

Mathew Wildcat from Hobbema, Myron Wolf Child from Lethbridge.

Mr. Speaker, it has been an honour and a great pleasure for me to have worked with these special YAP members. I ask the members of this Assembly to join me in thanking them for their efforts and wishing each one of them a happy, healthy, and successful future.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

International Revenues

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I have said before in the House, I have a dream or rather a vision of Alberta as an enterprise: Alberta Inc. History has proven many times over that jurisdictions, even small in population and landscape, become strong and influential when they go beyond their borders. For the benefit of Albertans Alberta needs to grow beyond its borders and go beyond its modest population.

So let's look at public revenue development, for example. Our publicly funded institutions should be allowed, encouraged to look for revenues from international sources to make profits from them in order to fund services inside Alberta.

Let's explore some options here. Let's open our services to the world. When people in the world are attracted to come here and pay for the services Alberta provides, we know that Alberta is the best. Doing so, we increase our capacity and earn good revenues for Alberta. We can also establish our Alberta services in other countries to earn revenues for Albertans. The profit from these free enterprising activities help with Alberta's public expenditures.

For this, I would like to recommend, for example, that the economic development/international trade area capitalize on Alberta's overseas connections to represent and develop more Alberta overseas trade at low cost. We need to market Alberta products and services overseas more aggressively through this yet-to-be-tapped connection.

Thank you.

2:50

Twinning of Highway 4

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the decision to move the development of the twinned highway 4 from the east side to the west side has many consequences for the small town of Milk River. The government has provided no solid reasoning for this change, and the residents have been fighting this change since it was introduced.

Over the past five years citizens of this town have been trying to get the attention of this government to change its plans for the west side. They have met with the Minister of Transportation, commissioned the redraw of the east side option, taken a survey, and signed petitions to show that this is not what the citizens of the town want. These actions have had no effect on the decision of the government to switch to the west side, a switch that seemed to have occurred suddenly after a visit by the Premier when he met with a few lobbyists in town.

There will be drastic changes to the physical landscape of Milk River because of the highway being built on the west side. There are three farms, and other farm sites will have to be changed. The riverbank will have to be built up against erosion. The railroad lines will have to be moved at a cost of approximately \$1 million per kilometre, plus there will be the additional cost of a new railway bridge. There will have to be the development of secondary roads to replace the old routes, and a private airstrip will have to close. These are just a few examples of the problems that this new route will cause.

The cost of this upgrading will be \$10 million more than the

design prepared by O'Brien Engineering in August of 2000. This design has far less changes to the landscape in the area. By bypassing the town to the east, there would be none of these changes that I mentioned earlier.

The west side proposal will affect the safety of the citizens in town. By moving highway 501 to travel right past the school, it is not safe for the children. This highway will have to cross a four-lane freeway, making it unsafe for drivers that frequently use it to go to town. This is at a time, Mr. Speaker, when the Department of Transportation is eliminating all such crossings that it can in the province.

Before this government finishes developing this section of the highway, it should take a second look at the extra cost it will have to pay for the development. The majority of people of Milk River don't want this development. In a 2001 survey only 29 per cent of the citizens supported this development. It's time the government listened to the citizens of Milk River and the surrounding communities and made the right cost-effective choice of the eastern development for highway 4.

Thank you.

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've got two petitions. I table a petition signed by 689 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to "introduce legislation declaring a moratorium on any future expansion of Confined Feeding Operations, with a view to phasing out existing operations within the next three years."

Mr. Speaker, the second petition that I table is signed by 90 Albertans petitioning the Legislative Assembly to urge the government to "invest a portion of the multi-Billion dollar budget surplus to properly fund education, thereby avoiding layoffs of teachers and staff, ballooning class sizes, program cuts, and closure of schools."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Evans: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege today to rise and table, first of all, the first tabling of Alberta's Promise Partners' Report, a report that summarizes the first year of activities, highlights the achievements of the partners, and profiles organizations and businesses in Alberta that are in support of our children.

Mr. Speaker, I have yet another tabling, if I may, and that is a letter to *Today's Parent*, a response to the questions that arose from other members of this House, a response, in fact, that we're forwarding to the editor of *Today's Parent* magazine pointing out some of the good things that are happening in child care in Alberta and clarifying some factors that were not taken into account.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, as a subsequent follow-up to the Committee of Supply, April 20, 2004, and the debate on Children's Services estimates I am providing for the benefit of the members the suitable number of copies of answers to questions raised in the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Mr. Jonson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Following a commitment the Premier made last week before the Public Accounts Committee, I

would like to table on his behalf the summary of expenses for the Premier's mission to India and Hong Kong in January of 2004. I'm providing the requisite five copies of this report.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Mr. Woloshyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a letter addressed to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre which is in response to Motion for a Return 80 as amended.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in the House today to table the appropriate number of copies of 250 letters written by seniors in Red Deer asking that the government of Alberta restore the seniors' exemption from paying Alberta health care premiums, restore the seniors' exemption from paying education tax, restore reasonable costs for long-term care facilities, and restore medical and dental benefits.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Lord: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the requisite number of copies of four brief tablings. The first is called *The Influence of the Social Pricing of Insurance on Road Safety in British Columbia*. It's extensively indexed in terms of references from numerous studies and provides evidence to the effect that government insurance in B.C. has led to 15,000 more injuries statistically than what might have been expected otherwise.

The second tabling is a document outlining the 10 most common myths as to the so-called benefits of government insurance.

The third tabling is a communication regarding yet another study indicating the much higher vehicle collision rates in provinces that have government insurance versus those that don't; for example, 18 per cent more deaths per capita and 59 per cent more hospital admissions by young males in provinces that have government insurance.

The final tabling is an article by Lawrence Solomon discussing the international experiences of countries that have government insurance versus those that don't.

Suffice to say that based on these reports it seems to me that a vote for government insurance is a vote to see many more of our citizens killed and maimed on our highways.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. With your permission I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of a report entitled *Milk River Hwy 4 Alternate Route Survey* dated March 10, 2001, compiled by Peter McCormick, a professor of political science from Lethbridge.

My second tabling is a tabling of 700 signatures on a petition to urge the government of Alberta to choose "an easterly Milk River bypass route, and abandon the west bypass plan because of increased hazards and delays caused by intersecting rail lines with Highway 4."

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got two tablings. The first one is the appropriate number of copies of a document providing details of the events being held on May 25, 2004, to celebrate the

National Day of Healing and Reconciliation at city hall, Edmonton.

The second tabling, Mr. Speaker, I'm doing on behalf of my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands, who has received letters from 18 students from a school in his constituency. Under the guidance of their teacher, Mr. Fekete, the students from Rundle school are becoming active citizens and taking part in the democratic process. Their goal is to have mandatory seat belts installed in school buses. It's with delight that I table these letters from these students for mandatory school bus seat belt legislation.

Thank you.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mrs. Nelson, Minister of Finance: Credit Union Deposit Guarantee Corporation 2003 annual report and a report entitled General Revenue Fund, Details of Grants, Supplies and Services, Capital Assets and Other, by Payee for the year ended March 31, 2003.

head: 3:00 **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Motions**

Alberta's Official Song

17. Mr. Zwozdesky moved:

Be it resolved that pursuant to the Alberta Official Song Act, section 8(1), the Legislative Assembly concur in the report of the Alberta Official Song Committee, tabled by the Minister of Community Development in the Assembly May 6, 2004, and recommend to the Lieutenant Governor in Council that a composition entitled *Alberta* by Mary Kieftenbeld of Rivière Qui Barre, Alberta, be proclaimed as the official song for Alberta in conjunction with the province's celebration of its centennial year, 2005.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Before I proceed and actually play the song, Mr. Speaker, and make a few comments of my own, I would like to briefly introduce, if I might, some very special guests who are here in the gallery this afternoon. You've already met her, but I'd like you to meet her again. The composer of *Alberta*, Mary Kieftenbeld, is here with her husband, Ed, and their children Jeremy, Kagen, Haley, and Emma. Also joining us today are Mary's parents, Henry and Kay Colesar, from Calahoo, Alberta, and Mary's two brothers and sister-in-law, also from Calahoo. They are Paul Colesar and Perry Colesar and his wife, Lise.

They are joined today by some hard-working members of my staff who've had an integral role to play in the development of this particular process. I would like to introduce and thank the head of our communications, Kathy Telfer, who is here; Beryl Cullum, who is working specifically on the centennial aspect of our communications; and my ever-faithful and hard-working assistant, Pam Boutillier.

Now, Mary, if you and all of your guests would please rise one more time and accept our very sincere thanks and welcome to the Assembly, I would appreciate it. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, Mary Kieftenbeld is a local singer/songwriter who was born and raised right here in Alberta; in fact, just about 20 minutes northwest of St. Albert toward Morinville, on the west side there, somewhere near Calahoo. She was born into a very musical family, and at the age of six she began her musical journey in the local church. By age 10 she had picked up a guitar and has been singing and playing ever since. She's become a very popular performer not only with her own family but at special graduations,

weddings, anniversaries, local festivals, and conferences. She's also performed live on CBC Radio, on A-Channel, and on stage for the CJCA-hosted Kids Kottage radiothon. She's also still involved in music at two churches in the area.

Last year Mary released her debut CD, *takin' time*, an eclectic mix of songs which she personally composed. It covers many genres, including folk, gospel, country, and easy listening, and I'm so pleased that she's continuing in that vein.

She, of course, does reside near Rivière Qui Barre, and I neglected to mention that she lives there on a farm and puts in her fair share of the family work, I'm sure. So thank you very much, Mary, to you, to your husband, Ed, and to your children, Jeremy, Kagen, Haley, and Emma, for allowing Mom to spend some time saluting this great province.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is fitting now for me to play the entire song so that everyone can hear what it is that they're expected to vote on, and I'll make some closing comments thereafter.

Flatlands, rollin' plains
Clear blue skies, prairie rains;
A tapestry of colours in the fall.
Snow covered mountain tops,
Wheat fields, canola crops;
Alberta has it all.

Alberta is calling me.
Home sweet home, it's where I'm proud to be.
Alberta is calling me.
I'm livin' right and I'm feelin' free.

The fur trade and native men
Started it all, way back when.
We've come a long way since that.
Agriculture, lumberjacks,
Oil derricks, natural gas;
There is no turnin' back.

Alberta is calling me.
Home sweet home, it's where I'm proud to be.
Alberta is calling me.
I'm livin' right and I'm feelin' free.

A culture diverse as it can be.
This is the land of opportunity.
Welcoming friends, night and day.
I pray that that's the way Alberta stays.

Alberta is calling me.
Home sweet home, it's where I'm proud to be.
Alberta is calling me.
I'm livin' right and I'm feelin' free.

In Alberta.

[As recorded by Mary Kieftenbeld]

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, there you have it: *Alberta* by Mary Kieftenbeld.

I want to just point out a few things to all hon. members before we proceed to other speakers and the final vote, if I might very briefly. What we've just listened to, Mr. Speaker, is referred to as a demo version. There's nothing wrong with demo versions; some people spend a lot of time and a lot of money producing them. But I think it needs to be pointed out to everyone that this may or may not be one of the final versions of this song should the Assembly pass it. It's very well produced, and I know Mary spent a lot of time with her musicians doing that, but I wanted to point out that, assuming the Assembly concurs in the selection of the committee, this particular song would become available in several other formats and genres and styles, be it folk or ballad or set for choirs in the church or

school bands or whatever. So that's important to keep in mind.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, we all know how difficult it must have been to have tried to encapsulate all of Alberta's wonders in the space of one page in the time frame of about three minutes. In my view, Mary has done that. I'm so glad that the committee that reviewed all of the entries concurred in a unanimous decision on this one particular song.

So I'd like to thank that committee, and I'd like to begin by thanking – I'd sure like to say his name, Mr. Speaker. I know the rules forbid it if I were to say Wayne Cao, the MLA from Calgary-Fort. This is a historic moment, and he's the fellow who introduced a private member's bill in the spring 2001 sitting of this Legislature. It was an idea he had to adopt some type of official song for Alberta in time for our centennial celebrations next year, which of course will mark Alberta's proud entry into the Canadian Confederation. The Alberta Official Song Act then was passed into law in November 2001 as sponsored by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort. Thereafter, I was privileged to appoint a committee to oversee the process and to select the song that you have just heard and make a recommendation to me for an official song to be adopted.

I want to reiterate my thanks not only to the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, who chaired that committee, but I'd also like to sincerely thank the members of his committee, beginning with yourself, Mr. Speaker. You sat as an ex officio member on this committee. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre was a member, the hon. Member for Calgary-Bow was a member, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark was a member. They were all joined by Barry Allen from the Alberta Recording Industries Association; Carol Dand of the Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta; Kelly Jerrott from Music Alberta; Neil MacGonigill from the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada; Gary McDonall from the Alberta Recording Industries Association; Gladys Odegard from Music Alberta; Judy Reeds, Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta; and Wayne Saunders, Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada, more commonly known as SOCAN. They were of course enhanced in their work by many members of my staff.

In addition to the individuals I've just mentioned, I'd also like to sincerely thank Al Chapman from our Alberta arts area, who worked very diligently in the preparation and presentation of all of this material. To all the members who are working in the centennial office and elsewhere throughout the department and also with our Alberta Foundation for the Arts, thank you to each and every one of them for their support.

3:10

In the end, Mr. Speaker, a contest was established. You've just heard the selection that came out of that. As Minister of Community Development I also offered a cash prize to the composer of the winning entry and committed to having this song, should it be accepted today, professionally recorded, professionally arranged, and disseminated in a professional manner to many, many other groups and individuals to use throughout this province beginning in 2005.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, what we've just heard today came about after 335 total submissions were reviewed. Those submissions came to us from over 100 different communities in the province of Alberta. I think it tells you and tells me and everyone here how much pride individuals feel in this great province and how much time they were willing to spend to do whatever it took to reflect that in song. No easy task. I want to thank every single person who entered the contest. At another time the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort and I will be discussing some special commemorative way of thanking those particular entrants for their work.

Mr. Speaker, I'll conclude just by saying that this song in my view is a wonderful tribute. It's a tremendous way to show our love, our respect, and our real feelings about the greatest province in Canadian Confederation, one of the best places in the world you could ever be. Mary, you said it all.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, as the chair of the Alberta song committee and on behalf of the committee I want to thank each and every member of the Assembly for the honour that the Assembly entrusted in us to select an official song for Alberta. Most of all, our sincere thanks go to 335 song authors who submitted their creative musical work and over 4,000 Albertans who made inquiries and 12,000 hits on the Internet. My personal thanks go to every member of the Alberta Official Song Committee and the staff in Community Development who worked on this song selection project. Personally, I'd really like to thank the minister for tabling the report today and expressing his enthusiastic feelings for Alberta.

Credits are given to each and every enthusiastic entrant, the members of the Alberta Official Song Committee, the staff of Alberta Community Development, and the music industry representatives who were involved throughout the process. All have contributed to the success of this endeavour.

As I have just said, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta official song centennial selection initiative has drawn large interest from many communities across Alberta. Following the openly publicized process, all entries were adjudicated on the rigorous analysis of lyrics, theme, melody, originality, and composition. The selection process involved a committee that consisted of many highly qualified people from the music industry as well as a few opposition and government MLAs who also qualified.

It was not an easy task, but the Alberta Official Song Committee did its best. The Alberta official song contest presented a unique opportunity through a labour of love for our province to capture Albertans' affection for Alberta. We are grateful for the generosity of Albertans who shared their creations and for the help we received from the music industries, that enabled us to be part of this celebratory and historical effort. I hope to hear all Albertans, our children and our children's children, singing and whistling it one day. It will be delightful to hear Albertans singing Alberta's song outside Alberta as well.

Mr. Speaker and all hon. members, I also have another plan as the minister just mentioned. It's the Alberta centennial songbook. I'm working on a plan to publish in 2005 the Alberta centennial songbook to recognize all authors who have submitted their songs. But due to legal and confidentiality requirements any authors of songs, even already submitted to the contest or not taking part in the contest, need to contact me or their local MLA's office if they wish their song included in this proposed Alberta centennial songbook. I'm also looking for corporate sponsorship for such publication to commemorate and celebrate Alberta's 100th anniversary.

Mr. Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Mary Kieftenbeld, whose song was selected. Last week outside this Chamber I briefly saw her happy family, a typical Albertan family of a caring mother, four beautiful young children, and a hard-working father. Like any other author she expresses her feeling for Alberta and Albertans in her song. Her song covers the magnificent, natural landscape of Alberta, its historical roots up to the present time, and the characteristics and feelings of its people.

Mr. Speaker, it is said that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so with your permission the proof of a song is in the singing.

I want to conclude this speech by trying to imitate Mary. My style of the song may be different. It goes – I'm trying to catch on a bit here:

Flatlands, rollin' plains
Clear blue skies, prairie rains;
A tapestry of colours in the fall.
Snow covers mountain tops,
Wheat fields, canola crops;
Alberta has it all.

Alberta is calling me.
Home sweet home, it's where I'm proud to be.
Alberta is calling me.
I'm livin' right and feelin' free.

With that I conclude my speech. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to say a few words of personal thanks for being involved in this committee. It was a very interesting experience to be involved. I also have to thank the Department of Community Development for the calibre of the private citizens that they got involved on this committee. It was a real honour to be able to work with them.

I also wanted to put in a word of support for the Member for Calgary-Fort in terms of a book of songs. There were fantastic songs that we looked at as part of this committee, and I would like to just give you an idea of the kinds of flavours that were presented to us. There was one that I really enjoyed that was a First World War-type style of song that was really a beautiful lyrical song. There was also another one that had a native motif which was really a fascinating song that had, you know, quite a breadth to it.

Most of all, I would like to thank Mary for her song. It is a song that expresses the incredible beauty of this land that's Alberta, and it also expresses the spirit of Albertans. I want to just thank her very much and encourage you all to support this song.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

3:20

Mr. Maskell: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and no, hon. member, I'm not going to sing. I do want to rise today also and thank the hon. member for his great idea and the creation of an Alberta song. One of the most enjoyable activities I've experienced while in this Assembly is being on the committee that looked at and listened to all of those wonderful songs that we heard.

You know, this song is not an anthem. Somebody, when they heard it the first time – in fact it was the hon. Member for Medicine Hat – said to me: this isn't an anthem that we're looking at; this song is something that's supposed to be fun, that anybody can sing. Anybody that has ever been to Disneyland and has listened to *It's a Small World* knows that you were singing *It's a Small World* for days afterwards. Well, this is what this song is about. By the time the committee heard it the second time, we were all humming and singing, and it was quite a sound to hear, I can assure you, except for our hon. member here who has operatic training. It was a wonderful experience.

It's the kind of song that is so singable. It doesn't matter whether it's a children's choir or you're in the car with the family on a holiday or whatever. It's such wonderful music. It was an interesting decision we had to make, but I think we absolutely made the right decision.

The people who were on the committee, the people in the business of music, were a fantastic group. The hon. minister in his selection of this committee of people from the entertainment community

certainly made some good ones. For any of you who are a little longer in the tooth, when you have people like Barry Allan from The Rebels and The Nomads and people who are songwriters and producers and all the rest of it – this just wasn't a few private citizens who didn't know a whole lot about the music world. These are the professionals, the leaders in the Alberta arts community and still are very active in the entertainment business.

In the end we were absolutely unanimous in that choice of song. You know, in Alberta we tend to be so reluctant to brag and sing our praises and so on, so that's what this song is all about. I know we've worked on a tartan and flower and grass and a gemstone and all the rest of it, and those are all worthy, I'm sure, but for me the fun one was the Alberta song. You're all going to be humming it this summer when you're driving down that Alberta highway going to one of those great Alberta vacation spots like Barrhead. I'm sure you will be absolutely thrilled to death to sing this.

There are going to be some changes. I know the hon. minister told people that there's the odd bit in the lyrics that made some people a little anxious, but what you saw in the handout isn't the final bid in terms of the lyrics. There's going to be a little alteration, I think. Am I right, hon. minister? No. Okay. I thought I was.

An Hon. Member: Tell us about Barrhead.

Mr. Maskell: About Barrhead? Well, there are Maskells in Barrhead. So, I mean, sensible people there and in Sangudo and so on.

Anyway, I want to thank the hon. member again for his great idea. I'm proud to have been a part of it, and I know that you're all excited about it and are all going to be humming it. It has unanimous support in this Assembly, I'm sure.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. minister to conclude the debate.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. If there are no other speakers, I'd be happy to do that. I want to just reiterate a couple of things in the two- to three-minute wrap-up that I have.

First of all, thank you to the people who have just spoken, all of whom were members of the committee.

I just want to clarify the comments from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark. What I indicated was that there would likely be different lengths and different versions available, some in a 30-second format, some in a one-minute format, and, of course, the main format, because there will be many different uses and applications. Some people will want one verse and one chorus for a certain type of function. All of that we're going to work out with the composer so that she's happy and we're happy, but the main item will be to create the full song in its entirety in many different genres. The others will be one-off applications on a one-off request, but we're not anywhere near that yet.

Mr. Speaker, I'll conclude by simply saying thank you to all the members of this Assembly for their anticipated support. In particular, I want to congratulate the Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert for representing the lovely constituency where Mary and her family live. I'm sure he's very thrilled and honoured as was evidenced when we all met together last week.

As a composer and professional musician myself for many, many years, Mr. Speaker, I know how difficult it is to compose to theme, to compose to a specific set of criteria, and to compose to certain length restrictions, but I know that in this particular case the committee couldn't have made a better choice in having found someone's song that suited all of those tight pressures.

In that regard, I hope that you will all support this historic motion and look forward to it coming out in the final produced professional versions very soon, all of which will be very much a centrepiece of our Alberta centennial celebrations.

With that, Mr. Speaker, assuming the support of the house, Alberta would become only the second province in Canada to have its very own official song, as penned by Mary Kieftenbeld of Rivière Qui Barre: *Alberta*.

Thank you again. I look forward to the vote of the House, Mr. Speaker.

[Government Motion 17 carried]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

**Bill 32
Appropriation Act, 2004**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After listening to that wonderful song, I'd like to follow through with some of the business of the House and move second reading of Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Yes, I'd like to speak on this. Mr. Speaker and members, I have some concerns about this particular bill. There are some funding areas that have not been taken care of, I don't think, in this particular budget. I think that we should have had more time to debate some of those issues and some of those particular budget areas where we ran out of time during debate. Particularly, I'd like to talk about seniors and seniors' funding.

As most members in this Assembly know, for the past month I've been door-knocking. Over that period of time I have knocked on just over 4,000 doors and I have visited 17 seniors' centres and lodges, and what I've heard from seniors is that they are mad, very angry, and they are scared about their future. They are very mad because they believed 10 years ago, when the cuts started on seniors' funding, that their funding would, too, be reinstated like many other program funding has for other organizations and people and groups, including MLAs, who had their salaries reinstated. But the group that has been completely abandoned by this government, as they feel, are seniors.

When we have heard repeatedly that seniors, including – the Member for Red Deer-North tabled this afternoon some documentation where seniors were asking for reinstatement of many of the funding costs that they used to get, such as eyeglasses, dentures, health care premiums, property tax. When all of that was cut, seniors believed it would be reinstated at some point when this province had the budget, and none of it has been. They have faithfully waited, budget after budget, announcement after announcement, to see when they, too, were going to get their fair share of the wealth of this province only to find out that that hasn't been the case and won't be the case.

3:30

We heard the Seniors minister speaking last week on the budget, when he talked about thresholds. Well, what seniors are most concerned about is that seniors will not be paying a higher cost and that the threshold for what they have to cover won't be lowered beyond what it is, because their incomes have not increased.

The minister talked about the catch-up jump for nursing home costs. Well, what about the catch-up jump for those seniors who are living on pensions that have not significantly increased over the years? He talked about things like incontinence supplies now being a necessary part of the funding for long-term care, but what about the funding for Aids to Daily Living, such as supplies that one senior pays for? Because his housing costs have increased and the Aids to Daily Living has not – he has had a colostomy, and he needs to buy the supplies for that – this fellow is rewashing his bags because he can't afford to buy new ones all the time.

Dr. Massey: It's shameful.

Ms Carlson: It's shameful; it is. As my colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods says: it's shameful. It's absolutely reprehensible that we'd be treating seniors like this.

So what is the solution? I have two excellent solutions for this government, and this is my parting gift to this government, actually, these two excellent ideas. [some applause] I hear some clapping about that. Some of you will be glad to see that I'm gone. But these are two great ideas that I'm going to give you that you would be smart to follow up on, as you did with the stability fund that was a great idea that a few of my colleagues and I came up with some years ago.

Here's the first one. [interjection] Edmonton-Highlands, that was an excellent comment.

Here's the first of the great ideas, and that is to establish a seniors' cost-of-living index. Now, I know that this government likes to hide behind the skirts of the federal government whenever they can, whenever they have to make choices that they don't like, but this is a time when you could take the bull by the horns and actually move forward on an issue and take the credit for it, and it would be a very good idea. When you are putting together the Alberta seniors' supplements and the different benefit programs, instead of using the general cost-of-living index calculated by the feds, establish one that would be a seniors' cost-of-living index.

Seniors for the most part have different living expenses than the general population. They're buying one and two potatoes, not 10 pounds of potatoes. They're looking at different kinds of transportation costs. Instead of running their own vehicles, many of them are looking at using taxis, at using the bus service, at using transportation systems like DATS. They have a higher percentage of prescription costs that they have to cover than the general public. Their housing costs are not as flexible as what they are for the rest of the general public. They're fixed by government agencies when they go to live in nursing homes or other kinds of lodges. They buy their groceries in single-serving packages rather than in bulk. It's impossible for them to buy them in bulk because often they're physically incapable of packing those groceries home. So this is the kind of thing that we need to take a look at when we're calculating the cost increases to supplementary programs that this province pays for seniors.

I would respectfully request that they take a look at this, because instead of the very insulting cost-of-living increases that seniors have been given in the past 10 years in comparison to what their living costs have gone up, particularly in terms of housing and prescriptions, instead of thumbing our nose at a whole society who spent their lives working to build this province up, this government could take the initiative and develop a cost-of-living index that was reflective of what the actual costs were for seniors who are living in poverty or very close to poverty in this province right now.

If there is a community that we should be thanking, it is this community. That is the way that we can do this, by ensuring that

they have adequate monies to live on, not at 40 per cent of what their former wages would have been, not a below-the-poverty-line kind of existence, not \$265 a month, which is all they have left over off their pension cheques, which one might think is a lot of money, but when you think about the small percentage that Blue Cross pays for their prescriptions and the pieces that they have to pick up after that – I'm talking to seniors who are never able to buy a present for a grandchild, who have to save for six months to buy a new pair of shoes, who sometimes can't even do that in six months if they have some kind of a chronic disease that requires massive prescriptions month after month, particularly if they're on some of these new drugs and are not covered by any kind of medical package. They are living in dire poverty. They cannot scrape two nickels together at the end of the month. It is abysmal that we as a province have allowed this to happen, and this government can make some changes in that regard.

That brings me to my second excellent suggestion that this government should take up. This is going to be a bonus year for this province. Forty-dollar-a-barrel oil means that you're going to be wallowing in cash very quickly, particularly when we saw the Finance minister come in with a budget that estimated oil revenues very, very low. You're going to have a huge injection of money that you weren't anticipating. Even above what you had coyly put aside to pay off the provincial debt, there's still going to be a huge injection of capital.

I suggest to this government that you take some of that money and set up an endowment fund for seniors so that you can start to pay out on an annual basis some of these costs that you've taken away over the years. If you want these very angry seniors to consider voting for you in the next election, then this is something that you must figure out how to do, how to get the money for those costs like prescription eyeglasses back in their hands. This would be a way to do it.

An endowment fund for seniors has a lot of cachet; it's very marketable. Instead of just one-off funding, which we have criticized so often in this government with the surpluses you have, establish a fund that would be perpetuated year after year to cover these kinds of costs. It would be a very smart way for this government to go, to recognize the importance that seniors have in our community and as a part of our history and to bring their level of living up to just a reasonable standard, not an excessive standard but above poverty lines. That would be a very small thing for this government to do.

I think they should seriously consider doing it because it's not just seniors who are worried about this. It's people my age who are taking care of aging parents. It's families with small children, some without children, who are taking care of aging parents. It's people who are worried about what's going to happen on this slippery slope of seniors' funding in the future for themselves as they age.

If this government doesn't stand up and take notice, the people who are talking to seniors and working with seniors and see the fear in their eyes on a daily basis in terms of trying to understand how they're going to pay for their next prescription or be able to buy their groceries until the end of the month – when they see that fear, they get angry. For the seniors who are angry now, those people are going to use their vote to record that anger, and this government is going to be the recipient of that.

While I don't like to give this government great ideas because I don't think they particularly deserve them, I think that good ideas that put forward the interests of the people of this province should be brought forward as soon as possible, and I think that those are two potential ideas that would go a long way to re-establishing some faith in government that seniors don't have now. And they're not blaming the feds for this. They're blaming this Conservative government and their actions over the past 10 years.

I say to you, "Ignore them at your peril," because they're angry. For the first time ever when I walk to their door, they talk about how mad they are with this level of government and how they will do anything to change this government because they have seen absolutely no payoff or return of any funding that they previously had as a result of actions over the past 10 years. They've had enough, they're completely fed up, and they're going to be voting unless they see some changes being made.

3:40

I was very surprised when we had the Seniors minister up here last Thursday that he talked four times for nearly 20 minutes each time and all during that whole discussion talked about how he wasn't responsible for any of these services being reinstated, that, you know, he did the best he could as the minister and it was not approved by cabinet.

Well, I say that that's not good enough. If that's the best you can do, then you shouldn't be the minister. You should be replaced. We need a minister there who will stand up for seniors and fight for what they need and fight for what they want and fight for them to have their rightful place in this society.

Mr. Speaker, thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak to Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004, and I want to start with a few general comments about the bill.

It is interesting that the total revenues are estimated at just below \$23 billion for 2004-05, which seems to be a serious underestimate. This is \$2.3 billion less than forecast revenues of \$25.3 billion in fiscal year '03-04.

Oil and gas revenues in fiscal year '04-05 are estimated to be \$2.7 billion below what they're forecast to be in '03-04. Given the upward movement on oil and gas prices, Mr. Speaker, this is completely misleading.

The government is reducing the general corporate tax rate from 12.5 to 11.5, which is a 9 per cent cut, permanently reducing government revenues by \$142 million. Alberta already has the lowest corporate taxes of any province, and this is a giveaway, Mr. Speaker, pure and simple.

Contrary to some media reports provincial revenue from school property taxes will go up by 5.7 per cent in '04-05. The 2.3 reduction in the mill rate will be more than offset by increases in the value of the assessment base. This is the third straight year that the Provincial Treasurer has broken her 2002 promise to freeze school property taxes at \$1.2 billion.

Surprisingly, Mr. Speaker, in a pre-election budget there are 25 new user fees for such things as outdoor recreation, parks programs, and the maintenance enforcement program; 11 other fees for parks activities; and insurance services are being significantly increased. While the new fees and fee hikes for things like cross-country skiing in Kananaskis Country and provincial parks programs most hit average Albertans, the insurance levies are puzzling given the concerns about the affordability of coverage.

There is mention of some royalty giveaway programs which may be reviewed in light of recent federal government changes, but no specific measures are announced in this budget.

Health care premiums are maintained at current levels for seniors and everyone else. In other words, corporations get tax breaks; seniors and middle-class families get nothing.

Mr. Speaker, I would like at this time to introduce an amendment to the budget, and I'll ask the pages to bring it to the table and distribute it to members.

The Speaker: The hon. member may sit down for a moment. I have not seen this amendment yet.

On the amendment, hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 32, Appropriation Act, 2004, be amended by striking out all of the words after “that” and substituting the following. “Bill 32, Appropriation Act, 2004, be not now read a second time because the bill does not adequately provide for the following: a reduction in classroom sizes, comprehensive health care benefits for seniors, and relief for utility consumers.”

Mr. Speaker, this amendment, which would have the effect of defeating the budget that’s been introduced by the Provincial Treasurer, is in effect a nonconfidence motion in the government. If this motion is passed, the government will fall.

Now, Mr. Speaker, hon. members may realize that given the government’s massive majority at the present time, that is unlikely to happen. So, then, why bring forward a nonconfidence motion in the government? Well, based upon the budget and based upon the government’s performance during this session, we felt that it was appropriate to at least put this forward so that even if it were not given adequate consideration by the government members, it would hopefully be considered by the citizens of this province, and the motives behind the amendment would be considered.

What the amendment says is that the bill does not provide for a reduction in classroom sizes, first of all. Now, we know, Mr. Speaker, that the government has committed to implement the commission on education recommendations and that these include adequate funding to bring down the size of classes in the province of Alberta. The Learning Commission document, I think, on balance, was a very well-thought-out and balanced document and could have provided a blueprint for the government to restore some of the damage that it has inflicted on our educational system. Unfortunately, this budget doesn’t deal with that.

What the budget has resulted in is the imminent threat of strike action for the second time in two years by teachers in this province. Far from reducing classroom sizes, far from giving school boards an adequate amount of money to deal with teachers’ issues, contract issues, as well as classroom sizes and to restore the programs that have been cut in the last few years as a result of the government’s programs, the budget brings us back to the brink of labour unrest in the public school system of this province, Mr. Speaker. As such, it completely fails Albertans, and it fails to deliver on the promise of this government to implement the recommendations of the Learning Commission.

Secondly, the question of comprehensive health care benefits for seniors, which have been eliminated by the government. There’s a need, Mr. Speaker, to not only restore those health care benefits which have been cut but to expand them. I note, as well, that the leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, Mr. Harper, has now weighed in to the federal campaign with a proposal for benefits for a national drug program. It’s not exactly the kind of national drug program that we would like to see, but it does indicate a direction that ought to be followed.

There can be an improvement in the health benefits which we provide for all Albertans, but in particular seniors ought not to be singled out for cuts as they have been. I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has talked quite eloquently this afternoon about the situation facing seniors and the anger among seniors, and much of that goes back to actions of the government, cutting comprehensive programs for dental and eyeglasses as well as their approval of increases for long-term care.

Now, Mr. Speaker, members might be interested to know that the

corporations that provide long-term care in this province are already showing improved bottom lines, and they are attributing that in their annual reports to the generosity of this government in increasing the amount that they can charge for long-term care by about 50 per cent. If the government would like seniors to believe or children of seniors in long-term care to believe that this was necessary in order to improve the care of their parents, they are whistling past the graveyard. Those people in long-term care and their children know that the money has primarily gone towards the bottom lines of the corporations that run nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

3:50

This perhaps is a model of what the government intends for health care in general, Mr. Speaker, because they have certainly talked about the need to increase the role of private health care corporations in the delivery of general health care, and I think this gives a good example of what we can expect to see should they manage to get away with that particular direction.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I last want to come to the third point in the amendment, and that has to do with relief for utility consumers. We saw before the last election a massive series of programs allegedly to help people deal with the high natural gas and high electricity prices that they were facing. What it was in fact was a massive program to make very serious problems of the government’s own making go away until the government was safely re-elected.

Now, the Premier and other ministers have floated the balloon that we might be looking at more rebate programs again as the election approaches, in this case probably primarily for gasoline. That’s not what we’re talking about. We’re not talking about bribing the voters with their own money. We’re not talking about implementing Bill 1, the first bill of this term that was passed, sponsored by the Premier, that gives the cabinet the authority to give utility rebates or energy rebates of any kind at any time without reference to the Legislature. This bill was in our view an abomination. It’s a bill that we strongly disagree with. We’re not talking about that kind of electoral use of taxpayers’ money to ease the government back into yet another mandate. What we’re talking about are actual steps that should be taken to reduce the prices of electricity and provide some protection for people on the natural gas side as well.

You know, Mr. Speaker, there are many failures of this government. The whole term can be judged a failure, in my view. It’s a litany of broken promises. When electricity deregulation was brought in, the promise was that competition would actually bring down prices. In fact, we’ve seen that the opposite has happened, and the government has taken no steps to reverse that direction. They actually have deepened their commitment to electricity deregulation and have brought in disreputable companies like Direct Energy to replace existing Alberta companies under the guise of providing more choice. Consumers know that it’s not more choice; it’s just a different same choice. Electricity deregulation is one.

The government has failed to bring in anything reasonable in terms of car insurance reductions. In fact, they’ve postponed the freeze until after the projected time for the next provincial election, so Albertans may not know until the election is out of the way that the government is unable to deliver comparable rates to those provinces that have public auto insurance. According to our calculations, by capping personal injury claims at \$4,000, they are able to save about 8 per cent of the cost of insurance, whereas eliminating the profits of private companies would allow savings of up to 35 per cent. So public auto insurance can produce savings.

The Speaker: Hon. member, I really am reluctant to do this, but

relevancy is very important with respect to amendments. There's nothing in here about automobile insurance. Let's move on.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I was trying to generalize about broken promises of the government. I accept your advice and will restrict myself to these particular broken promises of the government. There are many.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I just want to indicate that it's very clear that the government has failed, and failed miserably, to meet many of the obligations that it itself has undertaken in a broad range of policy areas. I can't think of one major accomplishment of this government that affects the lives of Albertans broadly during this entire term. This budget reflects that. This budget reflects a lack of vision, it reflects a lack of accomplishment, and it represents broken promises on one area of policy after another.

I believe that this government has been here too long. It's time that this government was thrown out, was defeated. I think that even if members opposite aren't going to be persuaded of that at this particular time, the voters will be. The citizens of Alberta are eventually going to say, "Enough is enough. We've had far too much personality. We've had far too many zany antics from the Premier, but we haven't had any real results," and they'll throw the government out.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available, a five-minutes question and comment period, should they wish to be directed toward anything said by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. None?

Then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods on the amendment, please.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking in favour of the amendment and with respect to not having adequately provided the reduction in classroom sizes, this is a particularly sore point with parent groups in this city and I suspect with parent groups across the province.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

There was a sequence of events that I think really had parents encouraged. The outcome of the strike resulted in the Learning Commission being appointed. The commission listened to parents, sent out workbooks, and I think parents were generally encouraged that if they took the time to deliberate and to put their ideas down on paper, to appear before the commission, to fill out the commission's workbook, they would get the kinds of recommendations out of the commission that they thought were in the best interests of their children. I think most of them were pleasantly surprised that the document that was produced by the government did reflect their wishes, and in one area in particular that's been a bother to parents and that's with respect to class size.

If you go back to the commission, Mr. Speaker – and this is speaking directly to not adequately providing for a reduction in class size – when the commission report came out, one of the recommendations was that they implement class size guidelines for kindergarten to grade 3. The estimated cost for that over the first three-year phase of the Learning Commission was to be \$111.4 million, and there was to be an estimated one-time cost of \$47 million.

There was a sequence of recommendations: establishing parenting centres, \$10.5 million; implement full-day junior kindergarten programs for children at risk, \$42 million, and that would have implications for class size and what goes on in classrooms; imple-

ment full-day regular kindergarten programs for children at risk, \$21 million; and then there were further recommendations with respect to First Nations and Métis and home liaison workers for them. Again, the program was to provide opportunities for students to learn second languages. The phase-in implementation of technology standards was to be another \$20 million. The total for phase 1 was to be \$224.4 million. The expectation, I think, roughly was that we would see in this budget \$70 million dedicated to putting the recommendations from phase 1 into practice.

4:00

The day that the budget was released, Mr. Speaker, there were a number of parents here in the building, and to say that they were disappointed would be an understatement. They expected that they would be able to go to this budget and look at the business plan and there on the business plan would be the itemization of these items from the Learning Commission's report with a commitment alongside each item as to how far the government was going to go towards implementing those specific items. We talked to a number of those groups, and I can't tell you how disappointed they were at that time that that didn't happen. They were looking for the money, and they were looking for the money to be earmarked for the recommendations from the Learning Commission.

Now, since that has happened, the government's response by the Minister of Learning to the criticism that that didn't happen has been that there has been an increase of \$289 million. If you go through the budget, Mr. Speaker, you can't find an increase of \$289 million because, in fact, \$60 million of that was money that had already previously been announced. So parents who were scrambling through the budget looking for the \$289 million won't and can't find it because it's not there.

More importantly, then, if you take away the \$60 million and end up with a \$230 million increase, they would like to see, because the minister says that the money is there, that \$70 million that was to be earmarked for implementing the Learning Commission's recommendations.

In fact, there isn't \$70 million in that budget. As the allocations to specific boards were put out last week, we saw that there just isn't that kind of money there. For the large urban boards and the large suburban boards, in fact, when you take into account the money that they need for salary grid increases, when you take into account the money that they need because of increased costs, there is very, very little left to implement the recommendations of the Learning Commission. For a number of those boards who had to release teachers last year, class sizes this coming September are going to be the same, or in some cases – and this is particularly true of the large boards – there's going to be an increase in class sizes.

So the budget, I think, has literally failed those parents who were looking and looking hopefully, Mr. Speaker, for a September when there would not only have been the number of teachers hired back that they had been forced to lay off in the previous year, but there would also be a number of extra teachers hired to work towards the reduction of class sizes, as outlined in the Learning Commission's recommendations.

The budget as an instrument of progress with respect to the Learning Commission is a great disappointment, Mr. Speaker, and it's for that reason that I think the amendment has to be supported.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad to have a few minutes to get up and address this amendment to our appropria-

tion bill. I don't know; I can't begin to express the level of disappointment I have that you've brought in this ridiculous amendment on what is in fact a really great budget in a really incredibly great place to live. We have absolutely everything in this province, and I despair sometimes that no matter how much we do, it's never enough, it's never right, and everybody can sit back and just take shots at it. I'm just stunned by it.

When you talk about the Learning Commission, which we've really just completed in the last – what? – six or eight months, they came forward with a massive number of recommendations. It's a great study. It's the first time that education had been studied that way in 30 years. I think it was an incredible report that told us that a lot of things are really very good in this system and that there are areas we need to improve on. They suggested – and it was their suggestion, hon. member – that we in fact have five years to try and deal with the implementation of their recommendations, and that is what is happening. Yet here you are saying: well, it didn't all happen at once; it didn't happen fast enough.

You know what? In my riding, through the Speaker, you couldn't even implement this. You cannot because I do not have enough physical infrastructure to deal with the growth that is occurring. In my constituency we have between 7 and 18 per cent growth, and I'm talking about actual population growth. In areas like Langdon, for example, in many portions of Airdrie they've tried very hard to bring in starter homes. We have many, many young families coming in. When you go through some of these neighbourhoods, as I do, I'm just constantly astounded at the number of really tiny little children that aren't even in school yet, let alone that my schools are absolutely packed to the rafters. We opened a brand new school with 12 portables already attached.

I do believe that this is a really important recommendation from the Learning Commission, that we get to a point where the classrooms are smaller. Right now I'm just really happy to have a classroom, you know, and I'm very grateful to my colleagues that I was able to have some funding allocated to my constituency for new schools because we desperately need them. We can't build them fast enough to keep up with the kind of growth rates we're dealing with.

Why do we have growth like this? We have growth like this because we have the single best, most vibrant place in this country to live. That is not a negative. It's just a reality of the fact that we have a booming economy. We're blessed with oil and gas. We're blessed with coal. We're blessed with forest reserves. We've got great farmers. We've struggled with drought and BSE, but we've got all of these other things, the gifts that we've been given in this province, and we cannot just squander them all because we have a surplus. People talk about a surplus like it's a bad thing. A surplus is a gift. It's just a gift.

We have the best health care in Canada. We have the best-paid nurses in Canada. We have the best education system anywhere in the world, and stats bear that out. We have the best-paid teachers anywhere in this country. In Ontario right now the new Ontario Liberal government is in fact trying to figure out how to break all of the campaign promises that they just made a few months ago, the Liberal Party in Ontario that made all these great, grandiose, sweeping promises on how they were just going to show everybody that you can actually spend money you don't have. Well, you can't.

Dr. Massey: It sounds like insurance here.

Ms Haley: You know what? If you want to get up and talk again, you do it, but you don't interrupt me.

Moving right along. [interjections] Yeah? Really? Free insurance?

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View has the floor. When she finishes, Standing Order 29 prevails, and you will have an opportunity to ask questions of her. She has the floor, and the chair recognizes her.

The hon. member.

Ms Haley: Thank you. You know, when we talk about everything that we have in Alberta, not only do we no longer have a deficit – and I'm grateful for that – but our debt is almost paid off. We are no longer squandering billions of dollars on interest, which doesn't create any jobs or do anything good for anybody anywhere.

We have the best programs, including the best programs for our seniors. Would I like to see whether we can raise the thresholds for our seniors? Yes, ultimately I would like to see that, but I am also not reluctant to say to you, Mr. Speaker, that I believe that our seniors' programs are pre-eminent anywhere in Canada.

When I talk to my mother, who is 76, and prior to my step-father's death last year – he was a very proud, very right-wing, very strong Albertan who believed that they had been given great opportunities in their life. They didn't have much. They had a small house, you know, that my mom still lives in today. It's a 50-year-old house, and she's happy in this house. She believes that she's never had it so good in her whole life. She is grateful that there is a thing like a co-pay with a \$25 cap on a prescription for the prescriptions that she needs. She and her husband, Bob, needed the health care system in the last couple of years in a big way, and it was there for them. So you will not find a person like my mom talking about how seniors have been taken advantage of or brutalized in some way. She's very proud of this province, living in this province, being a strong member of her community. She volunteers everywhere that she is physically and mentally capable of doing so.

4:10

I cannot believe that I have to sit here, knowing that my mother lives on a very small pension, and listen to how I would somehow abuse my own mother because I'm a government member, that I don't care about senior citizens, that I don't care about children. I mean, it's absolutely ludicrous. You do not have a market on compassion just because you're in a left-wing party, and just because you're in a right-wing party doesn't mean that you don't care about people. It's just ludicrous, the innuendo and the insulting comment that you make about things like that.

Utility relief. Let's talk about utility relief. Please name one other jurisdiction in North America that even has a rebate on anything – on anything – on any kind of gas or oil or coal or wood product.

Ms Carlson: You're gouging our seniors.

Ms Haley: Nobody's gouging anybody.

These resources belong to the people of this province, and they capture all of the royalties on it. It is why we have the lowest income taxes anywhere in this country, and compared to most U.S. states, we're better off. We do not have a sales tax, which most places in North America do in fact have. We have a natural gas rebate that kicks in at \$5.50, which takes some of the pain out of it. Is it perfect? No. But, then, who knew 10 years ago that natural gas would be this high? I think a lot of these things are incredibly important.

We have the best economy in Canada. We have the highest growth rate. We have the lowest unemployment rate. We have the lowest overall taxes. We have in fact an enormous advantage in living here, yet all I hear is the negative, the doom and gloom, the sky is falling. You know, it's like, wow, I must be living in a whole

other place. I leave this place; I go to Airdrie where people are happy. They're working; they've got jobs. Their kids are in school. They can drive on the road. They can go shopping. They've got jobs.

Eleven years ago we had 11.75 per cent unemployment in this province. Airdrie at 16,000 people had over 500 empty homes just sitting there that nobody wanted to buy. That's over. People have moved back to Alberta. They're moving in. We have the highest growth rate of any province in this country. We netted an extra 12,000 people from other provinces across this country last year, yet here we are in the doom and gloom scenario of the opposition. I'm staggered by it. I can't believe it, and I would urge my colleagues to please vote against this ridiculous amendment.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Mr. Mason: I have a question, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, the chair did make reference to Standing Order 29, but that applies to the debate. We are dealing with a reasoned amendment, and there is no provision in our Standing Orders right now for your questions.

The chair recognizes the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There was some confusion on this. The Speaker, before you came in, in fact said that there was room to ask questions.

I would like to speak, Mr. Speaker, in favour of the amendment. We're not naive to think that an amendment like this would pass this House. We were very clear when we debated among ourselves the appropriateness of bringing forward this amendment. We aren't doing it based on the premise that somehow the amendment will be passed and, therefore, the government will be defeated and we will have an election. We knew all that wouldn't happen.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, on the issue of a budget, a budget that in fact is a statement about the commitments of a government in power with respect to its vision, with respect to its policies, with respect to its commitments to the people of Alberta, it is exceedingly important that this budget be taken seriously, that the government be held to account for . . .

Speaker's Ruling Decorum

The Acting Speaker: I regret to interject. Hon. members, we are currently in the Assembly and not in committee stage. Members who wish to have a conversation may leave the Assembly and have a conversation outside or take their seats, please. Sorry for the interruption.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Debate Continued

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I was speaking to the reason for this reasoned amendment. It's an opportunity to hold this government to account for what this budget contains, what this budget reveals to Albertans about the failure of this government to keep its commitments, to respect its own promises, and to deliver on its own undertakings.

The Minister of Finance has failed the third time in her term as minister by bringing in a budget which fails to deliver to Albertans, Alberta's children first and foremost in this case, class sizes which are affordable, smaller class sizes. This government fully accepted the vast majority of the recommendations of the Learning Commission, which itself, I must say, was the result of a crisis in education that had been created by this government's own policies previous to

the establishment of that commission. But once the commission came up with the recommendation to reduce the class size and start doing that right away, forthwith, the government said: yes, we agree. What do we see in the budget? No money for following down that road.

It's outrageous that a government on the one hand accepts the recommendations of a commission that it appointed itself to reduce class size and then turns around and gives \$142 million in tax cuts to big corporations and says that there's no money to start reducing class size. It says that we need to wait for another year or two or three. We have another four years before we can begin to implement that particular commitment on the part of the government. It's shameful, Mr. Speaker, that the government should be reneging on its own commitments, on its promises to the children of this province.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, the motion draws attention to the failure of this government to restore to Alberta seniors the benefits that they have earned through their hard work, through lifelong commitment to building this province, to continuing to pay their taxes. Seniors are not people who don't pay their taxes – they pay taxes even now – yet when it comes to the benefits that they so strongly deserve, this government has failed them.

I raised this question during the debate on the estimates, both when we were talking about the Department of Learning estimates and the Department of Seniors estimates, and I was quite astounded to hear the reactions from the government side on this. The minister responsible for Seniors, the minister responsible for Learning, the minister responsible for Government Services, and the minister responsible for utility rates and deregulation of utilities have all failed and failed our seniors, failed our businesses, failed our householders, failed our renters.

When you deregulate and the result is an increase in utility costs for heating, for electricity, you know, it affects everybody. It affects businesses negatively, it affects homeowners, it affects the seniors who live in their own homes and live on stagnant incomes, and it hurts renters. The vast majority of Albertans live in rented accommodations. Their rents are going up thanks to the failed deregulation policies on utilities in this province.

So this government boasts about making this province the best place in the country to live. Yes, Albertans work hard. They are proud to have built this province the way it has been built. What this government is doing is failing them in their expectations. It spends more time in dampening expectations of Albertans rather than meeting those expectations, delivering on those expectations of Albertans. By setting the bar low, any government can of course boast that they've done these things, but this government is guilty of setting the bar so low in a province where people work so hard, where they're so proud of their accomplishments.

It tells them that you've got to live at a level which our neighbouring provinces, who don't have these resources, who don't have the opportunities, have had to accept because they didn't have the choices. We do have choices, Mr. Speaker, and this bill denies those choices to Albertans. That's why this amendment is one that I support, that's why we in the New Democrat caucus brought this amendment forward, and that's why we ask my colleagues in the House to support this amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

4:20

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, before I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, may we briefly revert to Introduction of Guests.

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed an honour today to look up in the gallery and see a very good friend of mine. This gentleman participates in actually two southern Alberta constituencies. His MLA is the hon. Member for Highwood, and this gentleman has a business in my constituency of Livingstone-Macleod. Soon the two constituencies will come together, so George Gaschler, who actually lives in Nanton and has a business in Fort Macleod, will all be in Livingstone-Macleod.

In both of these southern Alberta communities, Mr. Speaker, this gentleman is a community leader, very much involved in chamber of commerce. He's had a successful law practice for over 28 years. He is the chair of the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump advisory committee under the Minister of Community Development. He's a proud father of three wonderful children all still in university and a family that really, really enjoys and appreciates the Alberta advantage.

Mr. Gaschler is seated in the members' gallery, and I would have him please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Second Reading

Bill 32
Appropriation Act, 2004
(*continued*)

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I can depend on the third party in the House to come up occasionally with these Hail Mary passes, so to speak, and I think with a 74-seat majority, that's certainly what this motion is in trying to bring down the government or give a nonconfidence vote in the budget, but it did generate some back and forth discussion, which is very unusual in this House. I always greatly enjoy it when we're able to engage members of the government in debate.

She raised some interesting points, but I would counter some of the attitudes raised by the Member for Airdrie-Rocky View in that her attitude seems to be: well, in Alberta because everything's so great, you should never strive for anything better. I would think that's exactly what we're supposed to do, is strive for better.

It is about a political ideology that comes underneath and shapes the government's policy. Of course that's what it does. The government has a particular ideology, they're going to follow through on it, and it's going to show up in their policies, including things like the budget. So we're going to have choices made there and priorities placed on things that we in the opposition parties disagree with. That's exactly why you have these kinds of debate in the House.

Do I think it's wrong to bring forward an amendment like this in trying to strive to create conditions that we know Albertans are asking for? No, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think that's exactly what should be happening, and for that I commend the Member for Edmonton-Highlands for bringing forward this reasoned amendment.

I think that for my constituents there are certainly two out of three of the issues that are raised in this motion that are of intense interest to them. One is what has happened around utility costs. Of course, with a lot of renters and a lot of low-income renters that's of very

immediate assistance to my constituents. Essentially what we did was go from the most stable, reliable, and cost-effective, cheapest in other words, electricity prices in Alberta through the government's plan for electrical deregulation to some form of ongoing chaos.

The Member for Airdrie-Rocky View said, you know: isn't the province wonderful for offering rebates? I guess that I have to say: why do we have to have rebates? Well, we have to have them because the government got into electrical deregulation and also started to mess around with what was happening with the gas prices. That's why we have to have rebates, and frankly they've got enough money that they can give the rebates.

Now, I would question whether that in the long run is effective wealth management. Are these good management choices in the long run for the future of Albertans?

I note that the Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake is getting engaged behind me here and I'm sure will be joining in the discussion soon, aside from just heckling me from two rows back there. That's what's exciting about an amendment like this: it does generate that kind of discussion.

I think some of the other issues and the reason that I would support this amendment is the comprehensive health care benefits for seniors. I have to say that if there were one thing that seniors from all the seniors' groups that I've met with and talked to in the last year have said most consistently – and as the Official Opposition critic for Seniors I've certainly been to a lot of meetings on this – it is the loss of the extended health care benefits, particularly the original loss of the universal benefit program, that is most consistently brought up by seniors as really getting under their skin and irking them these days.

Again, you know, with the choices that the government has made, the seniors feel that they are not coming forward as a priority of the government. The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie spoke eloquently about that, and she's been most recently of all of us in here on the doors. I think we could say that a lot of us after three month or four months in here are getting dome disease, but she's actually been on the doors, and that's what they're saying, and I believe her.

So for my constituents in Edmonton-Centre I have to say that two of the three things that are listed in here are of immediate, pressing, and ongoing concern. That is the comprehensive health care benefits for seniors and the relief for utility customers.

The classroom sizes is a different issue for me. My schools are covered under the city centre school program. That was a special program that Edmonton public and Catholic got together on in recognizing what was happening to those inner-city schools and the kind of work that we had to do if we were going to have those kids enjoy the Alberta advantage, let me put it that way. So in many ways my schools have had the advantage of smaller classrooms because so many of the kids that are attending these schools are in need of very specialized individual attention and very small classes. We have been able, through reaching out into the community and partnerships with businesses and a variety of grant programs available through the government, to patch together a fairly extensive program. I don't want to see the day when these grants are all withdrawn.

That in itself is indicative of choices that this government has made, where you have the school system and the hospital system, two public institutions, I'll note, as the biggest competitors in the fundraising sector, competing for dollars against all of those other organizations that were traditionally fundraising for dollars to support their endeavours. The social service agencies and the youth agencies and the sports and recreation agencies and the arts and cultural agencies: all of those were the traditional entrants, and religious and charitable groups as well were all there before. Now our biggest competitors are schools and hospitals, all competing for

that fundraising dollar from the private sector and from individuals' pockets.

4:30

You know, budgets are about choices and priorities, and this government brings forward a budget that very much reflects their priorities. We have things like an emphasis on income trusts, which is very clearly going to allow corporations to pay less corporate income tax. One assumes that there's supposed to be a shift to individual income tax, but when you look at the numbers, you don't see a dollar-for-dollar replacement there.

Choices like a flat tax, a choice of the government. I would argue again that that benefits those that are in the \$80,000-plus range and not those that are middle and lower income. It's a choice the government has made. I would argue that I would make different choices, and I think that they should make different choices. Part of those choices that I would like to see are not reflected in what the government has done and are reflected in this motion that we're talking about.

This budget had no increase for people that are on assured income for the severely handicapped, known as AISH, or on SFI, which I think is now being reworked to be called Alberta Works. No increases there. So no increases for the very low income but much benefit accruing to those with very high income.

One of the other notes I quickly jotted down here was: no restoration of services and programs to the seniors, and I've already talked about the comprehensive health care benefits there.

You know, should we simply stay mum in the opposition because there's a lot of wealth in Alberta? Should we not push forward and push for the things that we hear people telling us they want? And I know that members in the government are hearing it from people. I'm not the only one that these people are speaking to. I see members out at other public rallies that I'm at. I know that they're hearing it from other people.

So I disagree with the Member for Airdrie-Rocky View. I think that's exactly what our job is, to continue to press for improvement in those areas. In doing so, I am willing to support this amendment brought forward by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands because it makes those points and because it pushes that envelope, as it should.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I won't be long, but I did want to speak briefly to the amendment because the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, by bringing this amendment in, has specifically addressed items such as the reduction in class sizes, comprehensive health care benefits, and relief for utility consumers. I'm just going to speak to the first, the reduction in class sizes, because in talking about that, there was comment about the Learning Commission report and I think also from Edmonton-Mill Woods extensive comments about the Learning Commission report.

The Learning Commission was one of the best things that we've done in a long time. The learning system hadn't been looked at comprehensively for some 20 years, since the Walter Worth report, I believe. There weren't a lot of surprises in there. There were lots of things that came up in the Learning Commission report that we had talked about with our constituents over time. What was beneficial about the Learning Commission report was the comprehensive look and bringing in experts and that.

There were some 98 recommendations in that report, and they were very good recommendations. Not everybody agreed with all of those recommendations, but I think the speed with which this

government moved to accept most of the recommendations, to only reject two recommendations – and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre says without money. She obviously can't read, because as I read the budget and the three-year business plan, there's some \$650 million more in the education budget over the next three years. Six hundred and fifty million dollars. Now, that's a lot of money.

The Learning Commission did not say that class sizes should be changed in one year. They recognized that every time you make a significant change in the education system, given the size that it is, that costs money and it costs a lot of money, so they suggested phasing those changes in.

We started before this budget phasing those changes in with money put into the learning system back in November, and those changes in November – and school boards will acknowledge this – allowed schools to move this January to put people in classrooms, either more teachers or more aides or more help, and the money in this budget will sustain that change.

Now, will it improve that in a significant amount? Probably not, because there are other issues that have to be addressed. There are issues of negotiations for salaries and things still to be addressed, but the change that was made in January will be sustained by this budget. That change in January was very significant, Mr. Speaker, in my view. We need to move forward with the Learning Commission, and we need to move forward with the funding of the Learning Commission, but it has to be done in a manner which is consistent with sustainability and consistent with balancing the budget.

Six hundred and fifty million dollars over three years for learning is no small change. It's a very significant indication of the priority that has been put on learning in this province, the priority that was stated in our strategic plan, the priority that was stated by our Premier last fall in the Legislature in answer to a question, saying that learning is our number one priority. I'm very proud of that statement. I'm very proud of that statement in our strategic plan that leading in learning is the number one priority because in every study that we've done and every time we've consulted Albertans, they have said that in order to move to the future economy, to build stability in the economy of this province, we need to have all of our children have the opportunity to get an education to build the tools that they will need to seize the opportunities of the future.

This government is committed to that. The budget reflects that. The business plans out three years reflect that in spades. The amount of money that's being put into the plan now is not insignificant. It's a major contribution towards that step forward. What I would ask members to do is don't build unrealistic expectations about what can be done overnight but help build the future by building on the commitments that this government has made to make learning our number one priority and to commit the resources to do so.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is gesturing to me hoping that there is a provision to close debate. Unfortunately, according to Standing Order 25(2), there is no such provision.

Anybody else wish to speak on the amendment?

[Motion on amendment lost]

The Acting Speaker: Anybody else wish to participate in the debate?

[Motion carried; Bill 32 read a second time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

**Bill 31
Highways Development and Protection Act**

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I read *Hansard* for second reading of Bill 31. Obviously, the minister was very generous in offering briefings to members of the opposition, and my colleague took advantage of that. He makes it clear from his comments that he doesn't have any concerns.

One of the things that's bothering me about this – and maybe I could just get the minister to respond – is that it is allowing the province to take ownership of a number of different roadways in different ways and at different times. Part of what is coming back to me is this sort of ongoing discussion that has been happening between the municipalities and the government around funding of infrastructure.

4:40

Certainly, we've seen in the past – I'm going to have to generalize on some of these statements because I just don't have the backup documentation in front of me here, Mr. Chairman. You know, I can remember things like the mayor of Calgary making quite a stink about infrastructure money and then being successful in prying some additional funds, probably one-time only surplus dollars, out of the government to work on some of the ring roads around the province, which seems to be particularly where the province and the municipalities intersect, if you will, on shared routes.

Here's my worst-case scenario. Let me put it that way. Do we get to a position with the new authorities that are being granted to the minister here to take control or have control or be allocated new control over various roadways and highway systems for the minister to be taking over some of these ring roads and then be denying funding to the cities? So we could end up with a situation where Deerfoot Trail in Calgary, for example, or Anthony Henday here or the Whitemud or the Yellowhead Trail in Edmonton end up being under the control of the government, and they then refuse to allocate money and the municipalities can't do it either because they've lost control over it.

I guess that's my fear because I'm sensing increasing agitation happening between the municipalities and the province. As I follow this in the media, which is where it tends to turn up, the municipalities continue to press the province, saying: "There has been an infrastructure deficit created. We need the money from you the province to help address this." The province is reluctant to allocate the money to that. Then we get into a discussion about who gave up what to get rid of the deficit or contribute to the surplus, and on it goes. There are various sorts of name-calling and downloading accusations on both sides here.

As a city of Edmonton MLA I'm more concerned that we could end up with a situation in my city where my own municipality doesn't have enough money right now and could continue to not have enough money to make sure that its roadways are in good repair. That affects not only people moving around the city but also

things like transportation routes in and out of the city to supply the city, the manufacturing sector, and others that have their goods and services leaving through the transportation routes and coming back in through those routes. That's part of what occurred to me as I looked at what was being anticipated here.

There are other things that don't seem to be any issue at all. They're allowing the telecommunications poles or the underground lines to be laid closer to the roadways. I don't think that that's an issue, and certainly my colleague has made it clear that it wasn't an issue.

The minister is given the right to remove the access road. Bylaws from city council are sent to the minister, and the minister may approve the bylaw in whole or in part. The province can take ownership of any road plans that it cancels within the municipalities that connect with the highways. That's part of what piqued my interest in all of this.

Regulations on highway use for exploration of the Mines and Minerals Act. Changes control of pipelines and other infrastructure surrounding highways into the Minister of Transportation's hands.

That's what I'm seeing here, and that's the question that I put to the Minister of Transportation. I'd like to hear something back from him before I can support the Committee of the Whole or third reading passage of this bill. So if he can speak to that, that would be very helpful.

Thank you.

Ms Evans: Mr. Chairman, I cannot resist responding in part to the concerns raised by the hon. member opposite. In the absence of the legislation in front of me, under the terms of the Municipal Government Act, passed in 1995, the control of the infrastructure within the boundaries of a municipality are at the discretion of the municipality and could not be interfered with. In terms of accountability for a ring road that is, for example, in this capital region, that is shared jurisdictionally between many members.

At one point in 1998 we provided the sum of \$10 million, voted on by every member of the ring road municipalities. Over 20 municipalities, I believe 24, voted the allocation of those funds to that at that time. Albeit the province has been involved in the design of major roads, highways, et cetera, at this point within that context there is a recognition that local authorities clearly have jurisdictional support with the legislation.

So I do not fear any municipal authority having the encroachment of any other level of government on the planning or the direction, if you will, of resources allocated to roads within those boundaries.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak on Bill 31, the Highways Development and Protection Act, in its study in Committee of the Whole. It's a comprehensive bill. It came toward the end of the session, and I was hoping that it would be circulated after it was introduced so that it would provide enough time for careful study of the bill by all parties concerned. That being said, we're proceeding with debate on it in committee. I just wanted to make a few observations, Mr. Chairman.

This bill, Mr. Chairman, Bill 31, really combines two acts, the Public Highways Development Act and the City Transportation Act, into a single framework. This fusion of the two bills into one is I think perhaps guided by considerations with respect to planning, development, and protection of provincial highways and rationalizing, I guess, transportation routes in the province. It makes sense to perhaps bring these acts together in general if it assists in planning.

The concerns that have been expressed – and I think the previous

speakers have spoken to the concerns on both sides of the issue, particularly how the provisions of this act will encroach upon the powers of municipalities and AMDs and whether or not full consultation has been undertaken to ensure that there is a broad-based consensus with respect to the changes that are incorporated in this act. I'm not aware of the extent of those consultations, Mr. Chairman, but I trust that some of those have taken place and that due attention has been paid to the concerns of other levels of government whose decisions may be impacted and affected or encroached upon by the provisions of this bill.

4:50

This bill is certainly quite ambitious. It will probably increase the kilometres of highway that are under the Minister of Transportation in the province. Already I think that we have 32,000 kilometres of highways for which the provincial government is responsible. The question that I have is: what amount if any in terms of kilometres will be added to the provincial responsibility for roads as a result of this bill being passed?

One of the provisions of the bill gives the government the ability to designate highways in urban areas as provincial highways. So I guess the net effect of that would be an increase in the total number of kilometres which become the responsibility of the provincial government. Does that mean, therefore, that once certain highways in urban areas are designated as provincial highways, the total cost of building them and maintaining them and operating them also then becomes the responsibility of the government? It's not clear to me from my reading of the bill that that is the case. So that's a question that I have.

Some other questions. It looks like some new fees may be introduced as a result of the legislation. If so, what might those fees be; what might they be about? What will be the effect of this bill on agreements with municipalities under which some ring roads or other highways and portions thereof are already under construction? I presume that they won't be affected but, again, a question.

How would this bill affect the completion of the Canamex highway? I understand that progress on that particular highway is presently stalled around Milk River. Would this bill have any direct impact on that impasse, on that stalled construction?

What kind of impact would it have on the proposed Fort McMurray rail link? Is that going to be covered under this act, or does it fall outside?

Those are some of the questions that I have, Mr. Chairman.

Another provision which has caught my attention is that any commercial site that ceases to be used as such for one year must apply to the minister for a permit to resume operation. The bill gives the minister the authority to demolish and/or dispose of unsightly, unsafe structures within a certain distance of a controlled highway. Likewise, the minister may remove unauthorized developments. The provisions and the powers that this bill will give the minister all seem to be interesting and in some ways perhaps justifiable, but they also raise questions about the degree to which the parties that are likely to be affected by these new powers being sought by way of this bill by the minister are onside with the changes or not.

Those are some of the questions that I have, Mr. Chairman, and that said, I'll take my seat.

[The clauses of Bill 31 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 33

Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill?

Some Hon. Members: Question.

[The clauses of Bill 33 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 34

Income Trusts Liability Act

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Little Bow.

Mr. McFarland: Mr. Chairman, on behalf of my colleague the Member for Calgary-Mountain View I would like to offer a few comments on the questions that were brought forward at second reading of Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act. If any of the opposition members have any questions that they'd like followed up, I have a written copy that I'd be happy to provide them with if it would help speed up the debate.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Ms Carlson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to have an opportunity to speak to Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act. We've seen this legislation come forward in other provinces. I think that for the most part it's a good idea to start to look at limiting liability for unit holders in income trusts.

We're seeing the income trust sector growing throughout Canada. There are now more than 150 listed on the TSX, and they've got a huge market value, over \$90 billion. They're a significant part of Alberta's business sector, particularly the resource sector, and by companies transforming themselves into income trusts, they can significantly reduce or eliminate their corporate income taxes. They flow through the income directly to the investor, who then pays personal income taxes on that income.

So why is that good? Well, it enables companies to grow their asset base so that they can do more research and development; they can take on larger projects. The benefit for the individual is that as a small individual, a small investor, or as a large investor you have the ability to invest in these companies that you might not otherwise have access to.

Personally, as an investor what do I want to know? I want to know that my liability is limited in that company. So I could buy shares or I could buy a piece of an income trust, and I want to know that if something goes wrong in that company, the liability isn't going to follow me as an investor. That's exactly what happens here.

It doesn't matter to me if the company is paying taxes as long as I'm getting my share of the income, and it comes much faster in an

income trust than it would as a shareholder in a company. The income flows right to you in the year that it's earned as opposed to you having to wait for an asset increase as a shareholder in a company and then you have to sell your shares in order to gain any benefits. This way the money flows right through.

We've seen that this industry has grown, but the regulations haven't kept pace with it. So the need to protect investors is real, and I think it's appropriate for us to see this legislation.

Certainly, the income trust sector has been asking provincial governments to pass legislation confirming that the limited liability flows through to the investors, and that will happen here. The legislation removes the concern that investors could be liable to cover the debts of an insolvent corporation in which they owned income trust units. It puts the income trust unit holders on an equal footing with common share holders, whose liability is limited. So we think that this is a positive place to be, where we strengthen investor protection in Alberta and work toward a more open and accountable reporting mechanism for publicly traded income trusts.

5:00

We support the legislation, but we do have a few questions, Mr. Chairman. This bill is being pushed through the Legislative Assembly before the government consults with stakeholders over the summer. They've made the commitment that they're going to consult, so why wouldn't you hold the legislation over in case we need some changes to be made to it that fall in line with what people are asking for? I would like that question answered before we vote on this bill. Why aren't you having that consultation as you have done in many other cases? Just hold it over the summer, and let's see what falls out of the consultations so that we can do the amendments prior to the bill becoming law. That would be I think a very good idea.

We've seen that the income trust sector has called for this type of legislation. What have investors' rights groups been saying? I haven't seen any documentation from people. We need to know who the government consulted with on the investor side. I would also like to know who has been meeting with the government on this legislation. Have you been meeting with income trust companies, and if so, who are those? What does the Revenue minister expect his participation to be in income trusts over the next 10 to 20 years, and what impact does he believe income trusts will have in this province over that same time period? What could we imagine the future to be with income trusts here in Alberta?

At the very least, I would like to know what the outcomes of the consultations will be. There must be some protocol you've established for getting more information. Are you going to have meetings? Are you just going to put out notices and ask for input? Will the information be available on-line? Will people be able to give their feedback and express their concerns and questions? I think that that would be very good.

This is a move, I think, overall, after those questions are answered, to improve openness and transparency in the stock market in Alberta. It's a good move for the government to make. Let's hope that they can include openness and transparency in more of their actions. That would be good.

Mostly what we're seeing here is investor protection, I think, so unless any concerns fall out from the consultations, we're prepared to support it. Once again the consultations happen after the bill passes, but generally speaking I don't think that there are going to be any huge concerns falling out of this. Of course, this government will change everything by regulation if there are, so it doesn't really matter what we have to say about it.

This is one area where we have to start thinking about other

investment opportunities for Alberta companies who want to build and grow. Income trusts are one option. Venture capital is another option and one that so far the government has stalled on. So I would like to take this opportunity to talk about the other ways that we can look beyond providing income to Albertans that is simply based on raw resources. This is the kind of thing we need to think about doing for the future and long-term viability of this province if we want to stay as a leader in Canada and for our part in the global economy.

Mostly it's a step in the right direction. Of course, this government always does things in terms of putting the cart before the horse. We see that here. It would have been really nice to see it after the stakeholder consultations, but having said that, Mr. Chairman, I will be voting for this bill.

[The clauses of Bill 34 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Bill 35

Companies Amendment Act, 2004

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Hutton: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to get up and say a few words about the amendment that we are making. I'm assuming that the members across the way did not allow us to put this through in miscellaneous statutes because they want to open the act and support the Minister of Government Services now and in the future with regard to having an amendment that allows increased research and increased global participation with regard to part 9 of the Companies Act.

There is one other thing. Last night the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar said: well, this will mean, perhaps, that a lot more companies will come forward. But it's through the discretion of Executive Council. I would assume it would be an order in council. This minister, I know, would use great discretion, but I'm sure any minister of the Crown would. It would be brought to cabinet and reviewed on its merit. In this case, this company was prepared to leave the province, and it would have meant a number of jobs lost, and anybody who knows the research community knows that this has a tendency to have a snowball effect.

By CIRG staying here, other scientists and other researchers, particularly in the cancer area, will come to where the great research is happening and where the money is. In the case of this company, we certainly didn't want to lose them in Edmonton. To have to open an act to do this, so be it. We've done it, and I'm sure that in the future Executive Council and the minister of the Crown, whichever portfolio it falls under at this present time, the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, the Minister of Government Services, will use discretion.

I encourage all members to support this bill. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. In response to the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, yeah, I'm one of the people that objected to this being in miscellaneous statutes and asked that it be pulled out. He's right. There is a situation that occurred with a company, the Cancer International Research Group. I think that all members involved and on both sides of the House recognized the importance of that group to Edmonton, to the world in fact, and certainly to the area, the sector of cancer research. We all wanted to make sure that this company was able to stay in Edmonton and in Alberta and wanted to work to facilitate that.

My concern was that what the government was proposing to do and in fact is continuing to propose to do wasn't to open a window briefly to allow this company to come through and change the requirements so that it could stay in Alberta, but in fact this is constructing a door through which nonprofit companies that are established under part 9 of the Companies Act can continue to walk. That was my concern.

I went back to both the sponsoring minister and the Minister of Justice and said: okay; what this really needed to have been was a private bill, because that's the parliamentary process that's available to us in this Assembly in Alberta to deal with one-offs. If the issue is a one-off, a special case that we really need to deal with, private bills is the process that's available to us. The problem was that by the time the company realized what it needed to do, it had missed the deadline for the private bills process. It's got a shopping list of criteria that you have to meet in order to bring that private bill before the Assembly, and they had missed the deadlines on that.

I said: no problem. The Official Opposition – we had the agreement of the third party as well – are more than willing to give unanimous consent to facilitate the private bill process for this company. If this one company was what we were trying to do and we were all agreed that we wanted to keep them here, then that was the parliamentary process that was appropriate. I didn't feel that it was appropriate to open the door for everybody else to come if we were really just trying to deal with one company, so I asked that it be pulled out of the miscellaneous statutes.

5:10

In fact, I was very surprised to see exactly the same wording that was in miscellaneous statutes now turn up as the bill. What that signalled to me was in fact that this wasn't about that one company. This wasn't about Cancer International Research Group. It wasn't, because the government did not take advantage of the offer from the Official Opposition to assist it in using the parliamentary process that was available.

What this is really about is that the government wants to have that doorway built forever to allow it to continue behind closed doors through the Lieutenant Governor in Council to make those decisions about what other part 9 companies they will exempt from meeting the residency requirements. That's what it's really about. So I'm glad that I insisted that the bill come forward separately, which, in fact, it has as Bill 35, the Companies Amendment Act, 2004, because it allows us to put all of this on the record here.

I was more than willing to bend over backwards to facilitate the Cancer International Research Group, but that's not what this bill's about. This bill is about making sure that the Lieutenant Governor in Council, which is cabinet, without it bringing it before the Legislative Assembly ever again can continue behind closed doors to make those decisions about exempting residency requirements.

I question that. I've been told, "Oh, everybody's doing it, and residency requirements are a thing of the past, and we're a global community now, and nobody's interested in that any more; we're all changing." Well, I haven't seen the all. I haven't seen the hundreds

of other provinces and states and countries that are supposedly getting involved in this. I'm just looking at Alberta and going: well, as an Alberta MLA am I safeguarding the assets and our processes and structures for other Albertans and for other Alberta companies that are nonprofits incorporated under section 9 here? I think that's not happening.

I'm aware that my colleague from Edmonton-Strathcona wants to speak to this, and I will give way for him to get some comments on the record, but my ultimate concern was that this government was being disingenuous about this. It wasn't about this one group. This is about changing things forevermore, and that was my concern with what was being proposed here.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I rise to speak on Bill 35 in this meeting of the Committee of the Whole. I want to I guess reiterate what's just been said by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

I'm a member of the Private Bills Committee, and I was called by the Member for Edmonton-Centre to seek my consent to waive the time conditions on a party being able to bring a private bill before that committee. I said, "No problem; we'll go out of our way to make it possible for this particular company, this being a nonprofit company doing some important work in the area of research on cancer drugs." I said that we'd do this. Yet that route was not chosen by the government. That would've been the appropriate route.

The act now, it seems to me, will give the government broad powers, without consulting the Legislature, to bring about a major change in the existing legislation, which will now make it possible for companies not to have to meet the 50 per cent condition for membership on its board of directors and residency condition.

So I am not happy for this bill to come forward this way. The appropriate route would have been the Private Bills Committee, and that would have certainly helped this company to come into Alberta to do the research that it needs to do without us opening up the floodgates.

But it seems that the intention behind the request from the government to put it through the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, was quite different. It was in fact to amend the existing legislation in quite dramatic form but do it through the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act. That's not what we've been asked to do, and that's why we turned that particular request down. This bill, in my view, really raises all kinds of questions with respect to general direction change in policy, and therefore I'm going to have to vote against it, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you.

[The clauses of Bill 35 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Deputy Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee rise and report bills 31, 33, 34, and 35.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Klapstein: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following: Bill 31, Bill 33, Bill 34, and Bill 35.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.
The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the work that's been done today, rather than moving that we adjourn to 8 this evening, I would move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 5:17 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 12, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/05/12

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Grant us daily awareness of the precious gift of life which has been given to us. As Members of this Legislative Assembly we dedicate our lives anew to the service of our province and our country. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Employment.

Mr. Dunford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today in your gallery are a couple of eminent gentlemen. Not to single out anyone by starting first, I'll start with Jim Horsman, who sat in one of these places along here at one time. Jim Horsman is here today representing the University of Lethbridge, and I want to indicate to him that all of us in Lethbridge and southern Alberta appreciate his efforts.

With him today is Bill Cade, the president of the University of Lethbridge. Bill has shown to now be a great asset to the university, a great asset to southern Alberta and, actually, to Alberta generally.

We thank both of them for coming today, and we would like the Legislative Assembly to show them an appropriate applause for their visit today.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly four very special guests. Colleen Quartly joined my office recently and provides a warm smile and greeting at our door as well as over our telephone in addition to all of the other workload that she shares in our office, but her most important job, of course, is her role as mother to Sydney. Sydney will be one on Friday, so it's important that she be at the Legislature early to start her career learning about government.

With Colleen and Sydney are Colleen's mother, Rose Desjardins, a retired psychiatric nurse with more than 30 years of service residing in London, Ontario, and Colleen's aunt, Elaine Arcand, a retired schoolteacher with more than 30 years of service residing in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario. Both her mother and aunt arrived in Edmonton today and have plans to visit Banff national park, Fort Edmonton, the Muttart Conservatory, and all the wonders that are Alberta.

All three have now risen, and I'd like them to receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the House 14 visitors from Spruce Grove from the Living Waters Christian Academy, which is a private school in my riding that does a great job

and is currently undergoing some expansion. The students are accompanied by teacher Mr. Mike Janzen and parent helpers Carole Ibsen and Ross Hogg. I would like them to rise in the public gallery and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater.

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 22 members of the Redwater seniors' association. I'd like to recognize their team leader, Mrs. Mable Cook, and driver Mr. Burt McNeil. For some it's their first time in this Legislature, and I had the opportunity of having lunch with them this afternoon. This group of seniors are great supporters of mine and of this government, and I truly appreciate all that they have done for this province and for their own communities. The commitment that they put in is greatly appreciated. I'd also like to thank their tour guide, who has done a splendid job on the tour with them this afternoon. I'd like to ask them now to rise – they're seated in the members' gallery – and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My group isn't in yet, but I would like to acknowledge them. It is indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly a group of 47 constituents that are going to come in from Glen Avon school in St. Paul. With them we will have Mrs. O'Neill, Miss Penno, Mr. Doonanco, and Mr. Levasseur. I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity for that introduction, maybe a belated introduction. I would ask the members of the Assembly to give them the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature very special visitors from Viking school. They are of course very enthusiastic. The school has a history of tremendous scholastic achievement, and probably just as important given the NHL finals, it's also the home of the very famous Sutter hockey family. You can see where the hard work comes from given the students we are about to introduce today. They are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Marlene Taylor, Mrs. Muriel Hill, and Mrs. Debbie Snider, a teacher assistant; parent helpers Ms Christine Ruzicka, Mrs. Trish Hollar, Mrs. Jeannette Andraszewski, Mrs. Cindy Severson, and Ms Trish Friend. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly two of our staff members who are seated in the public gallery. Aaron Roth has been a researcher with the Alberta Liberal caucus office since 2002. Prior to joining the caucus, Aaron worked in the Lethbridge-East constituency office for three years. He's a dedicated researcher and has served both the caucus and the Member for Lethbridge-East very well for five years. I regret to say that Aaron will be leaving us at the end of this summer to pursue what I'm sure most would think of as a more noble calling. He will be entering the seminary to pursue a life in the priesthood.

The second staff member I wish to introduce is Steven Rowe. Steven will be working in the Alberta Liberal caucus office for the

summer under the STEP program. He's currently enrolled at the U of A and is working toward his bachelor of arts degree in political science, specializing in Middle Eastern and African studies. Before going to university, Steven spent several years working in the oil field and, before that, a few years working in Israel as a farm labourer.

I would ask them both to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise today and to introduce two outstanding guests, both from the village of Breton, where I resided for 12 years. The first one I've introduced before. He's the mayor of Breton, also the vice-president of the AUMA, and today he was discussing the rural development initiative. I'll ask Darren Aldous to stand.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, formerly of Breton but who has now moved to this fine city, a very good friend of mine, one of Alberta's great volunteers. In fact, he helped me get elected. Let's give a big round of applause and welcome also to Ben Haluszka.

I'd ask them both to rise and receive the welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure of mine today to rise to introduce Mayor Barb Sjoquist and CAO Terry Tiffen, both from the village of Edgerton within my constituency. Edgerton is a small community, but they think big, and they're a model for rural development in this province. They're seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to stand and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly an excellent Calgarian who has just moved to Edmonton, Stephen Addo. Stephen is now working as registrar of the Alberta Society of Engineering Technologists. Stephen came to Canada from Ghana, West Africa, with an engineering degree and then worked in New Brunswick. He is also a reservist officer in the Canadian armed forces, and he is now settling here in Edmonton. I want him to stand and receive the warm applause from the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Members of the Legislative Assembly three members of the policy development team of my department. They are seated in the members' gallery: Leanne Connell, Darrell Hemery, and Graham Statt. I'd like them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two good friends of mine, Héctor González, who is one of my constituents and thus my boss and also a former graduate student

of mine, and Leo Campos, a well-respected and well-known community activist. Like thousands of other Canadians of Chilean ancestry they were forced to flee their homeland because of the brutality and oppression of the Pinochet dictatorship. Both of these gentlemen are sitting in the public gallery. I will now request them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly another two well-respected leaders of the Chilean community, Ramon Antipan and Sandra Azocar. Ramon Antipan is representing the Chilean-Canadian Community Association of Edmonton and Sandra Azocar the Chilean Canadian Cultural Society. Like thousands of other Canadians of Chilean ancestry they were forced to flee their homeland because of the brutality and oppression of the Pinochet dictatorship. Ramon and Sandra are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Taxation Policy

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When it comes to a tax system that's fair for everyone, Alberta has fallen behind British Columbia and Ontario. Albertans earning \$80,000 or less pay more in personal income taxes than people in B.C., and Albertans earning \$70,000 or less pay more in personal income taxes than people in Ontario. My questions are to the Minister of Revenue. Why does this government charge middle-income earners more in income taxes than our competitors in Ontario and B.C.?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to repeat an answer to the same question asked yesterday actually. With respect to the Alberta government's policy on taxation we have gone for some time, as we know, to a single rate for simplicity's sake to avoid a whole bunch of problems that are actually punitive to those that are in family situations, income between husband and wife. When you look at the levels of who earns what income, there are varying amounts at various ranges between \$20,000 to \$80,000, whether you're single, whether you're two parents, whether you have a family.

In many of the categories Alberta rates are still lower than all the provinces, but in all of the categories our rates wouldn't necessarily be the lowest. What is true and what continues to be true is that our overall tax load on persons remains the lowest in all provinces, throughout the country.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. To the same minister: how does the minister justify the unfair policy that under Alberta's flat tax a cabinet minister pays the same tax rate as a Wal-Mart employee?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, let's take that example, then, and understand that. First off, we have the highest exemption of taxes at the low rate. Our exemption rate started at \$13,000 and is indexed,

growing every year. Approximately \$15,000 of income that an individual earns is with no taxes paid at all. So if you want to take the person at the low rate, the Wal-Mart worker, they paid nothing, virtually no taxes because \$15,000 of it is exempt.

Dr. Taft: To the same minister: how does the minister justify the unfair policy that health care premiums take a bigger percentage of income from an Albertan earning \$50,000 than from an Albertan earning \$150,000?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, with respect, the person that earns the \$150,000 still pays more taxes than the person at \$50,000. They are always paying more taxes in absolute dollars.

When we say unfair and punitive, why is it that there should be an approach to penalize income? Just because you want to destroy the initiative to work overtime, do you want to destroy the initiative to attract people here that want to take the risk and earn money? No, we're not going to penalize those people that want to take the initiative and earn income.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Automobile Insurance Reforms

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Finance minister in an astonishing display of mismanagement admitted to the Public Accounts Committee this morning that she fumbled the ball on skyrocketing auto insurance rates when she indicated that she didn't know her department was rubber-stamping rate increases that led to a record high 59 per cent rise in auto insurance premiums for average Albertans. Adding insult to injury, the minister tried to paint herself as a heroine by stating that she had stepped in after the fact with a freeze that effectively locked in those rates until 2005, permanent high prices for auto insurance. My first question is to the Minister of Finance. Why did you stand by and do nothing when Albertans were facing unprecedented auto insurance rate increases?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to clarify something. For a chairman of a Public Accounts Committee to come in here and tell barefaced lies to this House – I did not say that at that committee this morning, and I am very upset with that coming in here to this House, and I'll deal with that later.

Let's get on to the insurance issue, Mr. Speaker. When it was raised in the activity and annual report of the Department of Finance that this was an issue that had to be dealt with, clearly that's exactly what we did. I have to say that when we raised this issue and realized that Albertans were being jeopardized and penalized from abiding by the law in this province by having available affordable and accessible insurance, we took action and we didn't wait.

We put together a team to come forward with recommendations. That was co-chaired by the Member for Medicine Hat, who took copious months and hours to gather information to bring forward to our caucus so that we could make some rational, logical, straightforward decisions that would be to the benefit of Albertans, and we did that last summer. We further put together an implementation team to carry forward the recommendations from our July caucus meeting to put in a new structure for Albertans that would benefit them, and I take great exception to you, sir, indicating anything different than that.

I believe that we are on a path that this summer will bring to Albertans an insurance plan that will serve them well, that will serve

their needs and will be there for them. That's what we're aiming for, and we are on target to deliver just that, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Do I take it that the Minister of Finance will be rising later on a point of order or privilege?

Mrs. Nelson: Yes, I will.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the same minister: why did you stand by and do nothing while the auto insurance industry was racking up record profits totalling \$2.6 billion, some of that on the backs of Alberta consumers?

Mrs. Nelson: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, I don't know where the hon. member has been, but we've been debating this issue for a whole year in this House and before that, and I can tell you that we have not sat back. We have done consultation. We have done work. We've brought two pieces of legislation forward in this House that have been debated in this House and passed in this House to put a structure forward that will give Albertans an insurance program that will work. We are in the process of finalizing those regulations, and they will be up and running this summer.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: when will you show us proof that of the 155 of the 157 applications for rate increases that were rubber-stamped by your department – where is the justification for this, and if not, will you roll rates back to pre March 2002 levels?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, the Department of Finance does not rubber-stamp applications for rate increases. There is an Automobile Insurance Board, that receives applications from the industry. They look at the prudence of those applications. If they feel that they were not correct, they would send them back.

Was it a good enough scrutiny? Probably. At the time it might have been. I don't think it is for the future. That's why under our new regulations we will be regulating insurance premiums, and we will be regulating them in the best interests of Albertans.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Public Insurance Model

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Revenue to the province of Alberta from crop and hail insurance premiums is estimated to total \$153 million in this budget year. My first question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. How much is estimated by the government to be paid out to farmers in crop and hail insurance this year?

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, I am by tradition a very . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier has the floor.

Mrs. McClellan: I am by tradition, I think, a calm and reasoned person in this House, and I always take the questions that I receive

from hon. members most seriously. But I want to say that if the hon. member believes that I can today describe what the crop conditions of this province are going to be this year, if I had those talents, Mr. Speaker, there probably would be another place for me.

Mr. MacDonald: To the Minister of Finance: given that we have over \$400 million set aside for that program, why is the government involved in crop and hail insurance programs and will not consider public automobile insurance in this province?

The Speaker: Hon. minister, I have a real problem here looking at the rules and understanding how that question fits in. There are two sides to that question; take whichever one you choose, if you wish.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member knows full well that the crop insurance program, that has over 40 years of successful history in this province, is a tripartite program that has been developed by and shared by the producers, the government of Canada, and the government of Alberta. He should also know – if he were to research this, it's not hard to find this information – that this program is actuarially sound in the entirety of the program. So it is a completely different matter. It is a risk-management tool that has been accepted on a national basis.

Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member should also know that agriculture is a 50-50 shared jurisdiction with the government of Canada, one of the only departments that is, and all of the programs that we develop on a national basis, such as crop insurance, any of the risk-management tools, the agricultural policy framework, are developed in consensus with the 10 provinces, the territories, and the federal government. To compare that to auto insurance, I can't go there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This time to the Minister of Finance: given that close to 60 per cent of Albertans indicated via a government poll that they want public auto insurance, why is that not debated at the standing policy committee? Why can't we have public auto insurance in this province?

Mrs. Nelson: Mr. Speaker, when we as a caucus went through the process of evaluation just about a year ago, we made the decision that our policy would be to go with the private sector delivering automobile insurance in the province of Alberta for a number of reasons. One, we saw no direct advantage for a change, and we had a structure here that in fact could very well deliver the product.

Now, as everyone knows, the path to delivering that product has been a difficult one because – let's be very honest – to accomplish our goal of lowering our rates so that they're affordable and accessible, money has had to come out of the system, and that's been on the side of the premiums that have been paid. Clearly, that hasn't always been accepted with warm feelings from the industry. However, they have come to the table and are prepared to continue on, and that would be the preference from going out and creating a government entity to do the same function. So we chose to go with the private sector and have them continue on operating in this province.

Let's be very honest. There are roughly 70 insurance companies in the province, and they have branch offices throughout Alberta with a number of people who are perfectly capable of delivering this service to Albertans as they have in the past but at a reasonably priced cost.

Speaker's Ruling

Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: Hon. members, I feel that I must make a clarification. *Beauchesne* 409, dealing with questions in question period, says that in order for a question to be in order, "It must be a question, not an expression of an opinion, representation, argumentation, nor debate."

Now, there's also a tradition we follow here that if an hon. member is recognized, they raise a first question and then they're allowed two supplementals. It has always been understood that supplementals must have something to do with the first question. I'm sorry; I just cannot find the connection between crop insurance and automobile insurance.

The hon. leader of the third party.

Supplementary Prescription Drug Benefit Program

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A young mother fighting cancer recently approached my office. She was turned down for the government supplementary drug benefit plan because she owes \$401 in health care premium arrears even though she's paying back the arrears at the rate of \$50 per month. To withhold health benefits from someone with a life-threatening illness as a collection tactic is deplorable. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: why does this government have a policy of denying access to the supplementary prescription drug program to cancer patients who are in arrears on their health care premiums even when an agreement is in place and is being honoured to pay these arrears?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, it is the policy of this government that individuals are not restricted from accessing the health care system regardless of their ability to pay, first off. I would be concerned about this circumstance as outlined by the hon. member. I don't have any details. He's not provided me with the advantage of any material before me. But if the hon. member would like to provide me with the details, I would certainly be pleased to look into this matter.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will provide the minister with the details.

However, given that this question is about the policy, not just one individual, how can the government justify an uncaring policy that uses eligibility for supplementary health benefits as a coercive tool for collecting past health care premium debts?

Mr. Mar: I've already indicated what the policy of the government is, Mr. Speaker. So, again, I'll look forward to the individual details of this particular case.

Dr. Pannu: Mr. Speaker, I have the policy here.

Why does the minister consider it acceptable that a cancer patient meeting the terms of an agreement to repay their Alberta health care premiums is denied access to the modest benefits provided by the government's supplementary drug benefit plan?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Mar: Thank you. I believe, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has asked the same question three times.

Health Care Reforms

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, last week we had a town hall forum in my constituency on the future of health care, which overall went very well. Questions were asked as to what areas we might be looking at changing and why there was any need for it. My first question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. I am wondering if high-profile special events, such as last night's Calgary Flames/San Jose hockey game, generally have had any noticeable impact on the number and type of emergency room visits to local emergency rooms.

Mr. Mar: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me say right off the top that I can't think of very many emergencies that would have kept me away from the television set last night.

There have been media reports, Mr. Speaker, that there have been a reduced number of calls for fire, for police, and for ambulance services when a Flames game is underway. In fact, there's a media report – and I've been advised of this personally – that the games may in fact result in people reporting their illnesses differently. A man who was undergoing a heart attack was asked a standard question in the triage as to when these symptoms started. He said: between the second and the third periods.

That I'm aware of, Mr. Speaker, the regional health authorities in their emergency rooms do not record the impact that such special events may have on their emergency room visits. They do, however, schedule emergency staff in accordance with what their historical data has been with respect to when they are busy, such as on weekends.

2:00

Mr. Lord: To the same minister: given that the Fraser Institute report indicates that Canada is experiencing a much greater shortage of physicians and specialists per capita than any other OECD country, could the minister explain what Alberta is doing to solve the current doctor shortage?

The Speaker: I gave a little caution here a little earlier to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar about consistency in questions. Once again, I am having a real difficult time finding the connection between emergency room visitations and an OECD report. Do you have another one?

Mr. Lord: My final supplemental question for the same minister along the line of health care reform areas that we might be looking at is: is it the case that there is evidence to indicate that people may be doing or not doing things that might impact their overall health in terms of their lifestyle? What would the minister be proposing to do if that is the case?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, indeed, there are many examples of people who are taking responsibility for their own health in this province – we applaud that – but there are of course many examples where individuals are not.

We are in the business of promoting wellness. We think that this is an underlying theme that must move forward as we try to reform and renew the health care system. We believe in the importance of investing in promotion and prevention. We think that there are frankly many, many areas where people could be doing better. We do have a tobacco reduction strategy. We have a Healthy U campaign that's underway. We've worked in collaboration with other portfolios, such as the hon. Minister of Learning, who has put forward mandatory daily physical education.

Mr. Speaker, regions throughout this province are committed to

wellness programs. We are setting targets such as a 10-year target for diabetes, and we are moving in a strategy to help promote better exercise and better eating habits so that we can actually make those targets happen 10 years from now.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Charlebois Consulting Ltd.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. According to public accounts tabled yesterday, the Department of Health and Wellness awarded almost \$120,000 in contracts to Charlebois Consulting, a company 100 per cent owned by the minister of health's former executive assistant Kelley Charlebois. In fact, in the two years since Kelley Charlebois left his position with the minister, the Minister of Health and Wellness has awarded a total of over \$250,000 in contracts. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. How does the minister explain giving over a quarter of a million dollars in government contracts to a PR firm owned by his former executive assistant?

Mr. Mar: Let me say first of all that that would include the expenses that were incurred in the conduct of this business, but most of all, Mr. Speaker, we get very, very good value and excellent advice from Mr. Charlebois.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the minister tell us what reports Charlebois Consulting has completed for Health and Wellness, and would he table them, please?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, there are no reports as such.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister tell us whether Charlebois Consulting won these contracts through a competitive process?

Mr. Mar: No, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

Alcohol Ban in Provincial Parks

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For the past few years about this time of year I've stood in my place and asked questions of the responsible minister regarding an issue of concern to me and to others in my constituency with respect to a rite-of-passage party, so to speak, in the Cypress Hills and the increasing amount of violence and dangerous conditions that seem to be progressing each year. The minister indicated each time I've asked the question that he is intending to take the situation seriously and will be putting into place a number of reforms. Well, this year the minister certainly has taken the situation seriously and, some would argue, has maybe even overreacted to the situation by announcing that there will be a pilot project instituted in a number of parks that involves an outright ban of alcohol in provincial parks. My questions are to the Minister of Community Development. I would like to ask the Community Development minister how it is that he came to choose the three locations for his pilot project that will be running on the long weekend in May?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the hon. member is exactly correct in that preamble with respect to the sudden and very sharp increase we have seen in liquor-related offences in our provincial parks. I want to say that we are prompted by the fact that 240 liquor-related offences occurred on the May long weekend a year or so ago, and over 50 per cent of those were attributable to three provincial campgrounds: Aspen Beach, Miquelon Lake, and Cypress Hills. As a result, we chose to do a pilot in those three provincial parks only to try and ensure that visitors and Albertans alike have a more enjoyable and a safer weekend there. So it's a total temporary liquor ban project on a pilot basis.

Mr. Renner: Can the minister tell us how this ban will be enforced?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, we're undertaking an extensive advertising and promotion campaign, if you will, so that potential visitors will be apprised of what is happening with respect to the liquor ban enforcement in those three provincial campground areas. We'll be putting signage on main roads. We'll be putting signage at the entrances, at the campground facilities, and distributing leaflets and brochures and so on to make sure that it's well understood.

Secondly, the enforcement side will be handled by our parks conservation officers and working in tandem with other enforcement agencies so that we will see, potentially, fines, if necessary, up to \$100, perhaps court appearances. Some people will be asked to leave for that weekend if they violate the law. In a general sense, we're hoping for compliance from visitors who might be thinking of carrying alcohol into those three provincial parks only to please not do that or it will be confiscated or they'll just be turned away.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the same minister. Given that this is a pilot project, can the minister tell us how the results of this pilot will be evaluated, and does he expect that this kind of liquor ban would be extended to other provincial parks and campgrounds as a result?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think we'll be doing the usual things that we do with respect to satisfaction surveys of the individuals who visited those sites over that long weekend in those three locations and seeing whether or not the main objective of creating a more enjoyable and a safer May long weekend did occur. Were there fewer problems? Was there less vandalism? Was there less rowdiness? Were there fewer complaints and so on? Those will be some of the benchmarks.

To the second part of the question the answer is: no, not at this time. We're waiting to evaluate the pilot results, and then we'll go from there, but we have no intention of expanding this temporary liquor ban into other parks whatsoever, unless something really dramatic happens and it were to become necessary to look at that possibility.

Thank you.

Twinning of Highway 4

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Transportation has suggested that the plans for the eastern route of highway 4 through Milk River had many problems, but he fails to recognize a third design that was presented to him to keep the route on the east side. To the Minister of Transportation: given that in the design provided

by O'Brien Engineering & Surveys Ltd. created in August of 2000, the survey solves the problems that the minister brought up about the sewage pond and the secondary road crossing, why has the government not considered this design?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned yesterday, this decision was made five years ago. Later today, at a very appropriate time in our schedule, I will be tabling quite detailed responses to the questions raised by the hon. member yesterday that not only will answer this question but others that he may have with respect to this project.

2:10

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: given that the reeve of the county brought this new design to you expressing the county's support behind it, will this government consider the redesign?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, there are many, many contributors to a final decision made given the new location of the highway. They, of course, do include input from the municipality but also from numerous engineering consultants that might have been hired either by Alberta Transportation or by another party with interest as to the location of the highway. We look at all the information that comes before us, and we make the best decision possible.

Mr. Bonner: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: why is this government content with spending so much more money on a western route when a more economically viable and environmentally friendly solution for the eastern route has been found?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is making his own opinion on what is cheaper and what is not cheaper. In five years a lot has happened in that particular area, and I would ask him to wait for the answers that I will table. He can review them, and then he can bring anything else forward that he may like with respect to that project.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Wheat and Barley Marketing

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It appears that Bill 206, introduced in the Legislature by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, may be held over until the fall sitting of the Alberta Legislature. Many Alberta farmers were hopeful that passage of Bill 206 would pressure the Canadian Wheat Board and the federal government to work with the province in setting up a test open market for Alberta over the summer. My question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Can the minister tell us what the plans are and what she will be doing in the interim of the summer, between the sessions, on Bill 206?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly, Bill 206 is one approach to the attempt to offer marketing choice to the producers in our province.

We will continue with our Choice Matters campaign. That has been circulated and, I must say, very well received and I think well received because it's factual. I have invited people who take exception to the campaign to identify to me any errors or weaknesses in this document. Difficult for them to do because it is a document submitted from the Ontario Wheat Marketing Board and others, and

it's difficult for people to find fault. So we'll continue to do that.

I'm going to continue to negotiate with Minister Speller and Minister Alcock, because I truly believe that when they fully understand what the farmers of this province are asking for, they will be hard-pressed to deny it to them on the basis of fairness and equality and choice. This is a democracy. These people own their product. They did not have the opportunity to vote to come into this board, as other marketing boards have. It is my anticipation that those ministers will see that and, clearly, provide the legislative changes that are necessary.

I am also hopeful that the members of the Canadian Wheat Board will recognize the value of their own corporation and understand that they could operate in a world of choice and of a competitive nature.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the minister's response, am I to take it that the Canadian Wheat Board has not responded to our efforts for marketing choice?

Mrs. McClellan: They have responded in a number of ways. One, they've taken exception to our campaign, called it undemocratic. I actually call the opportunity to market your own product democratic, but that's something, I guess, we disagree on.

Mr. Speaker, we had hoped that they would consider it a proposal. We had hoped that they would look at it in that way and that if there were need for improvement in this test market proposal, they would offer those to us, that if they saw ways that it could be strengthened or improved or how it could work, they would come back to us. In fact, what they have done is opt to give not one ounce of consideration even though 83 per cent of the producers in our province have asked for choice. As I understand it, they continue to tell anyone in our government that they will not consider any proposal that they see as a threat to their existence.

Mr. Horner: A final supplemental, Mr. Speaker. The minister mentioned the Choice Matters campaign in her answers to me. I'm wondering if she has heard from Alberta producers that would indicate to her that support is lessening or growing for our choice campaign.

Mrs. McClellan: Mr. Speaker, the indications we have from producers are that they like the information. It's factual; it's straightforward; it's easily understood.

I recently met with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, of which many producers in this province are members. That organization in fact found that 91 per cent of its members supported choice. So we're not going to give up. It's obviously what the producers in this province want. This government has a responsibility to represent their views, not those of a monopoly.

I will end with this one more time: this is not a threat to the Canadian Wheat Board. This government has never advocated the end of the Wheat Board, and if the Wheat Board is as good as they say they are – and they have told me that on repeated occasions – they are under no threat from offering marketing choice to the producers in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Water Storage

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of

Environment said that we needed to build more water storage. My questions today are to the Minister of Environment. Can the minister clarify what methods of water storage he is considering?

Thank you.

Dr. Taylor: Well, Mr. Speaker, I was talking and looking out into the future for Alberta. My point was that as we move into the future, we need to have a sustainable supply of water for Alberta: for Albertans in their homes, for Alberta industry, for Alberta agriculture, and for the aquatic habitats. Let me start by saying that we're looking at the future.

The way the Alberta supply comes is in the spring. We get the runoff, and it comes, and we pass on, depending on the river basin, anywhere from 70 to 85 per cent into Saskatchewan. What we need to do and what I very clearly said yesterday is to look at ways we can capture more of that water. We haven't done that yet, but I hope that in the future as a government we will actually look at ways that we can capture more of that water.

Ms Blakeman: The quote was actually, "Conserving water means building storage."

Given that evaporation would make water storage useless in curbing the shortages that are taking place, why is the minister considering this kind of thing?

Dr. Taylor: Well, obviously, Mr. Speaker, the people that write her questions have no idea about water storage.

Let me give you the example of the Oldman dam. It doesn't all evaporate. There's lots of water in the Oldman dam, and it controls the water that flows through Medicine Hat and Lethbridge. I can tell you that in 2001 if it wasn't for the Oldman dam, Medicine Hat probably would not have had water. There was enough storage in the Oldman dam that we could keep the water flowing through the Medicine Hat area. Certainly, there's an evaporation issue, but we can store lots of water, and it's a minimal problem.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: given that groundwater reservoirs are by far the better way to store water, why is the minister not considering long-term solutions such as moving flood dykes away from flood plains so that wetlands can be restored, thus feeding groundwater sources?

Dr. Taylor: I'd better be a bit careful here, Mr. Speaker. We need to look at all sources of storage – and that's the point I was making – as we move forward. We do not have a plan to store more water, but we need to develop a plan. We need to look into the future, determine the needs of Albertans, and then figure out how we're going to store more of that water that passes on to Saskatchewan to meet the future needs of this growing province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

2:20

International Air Services

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of Economic Development bragged in a news release that the government had snagged another direct international flight for the Calgary airport. However, the minister neglected to mention the fact that his government and the Edmonton Tory caucus have said to Edmontonians who are frustrated by the lack of international flights

out of Edmonton: hasta la vista, baby. While the government ministers are ferried about in the government's own private Air Farce, severely normal Edmontonians have only 12 international flights per day as compared to 39 for Calgary. My questions are to the Minister of Economic Development. Why is it that an Edmonton-based minister is not making it a priority to increase service from the Edmonton International Airport, instead choosing to follow the long-standing Tory policy of ignoring Edmonton?

Mr. Norris: Oh, where to begin, Mr. Speaker? I just don't know. First of all, I would like to say, with all due respect to the hon. member opposite, that I'm a minister of the Crown in the province of Alberta. I am not a minister for the city of Edmonton in any way, shape, or form. We are very well represented in Edmonton after the last election with the hon. members surrounding me, but the judgments that I make as a Minister of Economic Development are for the province of Alberta.

Clearly, the City Centre Airport, which the hon. member alluded to, is a vital piece of development for not only Edmonton, for which we should be very grateful to northern Alberta, but for all the north, where we book about \$50 billion or \$60 billion worth of projects right now. Access into Edmonton is clearly one of the big concerns and one of big reasons they choose to come to Edmonton. So on that particular issue I believe that the hon. member should be very clear that our job as a government is to help promote economic development in any region of the province. It doesn't matter if it's Calgary or Edmonton or rural Alberta. It just matters that it makes good economic sense. In this case it does.

I think I'd like to correct the hon. member and say, respectfully, that I was not quoted as saying that we got another flight for Calgary, nor did we. We are very, very pleased that the tour operator out of Britain decided to extend their season. It used to end in October, Mr. Speaker. They've now decided to go year-round. That was the work of – get this – one of our missions that we took where we may have bought some orange juice, but we also secured new flights into Calgary, and this is a direct result of it.

I'll conclude by saying that the bottom line about any new charters, whether they come into Calgary or Edmonton, is beneficial for all of Alberta because then Travel Alberta kicks into gear to spread the word and get to see the whole province of Alberta. So we're very happy. It's a great, positive situation, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Why is it that this minister's priority has been to secure access to Edmonton's municipal airport for the government air fleet while ignoring the needs of regular Edmontonians who need international air service?

Mr. Norris: I almost think that the hon. member is getting his questions from our own members. So I'll say thank you for that question.

I'm not trying to secure anything, nor have I ever tried to secure anything. The Edmonton Regional Airports Authority, which runs both the International Airport in Leduc and the City Centre Airport, has always recommended that scheduled flights to a limited degree will stay. But charter flights were never in question. Private operators, of which the government of Alberta is one, were never in question, nor was medevac ever in question. So I think it would behoove the hon. member to do some research. I was never suggesting to keep that airport open for the Alberta government, Mr. Speaker. I was asking to keep it open for the flights that come from

the north with their bags of money and their contracts and their engineering works.

Mr. Mason: I'm not sure the mayor would agree with the minister, Mr. Speaker.

Why did the government promise Edmontonians a seat at the table if they voted Conservative only to prove that 11 Tory MLAs equals zilch when it comes to Edmonton?

The Speaker: That has nothing to do with the first two.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Union Organizing Practices

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. The issue of salting, whereby a union certification vote takes place in part because of the instigation of union members in a nonunion workplace with no long-term attachment to the employer, is of concern to many nonunion Alberta employers. Recently at an Alberta Building Trades Council function I learned from union leaders that, in fairness, a continuing attachment to an employer should be a condition of continuing or of certification. Will the minister consider continuing attachment to an employer to be a precondition of union certification?

Mr. Dunford: Mr. Speaker, let me begin by saying: go, Flames, go. Everybody is wearing these nice little decals, but we're not hearing it on the floor of the House, so now it's in the record for today.

In terms of the question I think that the suggestion made to him at the trades council function, as I understand it, seems to be very fair and the sort of thing that should be considered in normal practice.

What I want to say to the hon. member is that salting exists today and that it is the responsibility of my department now to deal directly with the salting. We, of course, plan to do that. Now, if that takes care of the other suggestion that has been made – and I believe that it will – then of course we've resolved the issue.

Many of us have been around here a long time. The salting is not a new issue. This has come up before, and I guess the intent this time is to put salting to bed by defining it clearly and making it an unfair labour practice.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Alberta SuperNet

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My questions are to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Is Axia using computers owned by the Alberta government to run the SuperNet?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure how to answer that question. I'm presuming that Axia supplies their own equipment and operates the network using their own equipment, which may have been part of the contract to get the network established. But, again, on that specific question, I'd be happy to do more work on that and provide her an answer tomorrow.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Then further to that, if the minister can also find out what department oversight is in place for Axia to ensure

that billing and usage of government-owned equipment is coming forth according to the contract that has been signed.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, Axia SuperNet Ltd. does operate under a licence agreement from the government of Alberta and manages a network, and it does come under the purview of Innovation and Science.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that companies do go under, what business continuity plans are in place if Axia cannot or will not fulfill the terms of their contract?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, that question is pure speculation. We have built-in provisions in the contract that contemplate any action with respect to – for instance, on the infrastructure build that we have with Bell West, to ensure that that infrastructure build gets completed, we have a \$100 million bond to ensure that completion. Similar kinds of instruments have been provided throughout the entire contract, whether it be on the access management or whether it be on the infrastructure build.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Tourism Opportunities

Mr. Hutton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I've been approached by a number of groups as we are celebrating our hundredth anniversary. We are hosting the Churchill Cup in Edmonton and the Canadian championships in Edmonton, and I believe we are also hosting the world triathlon championships in the province this summer. My questions are to the Minister of Economic Development, responsible for tourism. What efforts is his department making to promote these very important and special events?

2:30

Mr. Norris: Well, I'd like to thank the hon. member for the question, and I'll maybe ask the hon. Minister of Community Development to supplement. What the department does, Mr. Speaker, quite simply is try to identify opportunities throughout the province in the summer and the winter for people to come and visit the province and expand their tourism opportunities.

To that end, we have worked very diligently with a number of the opportunities, most specifically the Churchill Cup, Mr. Speaker, which is a world rugby sanctioned function coming up in Calgary and Edmonton, and I would encourage all members to get more information. It'll be great for their communities. The world triathlon is indeed happening in Edmonton in July, and the World Masters Games are coming.

What we do in conjunction with Travel Alberta is work with those groups to partner and promote those events throughout the province, and you'll find them on the centennial web site. You'll also find them on the Travel Alberta web site. They're great opportunities when people choose to visit Alberta for other activities.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

head:

Recognitions

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of several members to participate.

Calgary Flames Team Canada Calgary Roughnecks

Mr. Lord: Mr. Speaker, how about those Flames? And how about Team Canada while we're at it?

Mr. Speaker, the temperature is rising, and our entire country is going hockey nuts right now as that red-hot Flames fever spreads right across the nation. It's no longer just the Calgary Flames any more, no longer the Alberta Flames; it's the Canadian Flames. And with last night's decisive butt-kicking of the San Jose Sharks, we're all holding our breath now just waiting for that Stanley Cup victory, which we all know is so very close now.

Mr. Speaker, it is amazing to see the incredible competition in hockey games we've seen over the past few weeks. It's not just the Flames that have been doing the butt-kicking either. We have the gold medal performance by Team Canada at the World Hockey Championships in Prague as well, the second victory in just two years.

And, hey, how about those Calgary Roughnecks while we're at it? With their North American NLL championship last Friday at the Saddledome in our official national game of lacrosse clearly Calgarians, Albertans, and Canadians are definitely back at the top of the world, on top of our games again, both official and unofficial, and may I say "finally."

So where is Stompin' Tom Connors? We need him to rework his song from "the good old hockey game" to "the great new hockey games."

Go, Flames, go.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

Tim Cooper

Mr. Horner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I take great pleasure in rising today to recognize the extraordinary efforts and achievements of a young man from my constituency. Tim Cooper is a 17-year-old double-A hockey player who attends St. Albert high school.

Not only does Tim participate in athletics; he also exceeds in his academic endeavours, as well. Tim is one of only seven students to be awarded the prestigious University of Alberta president's citation. To be considered for this scholarship, a student must have attained an average above 95 per cent for all three grades of high school. This young man has met this mark and exceeded it, maintaining an average of no less than 98 per cent throughout high school. He has also been awarded the Alexander Rutherford scholarships for grades 10, 11, and 12. In addition to this, Tim has been appointed as the valedictorian of his graduating class.

He plans to study the sciences at the U of A, and I am certain, Mr. Speaker, that we will be hearing more about this gifted student in the future.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Warner Hockey School

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and recognize an innovative and forward-thinking initiative which was established in my constituency: the Warner girls hockey school. This institute offers a year-round hockey program which is aimed at

attracting young women from all over Canada, Alberta, and abroad.

Mr. Speaker, school enrolments were beginning to decline in Warner to a low level which threatened the existence of the school. To ensure its survival, the town of Warner developed a unique plan to revitalize both the community and the school and established the Warner hockey school.

This endeavour was truly a collective accomplishment by the people of Warner. It took the community over 10,000 hours of volunteer time and over \$340,000 in funds raised. However, the school and the collaborative efforts have proven successful. This initiative is a testament to what can happen when a community works together for a common goal. But more than that, this project illustrates the perseverance, drive, and forward thinking of Albertans which has proven to make our province so successful.

I ask all members of the Assembly to join with me in commending the Warner hockey school and the town of Warner for their innovation and visionary approach to establishing a now thriving hockey program in order to save their school and an important part of their community.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Sandra Woitas

Mr. Masyk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great pleasure for me to rise and recognize a truly great Albertan. Ms Sandra Woitas is a lady who has spent a great deal of her life bettering the lives of our children. With a master's degree in education policy from the University of Alberta, she has spent her career as an educator.

Sandra has been a teacher at some of Edmonton's poorest schools and is a former principal at Edmonton's Norwood school, where presently my son, Brett, attends. She also spent six years at the central office of the Edmonton public school board as a consultant. She possesses a deep knowledge of Edmonton's social and economic challenges and a commitment to the downtown. She has also built a strong working relationship with the city's business community and with all levels of government in her efforts to better the lives of inner-city children.

In 2001 Sandra faced the challenge of leading the city centre education project, which led to the consolidation of Delton, Eastwood, John A. McDougall, McCauley, Norwood, Parkdale, and Spruce Avenue schools into one education community that resulted in an enriched, first-class education for almost 2,000 disadvantaged children, an extraordinary challenge that Sandra made happen with dedication and a special talent.

Sandra has established Partners for Kids, is the past president of Big Brothers Big Sisters, is an honorary member of the Riverview Rotary Club, and she also is a member of the Edmonton Police Commission. It's easy to see why Sandra is well known across Alberta as a speaker on a variety of educational topics.

And just last week, Mr. Speaker, Ms Sandra Woitas was included in the *Edmonton Journal's* top 100 Edmontonians of the century, truly a special honour for this special Albertan.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Asian Heritage Month

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the reasons Alberta continues to be such a great place to live, work, and raise a family is Albertans' respect for cultural diversity established so many years ago. Each of us is part of our diverse, vibrant, and enthusiastic

landscape of communities that share a strong commitment to the quality of life we all enjoy.

May is the month to recognize and celebrate the many ways in which Canadians of Asian heritage contribute to the cultural richness and prosperity of the province of Alberta. As Albertans celebrate the heritage of Asian culture, the old will remember, the young will discover the importance of Asian-Canadian contributions to Alberta and Canada.

I wish to thank each and every member of the organizing committee for the Asian Heritage Month's events in Calgary. Myself, the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Creek had the honour to be on the advisory board.

Through co-operation and community spirit we can all do it together.

Best wishes for the month of celebration.

Chilean Community

Mr. MacDonald: It is my pleasure to rise today to recognize Chilean Canadians who overcame hardship and oppression to come to Canada and build a better life for themselves and their families. Many members of Alberta's Chilean community proved their commitment to democracy Monday by exercising their right to peaceful protest outside this Legislature.

Fortunately, all Canadians have the right to express opposition to the government without the danger of reprisal. Many Chileans came to Alberta to escape torture, oppression, and even death for having political views contrary to those of a brutal dictator. Sadly, many Albertans don't recognize how fortunate we are to live in a country where our rights are respected and protected.

The Chilean Canadians who responded to the inflammatory remarks with a protest reminded many Canadians how lucky we are to have never experienced such atrocities. I'm proud of the protesters for speaking out, and I'm proud that they now call Alberta, Canada, home.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

2:40

Martha and Henry

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I stand today to recognize two Albertans whose feelings of betrayal by a series of promises broken by this government are making them seriously reconsider their political allegiance. Martha and Henry were told in 2001 that deregulating our electricity industry would give them demonstrably lower bills. Instead they got rate riders and bills that were as much as double what they were paying under a regulated system.

Then they were promised compensation for the BSE crisis. Instead, they saw their hard-earned tax dollars being funnelled into the pockets of American packing houses.

Martha and Henry were promised smaller class sizes, but their children remain packed into overcrowded schoolrooms. Martha and Henry were promised lower auto insurance, yet their rates remain 35 per cent higher than what their cousins in Saskatchewan and British Columbia are paying.

Martha and Henry can be forgiven if they are wondering what went wrong. Mr. Speaker, it's time the Premier and the government stop taking Martha and Henry for granted.

Thank you.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Mr. Stelmach: I have two tablings, and they are in response to

questions raised yesterday by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have several tablings today. It's a great pleasure for me to table letters from 18 students from my constituency. Under the guidance of their teacher, Mr. Fekete, these students from Rundle school are becoming active citizens and taking part in the democratic process. Their goal is to have mandatory seat belts installed on school buses. It's my privilege to table letters these students have written asking for mandatory seat belts so that their views may become part of the public record.

I have a couple of other tablings. The first includes two petitions signed by 90 Canadians of Chilean ancestry asking the Premier to apologize to the Chilean community for his remarks on the Pinochet military dictatorship.

The second is a letter from Adolfo Silva of Milton, Ontario, dated May 11, 2004, addressed to the Premier regarding his recent remarks on the Pinochet military dictatorship. He's deeply concerned with the Premier's philosophical thinking and its serious ramifications threatening the civil and democratic rights of the people.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings this afternoon. The first is a notice of power bills increasing up to 20 per cent from May 11, 2004, in the *Daily Express* in England as there's work needed to improve their national electricity grid.

The second tabling I have is a notice for a public forum that's to occur Wednesday, May 19, 2004, at Kilkenny Hall. The special guest will be Ken Gosling, a member of B.C.'s Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

Thank you.

head:

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Mr. Mar, Minister of Health and Wellness, pursuant to the Nursing Profession Act, Alberta Association of Registered Nurses annual report 2002-2003 and the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses financial statements for the year ended September 30, 2003; on behalf of the hon. member Mr. Griffiths, hon. Member for Wainwright, e-mail petition signed by 204 Albertans opposing the exclusion of financial support for infertility treatments under the Canada Health Act.

The Speaker: On a point of clarification the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. Make it brief because I'm going to make a comment on this.

Point of Order

Clarification of Acting Speaker's Ruling

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, I wanted to get clarification of a ruling made yesterday by the Acting Speaker during debate on second reading of the Appropriation Act. When I rose to ask a question under the clause allowing the five-minute period, 29(2), I was denied the right to do so despite the fact that you provided an opportunity to other members to pose questions to me after I'd completed my

remarks on the amendment. This was the reasoned amendment to the Appropriation Act. So I would like clarification on the rules of that for all members.

The Speaker: Yes. I'd be happy to provide that.

A great deal of energy and activity was spent by the table officers yesterday looking at the historical basis for reasoned amendments and the like, and I think that many of them perhaps had their minds fixed on that rather than what then did happen in the House.

It's absolutely correct that during the debate that occurred yesterday afternoon on the amendment when I was in the chair, I invited members to participate in the five-minute exchange period that's provided for under Standing Order 29(2), and that was done by me. Then later in the afternoon, when I was not in the chair, a similar situation came up, and it's my understanding that the Deputy Chair of Committees basically did not afford that opportunity to the hon. members. The Deputy Chair of Committees has discussed this matter with me, and it should be very, very clear to all members that that provision is available even during debate on amendments in second reading. So it should have been made available yesterday.

That's just a clarification, I think, that is important, and it's clear in all intents that there's absolutely nothing in Standing Order 29 that would suggest that that would not be available.

Speaker's Ruling

Member's Apology

The Speaker: Now, hon. members, the other day I did something in the House when we had a question of a point of order and notice had already been provided to the House and to the chair that the hon. Minister of Finance wanted to rise on either a point of order or a point of privilege. What I did the other day was that when a particular member did it, I looked at the individual I knew that it was going to come to and I afforded that person an opportunity to, quote, do the right thing. That may be a bit abnormal.

I received some notification that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar would rise now and offer some . . . [interjection] Just a second. In the parliamentary tradition, depending on what will transpire here, there's a way of us dealing with these matters in the tradition of our thing. I don't know what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar is going to say. It would not mean that the Minister of Finance would not have an opportunity to say something, but I'm going to provide the hon. member . . . I did it the other day, and in fairness I'm going to do it again today for the decorum in the House. I'm going to afford this opportunity to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I don't know what the hon. member is going to say. It doesn't mean that – the hon. Minister of Finance will still have a chance.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to withdraw my remarks from earlier today in question period and apologize to the Minister of Finance.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there is a tradition we have that once an apology is provided and if the feeling is that it's a sincere apology, it would be accepted. It doesn't have to be, so we can continue this.

So I now offer the floor to the hon. Minister of Finance.

Point of Order

Inflammatory Language

Mrs. Nelson: Well, Mr. Speaker, while an attempt to get out of this

has been made, I find, quite frankly, that when the chairman of a select committee of this Legislature stands up and makes a comment to a minister of the Crown who has appeared before that committee in public, in *Hansard*, and indicates that I have said one thing or another at a meeting that only took place this morning and reports that wrongly in this Legislature, the damage is irreparable. I find it unconscionable that a chairman would in fact do that in this Legislature.

I would refer to our Standing Orders 15, 22, and 23. There is an honour, when you talk about honour, Mr. Speaker, in that when you are made the chairman of a select committee of this Legislature, you are given the responsibility and the privilege to head up that committee, not only to report the actions and findings of that committee within this Assembly but an obligation to report them accurately and honestly not only to this Assembly but to the people of Alberta.

2:50

Now, as the cameras were rolling and the accusation was made in the preamble to that question, I was most insulted. I have not received the Blues from question period today. I have looked at the Blues from this morning from the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I believe that there were some serious accusations made against me or attributed to comments from my deliberations this morning in that committee, and I would ask, Mr. Speaker, that I have the option to come down with a case of privilege on this member tomorrow after I have the chance to review those Blues from question period today because I feel that my integrity, my honesty, and my openness have been put in question.

I'll tell you one thing further, Mr. Speaker. At 5 minutes to 1 today, before coming to question period, I realized that I had given an incorrect answer to a question at Public Accounts this morning. I phoned this chairman and said that I want to set the record straight, that my controller had indicated that the blue book that I had filed with the Clerk yesterday was for records of \$25,000 and above; I had said \$5,000, and he corrected me. It really was \$5,000, and I didn't want him to have that incorrect information even before we came into the House. So I was being open and up front with him, and then he came around with this other game. I find that dishonest, and I pride myself that if I make a mistake, I'll stand up and say that I've made a mistake. But that kind of representation I find unconscionable.

So I'd ask your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, to allow me the latitude to come back after I review the Blues of both question period and Public Accounts to have a prima facie case of privilege.

The Speaker: Such a request is in order.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading**

Bill 31 Highways Development and Protection Act

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, I'm prepared to move Bill 31 in third reading.

Just momentarily I kind of had my head buried in the *Hansard* looking at some of the questions that were raised by members of the opposition, and I'd like to reiterate a number of items. One, the bill allows for taking over the jurisdiction of the 15,000 kilometres of secondary highway, which we did a number of years ago, and including that in the provincial highway network system. They will no longer be called secondary highways. They will just be provin-

cial highways, and they will be planned, designed, and co-ordinated in the same way as any other highways in the province of Alberta.

Now, while taking over the jurisdiction of secondaries and while they were in the jurisdiction of municipalities, Mr. Speaker, a municipality had the right to close the road for some community event, like a parade, but when we assumed full jurisdiction of the secondaries, of course, legally we couldn't really do that. So this bill gives us permission to close a road temporarily for other than an emergency event, and as you know, parades are quite important in rural Alberta, and of course there are certain standards and rules we must follow in closing the road briefly for a parade.

With respect to access roads, many years ago the province of Alberta did pave a number of access roads into smaller communities, which gave these small communities paved access from the municipality to the main highway. We have indicated that we will maintain those access roads, but in some cases we have to be careful with the kind of development that occurs and also be very cognizant of the kind of maintenance that occurs on those access roads, again.

There were a number of questions with respect to the ring roads in Edmonton and Calgary. The province always had jurisdiction over those particular roads. In fact, the land was acquired back during the previous administration, under Premier Lougheed. That was a very visionary move on their part, and now we're following up by finally building the roads in those particular areas.

I believe we've covered pretty well everything other than that there was a question raised with respect to removal of some developments along a highway that may lead to the distraction of the driver. This was raised by the Member for Edmonton-Glenarry. What this does is allows us to serve notice to those individuals that might have parked, for instance, a truck with a sign on it in the highway right-of-way or perhaps parked it in an intersection, where it's not only distracting the driver but also impedes the vision for the drivers. We have consulted, of course, with all municipalities, AUMA, AAMD and C, the Urban Development Institute, engineering firms, all groups that may have interest in roads and public roadways in the province.

I believe I've answered most of the questions. The bill does consolidate the two acts, and it will clarify a lot of the differences, let's say, between the Municipal Government Act and the old Public Highways Development Act and City Transportation Act.

I look forward to this bill being approved in the Legislature.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your time.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. I appreciate the answers that were furnished to my questions yesterday through the Minister of Children's Services. She later checked with the Minister of Transportation and brought me additional information, and I appreciate that.

It appears that the government has done due diligence here. They're completing a number of things that they had set out previously. They did a good job of briefing my colleague, the transportation critic, and they appear also to have done a good stakeholder feedback loop.

So at this point I'm happy to support third reading of Bill 31, the Highways Development and Protection Act.

[Motion carried; Bill 31 read a third time]

Bill 33 Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to move Bill 33, the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, for third reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 33 read a third time]

Bill 34 Income Trusts Liability Act

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Revenue on behalf of.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Calgary-Mountain View I'd like to move third reading of Bill 34, Income Trusts Liability Act.

This act, as was probably mentioned in previous stages, is to clarify that those unit holders of income trusts are actually protected by limited liability. Their structures are actually established that way, but it's to help ensure that there's no doubt in debate of law as to that point. It's not to attempt to address other aspects of income trust taxation or anything else. It's just to help clarify the liability.

There will be some further consultation to continue this summer with respect to other income trust governance kinds of questions that might relate to the securities legislation, and we'll be following that up after consultation and be happy to report back to this House later, but I'd like to move third reading of Bill 34.

3:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to comment in third reading of Bill 34, the Income Trusts Liability Act. I know that a number of my colleagues have spoken in other readings of this. In particular I think we were looking for answers to the questions that had been brought forward by the Member for Edmonton-Glengarry. I'm also noting in *Hansard* that the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar put a number of questions on the record. I hear the minister speaking on behalf of the sponsoring member, saying that there will be additional consultation, but I was hoping for the record to get some of those questions answered.

This is an interesting one. I've read what the government has put out; I've read a number of the articles that are dealing with it. Everybody seems cheerful and happy.

Mr. Mason: But not Laurie?

Ms Blakeman: Not me. No. I have concerns here about what the government is doing around management of revenue. Considering how lucky we've been to be located on enormous gas and oil reserves, my feeling on this is that we should have a lot more money than we do, so I continue to question some of the financial decisions that the government makes around tax policy for instance.

A number of times I've questioned the Minister of Revenue on forgone revenue. What are the performance measurements for a number of these schemes where we're giving people tax credits or whatever and we're not bringing in money that we expected to be bringing in?

What's bothering me about this is that it's about a reduction in the corporate income tax that's paid. Now, it's good for attracting investment dollars. There's been some discussion and argument about whether the money stays in Alberta or leaves Alberta. I'm more concerned about a reduction in the corporate tax level just given that we have a cyclical economy that is through moves like this one increasingly reliant on a high dollar-per-barrel amount of

money, and if that tanks, we're at a point where we've now reduced and continue to look at schemes that reduce corporate income tax, for example, to a level that's not sustainable. If that dollar per barrel goes down to I don't know what – any level that it's gone down to in the past: \$13 a barrel, \$10 a barrel, \$8 a barrel – we're sitting here with not very much that's flowing in through other income tax schemes that the government has in place.

Of course, you know, if you're going to have that kind of downturn in the economy – and we do here in Alberta; it's no use pretending we don't – companies go under, so there are even fewer that are paying this kind of income tax. So I always question these schemes, and I want to see the documentation that shows that in the long run this is a great idea and, frankly, that it's sustainable. Increasingly I'm questioning the government on the choices they make about managing our wealth.

So this one just doesn't sit as well with me as it does with some of my colleagues. That's why I enjoy being with the colleagues I'm with, because we can agree to disagree on things like this. I note that my other colleagues have been more supportive of it. I also note that we did put questions on the record to which we were expecting answers before we were going to be in a position of having to vote for or against the bill. It is my understanding that those answers have not been put on the record, and I've put my brief concerns on the record as well. I remain unconvinced that this is the great idea that everyone else seems to think it is.

Thank you for the opportunity.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to make a few brief remarks with respect to this bill. As Minister of Justice I meet from time to time with members of the legal community, mainly in Edmonton and Calgary. If I'm in Calgary, I'll arrange to go to a law firm and sit down with lawyers and talk to them about what they find to be impediments to growth or impediments to success in the province in terms of building our economic base and those sorts of things. In almost every one of those meetings I can tell you that one of the things that I've been advised of is the need for upgrading some of our business law in this province.

They've mentioned unlimited liability companies, they've mentioned limited liability partnerships, but most of all they've mentioned income trusts and the need for us to be as current as other jurisdictions and ahead of other jurisdictions with respect to income trusts, the question of limited liability for income trusts where most people believe it actually exists, but there's not a degree of certainty necessary for investors to be comfortable. That has been an issue that's been raised with me over and over again.

So I rise today in the House to say that I'm really pleased that this bill was brought forward in the spring session, that the Minister of Revenue and the Member for Calgary-Mountain View brought this bill to the floor of the House because it satisfies one of those areas that over and over again people who have worked with businesses in this province and who have worked on making sure that business works have made comments on.

Now, I also wanted to rise because the Member for Edmonton-Centre indicated, I think for the first time that I've heard her in the House, an acknowledgment that revenues are cyclical and that sometimes prices go up and sometimes prices go down and that we have in the past seen oil prices around \$10 a barrel. In fact, she even said \$8 a barrel. I think that's an important comment to note and that there is understanding on that side of the House of sustainability and the prudent course of action that this government has taken with respect to revenues and expenditures to maintain sustainability and

to ensure that we don't build program spending to a level that we can't afford.

That's the first I've seen of any understanding of that concept. I may be overblowing the point. Maybe it's not understood as well as I heard it expressed, but for the record I just wanted to congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre for acknowledging the severe volatility of oil and gas revenues and natural resource revenues that we have in this province that we have to address from time to time and to ensure for Albertans that we have a prudent expenditure pattern and that we don't overextend ourselves on program spending. I wanted to thank her for acknowledging that on the record.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. Is this what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands is participating under?

Mr. Mason: Yes, please, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. Mason: I'd like to ask the hon. Attorney General and Government House Leader whether or not, given his concern for the cyclical nature of resource revenue in the province, he thinks that it's prudent for the government to be cutting corporate income tax in half.

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure how that pertains to the bill that we're debating, but I'd be happy to answer the question. I think it's the aggressive approach that this government has taken to making Alberta a good place to do business that has provided economic opportunity and good income levels for most Albertans, and we're working on that for all Albertans. One of the ways to do that is to make sure that this is a great place to do business.

One of the ways to make sure that it's a great place to do business is to ensure that taxation levels are fair and reasonable, and I think the policies that have been undertaken with respect to reducing taxes and corporate taxes can demonstrably be shown to have improved the economic climate of the province and therefore improved the economic status of Alberta citizens. We know that when your economic status is good, there's a high correlation to your health care and to all those other things that make quality of life important.

The Speaker: Other questions, comments? Next speaker?

An Hon. Member: Question.

The Speaker: Question having been called, does the hon. Minister of Revenue want to conclude the debate?

3:10

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to clarify two points actually, one with respect to investors. This is about investor protection more than it is even just about the income trust organizations and entities. Investors are purchasing these represented, and certainly by structure, that they have limited liability protection.

There is a structure in existence with these income trusts where they lend the money to corporate entities who buy the assets, and therefore limited liability is held inside that corporate entity. But because it's not clear potentially in a debate of law, this is just to express the state and clarify what is actually the structure of income trusts. It's not a creation of a new structure. It's not even a creation of a new entity. Income trusts exist. It's not a creation of a new vehicle. They exist. It's to help clarify our business laws and reflect what is actually represented and purchased by the investors so that

they know with more certainty what it is that they're buying and are not subject to potentially even a minute fraction of risk that they are liable because the structure doesn't have the risk flowing back to them on limited liability.

Consultation: that is the key question, and that's why we're seeking the passage of the bill at this time. There are broader questions with respect to governance with the Securities Act that we are reviewing, not just with income trusts but more broadly. Those are the ones that are not specifically related that we will be consulting on over the summer months.

As such, we'd like to close debate for third reading.

[Motion carried; Bill 34 read a third time]

Bill 35

Companies Amendment Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General on behalf of.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Glenora I'd like to move Bill 35, the Companies Amendment Act, 2004, for third reading.

Mr. Speaker, this is a very simple and straightforward act. It amends the Companies Act with respect to allowing the Lieutenant Governor in Council discretion to exempt a company that's incorporated under that act from the residency requirements for directors.

Now, I think the purpose of the act had been explained to the House earlier. There is a company which is resident in Edmonton which is a not-for-profit corporation, which of course are the only companies which are now alive under the Companies Act. Members will know that the Business Corporations Act was passed subsequent to the Companies Act, so all for-profit companies, all other companies are incorporated or continued under the Business Corporations Act. So the only companies that are under the Companies Act are part 9 companies, or not-for-profit companies. We have about 2,000 not-for-profit companies registered under part 9 in Alberta.

We have the situation where we have a part 9 company – CIRG has been referred to in the House earlier – which has come out of the research and the work at the Alberta Cancer Board and which engages primarily in breast cancer research, as I understand it, but has experts from all over the world who are a part of this company which is headquartered in Edmonton and registered in Alberta under part 9 of our Companies Act. But they have international expertise, international directors and offices, as I understand it, in California and Paris, France.

Our Companies Act requires that 50 per cent of the directors of a company be resident Albertans. I believe that the Business Corporations Act has been changed to have 50 per cent Canadians, but the old Companies Act, because it still just applies to part 9 companies, probably wasn't amended, so the residency requirement is 50 per cent Albertans.

If this particular company was to be made to adhere to those rules, they would have two choices. They could either ask their international directors, the pre-eminent research scientists from around the world, to leave their board and lose that talent on their board, or they could take the company out of Alberta and reregister it in some other jurisdiction, presumably California or Paris. Neither of those are good options.

This is a very good case for Edmonton and Alberta to maintain a company that makes a great contribution, to bring that talent into this centre and keep it in this centre to do good things for Edmonton and for Alberta, and the residency requirement does not make a signifi-

cant difference if it makes any difference at all with respect to this company. So it is certainly a good situation to provide an exemption from the residency requirements.

Now, we brought that forward as a miscellaneous statute proposal because it makes such pre-eminent sense. The opposition quite rightly identified that there's a broader policy question at play, because the way you bring that forward in the Companies Act, which is an act of general application, is to allow an exemption which not just in theory but in actuality could allow the minister responsible to bring forward to the Lieutenant Governor in Council a proposal for an exemption for another company.

But there is no other company for which that type of proposal is being made, and the assurances have been given that this was intended. It was being brought forward for this particular circumstance, which is not to say that there couldn't be another circumstance where it might be appropriate. It was also indicated that broader public policy discussion with respect to the residency requirement for directors was being undertaken by the Department of Government Services as they undertook to review the Business Corporations Act in its entirety and, presumably at the same time, the Companies Act.

I was a little discouraged. I wasn't discouraged by the opposition not agreeing to it going to miscellaneous statutes, because you could always have a debate. I was discouraged by the suggestion that there was somehow a disingenuous motive or intention, and I was discouraged by the failure of the opposition and the third party to leap forward to help a company that's doing such good work, to allow it to continue to stay with Edmonton as its head office. I was particularly discouraged by the comments that were made on the record in debate in Committee of the Whole, particularly where we're talking about: this could have been done as a private member's bill.

Mr. Speaker, if you can call this a violation of the process, it would have been a much worse violation of the process to ask a standing committee of this House, the Private Bills Committee, to waive all of the requirements for a private bill in terms of the advertising requirements, in terms of the petition requirements and all the time frame requirements, ask them to give cursory consent to a hearing, which the Private Bills Committee usually has, and to prejudge what that standing committee of the House would determine in terms of such a hearing. The time frames in terms of having the bill brought to the House, referred to the committee, reported back to the House: to waive all of those process steps would have been a much larger breach of any process than bringing forward this simple amendment, which will allow on appropriate review the Lieutenant Governor in Council to grant an exemption.

So this is by far the better methodology than abrogating that private bills process. Abrogating that private bills process in that way, Mr. Speaker, would have then set a precedent for anyone else who missed the time frames and who had a matter of an urgent nature to again request that process to be abrogated, and we would have, I would suggest, faced far more possibilities of requests on an urgent basis for changes to be made in that manner than we're going to have from the concern that's been raised about opening the floodgates to one of the 2,000 part 9 companies in this province coming forward and asking for a director's exemption. Clearly, in granting any form of an exemption to any other applicant, it'll have to be reviewed, and there will have to be a conscious and rational reason for an exemption to be granted.

Let me also state, Mr. Speaker, that this is not a unique circumstance. We do this all the time with respect to the foreign ownership of land regulation. I believe it's in the Land Titles Act or the Law of Property Act, where there are foreign ownership of land regulations

and requirements with respect to citizenship or residency relative to the ownership of land. There is a provision that you can go to the Lieutenant Governor in Council for an exemption from those regulations in appropriate circumstances. Two or three times a year, maybe more often, those types of exemptions are granted.

Now, that's not the type of thing that needs the scrutiny of the Legislature. Usually it involves a specific incident, a specific circumstance where the criteria are brought forward in terms of the applicant for the exemption, and they have to show that the exemption is required for a valid reason. That's presumably the same process that would be in place with respect to this limited area of part 9 companies under the Companies Act. It's not a floodgate. There are only 2,000 of those companies. There's no guarantee that any other company would be granted an exemption.

I do grant that in passing this particular bill, it opens the door for someone else to ask for the exemption, and presumably in similar circumstances that request should be examined. This is not a disingenuous way of opening the door or floodgate for any other purpose. The sole purpose for bringing this bill forward, as I indicated to both opposition parties in the past when we raised this issue, was to deal with this circumstance, which is of an urgent nature and needed to be dealt with immediately or we risked losing a very important not-for-profit research company from this city of Edmonton.

3:20

For people who seem to believe that they're the only people who ever speak for this city, I can tell you that they're not. In fact, this hon. member and members in this government other than members in the capital region caucus were very keen to move quickly to ensure that we retained this jewel.

So I'd ask all members to vote for this bill in third reading.

Ms Blakeman: Well, I've been prompted to enter the discussion again. I was just going to let this go to a vote, but the remarks of the minister encouraged me to get to my feet again. I think that we have to be very careful here, because there's an interesting little exchange going on. I have to be very clear, and I also have to look to the minister to be able to put the fullness of the discussion before the Assembly.

I was very clear, when I spoke on this bill yesterday, on the support that was coming from the Official Opposition, and I included the third party opposition as well because their support was equal in our eagerness to assist the organization that was listed, the cancer research group. We were very concerned. We were very supportive of this organization. We did our due diligence. We contacted them. We spoke to the university. Phone calls flew back and forth between myself and the minister's office as we tried to make suggestions on how to accomplish what this group was seeking.

My concern about this debate is that it is removing yet another legislative opening, legislative process, legislative opportunity from this Assembly, never to come on this floor again. So one more opportunity to have this debated in the open, in public, covered by *Hansard* with members of the public able to come and listen to it has been removed from this House, and I see that happening too many times, Mr. Speaker.

My conversations back and forth with the minister and with his staff were about: "Yes, we want to help this company stay here. We want those jobs to stay here. We're proud of what they bring to our city. We would like to assist them."

What was being proposed in miscellaneous statutes is now exactly repeated in what we see before us in Bill 35. It is not being done for this one company. This is not a window to help one company. This

is a door through which all others may forever march if they so choose. My point is that they don't march through this Assembly any more, Mr. Speaker. They march through the cabinet and behind closed doors, and all we ever hear about it is if people are monitoring the *Gazette* and see the order in council spit out on the other side. That's my concern with what was going on here, and it's why I insisted that it get removed from miscellaneous statutes, as is the opportunity that is afforded to the opposition with miscellaneous statutes.

So, you know, I'm interested in the selected excerpts that the minister was sharing with us during his debates, in which he put my concerns about the process on the record but neglected to share the rest of my 15- or 20-minute debate from yesterday on how important it was to assist this company.

My concerns with what was originally proposed are still here, as you can see, Mr. Speaker. Why do I think it's important that we hang onto those residency requirements? People are saying, "Oh, come on. It's a global marketplace. We're all going to be global now, and we shouldn't be restricting directors to being 50 per cent Albertans. You're not getting with the swing of the new economy here, Laurie." And I say: well, yeah, I understand that. But I still say that we are talking about a situation where these part 9 nonprofit companies are eligible for grants from the Alberta government, and those grants come through taxpayers' money. Some of them have charitable status, and that has repercussions under the tax act, and that is in effect forgone revenue for the people of Alberta.

Do I have concerns when I'm watching money from the people of Alberta potentially flow through to a group and leave Alberta? Yeah, I do, and I'm not ashamed of that. I'm not ashamed of saying that I want to see that under scrutiny on the floor of the Assembly when that's going to happen. That won't happen with the passage of this bill now. Any of those 2,000 part 9 nonprofit companies can now approach the government, and it can go through the Lieutenant Governor in Council, which is cabinet – they're in cabinet meetings – and they can get their residency requirements waived. If they pop, and nobody knows unless they happen to be an avid reader of the *Gazette*, which I don't think many people are.

That is what my concern is all about, that ultimately there's another process moving behind closed doors. I think there's the potential here for Alberta taxpayers' money, which I think should be for the most part for the benefit of Albertans, to now be going elsewhere, that they may not realize that that's where it is, and they don't have any say in how that happens.

So those were my concerns around this. In refusing it to go through miscellaneous statutes, we do have the opportunity to put these remarks on the record. The Minister of Justice has done so, I have done so, and we will now have a vote on third reading of this act.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Before I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a real pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 15 students from the Innisfree Delnorte school. They are

accompanied today by two supervisors, Deanna Ford and Joyce Baker. Innisfree may not be the biggest school in Alberta, and it certainly, as I pointed out to the Minister of Infrastructure, is not the newest. However, it has continually produced some of the best students in Alberta, and from its small numbers they have achieved incredible success. I was honoured to have them in our office and try and answer some of their questions that the Minister of Transportation may have been more suitable to answer. It would be an honour, I think, for the Assembly to recognize these people. I'd ask the students and supervisors to rise and accept the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Government Bills and Orders**
Third Reading

Bill 35
Companies Amendment Act, 2004
(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm also pleased to rise to speak to third reading of Bill 35. I, also, wish to express my disagreement with the comments of the hon. Attorney General and Government House Leader with respect to the rationale of this bill. Certainly, I think the minister was persuaded that the provisions contained in this bill ought to have been removed from the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act because they represent a broad policy rather than just a routine administrative change. The question is whether or not the bill ought to provide the opportunity for all companies to be exempted from this provision.

I also would like to indicate that I would have been prepared to support a specific provision in the case of this company. What the government has chosen to do is take this authority to make an exemption from the nonprofit corporations requirement that at least 50 per cent of the members of the board of every company shall be resident Albertans and give the cabinet the authority to exempt any company that they choose.

The question for us, then, is: do we trust this government with this particular power that this bill is going to give to them? You know, certainly for the part of the New Democrat opposition, we do not.

3:30

Mr. Speaker, this is a continentalist government, and they have been doing whatever they can to erase the border between Canada and the United States. I hear thumping opposite, so obviously some members at least of this government are admitting through their thumping that they agree with this. Otherwise, they would not be applauding the statement that I made, which in any other Assembly would have provoked howls of outrage. Here they just applaud. So we see the government through its actions on the Canadian Wheat Board, through its actions in dealing with BSE working for ever-greater harmonization with the United States.

We had the spectacle of the Premier and the government at the outset of the Gulf War eager to support the United States' invasion of Iraq. Again there's applause around the Chamber, Mr. Speaker. Thank God we don't have Canadian young men and women in that quagmire over there. If it had been up to this government, we would have had dozens of Canadian young people killed by now in a useless war fighting for control of the world's oil supplies. Systematically the government chooses every opportunity it can to attack the federal government of Canada and to support the American government of George W. Bush.

Now, the question is: given that political reality are we going to

trust this government to eliminate the residency requirements for nonprofit corporations operating in Alberta? I say no, Mr. Speaker. I don't trust this government on this matter, and I think that they'll use the opportunity to approve at every stage the elimination of the residency requirements. In my view this is equivalent to just taking out the residency requirement altogether, because anybody that asks for it is going to get it. I think the record speaks for itself.

I happen to believe that it's very important that we retain residency requirements for boards of directors operating in this province and in this country. We ought to stand up and defend our sovereignty in this respect. So the New Democrat opposition will not be supporting this particular provision. The government could have made an exceptional bill that would have dealt with the specific case, and they ought to have done so. We will not support this. We want to make absolutely clear that we are not saying that we don't support the change for the particular company in the circumstances that have been provided. It can be supported in this particular case, but it ought to be the Legislature as a whole that makes that decision and not this government.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View on the Standing Order provision.

Ms Haley: I guess I just wanted some clarification from the hon. member on his comments about having young Canadians killed over there because of something that this government would have done. The fact is that we were supporting an ally, who I happen to believe may not be totally wrong here after watching what I saw yesterday on television of a young person having his head removed by terrorists. I'm a little concerned that you're not aware that we are in fact in Afghanistan, that we have our young men and women over there trying to help them establish some kind of democratic life not just for the men of that country but for the women of that country, that were totally and completely done under by a group of religious fanatics.

I just want to know, hon. member: are you aware of the gravity of that situation? Do you have to inject innuendo and allegations against people's motivations in here on a never-ending basis? Do you have to somehow find a way to tie something as innocuous as this bill back into a global conflict that we're all in and that we should all be paying attention to?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I want to indicate to the hon. member that I am indeed conscious and aware of what's going on. My remarks were related to this government's support, which was aborted at the last minute, for the illegal American invasion of Iraq, and I want to indicate that that would have been a grave mistake. Had this government had its way, Canada would have been in there participating in this illegal invasion and abuse of the Iraqi people.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is still available.

Then the hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General to conclude the debate.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll just conclude with a few remarks in response to Edmonton-Centre and Edmonton-Highlands.

First of all, Edmonton-Centre indicated that I hadn't quoted all of

her remarks, and of course that would be unnecessary because they are printed for time immemorial in *Hansard*. So everybody can read *Hansard* and know what it was that she said in Committee of the Whole.

I was particularly concerned, though, about the comments that were made about the government, and presumably, then, she's referring to me because I've been the one who's been shepherding this. Even though it falls within Government Services and is sponsored by Edmonton-Glenora, I was talking to her about this one. To suggest that I was somehow trying for a broader purpose – I just wanted to have on the record that that was wrong, that the sole purpose for which I was bringing this forward and pursuing this option was to deal with this company.

The fact that the appropriate amendment to the Companies Act to allow that to happen might make it available to some others of the 2,000 part 9 companies is in fact correct, and I've acknowledged that. But that's not the purpose for bringing it forward, that's not the intention to use it, and this is not some great government conspiracy to take all of our part 9 companies abroad and dissipate the government's and, therefore, the people's wealth somewhere else but this province. I just wanted to put that on the record and make that perfectly clear.

This doesn't always have to be about some hidden agenda. The opposition can take some of these things at face value and understand that people try to do good things on a day-to-day basis to ensure that this province gets to continually move ahead and the people of this province get to have a quality of life and health status which they deserve. That's the purpose. That's the agenda. I always feel that one has to get up and correct the record all the time, because for every time you try and move forward, there's someone in the opposition, sometimes the Member for Edmonton-Centre, who's suggesting that you're being disingenuous or that there's some ulterior motive or some other reason for doing this.

Now, the reasons for this bill being brought forward in the format it is. I've talked about how inappropriate it would have been to disembowel the private members' process for the purpose of this one-off issue. It would also be inappropriate to bring into a broad-based act a specific reference to an individual company. It wouldn't be appropriate to do that in the act. One of the things we ought to do is make sure that our legislation is written appropriately and consistently. So this, in my view, is the best way possible to achieve the aim that we want to achieve without changing the public policy in any dramatic way, and because it's a part 9 act and not all companies under the Business Corporations Act, it is, in my view, appropriate to do it this way.

The hon. member indicated in debate that she was concerned about taxes or public money somehow going abroad. Well, she's surely aware, because of her involvement with not-for-profit organizations, that there are many not-for-profit organizations incorporated in many different ways. Societies and others can have access to grants from the Wild Rose Foundation or others. People can raise money in this province through casinos, and those monies go offshore to communities in India to support schools and all sorts of other good works. We do that; we ought to do that; we ought to continue to do that.

The question of residency of directors is not the issue with respect to taxes or public money, whether it's here or whether it's going offshore. It's a question of whether there's an appropriate accountability process in place for that public money and how it is handed out. I would say to the hon. member that there is an appropriate accountability process for all the money that's given out by organizations like the Wild Rose Foundation and the Ministry of Gaming and others.

3:40

With respect to the comments from Edmonton-Highlands about trust, that's about what I would expect from the Member for Edmonton-Highlands. Of course he doesn't trust this government. It's his sworn duty to defeat this government. But this government has a very good record of appropriate consideration of issues; for example, under the foreign ownership of land regulations. Albertans trust this government, and this government is going to make sure that the right decisions are made in appropriate circumstances. Right now it's the right decision to make to keep this company an Alberta company and an Edmonton company doing good things for this city, and I'm just sorry that you won't help us do it.

[Motion carried; Bill 35 read a third time]

head: **Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

The Chair: I'd call the Committee of the Whole to order.

**Bill 32
Appropriation Act, 2004**

The Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered with respect to this bill? Okay. I seem to have three or four. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to take the opportunity to continue some comments about Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004. I had the opportunity earlier in debate to hear from the minister, and we talked about a lot of things. One of the things that we didn't explore was the lack of any provisions in the budget to deal with the tuition problem and, in fact, the postsecondary programs in the province.

I was reviewing the work of the Auditor General with respect to the Department of Learning and the performance measures that they have with respect to public satisfaction and with the affordability of the learning system and the report where they indicate that they are making progress in delivering high-quality learning experiences and opportunities for Alberta students. The Auditor General has taken issue with the policies of the government in this area. He comments in a number of areas, and I'd like to point them out this afternoon because I think it really is unfortunate that the budget has not taken the complaints of students, their parents, and the concerns of a number of Albertans very seriously with respect to postsecondary learning in the province.

In the survey that they conducted indicating that fewer Albertans think that the learning system is affordable, the drop in the numbers is quite dramatic, Mr. Chairman. Seventy-five per cent of the people surveyed in 2001 thought that the system was affordable. That was down to 63 per cent in 2002, and that's down to 52 per cent in 2003. So almost a 25 per cent drop in the number of people who feel that the postsecondary system is affordable. The Auditor General comments on that. Well, he relates it to the policy later in the report.

One of the things that he indicated was that there's some difficulty with the measures that they're using: that they're trying to measure too much at once, that they're trying to measure students, taxpayers, and different components – basic education, postsecondary apprenticeship – all at the same time, that you can't really tell what's caused the decrease in the results. I think that for students and for people who are interested in the postsecondary institutions, the

reason is really very obvious, and that's the dramatic rise in tuition and the lack of any real program to address it other than to make possible larger and larger student loans.

The Auditor General also took issue with the income levels that were used in the survey to indicate at what income level the financial barrier seems to kick in with respect to participation in learning opportunities. The study that the government uses and quotes from all the time uses the thresholds of \$40,000 and under and \$70,000 and more as income levels in looking at categories for determining reasons for not attending postsecondary education. The Auditor General makes the remark that there seems to be no justification for either number and, really, that the numbers that are produced are rendered useless without that kind of specification. We really don't know from the surveys given by the government the effect of rising tuition fees on participation in postsecondary education of eligible students at different income levels, at least as interpreted by the government.

A further complication for the Auditor General was that the participation rates for students eligible for colleges or technical institutions weren't measured, so they concentrated on universities but ignored a large part of the postsecondary programs of the province. Again, the admonishment from the Auditor General was that they should measure those other institutions and they should measure the impact of fees on the other institutions to see what kind of effect they're having on participation rates, the number of students that end up in these institutions.

He concludes in this section of the report, "Without periodically measuring the effectiveness of the tuition fee policy and related programs, the Department may not achieve its intended outcome." I think that that's a very important statement and one that the government has not taken seriously thus far. We didn't see the provisions in the budget, again, to address the matter of tuition and its effect on students in this province.

A second area that we didn't see addressed in the budget was the whole area of the cap, the 30 per cent cap. The Auditor General went through and indicated in a number of places that the government has relied heavily on this 30 per cent cap, yet he found that the policy itself needed clarifying. It wasn't clear, he observed, what that 30 per cent cap actually meant. He went on to indicate, for example, that "universities are not deducting all of the sponsored research costs in the calculation of . . . operating expenditures" and that "tuition fee revenues in the first year of a new program are not . . . included in the cap calculation." The government assured them that they were, but that wasn't apparent from what the department had reported.

3:50

The period that was used to adjust the figures used in the cap and the allowable increase calculations is not included in the policy. He indicated that while the policy exempts certain fees,

it doesn't make allowances for situations where the fee for an exempt service is included in the overall tuition fee. This results in institutions that don't charge separate fees having a higher cap . . . than those that charge the separate fee.

So in his findings a number of policy problems with the tuition cap.

He also indicated that the policy is too difficult to administer, and then went on to give some examples. "The Policy requires that the annual increase in fees for instruction cannot exceed average amount per student prescribed by the Department," and "as the calculation of the actual annual allowable increase per student is done approximately 18 months after the institutions have approved the fees, the calculation is [certainly] not timely enough for prompt action" to be taken.

The final area that he had concern with – again, it goes back to this business of timing – was that one college in the province had actually exceeded the cap for three years and that because of the timing and the reporting and when the institutions make decisions about tuition, this could happen under the policy that we have before us.

So the concerns about tuition and tuition policy have been raised by the Auditor General, and they weren't, Mr. Chairman, addressed in the budget. We have yet to have what I think is absolutely necessary, and that's a long, hard look at how we finance and support postsecondary education in this province.

That's not just an Alberta problem. It's a problem that's felt across the country, and it involves the federal government. I think the time is long overdue when we should have had this province and the federal government sitting down and looking at how we can sustain our institutions, make them affordable and accessible to students, and make sure that they are of the high quality that we all want and to do that in the long term and to look at the next 20 years and to see how we can sustain this system, not only just sustain it but actually have it grow and flourish. I think it's a dereliction of duty for provinces not to take that seriously and put in place a plan for, first of all, dealing with the problem that would result in a plan for financing those schools in the future.

I don't think we can go along the way we are, ad hoc, adding 2 per cent here, 5 per cent there, and hope that that's going to solve the problem, particularly with respect to tuition. When you look at the dramatic increases, Mr. Chairman, it's frightening for those of us who have children or grandchildren and look to trying to put in place financial resources that will see them through in the future. As I said, it's frightening. I think the need to put in place a plan for financing of postsecondary schools is long overdue.

I think, Mr. Chairman, I'll conclude with those remarks. Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much. I'm pleased to get the opportunity to speak in Committee of the Whole to the appropriation bill, because there were things that I didn't get a chance to speak to during the debate in some of the five ministries that I am the critic for. So I'm delighted to get additional opportunities.

I'll also note at this point that we're now debating the appropriation bill, expected to vote on it. Well, I debated the Community Development budget on March 30, the Solicitor General on April 27, the Department of Justice on April 28, Gaming on May 4, and Seniors on May 6. Now, I wouldn't have expected to get a turn-around on answers on the last two, but I was kind of hoping that I might have got some kind of response back to my questions on at least the first one or the first couple. I always struggle with voting on the appropriation bill when I've got questions that are out there that haven't been answered, because that influences my support or lack of it for the budget.

At this point perhaps I'll get all of those things in by tomorrow, and I'll have a chance to read through them all and be able to vote on the budget. I don't think those kinds of fairy tales really come true any more, but it is a problem with the timing of the way we go through this process. I note that, you know, there are a lot more of the ministerial staff than there is of me, so I was kind of hoping I might get some answers there.

One of the issues that I had raised in a couple of different departments and, again, I think is one of those sort of orphan issues because it doesn't sit wholly and permanently with any one ministry – in fact, a couple of the ministers to whom I raised this issue said:

well, wait until the regional Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying, and all will be revealed; all will happen. I was happy to attend that regional Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying, which took place in Calgary this past Thursday and Friday and maybe even Saturday. I was there on Friday, anyway. My concerns about this particular issue, which is the funding of sexual assault centres, was reinforced as I went through that day.

I think that really my concerns are that the funding of these centres falls under Children's Services at this point, who actually is doing some funding, the Solicitor General, who is doing some funding. It should also include Justice, I think, because Justice and the Solicitor General end up so closely tied together and are dealing with victims of crime but also the Minister of Health and Wellness and, you know, Community Development, which looks after sort of the human rights aspect. If there is a minister that's charged with responsibility for women's issues, it still falls under that portfolio. So a lot of the portfolios that I'm responsible for.

My concern about this is that the funding and responsibility for the sexual assault centres are not completely falling under any one of the ministries that I have mentioned. What happens is that as a result nobody is responsible, and this group of agencies is constantly falling through the cracks. They are spending so much of their time scrambling for funds and applying to all of these different ministries trying to scratch together enough, peg together enough, sew a patchwork of project funding to fund their agencies and keep going. I really think that that's a problem. When I say to people, "Did you know that sexual assault centres don't get operating funding?" people are amazed. They're shocked. "You're kidding." "No. Really." "You don't mean that." "Yes, I do."

4:00

There is no one that is providing operating funding for this. They get a little bit of funding around court counselling from the Solicitor General, but there are fairly narrow parameters for that program. You know, you might have one person whose salary is partly paid through the project grant that's available under the Solicitor General for that court counselling piece. The Minister of Children's Services has also picked up a piece around counselling for children, but not all victims of sexual violence are children.

What are you supposed to do when you're dealing with people who have, as often happens, experienced their real trauma as adults? They're adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Well, they're not falling under the Minister of Children's Services purview any more. So now where do they go? Health and Wellness? Well, Health and Wellness doesn't deal with that. They punt them back to Justice or Solicitor General, and occasionally we get the minister of women's issues involved in this one as well.

So that's what I'm trying to get the government to understand, that this is so fractured, and I'm looking to this government for someone to take responsibility to put together whatever interdepartmental agency you need to make sure that this issue is addressed and these agencies are looked to.

The concern that had been raised with me and that I had as I read through the documents that were a preparation for the regional Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying was that the language about sexual violence didn't even turn up. Every time there was the phrase "family violence and bullying." That appeared I don't know how many times in the documents, but I was 20 pages into the document before sexual violence or sexual assault showed up the first time. That's part of the problem. It was not top of mind for people, so when you get into these breakout groups and they all start trying to describe what the problem is or the issue is or to find solutions, that section was not being discussed. Why? Because what

was constantly in front of people? Family violence and bullying. What was talked about? Family violence and bullying. Did we get the sexual violence, sexual assault included in that? No.

I went through all but one of the breakout groups. There were 16, I think, and as far as I know I went to all of them except for the one that was a special breakout group for aboriginal people. I was in one of the aboriginal ones but not the special breakout one. That issue came up once, and that's because I know a staff person was in that particular group.

When I questioned a little bit more during the coffee breaks and the lunch hour and things, what I was told was: well, that voice wasn't heard very loud in the community consultations. Well, no, because we don't have a lot of sexual assault centres in Alberta. Frankly, their staff are trying to do the job, struggling to find the funding. I mean, they're incredibly underresourced. How were they supposed to be getting out to all of these community consultations and getting their agenda up at the top of the list? You don't have that many centres. I think there are less than a dozen in Alberta to start with, so even if you took every executive director and sent them out there, you're still not going to have a loud voice to get you on top of the list.

I know that I've spent a lot of time on this, and you've been very patient, Mr. Chairman, but, you know, somebody has got to champion this. This is the problem. Everybody keeps, sort of: well, nice idea; yeah, gee, we sure need to be concerned about that. Then they punt it off to somebody else. So, yes, I spent 20 minutes talking about it during the Children's Services debate, and I've probably spent another 20 minutes here, but if I'm the only one, then I'm the only one. I've identified this issue clearly now. I've explained to you why it's happened. I'm looking for the government to take charge of this. For heaven's sake, you are far more resourced than I am, and I've spent 40 minutes on it. If each of you spent 40 minutes on it, this would be done.

Mr. Hancock: For 40 minutes you want to spend \$40 million.

Ms Blakeman: No, it doesn't need \$40 million. As a matter of fact, there was an article in the *Edmonton Sun* on Tuesday, I think. I was talking about the surplus that is in the victims of crime fund, and they said to me: what would you do with that? I said: well, for starters you could fund these sexual assault centres for operating money. They did talk to Deb Tomlinson, who is their executive director or something, and she said: well, yeah, this is how much money we could use. The amount of money she said was \$5 million.

So it's not \$40 million, Mr. Attorney General. I understand the play on words there, but I'm just going to keep pitching those strikes to you, sir. What we really need is 5 million bucks, and that's not a lot of money in the scheme of things. So see what we can do about that one because I sure hope I don't have to give the same 40-minute speech next year. I'm sure we can deal with that.

Now, I'm going to go back, and I've brought with me the notes that I made when I was debating various budgets. The one that I was most short on time for was the Solicitor General's debate, so I'd like to complete the rest of the concerns and questions that I had, and I know that the minister will respond in writing to me, sooner rather than later I hope, with the answers on some of these.

The integrated crime. The Solicitor General set up the integrated organized crime and gang enforcement unit, which I think is referred to as IROC. I think it turns up on page 385 of the estimates. It's not mentioned specifically there, but I'm wondering what's going on with this IROC organization or with this agency. What is the funding for it? What are the operations that it's now involved in? I mean, I'm not talking secrets here, but what exactly is the unit now doing?

It was set up, and then we sort of hear it referred to but not with a great deal of detail. So on the record then, Madam Minister, if I could get what the operations are. What's going on here? What is the effectiveness of it? We heard an awful lot about it last June, and now it's not turning up in either the business plans or the estimates. So where is it? Where's the funding for it? Has the funding stopped? Is it not in this budget, or has it been turned over to the local police agencies to fund themselves? What's the deal here?

The sexual offender registry was much talked about by the Solicitor General a year or two ago I guess. I'm wondering: could we get an update on that? You know, how much is it used? How many hits on the site? How many people have been captured as a result of that?

The reason I'm asking is that it looks like a recent U.S. Department of Justice report of 10,000 sexual offenders in the States shows that 43 per cent of sexual offenders had been rearrested for any offence. That included sexual offences but also things like robbery, drug trafficking, highway violations I'm assuming, anything. That compares with a 68 per cent recommit rate for other criminals. So the recommit rate for sexual offenders is actually lower, and I thought: oh, that's not at all what I expected to see. That was a surprising statistic.

That brought to mind: okay; well, then, how is our registry doing? How many hits? How many people did it bring down? What is the effectiveness rating happening there?

On the MLA policing review we ended up with some things that were not really dealt with in the final report, and I'm just wondering if we can get a bit more detail. At one point there was a recommendation to look at unstaffed aerial drones, kind of little spy plane things out there flying around spying on those cows and chickens. [interjection] It is. It is too much fun that one. I had a great deal of fun with it the first time it was recommended, but it sort of dropped off the radar screen, if you will forgive the pun. I'm just wondering what happened with that. It was sort of not mentioned again, so I'm looking for the update status report, so to speak, on that one.

Another thing. The whole photoradar issue was just kind of slid off to the side of the table but left on the table. So where are we with that? Is it going to be followed through or not? Yes? No? Who's going to be responsible? More of it? Less of it? What's happening?

4:10

The deputy constables were given a nod in the final report, but that's the last we heard. We are looking to have how many of them put in place? Where? By when? What kind of training standards? And I'm particularly interested in the details about the training standards compared to what the training standards are for what I would call a regular police officer. If I could also maybe get this on a grid with comparisons to the kind of training and criteria that the special constables have. If I could get that information, that would be helpful.

Centralized training facility. Now, we were looking for that. Is there going to be some sort of sod-turning on that this year or the taking over of an existing building? Are we going to see a centralized training facility in Alberta in this fiscal year? If we're not, where does it come in the three-year rolling plan? Where does it come in the 20-year plan? I'd like to get a detailed update on what expectations, timing, and budget allocations are for a central police training facility.

Finally, the Amber Alert. Now, the last time the Amber Alert was used, two of the media outlets are adamant they did not receive the information. The minister must have done an investigation on that. I asked a question in the House. She, in fact, denied that that happened, but the Premier later confirmed in media statements that

there were glitches. So what has been looked at? What's been done to the program to try and address the concerns that came there? There was something that happened. I'm trying to remember what the media outlets were. I know that there were two of them. Maybe they're both radio stations. If we could hear the details on that one, that would be helpful, please.

I think those are my comments for the Solicitor General.

Now I'm going to move to the Department of Justice and Attorney General. The area that I was not able to fully explore with the minister was around mediation and restorative justice, and I very quickly in the last couple of minutes made a slapdash plea for funding rates for mediators that are used by the department. My concern was that we are trying to develop a professional layer of people here that provide services. We want the mediation and restorative justice services to be used. The minister is quite a leader in this. In some cases I think he gets ahead of everyone, and they're kind of scrambling to catch up there. He's a leader in implementing things like alternatives to the court system that still provide justice, things like mediation services and restorative justice techniques.

There are two issues here. One is around the funding of the Edmonton restorative justice centre. They have been struggling along for some time, and it seems that they were in for some funding. Somebody was supposed to take responsibility for it, and then something happened. The minister turned over or something, and they never got the grant. It never came through.

I do note that they were very quick to tell me that the current minister's office did find space for them – and they're very grateful for that – but that really they have no stability in their programming right now because they don't have operating funding. They recently shut down their victim/offender mediation program, and that program had been running from '94 to '04, so 11 years actually, and they just had to shut it down. They work on the UN principles of restorative justice.

They originally had seed funding from the Muttart, from the Rotary, from the Edmonton Community Foundation, and they needed to move into stable, predictable, long-term funding from the government, and that seems to have stumbled somewhere.

So if I can put in the plea to the minister – I mean, we know that this works, and we know that victims and the court system and offenders and everybody seem to be very happy with the justice of the results. It doesn't take up court time. [Ms Blakeman's speaking time expired]

I will get another opportunity, I hope, later to put more comments on the record. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just briefly to comment on some of the issues related to Justice and particularly to say thank you for the very nice comments you made with respect to the mediation processes. It is indeed one of the areas that we are trying to move forward on to make sure that the spectrum of dispute resolution in the province is as broad as it can be and that people have the opportunity to have their disputes resolved in a fair, effective way that's accessible on a timely basis and that is very affordable, obviously collaborative law processes in family law, mediative processes in other civil dispute areas, expanding the jurisdiction of the Provincial Court and then putting in the mediation processes there. There are, I would acknowledge, areas that we need to expand on. It's difficult to find resources always in a tight system, but we have to find better ways to resource the mediation process.

In comments in committee you raised the question of increasing the honorariums. We're finding that we have a significant number

of people who agree to put their names forward on the list because it's a good training process as well. It gives them good experience, and they can then take that experience and market it. So there's not a shortage of mediators, but I would acknowledge that the honorarium of \$100 for a two-hour session, possibly split between two mediators, is modest in the extreme.

By the same token, we have DSROs and DROs in Edmonton and Calgary. These are senior family law practitioners who volunteer their time to act, in essence, in the mediation process so that disputing parties can come forward. Instead of going to court, they can sit down with a DRO and have that DRO help them work through what a court would award and then come to a consent order basis. Those are done on a volunteer basis. They're pilot projects, but they've proved very successful.

I just wanted to mention that on the record and again say thank you on the record to the senior members of the family bar in Edmonton and Calgary who volunteer their time for those projects. It's very nice that they volunteer their time. It's a wonderful project, but I don't know how long we'll be able to expect that they will continue once we've determined how effective the process is, and it is very effective both at helping people get good answers and helping people get good resolution to their problems, helping them to participate in their own resolution. That's very important.

I've also been very supportive of the restorative justice processes. I think that they are ways in which people can actually get some finality, some closure, particularly in the criminal justice area, to their events, groups such as the Community Conferencing society in Edmonton and other groups that have come forward have engaged in a very meaningful way in the system to help people with dispute resolution in those cases with resolution of problems of a criminal nature and the work that the conferencing society has done with, for example, the Edmonton public school board with respect to working in the schools and helping resolve bullying matters in a restorative justice context, in bringing that all together – very good work.

Of course, one of the problems always is that there are a number of community organizations of people who are prepared to put their time and effort forward, but they get always held up on the basis of proper resourcing. That's an issue that we have to deal with. We have to find a way to bring similar type groups together so that we can provide adequate resourcing to do the administrative functions and leave them to explore their passion with respect to making communities a safer place. That's not a finished project by any stretch of the imagination. That needs more work.

There are some good things on the forefront. In Calgary, for example, coming out of the domestic violence project there is a group that is bringing together a family violence resource centre – that's not the right name for it – a place where all of the agencies, the police, the health services people, the counselling people can be collocated and not lose any of their independence with respect to what they're doing but share some of the administrative burden in terms of the operational side and provide a place where people know they can go to get assistance and a fast response.

4:20

So there are very, very good things happening in the community, and one of the things we have to be certain we don't do as a government is get in the way of those good things happening. But one of the things we ought to do is find better ways to support administratively and to encourage those groups so that they are not using their efforts on fundraising and on administration but that they are using their efforts in the community doing the work that they have chosen to come forward and do to make their communities a safer and better place.

So I appreciate the comments from the hon. member which allowed me to put those comments on the record.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. I'm just going to continue in the same vein there because I think this is important. The minister is right. There's the opportunity here to create that partnership and, more importantly, the facilitation of a process. We've built ourselves into a society that's sort of lost the ability to resolve our own disputes, and we tend to immediately turn to either the police or the courts and say: okay; somebody else decide this and fix it. What we've ended up with is absolutely, you know, packing the courts with a lot of disputes that really as human beings and good citizens and decent people we should be able to figure out ourselves. It also takes a huge cost burden off that justice system and often the police resources as well. Frankly, taxpayers end up paying for all of this, so if we can figure out a way to do this that accomplishes the same end or a better end for less money, then I think we should be doing it.

The issue here – and it's the issue that the minister touched on at the very end – is really about capacity of the agencies to support the work. When I talk about a partnership, I'm talking about, you know, the nonprofit agencies that exist, like the restorative justice centre in Edmonton, who administers the program, organizes the people, trains them, certifies them, tests them, schedules everybody to go out and be where they're supposed to be, does the intake on who's requesting mediation or restorative justice services, all of that sort of thing that, frankly, can be done very efficiently by a nonprofit organization, but that organization needs support. They need the capacity to be able to do that. The minister is right and I'm right about having that agency run around trying to find money all the time, and then they're not doing all the rest of those things that I listed, and that's what's missing here.

So I'm going to continue to press the minister because I think he's the one that needs to take the lead on this, and I know that there's often confusion between: where does this one fall? Solicitor General? Attorney General? I think it's going to have to fall under the Attorney General, and we need him to take the lead on this one and charge ahead with it, because I think it's probably going to fall most under him, and to make sure that that proper resourcing, his words there, is available so that those organizations have the capacity to actually go forward and do this work.

We all win at the end of this. We don't have those, you know, time-consuming and difficult cases in the courts when we could be learning how to resolve them better outside the court system and still achieve the justice and the punishment sometimes and the redemption that we're seeking here.

The other part of this – and I disagree with the minister more here, and I'm going to press him more on it – is around the honorarium for the mediators. He's saying: well, we've got no lack of people that are lining up to do this. But, you know, the process that's in place is that mediators have to do 10 free mediations before they're even considered to go on the list to be eligible to do this mediation for a hundred dollars for two hours. Mediators almost always work in tandem, so you really are talking fifty bucks apiece for two people to do two hours of work. That's a very poor showing.

If we are trying to create a group of people who are professionals and who will develop professional standards, have an organization that makes sure that they are properly trained and that there is a professional standard that they meet and that there's certification and that they're retested and all of those things that society has come to expect, then we are looking at a profession there. That's not to say that there aren't very good people who do this as a volunteer, and

it's not to say that they shouldn't be allowed to volunteer to do that if they choose.

The problem here is that we're sort of getting engaged in compulsive revoluteering and saying that this is a needed thing. We're recognizing the talent or the ability or the training of people in the community to do it, and then we're saying: well, we want you to do this all to a very high standard, but we're going to pay you almost no money to do this.

While the minister is saying that he's got a lineup of people to take on these 10 free ones before they start getting paid \$50, I'm also hearing from others. They won't go there. They don't want to get caught in that loop where they would end up being paid 25 bucks basically to do this. So he's missing out on a group of equally trained and talented people who just don't want to get in his system, and I think that's a problem. That's a warning signal to me. If we are serious about this, if we want to move more people into this system, then I think we need to take it seriously and we need to value it. I think that putting a hundred bucks on two people for two hours is not valuing this system.

The last point I want to make to that is the two-hour time limit, and I referred to this some time ago, I think, when I first talked about it. Expecting that you're going to close a mediation in two hours flies in the face of everything that mediation is to be about. It's to allow people to come to those agreements in their own time. Putting two hours on it says that you've got to solve this problem in two hours. It's an anathema to the way this process works.

I'm not saying that you set it up so everybody just, you know, sits around with their feet up and drinks coffee forever. That's not the point. You are trying to resolve this situation, but judging the success of it by either the number of cases that you've closed or by saying, "You've got a time limit of only two hours and then it's done," is not the way that this particular process should be judged at all. It's the antithesis of it, and I think it gets us into trouble.

Those were the issues I wanted to bring up around the mediation and restorative justice.

From the Justice department – just let me check the rest of my notes here. Oh, yeah, just at the very end there. On page 35 of his annual report I notice that 4,121 more people received legal aid services than was the eligible number. I'm sorry; I didn't explain that very well. Can the minister explain why 4,121 people more than the eligible number of people received legal aid services? I'm wondering: why does he identify it as the demand for it? Why is that so much higher, and who is it that's receiving these legal aid services? Who are the extra people here?

I'm just going backwards through my notes. Oh, yeah, that is it. Okay. So I managed to get the rest of those on the record, or it looks like some of my colleagues also asked questions that covered that stuff. That's good.

The Gaming ministry is the other one that I have here. The only issue outstanding on the Gaming ministry was the disagreement between the minister and the Alberta Gaming Research Institute, which produced a study on VLT gambling and the lack of resources to support or to treat problem gamblers. The minister came out very quickly saying: oh, well, this was a very small sample; I think there were 206 that were involved in the study, and that makes it too small to take seriously.

4:30

In fact, if the minister looks at the study, they were interviewing people who actually were addicts, so this wasn't just going out and finding 206 people – I hope I've got that number right – on the street and questioning them about attitudes towards problem VLT gambling. They were actually interviewing people in places where

gambling takes place and talking directly to people who were either actively engaged in it or were self-identifying. From the reading I've done on this, that's indicating that you were actually working in the pool of people that you're talking about, and it makes that number much more valid.

I'm wondering why the minister sort of continues to attempt to trivialize the work that was done in that study because of the numbers there. I'm assuming he would know this. Actually, that was quite a valid number of people that they were working with. So if I could get his comments on that.

In the Community Development debates I was remiss in not asking questions about the human rights cases. Every year I like to get an update on the number of cases that were new, the number of cases that went on to the commission, which is always sort of the highest level there, and the number of cases that were resolved. Then that gives us a number on how many are sort of sitting in the middle of the process somehow.

I'd also be interested, if the commission keeps the statistics, in what number of cases were recommended to be resolved. In a case where the complainant wants some sort of resolution, the human rights staff usually go to the company and say: there's a complaint against you; are you willing to work with them or apologize or offer money as compensation or whatever? Then that counteroffer will be brought back to the individual. I'm wondering if there are any numbers kept on how many individuals accept that counteroffer from the company? I'm just interested in that for other reasons.

Those were the outstanding comments that I had from the original debates. I was able to get everything on the Seniors' budget. Thank you very much for the opportunity to get the rest of those on the record, and I look forward to receiving responses in writing to them.

Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

[The clauses of Bill 32 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd move that the committee rise and report Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration and reports Bill 32.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; at 4:36 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Thursday, May 13, 2004**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 04/05/13

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Give to each member of this Legislature a strong and abiding sense of the great responsibilities laid upon us. Give us a deep and thorough understanding of the needs of the people we serve. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Klein: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature Anita Singh. Anita is a summer STEP student who is working in my office at McDougall Centre in Calgary. She is in Edmonton to meet some of the staff and officials in my office, who I'm sure she'll be regularly working with over the phone and through e-mail.

Anita is an energetic University of Calgary student who will be starting a master's degree in political science this fall. This past year she spent some time travelling in Japan, and a few years ago she spent a term studying in India as part of her undergraduate degree in political science. It's a pleasure to have this fine young Albertan join my staff for the summer, and I know that she will find the experience both rewarding and challenging.

I would ask that our honoured guest rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Tannas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all the members of the Assembly an enthusiastic group of young Albertans visiting us today from Millarville community school. They are accompanied by their teacher Mr. Hoffart and by parent volunteers and driver Mr. Shukster, Mrs. Robertson, Mrs. Higgin, and Mr. Brown. They're seated in the members' gallery this afternoon, and I'd ask them now to rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Renner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week it was my pleasure to rise and advise you of Medicine Hat being home to the best hockey team in the country, and today it's my pleasure to advise all members that we're also the home of some of the best schools in the country, one of which is represented in our Legislature today. Crestwood school is joining us for about the 15th consecutive year. Every year that I have served as the MLA, I've had the pleasure of introducing Crestwood school and their grade 6 students, and this year it is a distinct pleasure for me to do so again.

So if I could introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly a group of 99 visitors, that consists of the grade 6 students from Crestwood school along with their principal, David George; vice-principal Al Tisnic; their teachers Karen Irwin, Bev Slater, Wade Lawson, Kathy Western, and Gary Ziel. They've also been joined on this trip by parent helpers Vince Wong, Danette Heintz, Garth Knight, Jeff Thompson, Theresa Wilde, and Laurel

Hill. Mr. Speaker, if I could ask them to rise – they're in both the members' and visitors' galleries – and receive the warm recognition of all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On your behalf I'd like to introduce 17 grades 5 and 6 students from the Busby school, which is located in the Barrhead-Westlock constituency. They're accompanied this afternoon by teachers and group leaders Nancy Zeise, Tilly Yagos, Kyle Beattie, and parent helpers Dan Vandeborn, Rhonda Breadon, and Keith Bidne. They are seated in the gallery this afternoon, and I'd ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My guests won't be here until 2 o'clock, and I would ask to introduce them at that time.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise on this great Alberta day to introduce to you and through you to the House two gentlemen who are very special to me. They work very hard at keeping me out of trouble in my constituency, and I can assure you that that's a full-time job. I would like to introduce Mr. Shawn Jorgensen, who is our constituency office manager, and our STEP student for the third summer in a row, Mr. Jonah Mozeson. Would you gentlemen please stand up and receive the warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a very special visitor. Kristopher Knowles is sitting in our members' gallery. Kristopher has a wish, and that is to walk across Canada and spread the message: Don't Take Your Organs to Heaven; Heaven Knows We Need Them Here on Earth. Kristopher has been waiting for a liver for the last 13 years. He is raising awareness about organ donation. He's on day 127 of a 345-day walk that began in his hometown of Sarnia, Ontario. He will be in the city of Edmonton until the 16th of May. He is accompanied by his father, Kelly, and George Marcello, founder of the Step by Step Organ Transplant Association. I would ask that Kristopher, Kelly, and George please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Yankowsky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly the mother and the grandmother of one of our pages, Whitney Haynes. Whitney's grandmother is from Rossland, British Columbia, and is here for Whitney's grade 12 graduation from Austin O'Brien high school. Our guests are seated in your gallery, and I would like to ask them to please stand and receive the very warm welcome of this Assembly as I call out their names: Whitney's grandmother, Lois Haynes, and Whitney's mother, Brenda Haynes.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a truly remarkable woman, Mrs. Lesley Miller. On November 21, 2000, Mrs. Miller's husband, Dougald, was severely beaten and left for dead at the bottom of the stairs in an apartment building in Edmonton. Since that time Dougald has been in need of 24-hour care, unable to move or communicate. Mrs. Miller has been by her husband's side providing comfort and fighting for his rights to fair compensation. I cannot imagine what she has gone through, and I wouldn't dare to even pretend to understand the hardships that she and her husband have faced. What I do know is that she is an amazing woman with an amazing spirit. She's in the public gallery. I'd ask her to rise and receive the warm welcome of the entire Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great honour today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly some individuals that are visiting through a Rotary International exchange program. Both as a member of the Assembly and as a Rotarian and someone who has benefited from the Rotary exchange, it certainly brings home the importance of it. I want to apologize in advance for how their names may come out as opposed to how their parents thought. Will you please join me in welcoming Marcos Chait, Viviana Olivares, Raul Fuentes Howes, Ximena Aguirre, and Christian Lopez. Would they please stand and receive the Assembly's applause.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to introduce Stella Varvis, Erin Miller, Tricia Waddell, and Kim Van Vliet, who are accompanying them as members of the Rotary Club of Edmonton.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

Mr. Masyk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour and a privilege to introduce to you and through you my nephew Kirk Hansen, who arrived about an hour ago from High Prairie in the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake's constituency. I'd ask Cricket – that's his alias – to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms. Calahasen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to Members of the Leg. Assembly three wonderful people seated in the members' gallery. Originally from Grouard, my hometown, Mr. Albert Brule attends the U of A, has just finished, and is looking forward to working for the summer and going back in the fall. Also, two individuals originally from Gift Lake, Esther Laderoute and her son, Bryce Cunningham. She's attending the Academy of Learning and making sure that she gets an education. Her young son, Bryce, is just truly quite a bright young kid at six years old. I'd like the members of this Assembly to welcome them with a warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On what's highly

likely to be the last day of the spring session, I'm pleased to have this opportunity to introduce to you and through you to all hon. members of the House four very special guests who are seated in the public gallery. Three of them are visiting from British Columbia, from a very small town south of Nakusp called Fauquier. One of my guests, Denise Douglas, recently took on the Campbell Liberals in a long fight to keep free ferry services to her small town. Ms Douglas and her community were successful, and the ferries are running free of tolls. She is here with her children Nadine Douglas and Gareth Douglas and her mother, Nadine Hooper. Nadine Hooper is the mother of Marilyn Hooper, who is our outreach co-ordinator, and Denise is her sister. I would now ask my guests to please rise to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly three Edmontonians from the Chilean community: Sonia Varela, Maria Luisa Kobek, and Carlos Parraguez. Like thousands of other Canadians of Chilean ancestry they were forced to flee their homeland because of the brutality and oppression of the Pinochet dictatorship. These three guests are seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development.

Mr. Norris: Yes. Mr. Speaker, to you and through you to the House I'd like to introduce a constituent of mine who has joined us in the gallery, Mr. Don Clarke. Attributing it to the Alberta advantage, Don and his wife recently have opened a business in the constituency of Edmonton-McClung, and I'm told it's going extremely well. Don is no stranger to anybody in the House here, but I would like to have him stand and receive the warm welcome of this House.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Contract Tendering Policy

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans are wondering if this government is looking out for taxpayers or looking out for its own friends. In the past two years the health minister awarded over \$250,000 in contracts to the consulting firm of his own former executive assistant, Kelley Charlebois, without going through any competitive tendering process. To the minister of health: what role did the minister play in approving over \$250,000 for these contracts?

Mr. Mar: A very integral one, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister admitted yesterday that there was no competitive tendering process on these contracts, how do Albertans know that they got value for their money?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, I'll be happy to talk about that right now. An RFP is not required for contracts under \$100,000. At the beginning of a contract year we try our very best to estimate what we will require in terms of consulting advice and so on. I can assure the

hon. member that when the contract was signed at the beginning of the year, it was for less than \$100,000, but as you can understand and appreciate – and I think most people who operate large enterprises would – the value of a consultant over a period of time may result in them spending a great deal of time on a particular issue in one week and then perhaps no time the following week, but we can't exactly estimate the value of what the total contract plus expenses will be for an entire year.

I can say, Mr. Speaker, that Kelley Charlebois has had many years of experience in government and outside of government. You don't get that kind of training anywhere else, and government doesn't get the kind of advice that we get from this individual from people who have never worked inside government.

An example of a job that would have been given to Kelley Charlebois would be that all of the provinces of the country were asked to put forward a name as a representative to serve as a liaison with the Romanow commission. Now, no report is produced per se by the individual consultants, but I can assure hon. members of this House and Albertans that every province put forward the names of people that they thought would serve well in their capacity as a liaison with the Romanow commission. Other examples exist, Mr. Speaker, of work that he's done. I'm happy to outline it in more detail.

Again, Mr. Speaker, I can assure hon. members that the 250,000 approximate dollars that were spent over a two-year period – it's a lot of money. I acknowledge that. But consider that in the next 15 minutes we'll spend approximately \$250,000 on our health care system, which costs \$8 billion, and if I can improve the quality of the health care system, if I can improve the relationships with our health care providers, if I can improve our relationships with our regional health authorities by spending money on a consultant, I can assure you that I will continue to do so.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. To the same minister. He's described the work of this person. Why not use one of the hundreds – hundreds – of staff in his own department if not simply to reward a friend and supporter?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, we do in fact have many people in our department that work with outside groups, and let me say that we've accomplished a great deal in terms of renewal and reform of our health care system over the period of the last four years. Many people deserve credit, and some of the people that deserve credit work within our own civil service. We pay them credit for the work that's been done.

We also acknowledge, Mr. Speaker, that the work is being done by regional health authority chairs, chief executive officers, health professionals, physicians, nurses. There are many people who deserve the credit for the kind of high-quality health care system that we have today. But we also acknowledge that there's a role for outsiders, people from outside of government, to also give us a fresh perspective on some of the policy issues that we may be working on within government.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier: can the Premier tell us if other departments follow the same practice as Health and Wellness of awarding untendered contracts over a hundred thousand dollars to former government officials?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would imagine that all departments of government follow the rules.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Again to the Premier: can he tell us whether in 2003 the \$129,000 in contracts awarded to his former chief of staff, Rod Love, went through the proper tendering process, or did Mr. Love get the same free ride as Mr. Charlebois?

Mr. Klein: Well, first of all, I don't know if Mr. Charlebois got a free ride. I don't think he did. As the hon. minister pointed out, Mr. Charlebois is tremendously knowledgeable in government and in matters related to health. Mr. Love is also very knowledgeable in government matters, Mr. Speaker, and I would imagine that any consulting fees paid to Mr. Love were paid in accordance with the rules set by this Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Can the Premier tell us what reports Rod Love Consulting has completed for government, and will he table them?

Mr. Klein: I can't tell you offhand, Mr. Speaker, but if the hon. member will provide a written question, we'll be glad to provide the answers.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

1:50

Energy Deregulation

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When the EUB approved Direct Energy's application to buy the customers of ATCO, the Minister of Energy said, quote: finally the consumer is going to see some benefit. End of quote. But the only thing the consumer is going to see is even higher prices. Direct Energy's preferred one-year dual contract will charge Albertans 49 per cent more for natural gas and 36 per cent more for electricity than the current regulated rates. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. Where are the cheaper prices that this government promised energy deregulation would create?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, despite the member's anticompetitive attitude it's very clear that the more entrants that enter into a marketplace, the truer you get to a real price. It's also true that only a blind man would've not read events from *The Economist* and newspaper journals all over the world that talk about the changing price of the commodities which Albertans use in the form of electricity and natural gas.

What we do know, unlike other administrations, is that, one, there is no debt associated with this province associated with the prices of either natural gas or electricity; two, providers can provide electricity and natural gas to Albertans across Alberta; three, we do not run the peril of blacking out and we have an adequate supply of electricity across this province; and four, the price of these commodities also benefits Alberta in the terms of royalty income and jobs and unprecedented economic growth.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Again to the same minister: given that even Direct Energy's preferred five-year contract charges 38 per cent

more for natural gas and 21 per cent more for electricity than the regulated rate, what happens to Alberta consumers when the regulated rate option expires on July 1, 2006?

Mr. Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, his first question says that there is no choice. Then he provides two alternatives, which were not there in the prior world. In fact, I think there's ample evidence that the government has made the right decision in terms of making the private sector accountable, and the private sector is going to find out how appropriate those prices are by the uptake by Albertans on each particular rate offering. That information is fully in the public domain, governed carefully – carefully – by the consumer affairs department, the Government Services department, and the Fair Trading Act. We're going to see what in fact will occur in this market, and we will watch this market very carefully over the period between now and July 2006.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: is locking in to permanent high prices with energy contracts the only way Alberta consumers can guarantee themselves some stability in this whole energy deregulation boondoggle?

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, the preamble of the question makes it hypothetical in nature because it is so riddled with errors, but I shall attempt to sort and filter out an area where we can provide information. In fact, we are living on a continent where we've seen higher gas prices, but higher gas prices have also brought unprecedented prosperity and royalty revenue to this province. As natural gas is used by Albertans in the most highly consuming months, there is a program that rebates some of the government royalties back to individual Albertans.

Also, we see in the electricity market, Mr. Speaker, that Albertans enjoy very competitive if not the lowest priced electricity rates across Canada. That's particularly true in jurisdictions where there is not hydro power, that of course has an overwhelming corporate debt guaranteed by each province.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane.

Supplementary Prescription Drug Benefit Program

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier today I shared a podium with Janet Buterman, a young mother fighting cancer who was turned down for the government supplementary drug benefit plan because she owes \$401 in health care premium arrears, which she is duly paying down. Yesterday the minister denied that such a policy exists, yet there it is in black and white on the minister's department web site, which says that only those without health care premium arrears qualify for drug coverage. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given that the minister said yesterday that it's policy that individuals are not denied access to the health care system because of an inability to pay, then why does government policy dictate that individuals with health care premium debts don't qualify for prescription drug benefits under this plan?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, as has been my practice being minister of health for almost four years, I will not engage in the particular debate of the circumstances of an individual on the floor of this Assembly. I did ask the hon. member yesterday if he would provide me the name and the details of the particular individual that he was trying

to help. He has still not done so. If he was interested in helping this individual, he has wasted a day in doing so.

Fortunately, I have asked the officials in my department to find out the circumstances of this particular case. I'm committed to helping this individual get on supplementary health insurance, Alberta Blue Cross, for drug coverage. But beyond saying that we are committed to helping this individual, I will simply say that I will not deal with individual cases on the floor of this Assembly. It is not parliamentary.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Why can't the minister see that this isn't a problem that can be addressed on a case-by-case basis given that there may be many more Janet Butermans out there suffering in silence?

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member has more cases he'd like to bring forward, if he provides me with the names of such people, then I'd be happy to deal with it. Otherwise, it strikes me as being an entirely hypothetical question.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question to the minister: will the government change its coercive policy of denying Albertans like Janet Buterman access to needed prescription drug coverage unless they first pay their health care premium debts in full, and if so, when?

Mr. Mason: That's a question. Answer that question.

Mr. Mar: Mr. Speaker, making it louder doesn't make it a question.

Canmore Nordic Centre

Mrs. Tarchuk: Mr. Speaker, the Canmore Nordic Centre in my constituency hosted a number of skiing events during the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, but these facilities, the equipment, and the trails have worn, and there have been no substantial improvements since the centre's construction in 1986. In addition, international standards for cross-country skiing and biathlon have changed, which means that the Canmore Nordic Centre no longer qualifies to host international competitions. Can the Minister of Community Development, whose ministry owns and operates this centre, tell us what he is doing to address this very important issue?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. There's no doubt about it that the Canmore Nordic Centre has provided tremendous value to Albertans and to visitors and other tourists for the past many years. In fact, the economic impact of that has been very significant, as have the health benefits to all of the users.

However, she's quite correct. The equipment and the trails and the buildings and so on have come to the point where they do need to be visited and repaired and/or replaced in order to make the necessary improvements. Therefore, I did appoint a committee of senior managers from Community Development and I had co-operation from Economic Development and from Alberta Infrastructure to prepare what we call a business case scenario.

The long and short of it all, Mr. Speaker, is that they have now

reviewed every piece of equipment, every trail, every building and provided that business case scenario to us to have a look at, and I'm doing that. It does talk about the need for millions of dollars to replace and upgrade, so we will take some time to review that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this centre is so important to Albertans, to tourists, to the development of high-performance athletes and the hosting of international ski competitions, can we get a more specific answer on how long it'll take to get these much-needed upgrades?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I would like to think that we can probably get that done in a reasonable period of time. I have indicated to some of the people that are putting a bid forward, in fact, to host the World Cup in 2005 that in a perfect world we'd have some answer by the end of June, although I cannot guarantee what the results of the answer will be, because we're talking about potentially upwards of probably \$20 million to achieve what is necessary to elevate the Canmore Nordic Centre back to international standards. As we put that business case forward, it of course has to be balanced in the overall context of other government priorities. So as soon as possible we'll get an answer out.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

2:00 Victims' Assistance Programs

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In November 2000 Lesley Miller's husband, Dougald, was brutally beaten and left in 24-hour care for the rest of his life, unable to move or communicate. While the man who beat Dougald gets free room and board in prison, Mrs. Miller continues to struggle with bills for room and board and physiotherapy for her husband. Despite meeting with the Minister of Justice in February of this year, Mrs. Miller has received no word on what this government is prepared to do for her or her husband. My question is to the Minister of Justice. Can the minister explain what he is going to do to help out Mr. and Mrs. Miller?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is truly a tragic situation, and as the member said in his preamble, we have here a situation where a person who is an innocent victim of crime is in a long-term care facility and the person who committed the crime is in jail at the public's expense.

I did meet with Mrs. Miller, as the opposition leader indicated, and I indicated to her that I would conduct a review across government of what we might be able to do, because this is truly one of those situations which does not fit into any of the programs that are available. There isn't a program for this sort of situation. There's the victims of crime fund, which can engage and I believe has engaged. When you talk to the health authorities, the health authorities have some ability to provide coverage for a period of time, and I understand that's been reviewed. Depending on income levels, a person in this position might be able to access AISH. But those are all the things that one has to look at to see whether there's any other way that we can as a government deal with a person in this instance.

As I say, they don't come along very often, thank goodness.

They're tragic when they do. We have to make every effort to see what we can do about it. I've committed to Mrs. Miller that I will conduct that search. I've got a request signed so that I can access those files, which are private files and cannot be accessed. I certainly can't share the results of what I've received, because I don't have permission to do that and wouldn't in any event, but I can indicate that I'm doing everything I can to find a solution to this particular problem.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: exactly what does Mrs. Miller have to do from here on to the end of the process to gain fair and adequate compensation for her husband, who is the victim of such a terrible crime? Exactly what does she have to do?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, I'm not at liberty to discuss particular situations. I understand that there is the victims of crime fund, which is available and has been accessed, as I understand it, and that goes some way but doesn't go, perhaps, far enough. We have to look at whether there are ways – and I have to talk with the Solicitor General about that – that we can deal with the victims of crime fund parameters to see whether they can be extended. At present it doesn't look like that's possible without changes to legislation or regulations. So we have to review that.

I do know, Mr. Speaker, that while Mrs. Miller is receiving bills with respect to care on an ongoing basis, there is no pressure being put on with respect to the payment of those bills. So while the fact that she's receiving the bills will weigh heavily on a person's psyche, she I think does have some comfort in knowing that there is nobody actually pursuing payment of those bills at this time.

I need the time to continue to see what we can do, because whether we should or not, we do not have a program in place to deal with the unique circumstances of this particular tragic incident.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Then my question will be to the Premier. Will the Premier take it on to make this particular case a priority for his government to resolve as soon as possible?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. Government House Leader and Attorney General has indicated that he is investigating this case, plans to give it his utmost attention. It is a matter that certainly is of priority to the wife of the victim involved and, I would suspect, a matter of priority for the Attorney General. I would suggest to the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition: let the Attorney General do his work. Let us deal with it as government, and we will make sure – this is an undertaking – that the wife of the victim will be treated fairly, and the victim will be treated fairly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenarry.

Commercial Fishing Industry

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question is for the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Commercial fishing is very important on some lakes in my constituency. I've been hearing from fishing operators about the compensation program and other changes to the commercial fishing industry. This seems to have taken a long time to develop, so I wonder if the minister can tell us whether real progress is being made on this program?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is a very good question, a very important question. In fact, like the hon. member says, the process has been around for a long time. I know that in 1990-91 the process started. The commercial fishing industry itself is a very important industry in Alberta for a lot of fishermen, although it's a reasonably small industry. It's about \$5 million. On the other hand, the sport-fishing industry is about a \$350 million industry. So we always have to keep the balance.

What we are proposing here, Mr. Speaker, is to reduce the number of commercial fishing licences. Presently there are over 800 commercial fishing licences, access to 34,000 100-yard nets. What we'd like to do in Alberta to keep the balance is reduce that to about 200 licences, which would hold approximately 18,000 100-yard nets, so that we reduce the pressure on our lakes.

We commenced the program in April. To date over 340 individuals have applied for the compensation package. This process will take three to five years to process, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is for the same minister. What steps are being taken to allow commercial fishing operators to appeal decisions that they feel are unfair or biased with regard to the compensation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is a very good question and very important for those people involved in the process. The whole package was developed jointly with the commercial fishing industry. One of the things that they identified as the process moved forward was: will there be an appeal system? It's such a complicated process. Will there be an appeal system for those people that may fall through the cracks in the process? We did put an appeal system in place.

Rev. Abbott: My last supplemental is also for the same minister. How is his department going to ensure that our fisheries benefit from this initiative?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Like I said, the number of lakes that we have in Alberta to start with is about 800 to a thousand. It's not like Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where they have a lot more lakes to do commercial fishing and sport fishing. Therefore, we have to be very proactive in managing our lakes.

In fact, this spring we introduced the barbless hooks, as one example. We increased the commercial fishing licence to try and reduce, through the compensation program, the number of commercial fishermen. We ran some pilot projects and other projects like, for an example, improving the spawning areas of the fish by removing some beaver dams. It's working very well.

Hamelin Creek Culvert Project

Mr. Bonner: Mr. Speaker, the Hamelin Creek culvert project had \$2.8 million in cost overruns. My questions today are to the Minister of Transportation. Will the minister table in the Assembly supporting documentation for the cost overruns?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we'll provide the hon. member whatever information he requires on this particular project, whatever he requests.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you. To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: did the minister consult an engineering firm other than the original firm after the slide to the site occurred?

Mr. Stelmach: The process is that not only is there a consultant assigned to a particular project, but it's also reviewed by our department officials. In this case, Mr. Speaker, it was a geotechnical issue. Once the earth was opened up in placing the culvert, there was additional remedial work that had to be done, and we had to follow up on it to ensure that the culvert was placed correctly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonner: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: are members of the Treasury Board required to remove themselves from the approval process for projects that have cost overruns originating from their departments?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, every department is issued a budget, and we operate within those budgets, and at the end of the year the spending of those budgets is also reviewed by the Auditor General. So there are very significant processes in place. The policies are followed by not only cabinet but government as a whole.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Achievement Testing

Mr. McClelland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Learning. Recently the Department of Learning announced the intention of retesting at grade 4 certain students who did not do well at provincial achievement exams at the grade 3 level. My question: if this is such a necessary and good idea, why was the initiative so poorly received by school boards and teachers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, in answering this question, I believe the hon. member should have the rationale as to why we're considering doing this. The reason, quite simply, is because there are grade 3 students who, when they do the achievement tests, do not pass the achievement tests, who are not up to grade level, who are not to grade standard.

Mr. Speaker, included in the Learning Commission is a recommendation that all students shall succeed, that all students should learn. What we're attempting to do is to ensure through remediation that this 10 or 15 per cent of students that are not up to grade level are up to grade level by the end of grade 4. So it is extremely important for us first of all to have in place a remediation package so that we can work directly with these students, and that will be done with the particular school boards. Subsequently they need to have an exit exam to ensure that at the end of grade 4 they are up to grade level.

The reason, Mr. Speaker, why it was so poorly received, I believe, is because of the way it was put out. It was put out in a leak from my

department. It was something that was not ready to be put out at that particular time. It's very unfortunate when these leaks do occur.

As the hon. member fully well knows, this is an optional exam this year. The way we introduce all curriculum is optional first. We test it out there. We will be field testing it this year to see if this is the actual exam that is going to benefit, if it's the actual exam that is going to work to help improve the learning of students who did not learn in kindergarten to grade 3.

Mr. McClelland: Well, given that there was a leak that got it out in the first place, what is the department doing to get teachers and educators onside so that this worthwhile and good initiative is well received and does what it's intended to achieve?

Dr. Oberg: That's an excellent question, Mr. Speaker. What we will be doing over the next year is working with school boards, working with teachers to evaluate exactly how successful this initiative has been and will be. I feel very strongly and I think all government members here feel very strongly that every child must succeed in our school system. This is one way that we can ensure that we can show that our children will succeed.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Access to Motor Vehicle Information Database

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The War Amps isn't getting co-operation from private registries to meet the requirements set out by Government Services to allow them to continue accessing driver information for the key tag program. While the War Amps charity struggles to access registry information beyond 2006, the province is allowing most parking lot companies access to that very information. My questions are to the Minister of Government Services. Why is the bar being set so high for a proven charity that raises money for amputees, particularly child amputees?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, this question came forward in the House a couple of weeks ago, and we have worked with War Amps over the years to provide access to the motor vehicle database for their very valuable charitable fundraising purposes. We know the benefits that it gives to young people across this province in terms of making sure that their prosthesis is funded by that particular organization.

Nonprofit groups have been denied access to the motor vehicle database because there are about 8,000 of them across this province, and all fundraisers would love to have access to this. Because of War Amps and their very worthwhile project, keeping in mind the protection of privacy that is required by Albertans and is required in law, we made a special exemption for War Amps. We developed that exemption to give them access to the database until the year 2006, and in between now and 2006 we will work on a consent-based approach so that Albertans can consent to having their names and addresses added to that database that will be developed by War Amps. So we're not denying War Amps anything. As a matter of fact, if anything we are making a special exemption to accommodate War Amps at this time.

It's unfortunate that today I got a letter from War Amps saying that they were going to walk away from the discussions about consent. I have sent them a letter as of this morning asking them to reconsider that. We are still going to appear at the table to try and work this situation out with War Amps, but between now and 2006 they get total access so that they can put their database in place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. To the same minister: given that the department is accepting signs in parking lots as implied consent, will it accept a sign at registry offices or a statement on vehicle registration forms as implied consent for the War Amps key tag program?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have a partner in this, and it's called the Alberta association of registries. We have 226 registry offices across this province. Part of the negotiation that we would work through with War Amps and that association, because this kind of initiative would involve registry agents' offices, is one of the things that we had hoped to put on the table. It's going to be very difficult to put that on the table if War Amps is not at the table working with us.

I'm hoping that my letter to them today will convince them to come back to the table and work these kinds of arrangements out. The consent-based form that we're looking at would have to be agreed to by all parties. It's not our initiative. This is an initiative where Albertans can participate in a charity of their choice.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Again to the same minister: will the minister instruct registry offices to co-operate with the War Amps in order for the charity to meet the department's requirements to obtain registry information? Will they put the sign up?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, when you go to park your car in somebody's parking lot that is owned by them, they have an investment into the land, they have an investment into the equipment, they have an investment into the parking arrangement, and they have a fee to be paid for you parking in that particular lot. That is considered a private parking lot in this province. When you go there and you decide to park in that parking lot, you do so based on their rules, and we want to make sure under these new regulations that the rules are very, very well laid out before you gain access. By gaining access and going into a parking lot, then you have given consent that you go into a parking lot knowing the rules and the regulations by which you're parking.

The reverse of that is the situation with War Amps and getting Albertans' consent to have their names put on their database. They're completely different issues, although they are both based on consent: consent to go in to park your car based on the rules and the regulations, consent to have your name and address given to a charity based on the fact that you know that the charity is going to have your name in their database. So it's consent based, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

2:20

Labour Relations

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. For many years the Merit Contractors Association has been lobbying the Tory government to further tilt the playing field in their favour when bidding on construction contracts in competition with unionized contractors. [some applause] Something obviously supported by many here. A particular target of the Merit Contractors are market enhancement recovery funds, or MERFs. For the past year a Tory-dominated committee has been studying the issue, and this report has now been submitted to the Minister of Human Resources and

Employment. To the Minister of Human Resources and Employment: given that nonunion contractors are only looking for an advantage vis-à-vis unionized contractors when bidding on construction projects, why is the minister allowing nonunion contractors to dictate changes to the Labour Relations Code?

Mr. Dunford: Well, I think he's just a bit premature with his comments, and it might indicate more than that. Yes, I have received the report. Yes, we are looking at issues of both salting and MERFing. Yes, we will have the government response in the fullness of time.

Mr. Mason: Same old answer, Mr. Speaker.

Why would the minister even consider interfering in the marketplace by ruling out MERF funds, thereby giving an unfair advantage to nonunionized contractors bidding on construction projects?

Mr. Dunford: One of the . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. minister has the floor.

Mr. Dunford: I think that one of the key notes of this government, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that we respond to issues that are brought forward. We take a look at them, we analyze them, and then we make a response. Sometimes it's: hey, this is not an issue, and we're not going to deal with it. Sometimes we say: hey, this is an issue, and we will deal with it, and here's how we'll deal with it. We're currently in that area of the process right now where we're still looking at recommendations, and we will make a public announcement at the time the government response is ready. It is not ready right now. So scream and holler all you want; you look good on TV.

Mr. Mason: I'd like to thank the hon. minister.

Given that this is the last day this Assembly will sit for nearly six months, can the minister outline the process and the timeline he plans to use before finalizing the changes, if any, to rules around MERFing and salting in the construction trades?

Mr. Dunford: Way too early to make that kind of commitment. We still have to deal with the government response.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Calgary Regional Partnership

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The city of Calgary has taken the initiative to join with other municipalities in the area to form a regional partnership, which will be formally announced tomorrow. My first question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Can the minister please explain the benefits of this partnership and what he's doing to support it?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is exactly right. The Calgary Regional Partnership is made up of actually 15 municipalities. As I see the young students here today where they work together hand in hand with each other, really this regional partnership is about working together, coming together, collaborating, co-operating to eliminate duplication, and at the same time stretching the tax dollars at the municipal order of government in a way that best serves them. I want to say that tomorrow we're going

to be announcing 700,000 Alberta tax dollars going towards this regional partnership, because it is a very good initiative in stretching that dollar further and helping those municipalities that are involved.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can he tell us if he's prepared to fund other partnerships outside the Calgary region?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's important to say that we want to avoid duplication in terms of what is taking place. I also want to say that there are so many municipalities involved in this initiative. I failed to mention that the cities of Airdrie, Calgary, Bighorn, the Tsuu T'ina First Nation, Chestermere, Cochrane, and the MD of Foothills are involved. You may ask me: who else is involved? Strathmore, Turner Valley, Redwood Meadows, Canmore, Black Diamond, the MD of Rocky View. They're all involved.

I want to say, Mr. Speaker, that the capital region, here in Edmonton, also has an important initiative. The central region also has an initiative. They're coming together, working together, collaborating together to eliminate inefficiency so that we can stretch that dollar to best serve our citizens at the municipal order of government.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Redwater.

Achievement Testing

(continued)

Dr. Massey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government's proposal to test grade 3 students who fail to meet a satisfactory standard again at the end of the fourth grade has parents and teachers upset. The pedagogical reasons are lost on almost everyone. My questions are to the Minister of Learning. Why, if the government wants to help these children, do they not put in place a diagnostic test at the start of grade 4 that could then be used to plan instruction?

Dr. Oberg: That is part of our strategy.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. If you stay here long enough, good things happen.

My next question is to the same minister, Mr. Speaker. Why, when only 28 per cent of Learning Commission workbook respondents supported testing at grade 3, has the government added another test at grade 4?

Dr. Oberg: Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the issues, I think, that every MLA has heard about, that every person in Alberta has heard about and certainly wants, is that they want all children to succeed. Indeed, the Learning Commission's report is Every Child Learns; Every Child Succeeds.

Some of the people, Mr. Speaker, who are not succeeding are those people in kindergarten to grade 3 who are not at grade level by the end of grade 3. Typically in a provincial achievement test about 10 per cent – 10 to 12 to 15 per cent – of these kids are not there.

It's our job, as the people who control the learning system, as society controls the learning system, to ensure that these kids have the ability to read.

Quite simply, as the hon. member stated, there needs to be a diagnostic test to find out the question: why are these students not learning? Why are they not at grade level at the end of grade 3? Then there needs to be an exit exam at the end of grade 4 which will determine exactly: have they come up to grade level? Have they gained the skills that are necessary in order to compete in the world? Have they gained the necessary skills?

Mr. Speaker, one of the most important things that is shown is that a lot of those people who have problems later on in life, whether it's in school, whether it's in life in general after graduation, are people who did not pick up the basic skills in kindergarten to grade 3. That's what this test is about, and quite simply that's the rationale behind doing it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Massey: Thank you. Again to the same minister: is this the first step in a move to have an achievement test at the end of every elementary grade?

Dr. Oberg: No, Mr. Speaker, it isn't. Quite simply, what we are doing here is we are attempting to identify a specific population that has had problems that is not at grade level, and we're attempting to do something about it. I think everyone in Alberta wants every child to learn, every child to succeed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Redwater, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Centennial Project Funding

Mr. Broda: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Community Development recently announced new centennial funding for municipalities and community-owned legacy projects. While this is welcome news for communities in my constituency, I've heard concerns about the short timelines to apply for the funding. My questions are to the Minister of Community Development. Given that the municipalities and not-for-profit groups were only notified a few weeks ago about this new funding, why wasn't more time given for the application deadlines?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

2:30

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, thank you, hon. member, for the question. Mr. Speaker, I think the fact is that not-for-profit organizations in the province and in municipalities have been waiting since March 2 of 2001 for the next phase of the centennial program to come around. During the past three years of that window we have heard from about 1,200 potential applicants and informed them that at an appropriate time we will announce phase 3 of the Alberta centennial legacies grant program. We have stayed in touch with them, so it's not as if those particular groups for that program haven't been informed along the way that we were expecting to make progress quickly. That particular program carries about \$16 million, and it has an application deadline of June 15.

The other program, very briefly, is the centennial municipal per capita grant program. That one is almost an automatic grant program that will go out to every incorporated municipality in the province of Alberta, and it has an application deadline of June 30.

Now, all of these figures were contained in the budget announced back in March. We've done the best we can to get it out there quickly. The centennial is coming quickly, and we wanted to respond as quickly as possible.

Mr. Broda: To the same minister, Mr. Speaker: what process will the minister use to determine which projects will receive centennial funding?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, all projects will be evaluated against the same criteria of merit and ability to accomplish the project, the ability to attract the necessary matching requirement of funds. We're looking for applicants to provide two-thirds, and we will consider up to one-third to a normal maximum of about \$2 million under the centennial legacies phase 3 grant program. Other than that, we will also look at those areas of the province that have not yet received any of these centennial legacy grant funds, and then other related criteria will apply. In a nutshell, that's basically how the process will work.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Court Interpretation Services

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Ensuring access to court is important to all Albertans. For some men and women whose primary language is not English having access to a language interpreter is critical to ensuring them a fair trial and clear understanding of the laws of our land. I have raised a concern before with the Minister of Justice and Attorney General about the unchanging 20-year-old funding rate paid for language interpreters by Alberta Justice. So my question today: will the minister please provide members of the Assembly with an update on what his department has done to review the current fee structure for the Provincial Court interpreters?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Access to justice is a very, very important part of our business in the Department of Justice, and making sure that people understand the process and understand what's happening in court is integral to that. I agree that interpreters play an important and essential role in the courts by ensuring that language barriers do not impair the court's ability to take all relevant testimony and evidence into account and, also, that language barriers do not bar an individual from understanding what's happening to them or for them in a court of law.

This hon. member has raised this question with me a number of times, both in the House and in estimates, and I can say to him that we try very hard to make the resources that we have in the Department of Justice go as far as we possibly can. We continually try and bring on new initiatives, but continuing the provision of the infrastructure and the operation of the court system and the rest of the process does take up a lot of resources.

We're constantly reviewing those. We have a committee which is looking at witness management practices. We've asked that committee to look at the issue relative to interpreters, and we hope that we will get from that a recommendation as to what the highest priorities are to ensure that Albertans have access to justice and that language is not a barrier to access to justice.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: can the minister advise if there is anything that can be done now within the current fee structure to address the concerns of interpreters?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We try to make sure that we have competent interpreters in court. If there's a concern about the availability of a competent interpreter based on the monies that we have available to pay, we can adjust the remuneration on a case-by-case basis, and we do that analysis and make that adjustment.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

Hon. members, before I call on the first of four for Members' Statements, let me just say wow. That was very, very good this week, assisting the chair in allowing hon. members to participate. On Monday we had 13 members that could participate; Tuesday, 14; Wednesday, 14; and today, 15. That's an average of 14 a day, or 56 members that could participate. That's really very, very good.

Might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Learning.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour and privilege to introduce some guests that I have here today from Brooks. These ladies and gentlemen are from the Holy Family Academy. The teachers that are present are Wayne Lorenz, Mike Fleck, Reg Orich, and Shannon Hurley. The parent helpers, who give an incredible amount of support especially in this particular school, are Denise Amundson, Moe Bell, Rob Bartusek, Caroline Tilley, Theresa Paproski, Debbie LaRocque, Stan Waddell, my neighbour Treena Ramsay, Tracey Waddell, Mrs. Peeters, and Elsie and Robert Craig. The total number of visitors that are here today from Brooks is 70. They're the ones wearing the brilliant orange shirts in the gallery. I would ask them all to rise and receive the warm welcome of our Legislative Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Rocky View.

Chestermere Lake Middle School EarthKAM Project

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to be able to rise today and offer my sincere congratulations to a group of 36 enthusiastic students from Chestermere Lake middle school and their five staff advisors led by their teacher, Mr. Brian Jackson.

Chestermere Lake middle school is the first school in Canada to participate in the International Space Station's EarthKAM project. EarthKAM is a unique educational initiative that allows students the opportunity to control an on-board camera mounted on the International Space Station. The initiative is sponsored by NASA's Johnson Space Center, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, the University of California in San Diego, and Dr. Sally Ride, the first American woman in the space program.

The week-long International Space Station EarthKAM missions occur about once every three months, and during each mission

participating schools arrange their own mission operation centre, which consists of student teams involved in taking photographs every hour of the mission, charting, recording, and verifying photos of Earth as seen from the International Space Station.

The program helps students learn to recognize and conduct research on features of the Earth in addition to locating the exact geographical location of the images used in maps and atlases. The student requests are collected, compiled, and up-linked to a computer aboard the space station, and the EarthKAM digital camera takes the photos, sends the images back to the computer, and then back to the International Space Station EarthKAM computers on the ground. These photographs are then made available on the web site to the schools as well as to the general public.

Mr. Speaker, I'm so proud of this group of students, their teachers, and the entire Rockyview school division for making science come to life and want to recognize them in the Assembly today for being accepted as a participating school in this great educational opportunity. I wish all the students good luck today in their endeavours as they're doing this while the rest of us earthbound mortals continue to do our work down below the space station.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane.

Canmore IceCats Atom A Hockey Team

Mrs. Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take this opportunity today to recognize a tenacious and talented group of young constituents who have proven that hard work is often rewarded. The Canmore IceCats cleared the benches and mauled their goalie when they captured the provincial atom A championship on home ice recently.

It was the first time in 22 years that Canmore was chosen as a venue for a provincial hockey championship, and the local team didn't disappoint us. They skated away with an 8-2 win over the Morinville Snipers in the championship game.

Curtis Azevedo, Landis Burr, Alex Cartwright, Owen Ferguson, Davis Fleischer, Marcus Messier, Nils Moser, Ken Naito, David Norris, Jordan Pauls, Luke Philip, Simon Philip, Tanner Sautner, Luke Simpson, and John Stevens exhibited much skill as a team as the IceCats outscored their opponents 58 to 18 during the five games they needed to capture the provincial crown. The team was coached by Peter Philip, Luke Azevedo, Ron Sautner, and Mitch Messier, while David Fleischer was the team's manager.

The five-game winning streak capped an amazing run that the team experienced leading up to the provincials. The IceCats strung together 27 wins in a row before competing for the Alberta title. The last time the team experienced a defeat was in November 2003.

This team deserves to be congratulated for their team effort and their ability to focus on a common goal. Undoubtedly, it was the focus that was a major contributor to this amazing achievement.

In addition to the IceCats team I would also like to congratulate and commend the Canmore Minor Hockey Association and its volunteers for the fantastic work they did in making sure the tournament was a first-class one.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:40

Government Accountability

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This spring session of the Legislature has made one point very clear: it's time for more accountability from this government. The Alberta Liberals

have responded with some guidelines for the government to follow. I'll call it six steps toward greater accountability.

One, the government should bring in a lobbyist registry so the public knows who is meeting and getting the ear of the Premier, his ministers, and staff.

Two, bring in rules on how taxpayers' money is spent on hosting. Alberta should introduce rules like Ontario's, which set guidelines and define appropriate spending and prohibit lavish dinners and spending on alcohol.

Three, Alberta has a freedom of information act. It's time to use it properly. Taxpayers and their representatives, such as the Official Opposition, should be able to obtain information from the government without the artificial barriers of delay, costs, and omissions from the Premier, his ministers, or staff.

Four, the government should be more accountable for how it spends taxpayers' money on travel. Most Albertans are careful with their own money. They expect the same caution from government.

Five, all information on government expenses should be accessible, detailed, and released in a timely manner. We suggest posting on the Internet.

Six, don't mix government business, party business, and pleasure. The government must clearly account for what source of money it uses for what activity.

An Alberta Liberal government would follow these six simple steps. Will the current government?

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Democracy in Alberta

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In this House I've often spoken about the need to strengthen democracy in this province through such means as all-party policy committees and proportional representation. In light of the events over the last few weeks and days I think democracy needs a lot more to be done in this province now.

A week ago the Premier made comments that seemed to many to support Pinochet's bloody 1973 coup, which ended a long tradition of democratic rule and governance in Chile. This week the Premier deepened the insult when he said that Chilean socialists had brought the unintended consequences upon themselves. The implication was that supporters of the democratically elected President Allende had brought Pinochet's brutality upon themselves and that the victims of torture and abuse deserved retribution for electing a government committed to democracy and social justice.

One thing the Premier could have learned but didn't from his recent trip to India, Mr. Speaker, is unconditional respect, respect without reservation for the electoral choices citizens make in a democracy. This week's comments show a chilling lack of respect for democratic processes, and Albertans must wonder what other ways of avoiding or submerging democracy are supported by the Premier.

Mr. Speaker, this week a local radio station played a harmless prank on the Premier. Within a day the station had not only apologized but had produced \$1,000 for a charity of the Premier's choosing. This timely act of contrition stands in stark contrast to the Premier's belligerent refusal to offer a sincere apology to the thousands of Chileans who fled their homeland because of fears of disappearances, torture, and murder at the hands of Pinochet's regime.

On behalf of the New Democrat opposition I would like to echo and amplify calls for a sincere and full apology to Alberta's Chilean

community by the Premier. I would also suggest that the Premier consider making his own thousand dollar contribution to a charity of the Chilean community's choice. It is the least he can do to show regret for his affront to democracy in general, to Chilean democracy in particular, and for his apparent approval of Pinochet's brutal coup.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to Standing Order 34(2) to give notice that on the next sitting day of the Assembly I will move that motions for returns appearing on the Order Paper do stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 162, 164 through 168, 174 through 180, 183 through 205, and 207, 208, 209, and 210.

Thank you.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Stevens: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings. They are responses to outstanding questions asked by the MLA for Edmonton-Centre, the MLA for Calgary-Egmont, and the MLA for Edmonton-Highlands during Committee of Supply with respect to Gaming and the Alberta lottery fund estimates.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mr. Doerksen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday in question period I promised to provide the Member for Edmonton-Centre a more specific response to a question, and I table that today.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling responses to questions raised during Committee of Supply estimates of the Department of Justice which I hadn't fully responded to during the Committee of Supply. Those were questions raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Four quick tablings today. First, copies of my response to Written Question 3.

Secondly, copies of the government's response to written questions 6, 7, 8, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 34, 46, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 72, 73, 80, and 81.

Third, copies of the government's response to motions for returns 16, 17, 50, 51, 54, 63, 74, 76, 77, 106, 107, 124, 125, 126, 127, 144, 145, and 206.

Also, copies of the government's response to motions for returns 34, 46, 66, 69, 93, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 174, 175, 176, 178, 179, 180, 189, 197, 200, 201, 202, and 203.

Where appropriate, copies of the aforementioned tablings have now been provided to the House leader of the Official Opposition for distribution to her various members who raised those questions.

Thank you.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, today I rise to table responses to questions raised during Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development budget estimates in Committee of Supply on April 19. These

were questions that I was unable to respond to at the time. Therefore, I'm ensuring that they get the answers, and I've forwarded these responses to the Leader of the Opposition as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have the great pleasure of tabling copies of a letter congratulating Kent Gigliuk, Paul Waisman, Josh Cockburn, Adam Peter, and Jordie Weich, all members of the Red Deer Heritage Lanes junior boys team for winning the YBC five-pin national championship in St. John's, Newfoundland, on May 3, 2004. This Alberta junior boys team is coached by Greg Gigliuk. They will display their gold medals at their home club, Heritage Lanes, in Red Deer. I know that we are all very proud of the accomplishments of Alberta's junior boys team.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling this afternoon, and it is documentation from the Alberta Construction Association in regard to MERFs, or market enhancement recovery funds.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table the appropriate number of copies of a special report from the British publication *Guardian Weekly's* internet edition called *Guardian Unlimited*, published on March 3, 2000. The document entitled *Victims of a Brutal Regime* bears witness to the 3,197 people who were tortured, murdered, or simply disappeared in Chile during Pinochet's 17-year regime.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling the appropriate number of copies of an open letter dated May 11, 2004, from Patricia Pasten addressed to the Premier regarding his recent remarks on Pinochet. Ms Pasten states that the Premier has insulted the Chilean community and she is awaiting a public apology.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

2:50

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table five copies of a letter from Kim Robinson, who is a tourist from Ontario who visited the GuZoo Animal Farm in Three Hills and noted that "the overall state of the facility was one of disorder," that animals didn't have potable water, and a number of other observations while she was there.

Thank you very much.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Norris, Minister of Economic Development, the report entitled *Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity: Sustaining the Alberta Advantage*.

head: **Projected Government Business**

The Speaker: The Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. In accordance with Standing Order 7(5) I would ask the Government House Leader to please share the projected government business for the upcoming week.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is no projected government business for the upcoming week. We anticipate that this might be the last day of the session. The Order Paper is clean.

Privilege

Inflammatory Language

The Speaker: Hon. members, yesterday at the conclusion of the Routine just prior to Orders of the Day there was an exchange between hon. members, and at that point in time the hon. Minister of Finance indicated to the House that she would be rising today on a question of privilege.

Standing Order 15(2) indicates that a member wishing to raise such shall give notice. I view that as notice given, so it meets the intent if the hon. Minister of Finance wants to proceed.

Mrs. Nelson: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise under Standing Order 15(1) to raise a point of privilege pertaining to comments made in this Assembly yesterday afternoon, May 12, 2004, by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I refer to *Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules and Forms*, sixth edition, page 25, and *Erskine May*, 21st edition, page 69. Both of these authorities clearly confirm that a member should never feel harassed in the performance of their duties.

Yesterday I was harassed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. Mr. Speaker, during the publicly televised question period in this House the member opposite questioned my performance as a minister of the Crown. In posing his question, he referred to a statement allegedly made by me during my appearance before the Public Accounts Committee earlier in the day.

As chair of that select standing committee of the Legislature the member opposite has a special responsibility to report to this House on the actions and activities of the committee. A member of the Assembly who is appointed chair of a select committee is held to a high standard of truth and integrity because of their position of privilege. Furthermore, there is an expectation that he will report on those activities in a manner that is fair and accurate. In fact, Mr. Speaker, it is his obligation to do so.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday in his question the member opposite failed to fulfill any of those expectations or obligations. In deliberately doing what he did, he has inferred and compromised my abilities to function as a minister of the Crown and, as a result, deliberately misled this House and the viewing public about my statements earlier in the day in Public Accounts.

I refer you, Mr. Speaker, to page 1389 of *Hansard*, dated May 12, 2004. The Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar stated:

The Finance minister in an astonishing display of mismanagement admitted to the Public Accounts Committee this morning that she fumbled the ball on skyrocketing auto insurance rates when she indicated that she didn't know her department was rubber-stamping rate increases that led to a record high 59 per cent rise in auto insurance premiums for average Albertans.

Now, I refer to the *Hansard* from the Public Accounts meeting of May 12, 2004, at 9:05 a.m. In response to a question from the Member for Edmonton-Centre about the number of insurance rate increases approved by the Automobile Insurance Board in 2002 I replied:

That's why I brought the issue forward, and that's why we're making a change. That's not acceptable. That's why you saw in here that we already identified that we had a problem. We've got to make a change because that's not an acceptable process, watching those kinds of increases occur without challenge. So we're going to have to regulate. When I saw this happen, we started to make the correction at that point.

That's the Hansard Blues transcript of my comments to the Public Accounts Committee, Mr. Speaker.

Clearly, there's absolutely no similarity between the Hansard Blues record of what transpired in Public Accounts earlier in the day and the misleading and inaccurate portrayal uttered by the member opposite during question period yesterday. Not only did the member opposite distort the comments I made during Public Accounts, but he misled this House by providing erroneous information that clearly is not on the record from that meeting. Further, Mr. Speaker, that erroneous and misleading information was broadcast live on television throughout the province.

There can be no doubt that this was deliberate and premeditated. Yesterday as he rose in this House, the hon. member clearly read from his prepared script as he proceeded to misrepresent my earlier statement. He didn't just ad lib from the top of his head; he had it written down in advance. By his deliberate actions, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite has breached my privileges as a member of this House.

During the normal give-and-take of a question period it's not uncommon for the debate to become heated and for words to fly across the Chamber that question the performance of a minister. However, it is entirely a different matter for the chair of a select standing committee to rise in this House and report that a minister has made self-incriminating comments to that committee. It is also a different matter when the chair of that committee declares to this House that statements were made during a meeting of the select committee that clearly were not.

Mr. Speaker, you have pointed out to all members of this Assembly that when a transgression occurs, a sincere apology from the member responsible is traditionally accepted by the offended party, and that is certainly the practice of this House. But I would submit that the words offered by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar fell well short of what could be considered sincere.

This chair of the select committee made his allegations on live television for all to hear, not to mention the school groups watching from the galleries. His meagre words of contrite apology came well after the televised question period, only when the members of the House and a few gallery guests were gathered to see that the record was set straight.

Mr. Speaker, I submit that the chair of a select standing committee of the Legislative Assembly should be held to a higher standard of conduct than this. Therefore, I hope that you will find that a prima facie case of privilege does exist in this matter and that I may proceed to have the Assembly assist me in clearing my name of this accusation.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my role as the House leader for the Official Opposition I have to say that I am surprised to hear that the minister is bringing a case of privilege given that the remarks from Edmonton-Gold Bar were clearly withdrawn and an apology was offered at the first opportunity to do so. That appears in the *Hansard* for May 12, 2004, on page 1397. So as a student of parliamentary process my interest is piqued on how a point of privilege can be called on comments that have been withdrawn and an apology offered.

3:00

Additionally, I was expecting that should a privilege case be brought by the minister, notice according to 15(2) of the Standing Orders of this Assembly would be followed. I understand that the Speaker has already made comments on that, but I will, begging the indulgence of the Speaker, note that 15(2) says

A member wishing to raise a question of privilege shall give written notice containing a brief statement of the question to the Speaker and, if practicable, to any person whose conduct may be called into question, at least two hours before the opening of the sitting and, before the Orders of the Day.

I expected to see some sharing of that notice in a written form with the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

In fact, I note that this was upheld during a case of privilege that was brought in April of 2003. If I refer to the pages in *Hansard* between 1240 and 1244, the Speaker in fact reprimands a member of the opposition for not having provided that written notice to the person that was involved and named in the privilege. So I would argue that proper notice was not extended according to the intent of Standing Order 15(2).

Now, I did my best to take notes while I listened to the case that was presented by the Minister of Finance, but as this is the first time I've been able to hear the full content of the accusation, I would refer to Standing Order 15(3) and 15(4) and ask that the response on behalf of the member be heard on the next sitting day of the Assembly. I cite two examples of precedents for the Speaker in delaying the response on behalf of the member, those being the 29th of April, 2003, appearing on page 1288 of *Hansard*, and also one from the 19th of November, 2002, appearing on page 1387 of *Hansard*. That will allow me time to review the citations that have been brought forward by the Minister of Finance and to be able to vigorously answer and respond on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. I would ask the Speaker's support in delaying that response to the next sitting day.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Anyone else want to participate or offer anything today? Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I would like to participate, but if it's to be put over, I would prefer to participate after we've heard the response.

The Speaker: My statement was: anybody else today?

Well, our privilege rules are very, very clear, and Standing Order 15(6) indicates that the Speaker may allow such debate as he deems appropriate in order to determine whether a case is before us. It would seem to me that the hon. Minister of Finance has moved today on the matter in which she has chosen to move and has presented that document to the Assembly to be added to the words issued in the Assembly yesterday, and on the next occasion on which this Assembly shall meet, opportunity will be offered to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar to present his case. This matter will be dealt with by the chair.

head:

Orders of the Day

head:

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 32 Appropriation Act, 2004

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mrs. Nelson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to move third reading of Bill 32, the Appropriation Act, 2004.

[Motion carried; Bill 32 read a third time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Much earlier than I had anticipated. However, pursuant to Government Motion 7 agreed to February 18, 2004, I move that the Assembly stand adjourned.

The Speaker: Hon. members, just a bit of information for you before we declare that motion in place. With the private members' bills having been passed this spring, under our rules of democratic reform established in September of 1993, we now have arrived at an extremely unique situation anywhere in the parliamentary world in

that this Assembly has now provided that 37 private members' public bills will receive royal assent. That is incredible.

It's approximately 97 minutes after 1:30 o'clock today. So in this session, the Fourth Session of the 25th Legislature, we will have now sat for approximately 12,225 minutes, and this will be the third time since 1971 – only the third time since 1971 – that all government bills appearing on the Order Paper have actually been dealt with, the other two years being 1996 and 2001.

So, hon. members, pursuant to Government Motion 7 agreed to on February 18, 2004, the House stands adjourned.

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you all a very safe, safe summer.

[Pursuant to Government Motion 7 the Assembly adjourned at 3:07 p.m.]

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- Property theft in (Q65/04: Accepted as an amendment to
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728; *Carlson* 728; *Hancock* 728; *Zwozdesky* 1421
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- Estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 785–87,
789–91, 793–94; *Danyluk* 794; *Zwozdesky* 783–85,
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MacDonald 1150-51, 1153-56, 1160-61; *Mason*
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 Estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Friedel* 1163
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 Information technology services costs (M13/04: Defeated) ... *Carlson* 616–17; *Hancock* 616
 Interim estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 561
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Dept. of Finance

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 Estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Lougheed* 977
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Dept. of Gaming

Bonuses awarded to senior officials (M178/04: Not dealt with; Replaced by M34/04; Response tabled as SP372/04) ... *Zwozdesky* 1421
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 Estimates 2004-05: Debated, Responses to questions during (SP362-364/04: Tabled) ... *Stevens* 1421
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Information technology contract tendering policy (M125: Accepted as amendment to M16/04; Response tabled as SP371/04) ... *Blakeman* 742–43; *Hancock* 742–43; *Taft* 742; *Zwozdesky* 1421
 Information technology services costs (M72/04: Defeated; Replaced by M10/04) ... *Blakeman* 1186; *Zwozdesky* 1186
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 Interim estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Klapstein* 573
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Dept. of Government Services

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 Interim estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Klapstein* 573
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Dept. of Health and Wellness

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Information technology services costs *See Government departments, Information technology services costs (M10/04: Accepted as amended)*

Interim estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 560; *Mason* 533; *Taft* 528

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Dept. of Human Resources and Employment

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Bonuses paid to senior staff (M66/04: Defeated; Replaced by M34/04; Response tabled as SP372/04) ... *Blakeman* 1183-84; *MacDonald* 1183; *Massey* 1183; *Zwozdesky* 1183, 1421

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Funding provided to private vocational schools (Q79/04: Accepted) ... *Dunford* 1026; *Pannu* 1026

Information technology services costs (M60/04: Defeated; Replaced by M10/04) ... *MacDonald* 1182; *Massey* 1182; *Zwozdesky* 1182

Interim estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 562-63; *Mason* 533; *Pannu* 566

Interim estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Klapstein* 573

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Dept. of Infrastructure

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Construction grants, Cost-effectiveness of (Q57/04: Accepted) ... *Bonner* 870-71; *Lund* 870; *Mason* 870-71; *Stelmach* 870

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Credit card statements for minister and executive assistant (M160/04: Defeated; Replaced by M26/04) ... *Bonner* 1341; *Lund* 1341; *Zwozdesky* 1341

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Information technology contract tendering policy (M144: Accepted as an amendment to M16/04; Response tabled as SP371/04) ... *Blakeman* 742-43; *Hancock* 742-43; *Taft* 742; *Zwozdesky* 1421

Information technology services costs ... *Bonner* 1262

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Dept. of Innovation and Science

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 Estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 1045-47; *Doerksen* 1044-45, 1047-50; *Massey* 1048-49
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 Information technology contract tendering policy (M106: Accepted as an amendment to M16/04; Response tabled as SP371/04) ... *Blakeman* 742-43; *Hancock* 742-43; *Taft* 742; *Zwozdesky* 1421
 Interim estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 563
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Dept. of International and Intergovernmental Relations

Auditor General's recommendations re ... *Blakeman* 563
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 Budget ... *Jonson* 755
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 Credit card statements for departmental staff (M39/04: Defeated; replaced by M24/04) ... *Carlson* 1031; *Zwozdesky* 1031
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 Estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Graham* 760
 Information technology services costs (M14/04: Defeated) ... *Blakeman* 737, 741; *Carlson* 737; *Hancock* 737, 741
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 Interim estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 563-64
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 Performance measures ... *Jonson* 755
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Dept. of Justice and Attorney General

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Dept. of Justice and Attorney General (Continued)

Credit card statements for departmental staff (M135/04: Defeated; Replaced by M24/04) ... *Blakeman* 1336; *Carlson* 1336; *Hancock* 1336; *Zwozdesky* 1336
 Credit card statements for minister and executive assistant (M27/04: Defeated; replaced by M26/04) ... *Blakeman* 1029; *Carlson* 1029; *Zwozdesky* 1029
 Criminal Justice division ... *Hancock* 1123-24
 Estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 1125-27, 1134-35; *Cao* 1134; *Hancock* 1123-25, 1127-33, 1135; *MacDonald* 1133-34; *Pannu* 1129-30
 Estimates 2004-05: Debated, Responses to questions during (SP366-368/04: Tabled) ... *Hancock* 1421
 Estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Graham* 1136
 Information technology contract tendering policy (M76: Accepted as an amendment to M16/04; Response tabled as SP371/04) ... *Blakeman* 742-43; *Hancock* 742-43; *Taft* 742; *Zwozdesky* 1421
 Information technology services costs (M71/04: Defeated; Replaced by M10/04) ... *Blakeman* 1185; *Carlson* 1185; *Zwozdesky* 1185
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 Interim estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *Blakeman* 569-70; *Hancock* 570-71
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 Legal Services division ... *Hancock* 1123
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 Maintenance Enforcement division: Budget ... *Blakeman* 1126; *Hancock* 1127
 Minister's travel expenses ... *Hancock* 571
 Property theft in (Q62/04: Accepted as an amendment to Q28/04; Response tabled as SP370/04) ... *Blakeman* 728; *Carlson* 728; *Hancock* 728; *Zwozdesky* 1421
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Dept. of Learning

Appearance before Committee of Supply, Change in date re (SP203/04: Tabled) ... *Hancock* 728
 Bonuses awarded to senior officials (M203/04: Not dealt with yet; Replaced by M34/04; Response tabled as SP372/04) ... *Zwozdesky* 1421
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 Credit card statements for departmental staff (M137/04: Defeated; Replaced by M24/04) ... *Bonner* 1336; *Massey* 1336; *Oberg* 1336; *Zwozdesky* 1336
 Credit card statements for minister and executive assistant (M143/04: Defeated; Replaced by M26/04) ... *Bonner* 1337-38; *Massey* 1337; *Oberg* 1338; *Zwozdesky* 1338
 Estimates 2004-05: Debated ... *MacDonald* 998-1002; *Massey* 995-98, 1006-09; *Oberg* 994-1009; *Pannu* 1002-06
 Estimates 2004-05: Passed ... *Johnson* 1009
 Funding provided to private vocational schools (Q77/04: Accepted as amended) ... *Oberg* 1024-25; *Pannu* 1024-25
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